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# ALPHA SIGMA NU: A SHORT HISTORY

By **Beatrice Henson-O'Neal**

**I**n the first half of the 20th century, administrators of Catholic institutions of higher education found that their students were being systematically locked out of honor societies, especially Phi Beta Kappa. Neil McCluskey, S.J.'s research on Catholic school applications to Phi Beta Kappa from 1931 to 1958 seemed to verify that claim. Of the 23 Catholic schools considered during the period McCluskey examined, only two were awarded chapters, leading the author to respond that "the absence of certain distinguished Catholic colleges, which by every criterion are blue-ribbon, is perplexing." (*America*, February 22, 1958))

Catholic educators called this lock-out discrimination, while their secular counterparts argued that poor academic standards among Catholic schools were to blame. The Catholic college and university administrators repeatedly attempted to bring national honor societies onto their campuses and failed.

John Danihy, S.J., who arrived at Marquette in 1899, first as the athletic director and later as the football coach, visited many colleges and universities and developed an affinity for honor societies. In 1915, he founded Alpha Sigma Nu (then Alpha Sigma Tau) at Marquette as a partial response to the discrimination of his day but also to acknowledge something deeper that went beyond one's academic discipline. Since Jesuit colleges and universities were not yet coeducational, it was for men only.

In 1921, Fr. Danihy's vision went beyond the walls of Marquette towards the creation of a national Jesuit organization. Inductees were instructed "to band together those who most fully understand and appreci-

ate the ideals of a Jesuit education and to impress these ideals upon their fellow men." Alpha Sigma Tau spread in its first decade to include Creighton University, St. Louis University, and the University of Detroit. By 1930, the society became Alpha Sigma Nu.

Meanwhile in 1924, Marquette also founded Gamma Pi Epsilon to honor outstanding women, with the motto, "For the Glory of the School." They became a national organization in 1947. Alpha Sigma Nu and Gamma Pi Epsilon pursued separate but similar paths for almost 50 years, expanding nationally and cooperating on campuses where they existed together.

Despite the student unrest on many American campuses in the 1960's, Alpha Sigma Nu continued to flourish and was ready to usher in a new era that included women. At the 1964 AΣN conference, the issues committee reasoned that: "If AΣN is to honor students desirous of said honor, no one should be eliminated on grounds of sex. The present set-up contradicts the notion of Jesuit honor students." By 1973, they were officially merged. Currently, 1,800 men and women are annually inducted as life-time members into AΣN, the only honor society permitted to bear the Jesuit name. The tradition that Danihy began of giving new members a key and certificate that bore the three Greek letters AΣN and the eye of wisdom continues today as its 60,000 members commit themselves to scholarship, loyalty, and service. ■

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