

## **Speakers Notes on the History of Women in AΦΩ**

*Based upon workshops given by Cheryl Lyn Smith (Alpha Beta, '82)*

General theme:

How change happens in a large organization

1. It takes some time to get an idea for change to spread throughout the organization
2. The organization needs time to discuss and determine how to respond to the change

Prior to 1972, women were involved in a variety of ways in Alpha Phi Omega.

In the Winter 1997 T&T, the page in history (1947) features a co-ed dance sponsored by Gamma Rho, the University of North Texas.

Chapters used to recognize women as "sweethearts" who supported chapter activities. Some chapters used to have close relationships with the Gamma Sigma Sigma sorority (some still do). Gamma Sigma Sigma is predominantly female, though now co-ed, and was founded by (and currently is still led by) some women who have close friends from AΦΩ chapters. Some chapters created "little sister" organizations of women who participated in some activities but were not national members.

Chapters who went coed "illegally" used to register women by using only the first letter of their first name.

Chapters who tried to nationally register women would receive back their paperwork and money for the female pledges from the national office.

The Alpha Chi Chapter at MIT ran their own printing press and thus generated certificates recognizing membership in Alpha Chi chapter for women.

The first step in paving the way for women was when the Constitutional Convention in 1967 removed the requirement that members have affiliation with the then all-male Boy Scouts of America.

Judy Mitchell joined the fraternity office staff in 1972. Marilyn Tschinski joined several years later. These two women have given combined over 50 years of service to our organization.

In 1974, the convention voted to create affiliate membership for women. Women were not allowed to participate in certain parts of the ritual and could not hold national office.

Women who attended the '74 convention had to register as guests and were not allowed to serve as voting delegates, even if they were officers in their chapters. There was a lot of tension and ill-will between *pro-co-ed* and *anti-co-ed* chapters and individuals at the '74 and '76 conventions.

In 1976, there was much conflict about whether to admit women as full members. The Title IX federal law played a major part in the vote. Title IX required institutions who received federal funding to open athletics and student organizations (not associated with student residences) to provide equal access to women.

At the time, chapters who wished to remain all-male would be allowed to do so as long as their institution continued to recognize them as such. This has been referred to as the "local option" or "Gentleman's agreement."

When full membership passed, chapters such as Delta Rho (Rutgers) enjoyed informing their female presidents and other chapter officers that they could now become official active members of ΑΦΩ.

Still, it took 10 years from the time that women were granted full active membership to the election of the first woman to the National Board of Directors.

Who were the first women on the board? Two of the first three women (Kay and Betsy) had made specific contributions on the national level in particular areas (publications and leadership development). The third (mrn) followed a more conventional route to board service: several years as a volunteer alumni staff member on the Sectional and Regional levels and several years service as a Sectional Chairman (they were officially called chairmen back then). Of the three, Betsy and mrn had joined prior to the national recognition of women as ΑΦΩ brothers. In addition, Kay came from a chapter (Beta Rho – Texas Tech) that had two prior board members serving in the position to which she was elected (Dean Lewis Jones and Eugene Lake served as National Service Chair & Member at Large – see Fall '98 T&T). Kay pledged in '79, graduated in 1980 after serving her chapter as Service VP and joined the Region VII staff and National Publications Committee shortly after graduation. Note that the original biographies sometimes obscured the illegal pledge dates. How did these women and others get elected? Someone in ΑΦΩ pointed out their potential and asked them to run. They overcame anti-female bias with exemplary service and were outstanding among all brothers.

[Note that Rick Boyko, alumni of Gamma Chapter has reference material on the history of women in Gamma Chapter – Cornell University (which had historically supported efforts to become co-ed) and a national gathering held at Cornell prior to the very first convention].

Women have earned National Awards in ΑΦΩ. In 1985, the first female pledge class namesake honored the first (and only to date) woman: Phyllis Tenney, an advisor to Phi Epsilon chapter (Maine Maritime Academy) who had registered in 1970. In 1987, the Maude Walker Young award was created to honor non-ΑΦΩ spouses who show individual dedication and support of APO activities. In 1988, Betsy Ullrich became the first woman to earn the National Distinguished Service Key (as of Spring 2004, there are three female recipients).

Women have distinguished themselves in national service in a variety of ways.

Lisa Covi began the APO-L national electronic discussion list in 1989 and promoted its use widely.

Carla Moran chaired the first International Service Project, which was a book drive where chapters all over the U.S. shipped literally tons of books to the Philippines.

Beginning in 1984, there have been 6 female active members who served as chair of the National Convention. This means that they were in charge of the National Committee that planned the convention over the two prior years.

The National Office Staff has been predominantly female for many years. Although we have never had a female National Executive Director (we did interview one prior to Bob London's hiring), our first Fraternity Accountant is Linda Secrist, C.P.A.

Some divisive gender issues survive in a variety of forms today.

Although many co-ed chapters are predominantly female, the number of women in National leadership has still not reached 50% (Sectional Chairs, Board members, Board of Trustees, etc).

There was an advisory committee to the president convened in the 1990s consisting of (all-male) university presidents. The predominance of men in certain leadership positions in certain corporations will continue to influence APO in some ways.

Some male and female members are offended by the use of the term "men of Alpha Phi Omega" in the National Toast Song. Proposals to change the wording have been raised at almost every convention. Although it continues to be a spirited issue, the convention currently must have 75% yes votes in order to change it so even 2/3 or simple majority is not enough.

There are sometimes objections to the use of the term brother for female members. Historically, the term has been adopted to emphasize unity and avoid the connotations of separate types of membership for men and women. However, AΦΩ-Phillippines uses the terms Brod. and Sis. to refer to male and female members.

Groups continue to challenge the board policy that all new chapters (reactivations and schools who have never hosted an AΦΩ chapter) be representative of the demographics of the institution. This means racial and gender diversity as well as a variety of majors and backgrounds.

The official AΦΩ policy is to encourage all-male chapters to go co-ed. However, there has not been any strong efforts to coerce these chapters from the national leadership. Some all-male chapters work closely with similar all-female organizations on their campuses. However, the number of all-male chapter is dwindling (we are currently down to less than 20. Some of those chapters have strong traditions of campus leadership and service in AΦΩ, in their communities and on campus. Some have even accepted transfer members from other chapters, but that is still their option.

It is important that we educate ourselves about the variety of APO experiences, the organizational rights and policies for chapter membership and we can constructively discuss changes to make our fraternity strong for the future.