

History of AAUW

The year was 1881. The location was Boston. A young woman named Marion Talbot realized that women like her with college degrees really had no outlets for their education and few ways to serve their communities. Her mother suggested that there must be other college-educated women who were having the same problem. In November 1881, 17 young women met and decided to form some kind of organization. They sent out a call to women graduates in the area. Just six weeks later 65 women met and formed the Association of Collegiate Alumnae. Their purpose was to unite alumnae of different colleges for practical educational work.

Practical educational work! Today we'd call it advancing equity for women and girls. Our founding mothers began their practical educational work by disproving some of the false ideas, which were popular at that time. In his book, *Sex in Education*, Dr. Edward Clark, a professor at Harvard Medical School, declared that higher education for women would impair their physical health. Further, an educated woman would surely produce a malformed offspring. The rationale was that studying drew the nourishing blood from the fetus to the brain! That ridiculous notion was disproved by our very first research study in 1885. It was followed by a long line of studies which continue to this day: infant development 1936; financing of public education 1955; status of women in higher education 1970; *How Schools Shortchange Girls* 1992; and our latest research, *Where the Girls Are: The Facts About Gender Equity in Education* published last year, which makes it clear that girls' gains have not come at the expense of boys.

After the first world war, we began to award fellowships to women from other countries. We worked hard for the constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote. Can you picture our foremothers wearing middies and marching in parades when carrying a sign took a lot more courage than it does now?

In 1889 we welcomed the Western Association of Collegiate Alumnae and in 1921 the Southern Association of Collegiate Women. The combined organizations took the name The American Association of University Women. How we have grown over the years! Now we have nearly ninety thousand members in more than 1000 branches and as members-at-large.

At the time of AAUW's fiftieth anniversary in 1931, our reputation had increased to the point that Mary Wooley, chair of the International Relations Committee, was appointed as one of the U.S. delegates to the disarmament conference in Geneva. Later we established a refugee fund to assist university women fleeing dictatorships. During the second world war AAUW supported the formation of women's units of the Armed Services and called for equal pay and rank. Doesn't that sound familiar?

At the end of the Second World War AAUW member Virginia Gildersleeve was the only woman member of the United States delegation to the conference to establish the UN. As far as I know she was the only woman in any delegation. It was Gildersleeve who insisted on the phrase "We, the Peoples" in the preamble of the UN charter.

Last year we gained special consultative status at the United Nations with the Economic and Social Council. Now AAUW will participate in international conferences, sign onto the non-governmental organization statements and share our expertise.

We've been supporting or opposing legislation affecting women and girls since 1898 when we formed our first legislative committee. By 1900 we were advocating child labor laws. In 1930, that's 1930, 79 years ago, we urged the dispensing of contraceptive devices by physicians. In 1994 we were successful in getting our first AAUW legislation, gender equity provisions, into the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In 2000 we developed the Educating America's Girls act. So now we're authoring legislation!

This year is the one hundred and twenty-first anniversary of the EF fellowship ever awarded. In 1888, Ida Street was awarded three hundred and fifty dollars to study English at the University of Michigan. Today, stipends run as high as thirty thousand dollars. I wish you could have been with me at NASA in Houston for the dedication of the Judith Resnik memorial fellowship. Maybe you knew that it was an EF fellowship that enabled Judy to get her doctorate in engineering and become an astronaut. But did you know that she was a member of the Clear Lake, Texas branch?

In 2008 AAUW branches, members-at-large, foundations, and corporations contributed over three and a half million dollars. That makes our foundation the largest non-university source of graduate fellowships for women. Three and a half million dollars seems like a lot of money - but that amount funds only three to six percent of the women who seek more education. Still that's a lot of fundraisers and checks written. My favorite was a live auction held by my branch. You know the kind of auction in which branch members donate all sorts of goodies like vacation homes or home baked bread or dinners for six. Those present had maybe one glass of wine too many and then bid on each other's offerings. You should have heard the spirited bidding on breakfast in bed - for four!

Let's not forget that EF works both ways. We give money - but we get it back for special projects and to start new careers. A member of my branch received a career development grant and became a substance abuse counselor. With two kids in college she couldn't have afforded the fees without the grant. So the next time you hear branch members complaining that they send money to Washington and don't get anything back, ask them why they haven't applied for a community action or career development grant.

LAF, the Legal Advocacy Fund, is a major program of AAUW. It works to combat sexual discrimination in higher education and in the workplace. It provides support to sex discrimination cases that have the potential to make a difference. I served on the LAF board for two years and I've come to realize that far from competing with the Educational Foundation, the Legal Advocacy Fund complements it. Remember this sentence: EF opens doors for women; LAF keeps them open.

In 1987 we began to admit men to AAUW and stopped being a sexist organization. Our male members genuinely believe in equity for women.

The Leadership Training Institute is the youngest of our major programs. Founded in 2002, it hosts the National Conference for College Women Student Leaders every year. This year over 400 young college women learned about advocacy, leadership skill building, and financial management. I'm excited about Campaign College, a Leadership Training Institute program being taken to college campuses which trains women students to run for campus leadership positions with obvious carry over to community leadership.

Four years ago we extended membership to those with associate degrees. More than two thousand associate degree holders have joined. Last month over 900 of us met in convention in St. Louis. We combined ourselves into one organization called AAUW and gave each member the right to vote.

I've talked a lot about our past and present accomplishments. In fact, I've talked too long. When I was in Argentina visiting branches of the Argentine Federation of University Women, I discovered the very best way to give a short speech - give it in another language! But if you'll bear with me another minute, I want to mention some of the exciting programs that are available to branches now. A new video tour called Second Life; Program in a box – everything a branch needs to put on mission based programs; free e-student memberships for 4 years of college and then a gift membership; Sisters in Action, the follow-up program to Sister to Sister; our upcoming research on girls in STEM: science, technology, engineering and math.

It's an exciting time to be an AAUW member. I think you'll agree that AAUW is a provider of possibilities - a provider of possibilities - an organization through which we can break through barriers so that all women have a fair chance.

Thank you.

Jo Harberson