

## Our History, From the Association of Collegiate Alumnae to Mergers to a New Name, the American Association of University Women/AAUW

Boston 1881- and the problems of providing quality education for young women.

The parents of Marion Talbot and her younger sister, Dr. and Mrs. Tisdale Talbot, were aware that Boston's educational system was geared toward the education of young gentlemen. It did not provide adequate preparation for the education for young ladies who had real intellectual potential, such as their daughters, which would allow them to enter and compete in male dominated college programs. Because of this they had had the foresight to start Marion on the study of Latin at age ten and Greek when she was thirteen. They also took both daughters to Europe for 15 months so they might have the opportunity to learn to speak and read both French and German.

Marion was finally able to begin studies, in the winter of 1876-77, in the College of Liberal Arts at Boston University where her father was Dean of the School of Medicine. In that initial winter semester she not only finished making up some still remaining entrance requirements, but also completed a full year of freshman course work. She graduated with a BA degree from Boston University in June of 1880, after three and one-half years of study.

Her education had set her off from her girlhood friends. She now had little in common with these young women, with her aims, by then, so different from their own. They did not speak the same language as Marion so she was, in affect, almost socially ostracized from her old circle of friends.

As she had a compelling desire to use her mind she returned to Boston University, where she earned a Master's Degree in 1882. Her very wise mother could see the problems young women college graduates faced in utilizing their education. Except for

teaching there was limited work opportunities, and even less opportunity for socializing with other educated women. In fact, as educated women, they were not satisfied leading the life of leisure their earlier friends led.

And so AAUW had its beginning.

It was Mrs. Talbot who inspired Marion and a new friend, a graduate of Vassar College, to call together a group of young women in November 1881. Tradition tells us this meeting was held in the Talbot's home, but Marion, herself, places it at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I expect there was an initial meeting in the Talbot home before the one at MIT. Interest in the group grew and by January 1882, sixty-five women gathered for the launching of the first association of college and university women in the world. Membership, at that time, was limited to those eight institutions represented by the earliest members and only graduates of those institutions were eligible for membership in this early version of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae.

Among those members were three graduates of the University of Michigan.

- Remember that the U of M had been forced into accepting women students in the 1870's, when a young Miss Stockton, from Albion, and later, Battle Creek, with the help of suffrage leader and educator, Lucy Stone, won a lawsuit against the University. The school's charter did not prohibit women students, it had just been the established custom to do so and this did not hold up in court.

Individual membership was later limited to women with degrees in the Arts, Philosophy, Science or Literature, from any institutional member, a college or university which had met with the approval of the Executive Committee of the Association.

The object of this new organization was:

- “To unite alumnae of different institutions for practical educational work.”
- To provide opportunity for socializing with other educated women.
- To promote research, an important activity of this new organization.
- To promote social work projects, which were undertaken by even the earliest of the branches.

The first research project was undertaken by the group, in 1885, to determine the validity of the belief that it was harmful to women’s reproductive organs to undertake the intellectual strain, that male students were able to undertake without the same difficulty. It was believed, among medical circles, that “identical education of the two sexes is a crime before God and humanity...”

Other early research was directed toward the health and physical education of young women. The lack of good health measures, including physical education was attributed to many of the difficulties encountered by women aspiring to become college students.

- Health Measures? Look at the tight clothing women were expected to wear.
- Physical Education, as we know it, would have horrified the communities these young women grew up in. Horseback riding was about the only form of exercise deemed appropriate for them, aside from walking.

AAUW’s approach to research has continued to take the same approach throughout our history, which leads to informed activism. We gather information, study and learn before we act!

AAUW established very strict qualifications for membership of educational institutions. No system of evaluating the quality of educational programs, the facilities, and the faculty, provided by post secondary schools, had been developed and put into place at this time in history.

- It was important that these institutions provide a setting geared toward the needs of women students.
- It was required that the quality of education for girls would be equal to that provided for male students.
- The ACA stressed specific requirements for the quality of women faculty,
- It stipulated that a certain percentage of faculty be women.
- It was required that facilities meeting the needs of women students be provided before approval was granted to any institution.

Out of this very early and important work of the ACA, the Association was able to develop a system of accreditation of educational institutions, which is much as we have today.

Approval for accreditation became competitive.

- No women college graduate, at that time, could join the ACA unless her school was on the approved list and had become a member.
- Graduates of non approved institutions who had later gone on to earn degrees from graduate schools on a par with Yale were accepted as Associate members.
- This caused competition among institutions as they were now competing for the brightest of women students.
- Colleges and universities found membership in this organization brought them much desired prestige in the academic world, therefore they felt pressure to raise their standards for women students.

- The Association had established, as one of its purposes, that of establishing itself as the “national guardian of standards for women’s higher education.”
- These conditions are much the same today, with the exception that women now earn degrees from across the educational spectrum, many of them professional and technical degrees unavailable to women, and often times to anyone, at that time.

Characteristics of the early organization included:

- The concept of continuing education. This started early, and provision for serious group study was instituted from the very beginning. Even today we have our study or interest groups, although many of our interest groups would not be considered to be based on serious study.
- It was never the intention of the early members that this organization be local, but “one of far flung sister groups” across the country.
- By 1884 provision for branches had been developed. The first branch was established in Washington DC, at the time these provisions were accepted, and this first branch included Baltimore.
- Other early branches included New York City, Pacific, later called the California Branch, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Minnesota, Central New York. Detroit, including Ann Arbor, was established in 1890, as was Western New York, Indiana, and Eastern New York, in the same year. By 1906 there were thirty-five branches. Within 50 years AAUW consisted of 500 branches.
- Formation of a new branch had to be approved by the Association, just as it does now.
- Members had to be graduates of approved institutions, and have earned a BS, BA, MS, or MA degree from those schools.

- These groups were to be referred to as branches, not chapters, of the Association.
- Branch members were also required to be members of the Association.
- There were a few requirements for bylaws, related to eligibility, stipulated by the Association. Branches, otherwise, were to make their own bylaws. Today the Association expects conformity by way of the Model Branch Bylaws.
- As branches were formed it was required that members live within a geographical distance that would allow for attendance at meetings.
- Branch meetings were education oriented, involving research, and presentations of formal papers, or presentations by experts in a given field, especially on any aspect of education, whether elementary, advanced, rural or industrial.
- Socialization was provided for through dinners, luncheons, teas, or at least refreshments, at most meetings. This opportunity for socialization is still important at branch functions.

Now a word about the early Detroit Branch:

- This was the mother branch of Michigan!
- It was organized in 1889, after the Western Association of Collegiate Women met in Ann Arbor in 1888.
- It served college graduates in both Detroit and Ann Arbor.
- The branch had an early interest in women students of the U of M.
- The Detroit Branch was instrumental in raising money for the Barbour Gymnasium, (for women students),
- And assisted with the formation of the Women's League.
- It established a scholarship loan fund of \$500.00. Local scholarships started early!
- The branch had an early interest in social problems,
- leading to a women's reformatory for Michigan,

- the establishment Juvenile Court system in Detroit,
- social settlement work,
- and the work of The Child Study Committee, led by Dr. Millicent Shin.

How did the early financing of the Association develop?

- The ACA lived hand-to-mouth in the early years. Income for the 1882-83 year was \$117.13, which came from voluntary contributions.
- Finally a \$1.00 annual assessment was adopted, and at that time this debt was waived for any member who could not afford payment. Later this amount was raised to \$2.00 per year. Even later, provision was made that any member, who had failed to pay dues for three successive years, was to be stricken from the membership. We are not that forgiving today.
- In 1896 provision for life memberships were made available to eligible women, at a fee of \$25.00, which was to be placed in a permanent fund to support fellowships or other purposes approved by the Association.

The beginning of our fellowships:

- The first fellowship for graduate study was awarded to Ida Street, in 1888, and the second in 1889, by the Western Association, a short time before this group merged with the ACA.
- The ACA awarded the first fellowship for study in Europe in 1890.
- Fellowships became an active part of the ACA program, and we continue fund this today, with book sales and other fund raising activities. Then, as now, the fellowships were awarded from interest earned from large endowments.

The merger with the Southern Association of College Women took place in 1921 and our name was changed at that time to the American Association of University Women, the AAUW.

A newer book, *Degrees of Equality*, by Susan Levine, picks up where Marion Talbot's book leaves off. Her book starts with the onset of the Great Depression years, in 1929, continues to the eve of our 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday, in the late 1970's, and shows how AAUW struggled with those changing times in America.

The history of AAUW since 1929 provides a window, according to Ms. Levine, on the development of the women's rights movement in the United States and the transformations in American feminism. Ms. Levine informs us that because AAUW, as well as other prominent women's organization, were not receptive to the label of feminist, (indeed, some men and women still are not) and were long opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment, their role in the women's rights movement has not been given it's proper place. They have, in fact, as she says, "pressed for equal rights and confronted discrimination throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century."

We have always recognized that our educational mission distinguished us from any other women's organizations. What some members do not realize is that as early as the 1930's our leaders "envisioned women as major players in shaping public policy, particularly in the area of education," and that we served as a unique resource for policy makers and educational organizations. As you can see, our current involvement in public policy was derived from an early attention to this area. It is a strong component of who we are and how we advocate for "positive societal change," as spelled out in our mission statement. Ms. Levine tell us that we were supporting affirmative action long before it had a name.

As the Roosevelt Administration looked to the expertise of women's organizations, AAUW increased its lobbying efforts and nurtured its legislative program.

We became familiar faces at legislative hearings and congressional offices. We were concerned with health, education, consumer affairs and international peace. We lobbied for a federal office of education and one still exists today

While our Association believed in equality in principle, we did not, at the local level, always practice it. We have been accused of *elitism*, and rightly so. There was a time when some branch membership committees did not follow the Association criteria for membership, but instead "required recommendations from other members, sometimes visited prospective member's homes, and easily excluded those they deemed unsuitable or ineligible."

Although the Association accepted any woman, who met the educational requirements, as a national member (MAL's), few branches accepted black women, and the Association tread very carefully for a while in this area. Of greatest concern was that integration might split the Association. After all, we lived in a segregated society, and this was requiring a great change.

Eventually the Association realized it could not continue to function without living up to its principles.

Therefore, in December 1946, the Association board ruled that eligibility must be based on educational criteria only. Branches were no longer allowed to discriminate, in any way, in their membership policies.

We had truly considered ourselves, to our shame, to be an elite group. This had to be changed.

AAUW had a problem with the Equal Rights Amendment. It was not that AAUW, and its sister organizations, did not believe in equality for all women, but that it could be brought about by women "proving their worth", ... "through hard work, study and service," rather than by the legislative process. We had placed our

emphasis on equity in education, our reputation for quality research and the development of an organization led by a moderate leadership. We were proving our worth and strongly rejected the need for an Equal Rights Amendment. Even later, in the 1940's, when other women's groups were changing their stance on the ERA, and AAUW continued to support equality in principle, it's leadership still strongly opposed the amendment, "as a method of obtaining equality." Those who did support the amendment argued that "women, like men, should be able to realize their individual potential unhampered by arbitrary barriers and discrimination. They felt that the contributions made by women during World War II, "should be acknowledged and rewarded by future opportunities."

Feminism may not have been a comfortable term in the 1930's, but the concept of feminism was gradually changing. AAUW membership grew in the decade after WWII, its fellowship program was expanded, and it established the Educational Foundation. It maintained its positions on women's rights, and international cooperation, through its support of the United Nations, and it continued to push for educational reform. This placed the Association "squarely in the camp of American liberal reform," and therefore vulnerable to cold war era attack.

Antifeminist labeled such women's groups as un-American because of their pursuit of professional lives and their pre-war pacifism. AAUW's national leaders now became involved in the fear and distrust of the McCarthyism era which was sweeping the country. These leaders were subjected to congressional investigations, some were accused of lesbianism, (professional and unmarried), and many careers were destroyed.

Public school teachers, predominantly women, and well represented among the AAUW membership, were also suspect, as they "were a prime target for groups looking for subversive social

influences.” ...”Just being defensive of our liberties as a free people, these women agreed, put them at risk of being labeled communist sympathizers, fellow travelers, even communist!”

As these attacks on liberal groups continued, reference was made to the “Pink Ladies of the AAUW,” in a 1954 issue of the *National Republic*, suggesting that we promoted communism in our study groups, legislative agendas, and published materials.”

AAUW leaders were forced to be increasingly cautious, in the wording used in public statements and to withdraw from coalition building, so as to avoid having activities misinterpreted. It was at this time that the Association adopted a strict “use of name” policy, clearly spelling out how AAUW’s name could be used in connection with legislative and policy positions. This chilly cold war climate, according to Levine, had the effect of restricting political debate among women and liberals generally, which was at least partly responsible for the decline of feminism in the 1950’s.

The demographics of AAUW membership changed after the war. GI’s, under the GI Bill of Rights, took over the places of young women, who were required to wait until the men had enrolled in classes. Where as women had been in the majority during the war, they now found themselves in the minority, with only 30% of all college students being women. A survey of the membership in 1955 revealed that 2/3 of AAUW women were married, 41% were housewives and 50 % were mothers. More than half reported they held paid work positions, primarily in the traditional female professions.

These women had also become the volunteer backbone of their communities. What’s more, AAUW, which had originally been an organization of professional women, concerned with higher education for women, had now become an advocate for women’s rights, while continuing to reject the need for an ERA.

There was even some question of continuing the long standing Status of Women Committee, determining that issues they considered related to women were actually universal in nature. At the same time they looked for another approach in marketing AAUW to college seniors, replacing the senior teas with more substantial programming, so as to show the real concept of AAUW's broad program.

In spite of the antifeminist climate in the country AAUW membership continued to grow, and funds raised by local branches for a new national building poured in, while monies for the newly established Educational Foundation increased. Now there was a demand for racial equality. We entered the Civil Rights era and, with it, not so much a rebirth of the feminist movement but its "legitimization as part of the mainstream liberal political agenda.

College enrollment for women increased from 15 % in 1960 to over 50% in 1980, while at the same time only 4% of AAUW members held Ph.D's, and even fewer had earned professional degrees. By this time the number of women working outside the home increased, and women were choosing to marry and to start families at a later age. AAUW recognized that it must change. In 1963 it dropped its strict liberal arts requirement and accepted women with degrees in home economics, nursing, and education. Its membership increased from 147,920 in 1960 to 190,327 in 1976.

We were no longer primarily a small elite class of women with graduate degrees, our members represented a wide spectrum of occupations and interest, a group representing mainstream America, 2/3 of which were over 45 and almost half over 55. We were comfortably middle class, and unfortunately, we also continued to be overwhelmingly white.

AAUW leadership continued to focus on developing the educational environment for women. They realized that “Men are always thinking primarily of women as homemakers,” while professional women were “thinking of women as taking their places in our society equally with men.” The Educational Foundation began to offer fellowships in those professions where women were disproportionately represented, and initiated Research and Projects Grants to encourage more educational activities.

When President Kennedy established the President’s Commission on the Status of Women AAUW leaders were surprised, for the commission was to study the same issues that AAUW members had been confronting for years. These same issues, documented in the Commission’s report, included “discrimination against women in employment, law and politics.” This was followed by passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963 and the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which included a clause banning discrimination based on sex! Then, in 1965, President Johnson signed an executive order that prohibited discrimination in federal contracts and required affirmative action in hiring. AAUW was finally recognized for its longtime work in achieving equity in the workplace. Although historians gave much recognition to Now, it was well acknowledged that they were but one group whose work had contributed to this success. AAUW and its techniques of research had made a major contribution.

By late 1968 the organization was “redefining its political identity,” even as it recognized the “apathy toward the new women’s movement, particularly among older women.” Some felt the organization was becoming more and more political, some were “more concerned in providing funds for local scholarships.” Surprisingly, 70% of AAUW women, in 1970, favored legalized abortion, while in 1971 only 53.8 % of the membership favored the ERA. Because of this reluctance AAUW became one of the last national women’s organization to endorse the amendment.

The 1970 passage of the amendment by the House of Representatives moved the ERA to become a powerful symbol of feminism, and AAUW finally endorsed it at their 1971 convention, “declaring it a top AAUW priority.” At that same convention the delegates passed a resolution in support of legalizing abortion. It was said by one delegate that the right of women “to control their bodies is as important as the right to vote,” the only right, incidentally, that American women, to this day, have guaranteed to them in our constitution. Association President, Anne Campbell, pleased with her convention, stated that she “saw AAUW as a leader in reconciling moderate, mainstream feminism with the new spirit of the women’s movement.

AAUW women used their well developed lobbying skills, working within a coalition, to formulate such legislation as Title IX, which passed as part of the Educational Amendment in 1973 and the Women’s Educational Act in 1974. “AAUW saw in the passage of this legislation, and in the growing number of affirmative action decisions, acknowledgment of its fundamental mission. Equity for women students was not enough, though, equity for women college faculty had not been achieved. These women were asking AAUW for help and the AAUW leadership recognized that they must find a way to provide it. Within a few years the Association Legal Advocacy Fund had been established.

While Marjorie Bell Chambers, AAUW president, 1975-1979, wished to avoid the “angry militancy of women’s liberation” she adopted the view that AAUW must “become politically visible and take on a leadership role in the feminist movement.” At the 1977 convention, Helen Wolfe, AAUW Executive Director, acknowledged that AAUW had changed, having moved, she said, from “a women’s organization to feminism. The difference, as she saw it, was one of orientation. A women’s organization, she argued, is largely content with the status quo, is socially oriented, concerned with civic activities and study for self-improvement. A

feminist organization is concerned with equality of women and the full role of women in society.” When looked at in this light, AAUW has always been a feminist organization, and now it must adopt “strategies and programs directly aimed at political action towards those goals.”

We have grown mightily in the years since 1881.

Since that first meeting in Boston AAUW has been a catalyst for change!

From the 65 women who met to form the ACA in January 1882, we have become an organization of over 100,000 members, 1,300 branches, and 500 college and university partners. Today we work hard to gain equity for all women. We have endorsed the ERA, and a women’s right to choose. We have developed an all inclusive stand on diversity. We even voted years ago to open our membership to men who support our mission.

We have recently changed our Mission Statement. The new wording is

AAUW advances equity for women and girls through advocacy, education and research.

We have a very active Public Policy program, using the Internet to involve members at the grass roots level. Washinton Update and the Two=Minite Activist allow our members to contact members of congress, electronically, when important legislative matters are to come before the House and Senate. We also have an all volunteer Lobby Corp, composed of branch members living in the Washington DC area, who visit the Hill each Thursday to confer with members of Congress and their staff about issues affecting women and children.

Today, if you go to the Association web site, you will find, in the Member Center:

- A well developed Online Museum of AAUW History.

- It is presented in a timeline format and beautifully illustrates how political activism was embedded in the work of the Association, almost from its inception.
- It also informs about the many research projects AAUW has been involved in which speaks especially to the needs of young girls and women.

We do, indeed, have a unique history, which makes us very different from any other women's organization around. We have a right to be very proud of our past. We have just celebrated our 125<sup>th</sup> Birthday and now, at our Association Convention, held in Phoenix this past summer we have made history again, by putting in place a plan to merge AAUW and the Educational Foundation, with the Legal Advocacy Fund, into one organization. We are determined to continue to change to meet the needs of a changing membership and a changing world.

“Like the Phoenix of mythology, we must use our gentle wisdom and the powerful force of our united commitment to enlighten our choices for the next 125 years. By sharing the knowledge of our historic past and passionately focusing on our mission, AAUW will rise to confront the lingering and the emerging challenges that face women and girls today.”

Researched and Written by  
Patricia Jennings  
Communications Director  
AAUW of Michigan

