

# ALPHA SIGMA LAMBDA

## *Its First Sixty Years*

*By Judy Parr*

Alpha Sigma Lambda's history stretches back to the great shift in higher education that occurred when World War II veterans went back to school under the GI Bill. At the time, adult students were viewed as quite separate from the traditional age students. They only attended college part time and at night and were not considered eligible for extras like membership in honorary societies. Even if they had been, honoraries like Phi Beta Kappa ordinarily confer membership only when students have completed three-fourths of their degree program. In addition, transfers from school to school, necessitated by work or family obligations, made it impossible for evening students doing outstanding work to stay in one school long enough to meet the credit requirements for recognition in existing honor societies.

In 1945, Dr. Rollin Posey was Dean of the University College at Northwestern University. He had inherited an honorary named Alpha Sigma Lambda but not, it seemed, a history, constitution or bylaws. He decided to remake Alpha Sigma to serve the needs of his students. He invited students to attend a meeting in early January 1946 to "consider the establishment of an Honor Society, Alpha Sigma Lambda, in order that we may have some means of recognizing superior scholarship among our students. Apparently, the students liked the idea, and he drew up a proposed constitution. In it, he expanded on what he thought the Society should be. Its purpose, he wrote, was "to bind together into one Society the excellent students within the University College in order to provide a stimulus to and recognition for their worthy efforts to make best use of their college years." This language was still in ASL's constitution 20 years later.

Students were eligible for membership after either earning thirty credits at the University College, or earning fifteen credits there if they had transferred in thirty hours from a regionally accredited college or university. In those heady days after the war, Dr. Posey

believed that Alpha Sigma Lambda should also provide “intellectual leadership in extra-curricular activities which will aid all students to round out their cultural development and equip themselves for the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy.” No student was admitted to Alpha Sigma Lambda who was not of ‘good moral character’, as determined by faculty and current members of the Society. This requirement apparently grew out of his belief that ‘civilization rightfully asks its more brilliant people to accept responsibilities commensurate with their superior abilities. A major role of Alpha Sigma Lambda is, in consequence, to stimulate the love of learning among the students of the University College in Northwestern University through exercising intellectual leadership among them....[with membership] you will experience the deeper satisfaction that results from the inner knowledge that you are carrying your share of responsibility to the university and to your fellow men.” Posey’s emphasis on leadership and service persists to this day, as approximately half of all chapters offer services and activities to members and their fellow adult students

Posey attended an Association for University Evening Colleges (AEUC)<sup>1</sup> meeting shortly after reviving Alpha Sigma Lambda. Posey’s friend and colleague from the University of Cincinnati, Frank Neuffer, reported in 1982 that “Rollin and I roomed together, talked shop far into the night. Rollin regaled me with the merits of a local honor society....The idea of such an organization appealed to me. I suggested I would start a chapter the University of Cincinnati Evening College and thus make ASL national. So we two elected Rollin president and I took over as vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. I agreed to prepare a [national] constitution and by-laws, write a likely initiation ceremony, define the name of the organization, and endeavor to attract other colleges and universities into membership. Returning to Cincinnati, I asked my assistant dean, Ralph F. Yeager, to come up with the initiation ceremony and some appropriate words explaining the significance of the letters alpha, sigma, and lambda. It’s surprising what the reference department of a library can produce.”

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<sup>1</sup> The Association of University Evening Colleges, established in 1939, changed its name to the Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) in 1973. ASL has enjoyed close ties with ACHE since its founding.

ASL's first national constitution stated that "its purpose is to provide an association of the outstanding students in university evening colleges." Membership was confined to the top five percent of those who were otherwise eligible. The moral character requirement had been dropped.<sup>2</sup> The society would meet triennially at national conventions. The convention was "the supreme legislative authority of the Society" but between conventions the powers of the society would be exercised by a National Board of Councilors. Neuffer and Posey ratified ASL's first national constitution on May 7, 1947. Neuffer's Beta chapter was chartered two weeks later, and the first annual meeting was held that November at the AEUC convention in Minneapolis.

In 1955, Ed Spengler, a national councilor, wrote to Neuffer that "I am happy to see the roster growing and note that ASL is becoming a significant honor society among evening colleges." The first twenty years or so saw the Society gain members slowly but surely, presumably through word of mouth. In the early to mid 1950s, ASL had eight members. In 1957, the ritual was modified, but why and by whom is a mystery. In 1959 there were nineteen chapters.

By 1966, the constitution stated that all national councilors had to be members of the Association of University Evening Colleges.<sup>3</sup> Chapter members could still have transfer credits, but they had to have attended college for a minimum of four semesters. Members came by word of mouth and were clustered in the eastern part of the US. Chapters met at ASL's annual meeting, held at the AEUC annual meeting. Each chapter's national councilor voted on applications for new chapters. There were thirty six chapters by the time Drury College of Springfield MO applied in April of 1967. It took over a year for the application to be approved, which prompted the Society to rethink how it did business.

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<sup>2</sup> However, in 1969 the application from Texas Christian University stated that members could be dropped "for conduct detrimental to the Society" by membership vote.

<sup>3</sup> In 1959, KW Riddle, ASL president noted that "among the reasons for this [requirement] is to make it possible to have a national board meeting in conjunction with the annual meeting of AUEL. Until such time as the fraternity assumes unwieldy proportions, this recommended procedure should be followed." In early 1999, the minutes note that ASL's annual meeting continued to be at ACHE to keep travel costs down.

The problem was the time it took to get approvals from all the national councilors. By March 1968, twenty four of the thirty six chapters had approved Drury's application; the last approval didn't arrive until June. As Daniel Lang, ASL board member and Dean of the Evening Division at Northwestern University put it, "calling for approval by mail of chapter applications is time-consuming, cumbersome, and no doubt often exasperating because some councilors do not cooperate." The question was how, then to approve applications. Not by one person: as Lang pointed out: "such a policy would place far too great a burden of decision on one man. Second, the individual standard would or might shift every time a new man took office." He suggested a Committee of Membership to screen applications and present them to the Society at the annual meeting. In 1969, ASL member James Southouse proposed that the Executive Committee review applications. His colleague Sherm Kent wrote to him in support: "I agree that n Executive Board meeting might be able to work faster than the present system. " It is probably about this time the Society voted to allow the Executive Committee to approve applications. There are many subsequent discussions in the minutes on how best to review applications; yearly, quarterly, or as they were made. (Currently, the office manager and the executive director review applications when they arrive at the office and then email them to the Executive Committee for approval.)

How best to manage the Society's business became more pressing as the years passed and the Society expanded. In 1970, the Executive Committee standardized certificates of membership which had been produced by individual chapters. In 1977 *The Midnight Oil*, was published for the first time, suggesting that ASL's leaders were concerned about communicating with its member chapters which had become more far flung and diverse than was the case in ASL's early years. The first community college was admitted in 1973, and ASL no longer assumed that geographical closeness could allow chapters to continue the tradition of having an ASL official at a charter induction ceremony. The Society also began to publish chapter directories and informational brochures in 1972. Publication was sporadic, perhaps because ASL was still slow to change and still a very part time enterprise.

In 1977, board member Martha Check, in a letter to a fellow board member, noted that “evening colleges...are fast becoming divisions of continuing education. This being done [because] we are extending programs into the daytime and into...many different formats. “ Soon after she wrote this letter, the Society took major steps to attract new members. The results of these initiatives shaped the Society into what it is today.

Under the leadership of President Leslie Jacobsen of Brooklyn College, ASL embarked on its first known membership drive in the Spring of 1979. A mailing, coupled with personal recruiting efforts by national councilors, yielded sixteen new members. ASL also worked on reactivating idle chapters, bring five chapters back to active membership. The mailing was sent to ACHE members. ACHE was still an integral partner with ASL. ACHE membership was no longer specifically required in a 1980 version of the national constitution, but the constitution did continue to designate the ACHE representative as the ASL national councilor.

With growth came challenges. A wider array of institutions applying for memberships spurred the Executive Committee to appoint a task force on admissions standards, later dubbed the Associate Degree Task force, chaired by Dean Constance Scott. Past president of ASL. The pressing question for the task force, as the minutes from the November 1979 annual meeting stated, was ‘why can’t the minimum number of credits be reduced by half to 15, for the benefit of community colleges?’. The role of transfer credits in determining eligibility was also revisited, as was the distribution of credits outside the student’s major field.

The Task Force affirmed that transfer credits should not be considered in determining eligibility: “this seems like the logical conclusion in that grades are not transferred, only credits.” The Task Force also reminded ASL that “the institution where the ASL chapter is chartered is the one offering the distinction of becoming an honor society,” an essential truth about the Society that its executive committee twenty years later would use to fashion its response to many questions from national councilors and institutions interested in joining ASL.

The idea of lowering the residency requirement to fifteen credits at the chartered institution was rejected since, as the Task Force noted, “fifteen semester hours [are] not enough of a sample of the student’s ability.” What really raised a stir was its proposal to add language to the constitution concerning the distribution requirement, which stated that inducted members must have at least fifteen credits outside the major in the liberal arts, *excluding applied arts and science courses*.

This notion was hotly debated at the 1979 annual meeting. The minutes from that meeting report that some national councilors thought it was ‘discriminatory. Others argued for more stringent requirements.’ The amendment of Article II, Section 3 to exclude applied arts and science courses did pass, by a vote of 17-6. Frank Funk, a task force member, spoke for the seventeen when he wrote, “the very notion of a national honor society is elitist and was never designed to admit all part-time students, but the *best* of each of our students groups as they are constituted.”

ASL’s affirmation of its elitism in no way impeded its growth. It was helped along the way by the expansion of continuing education programs nationwide. As Peter Mills, ASL’s vice president, observed in 1982, “the era of the adult learner has definitely arrived”. The Society continued its campaign of targeted mailing to ACHE members and in 1982 instituted bulk production and distribution of ASL pins by the executive committee. Ten new members joined in 1980, prompting the Society to split the Secretary-Treasurer position in two: “The popular response to the extensive membership drive during the past two years has imposed increased burdens on this office,” reported the minutes from the 1980 annual meeting. .

The Executive Committee in early 1981 discussed what national secretary Paul Sable called a ‘continuous membership drive,’ with a special interest in recruiting Western states. In 1981, ASL had 70 chapters, in 1984 90 chapters, and in 1986 ASL had 115 chapters in 28 states. By 1988, *The Midnight Oil* reported, “of the 125 ASL chapters, 53 have been added in the past 4 ½ years – a 72% increase...ASL is becoming national in

scope; and members are demanding more services. Without growth, the Executive Committee could cope. However, no new members could be added and there could be no additional services to present members.”

The announcement in *The Midnight Oil* was the product of an idea that had been percolating in the Executive Committee. Two years earlier, the Executive Committee first began to believe that a ‘central office for records and mailing and word processing equipment would be very valuable.” At the 1986 annual meeting, the Committee broached the idea with the membership. In June 1987, the Executive Committee established a Task Force on the Executive Secretary of ASL, chaired by Leo O’Hara. O’Hara reported back to the membership that November at the annual meeting.

The Task Force hastened to reassure the members that the executive secretary would not replace the executive committee. Rather, the secretary, *The Midnight Oil* reported, would “carry out routine tasks mandated by the Executive Committee.” The Task Force further recommended that the office be institutionally based, funded by increases in dues and the price of pins. The membership passed a motion approving the position, and charged the task force to turn its attention to implementing the idea, including soliciting bids on housing the new office. In 1989, Beth Panzini at the Philadelphia College of Textiles became the first Executive Secretary, and ASL purchased its first computer ‘to increase efficiency of record keeping and simplify billing and mailing,” according to the minutes from the annual meeting that November.

The Executive Committee was busy with more than operational matters in the 1980s. Sherm Kent, longtime *Midnight Oil* editor, first proposed a foundation. Its main purpose, the 1981 proposal said, “will be to promote the advocacy of lifelong study and the Society’s commitment to adult learners.” In practice, that meant that the Foundation would grant scholarships. The minutes report that “the idea was met with much enthusiasm and interest by the Committee.” An Ad Hoc Committee for the Foundation prepared a formal proposal for the September, 1982 Executive Committee meeting. Presumably the Foundation was approved then, as its only separate organization. The

first president was Sherm Kent. The ASL Adult Education Foundation distributed its first scholarships in 1985. In 1996, the Society's Executive Committee passed a motion to permanently assess a \$1.50 surcharge per pin to support the Foundation's scholarships, and later added a surcharge on honor cords. In 1998, the Foundation president became a permanent member of the Society's Executive Committee.

The 1989 meeting also saw the members grapple with a significant change in the configuration of continuing education programs. For the first official time in its known history, the Society explicitly addressed the shift away from purely part time, evening study. Past president Peter Mills, the minutes reported, "urged the [Society] to facilitate membership of schools that have full time as well as part time students, to include adult learners rather than exclude them....[President] Joe Dougherty indicated that while ASL has not focused on admitting full time students, many students do indeed go full time at some time in their program, and that the only distinction has been that ASL was not open to schools which had only full time students....Historically, the Society was established because of an awareness that part-time students were being excluded from the traditional honor societies." The point that Mills raised prompted ASL to consider how it had to make its intentions clear to possible members and to the membership at large as the scope of continuing education continued to expand.

In 1990, the executive committee appointed an Eligibility Task Force chaired by Paul Sable because, the minutes report, "requirements need updating to keep up with changes in continuing education." Paul Sable's report elaborated on this idea. He wrote, "as continuing education programs continue to evolve serving ever more diverse populations, Alpha Sigma Lambda must consider how, or indeed, if it should serve these emerging issues. Quite simply, how can Alpha Sigma Lambda open its membership to the largest number of adult learners while maintaining the intrinsic goals and standards of the Society." In the end, the Task Force affirmed that the institution should determine who its non traditional students are.



By 1995 however, the June 1995 minutes note that “the liberalizing of the constitution is good for diversity in a changing environment but the Society may have given too much away, and the Committee’s evaluative role may be too small in the admissions process” Over the years, the constitution had dropped its original requirement that member institutions be regionally accredited. The Executive Committee also noted that the constitution did not explicitly limit membership to adult students. This had been easy to do in the early days when the constitution limited membership to evening colleges. Now the demarcation wasn’t as clear. The 1995 minutes show that the Executive Committee passed a motion to ask chapter applicants for their definition of what an adult student was. In 1997, the committee authorized an Institutional Membership Eligibility Task Force, chaired by vice president Lynn Penland, recognizing that “there are new paradigms at work that don’t fit well into the Society’s current requirement.” Bible colleges and technical institutes had responded to a recent mailing, as had institutions that weren’t organized around credits and grades.

1997 and 1998 were busy years for the Society as the Task Force, the home office, the members, and the Executive Committee wrestled with defining what the essentials were to ASL membership. In the end, the Society affirmed the following;

- Regional accreditation was the *sine qua non* of membership. The constitution again listed accreditation as a requirement, and went further to list the regional accrediting bodies that were acceptable.
- The liberal arts requirement, which had been so controversial twenty years earlier, became a useful delineator of the kind of education which fit under the ASL umbrella.

With these tenets in place, ASL could comfortably admit some technical institutions, at first glance not suitable, because they met these standards and could, with equal comfort and clarity, reject other technical schools which did not. ASL also affirmed that chapters have a great deal of autonomy. A chapter must meet ASL’s minimum standards but it is welcome to set its standards higher if it chose.

Over the years, ASL has chosen to exclude graduate students (ASL serves undergraduates and there are honor societies for all graduate students) and external degree programs since there is no home institution as such for students to earn their residency through, or to grant a charter to. Expanding internationally came up intermittently throughout the late 1990s but has been tabled in order to concentrate our efforts and staff time on expanding nationally. How to properly translate the regional accreditation requirement has also been a stumbling block. The Society has also decided that its main purpose is to support the chapter, which in turn can support the students it inducts. ASL does not maintain a data base on its inducted students.

In 1997, ASL also revisited the 30 credit residency requirement. As had been true almost twenty years before, the burden it placed on community colleges was causing concern among the society. This time, the Executive Committee only shaved a little off the requirements, moving the residency requirement down to 24 credits and the distribution requirement down to 12. Despite these changes, some matters remained unresolved, as higher education for adults became much less clear cut than before. The 1998 minutes record that the Executive Committee had a long talk about the relative terminology of 'continuing education' versus 'non traditional students.' Talks like these pepper the minutes for the next several years and were never resolved to everyone's complete satisfaction; how could Alpha Sigma Lambda agree on the proper terminology when opinions, and terminology, differed all across higher education? Yet the Executive Committee did want to specifically limit its membership to adult students. ASL's mission statement from 2000 illustrates the awkwardness of this time in higher education by using compromise language to identify its students as "adult/non-traditional undergraduate students."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, changes in institutional leadership and organization had bounced the office from Textiles (now Philadelphia University) in 1991 to a brief tenure at Cedar

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<sup>4</sup>The entire mission statement reads, "Alpha Sigma Lambda recognizes and fosters scholarship and leadership among adult/nontraditional undergraduate students." In 2002, the mission statement was changed to read "Alpha Sigma Lambda is an honor society that partners with colleges and universities to celebrate and advance the scholarship and leadership of adult students in higher education."

Crest College. By the end of that year, the office moved to LaSalle University for two years, then to Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales (now DeSales University) in 1994. As ASL continued to grow, it became more and more difficult for any host institution, however well intentioned, to take time away from its own staff to attend to ASL business. As Debbie Booros, Executive Secretary at Allentown College noted, “ASL has become a mini-business that not only requires but deserves the proper staffing and support.: In 1996, the home office moved to Eastern Illinois University at the invitation of Dean William C. Hine. The Executive Committee fervently hoped that things would be different at Eastern, and they have been. Under the able and energetic management of L. Kaye Woodward, National Executive Director; Shirley Melton, National Office Manager, and Pam Collins, Director of Conferences, the Society has changed radically, in scale and in scope, from its early days. As president George Rogers remarked in 1999, “the strength of the Society is rooted in the stability and organization of the national office.”

The Cedar Crest office made the first attempt at selling ASL products and clothing, but that effort did not survive the tumult of the early years of the home office. The staff at Eastern devoted considerable time to designing and then refining a range of products for sale, from clothing for ASL members to introductory packages for new member institutions. ASL pins have been a perennial source of income, and the highly popular ASL honor cords, introduced in the late 1990s, have made a substantial contribution to the Society’s income. The budget, which was under \$6,000 \$116,000 in 2006. Product sales, especially the always popular cords, plus dues from around 300 chapters, help subsidize the office. In the mid-1990s, the Executive Committee added a line to support committee members’ travel, in the interests of getting geographical diversity within the Executive Committee. The budget now includes a permanent line for membership development. Costs continue to rise, however, and managing costs continues to absorb the home office and the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee has reluctantly had to raise dues fairly regularly since the 1990s<sup>5</sup> to keep up with the demands of the membership and of a busy full time office. After much debate over the years, in 2003 the

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<sup>5</sup> Dues were \$15 in 1981, \$25 in 1984, \$60 in 1989, \$75 in 1992, and \$100 in 1994.

Society adopted language in Article V of the constitution that did not list a specific amount for dues, as has always been the case. Changes to dues must still be approved by the membership, but by eliminating the amount from the constitution, the constitution itself does not have to be changed.

Along with these initiatives, the Eastern office has standardized the quality of the look of Alpha Sigma Lambda. The ASL script was registered in 1997 and the ASL colors, which had originally been purple and gold, officially became burgundy and gold.

Shirley Melton is the first person ever hired to work strictly for AS., originally to work part time but since November 1997 has worked full time. She, with the encouragement of the board, developed quarterly mailings to increase communication with the members. The phone calls she and Kaye Woodward field have provoked many discussions at executive committee meetings. Language in the constitution has been clarified in response to reports from Shirley and Kaye about phone calls and emails from confused members. In 2000, for example, the board drew up explicit directions for calculating membership, a long time source of confusion.

More confusion came with the perennial push for new members. Under Paul Sable, appointed Membership Development Committee chair in 1993, and his successor in 2000, William Hine, the number and variety of applicants had increased gratifyingly. By 2002, a third of our national councilors did not label themselves as continuing educators. Sable and Hine had been alert to these changes, and they and the home office staff had been attending conferences at CAEL, NACADA, and UCEA. In Spring 2005, the Executive Committee broke with tradition and met at a non-ACHE convention, in this case UCEA. ACHE continues to be a valuable ally of the Society, but the time has come for ASL to expand its affiliations to match the affiliations of its national councilors, or potential chapters. How, though, should ASL best serve national councilors like the one who identified himself as a history professor but who managed records and advising for a continuing education unit? What would be his affiliations – continuing education, academic administration, or faculty? Adding to the difficulty has been evanescence of national councilors. As higher education for adults continues to shift and change, Shirley

Melton estimates that national councilors turn over by as much as a third in any given year. In response, the home office has put together a series of informational tools to give hapless new national councilors the tools they need to keep their chapter active.

The Society has also been careful over the years to assure chapters that they have a good deal of autonomy to fashion their chapter into an organization that suits them. About half of all chapters offer inductions only. The other half organize activities and fundraisers. The level of activity changes with the energy and free time of national councilors and students, and home office. The Society has worked hard to let chapter know that chapters that stick to offering inductions only are fully as valuable as chapter with more activities. It has stayed true to the reassurance Frank Neuffer gave an applicant in 1956: “in setting up the national organization, it was the intent of the founders...that the local chapters have as much autonomy as is consistent with the National Constitution....With this background in mind I would, therefore, say it is entirely a local problem with you as to how you will conduct your individual chapter business.”

In 2003, Will Hine designed the “Each One Reach One” membership campaign, which enlisted current members to recruit new members. In 2004, this effort yielded ASL’s 300<sup>th</sup> chapter: Western Carolina University. 2004 also marked the darkest time in ASL’s history. Blair Hall, which housed ASL at Eastern, was partially destroyed by a fire on April 28<sup>th</sup>. Many historic records were destroyed and more current files were badly damaged. The home office was in temporary quarter for two years. Despite this, the office and the board soldiered on with a new membership campaign called 400+ in 2005. In 2006, at sixty years old, Alpha Sigma Lambda seems to have fully realized Rollin Posey’s hope that “we may expect that the formation of the organization here will be followed by the creation of similar groups in other evening colleges throughout the country, thus placing Alpha Sigma Lambda on a national basis.”