

WOMEN'S SELF-GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION SCRAPBOOK, 1926-1931

Series 30/14

Box 1 (dropfront box)

History

Northwestern University's Women's Self-Government Association (1923- 1950) had roots deep in the University's history. The concept of self-government for women students first came to Northwestern in 1873 with the arrival of Frances Willard as the University's first Dean of Women. Women had been able to attend Northwestern University since 1869, when one woman was enrolled. In 1870, women students were encouraged to gain concurrent admission to the Evanston College for Ladies where they could board and take courses in art and music along with their University courses. The Evanston College for Ladies had a strict set of rules governing mealtimes, study hours, daily prayers and the reception of guests. It also had a program of self-government developed by the College's President, Frances Willard, where women policed themselves, evaluating their compliance with the rules of the College. When the Evanston College for Ladies merged with Northwestern University in 1873, Willard became the University's first Dean of Women and brought her self-government program with her. This proved to be controversial within the University, as it placed women under the sole governance of the Dean of Women and established separate rules for women students. Willard resigned from the University in 1874 because of the controversy.

After Willard's resignation, women students were largely governed by residency requirements. Women students were limited to two residence halls on campus, the Woman's College or College Cottage. The Dean of Women, or a principal appointed by the Dean, lived in the Woman's College and had direct oversight over the students who resided there. A separate but affiliated organization, the Women's Educational Aid Association, had oversight of the women who resided at College Cottage. At both residence halls, high standards of behavior and deportment were maintained and the buildings were meant to resemble "Christian homes" in the "Christian association, influence and discipline" that women received there. These rules governing women's residence and behavior on campus were in place until the early 1900's. Although there were several women's organizations on campus, including literary societies, sororities and the Young Women's Christian Association, these organizations had little to do with the governance of women students.

In 1906, the Women's League was formed. Initially, the League's primary purpose was to provide social activities for women not involved with the sororities on campus, but it soon became involved with a new variation on the concept of women's self-government. Around 1910, college campuses around the United States began considering offering their women students more responsibility for policing their own activities. At Northwestern, this movement became formal in 1918 when the Women's League formed a Judiciary Committee that was in charge of creating rules for women on campus and monitoring students' compliance with these rules. The Women's League was under the supervision of the Dean of Women but had a fair amount of independence as well. The Dean sat on the League's Executive Board, approved the rules that were adopted each year, and was the final arbiter of any appeals of punishments, but the League was largely free to set its own agenda and enforce its rules.

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The Women's League changed its name to the Women's Self-Government Association (WSGA) in 1923. The WSGA continued the work of the Women's League, setting, enforcing, and interpreting the rules that governed all aspects of women's lives on campus. All women students were automatically members of the WSGA and all of them were governed by its rules. These rules included regulations regarding women's residence on campus; hours and rules for women's absence from their residences; rules governing women's attendance at sporting events, on and off-campus; quiet hours and lights-out hours for residence halls; and rules regarding male visitors at women's residence halls. The WSGA also developed a complicated points system that governed the number of organizational activities women students could participate in, based on the level of responsibility a student attained in the organization and the hours of time membership in the organization required. This point system was used to control women's extracurricular activity, preventing them from sacrificing academic achievement for social and organizational involvement.

In addition to its rules-setting activities, the WSGA also provided social activities for women students. These included "Big Sister" programs for freshman women; class council organizations called "Lanterns" (with each class year identified by a different color); and May week activities, including holding the May festival, editing a special issue of the *Daily Northwestern* newspaper, and electing the May queen. The WSGA also established a special vocational guidance program and lecture series specifically on careers for women. During WWII, the WSGA organized women's volunteer activities in the USO and the Red Cross, and offered "defense courses" in typing, shorthand, home nursing and knitting.

The structure of the WSGA changed over time. Originally, the executive board and judiciary committee took responsibility for social activities and conduct matters as well as setting the rules for women's houses. By the 1940s the organization was composed solely of women's house presidents who set house rules and set up lectures and special events. The WSGA had long been associated with the Intercollegiate Association of Women Students and in 1946 hosted the national conference of the organization on campus. In 1950, the WSGA changed its name to Associated Women Students (AWS). In 1967, women students circulated a petition that called for abolishing all rules on campus that applied only to women. College campuses throughout the United States were experiencing the same kind of movement toward changing what many saw as a double standard towards women. At Northwestern, the women students' petition initiated several years of discussion which ultimately resulted in the complete dismantling of the separate governing structure for women students in the spring of 1968. Although AWS continued to function as an organization on campus, it no longer had rule-setting responsibilities.

Description of the Series

The Women's Self-Government Association Scrapbook spans approximately the years 1926 to 1933 and provides a wide overview of the organization's responsibilities and activities throughout this period, predominantly with newspaper clippings from the *Daily Northwestern*. There are over sixty pages of newspaper clippings dealing with most aspects of the WSGA:

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including the setting and implementation of house rules, the requirements to attend away games, the organization of a vocational guidance program, as well a number of social activities that involve the election of the May Queen. Most of the clippings are undated.

The other items in the scrapbook include seven pieces of correspondence dating from 1927 to 1931, several copies of the constitution and by-laws of the Intercollegiate Association of Women Students (IAWS), the WSGA's parent organization, ballots from the yearly WSGA presidential elections during this period, a small number of away game tickets, a vocational survey, a chart of the new points system set up in the late 1920s, several programs for WSGA events (1928-1932), as well as newsletters related to IAWS activities (1931-1932).

The original scrapbook, which was deteriorating due to the newspaper clippings it contained, was preservation-photocopied and returned to the Archives in spring of 2004. The pages of the original scrapbook were retained and are filed in the same box as the photocopied scrapbook.

Cross References

Records of the Women's Educational Aid Association, 1871-2000 (Series 55/38).
Student handbooks (University Archives Serials Collection).

Provenance: The Women's Self-Government Association Scrapbook was transferred to the University Archives by Charlotte Voigts of Alumni Relations, on June 12, 1980, as Accession No. 80-95.

Restrictions: None.

Separations: None.

Processor: Amber Thessen and Lori Osborne; May 2004.

Reformatted by: Rachel C. Teuer; July 27, 2004.