

2006

Delta Epsilon Sigma Honors Convocation (Photo), Delta Epsilon Sigma: Scholastic Honor Society at the College of Saint Benedict, 1940-Present

Carol Berg OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, cberg@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Berg, Carol OSB (2006) "Delta Epsilon Sigma Honors Convocation (Photo), Delta Epsilon Sigma: Scholastic Honor Society at the College of Saint Benedict, 1940-Present," *Headwaters: Vol. 23*, 16-24. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol23/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Headwaters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Delta Epsilon Sigma Honors Convocation



Delta Epsilon Sigma Honors Convocation, Omega Chapter, College of Saint Benedict, 1964.

Left to right: S. Mariella Gable, OSB; Diane Smith; Paula Muggli; Mrs. Richard Palmquist; Karen Kloubec; S. Mary Grell, OSB.

Photo courtesy of the CSB Archives.

Delta Epsilon Sigma: Scholastic Honor Society at the College of Saint Benedict, 1940–Present

The Omega Chapter of Delta Epsilon Sigma (DES), a national Catholic honor society, is now fifty-five years old. Yet few members of the campus community know of its existence much less any of its history. This article is meant to remedy the situation by informing readers of the philosophy, operations, and format of the national organization, and our local branch.

The College of Saint Benedict was in its twenty-sixth year when the Academic Dean, Sister Claire Lynch, wrote to the Reverend Edward Fitzgerald of Columbia College, Dubuque, Iowa, responding to his inquiry about interest in setting up a national scholastic honor society for students, faculty, and graduates of colleges and universities with a Catholic tradition. As was true of many Catholic colleges and universities nationally, Sister Claire's response was very favorable. By fall of 1939, Father Fitzgerald had assembled an executive committee as well as an insignia and regalia committee to work on a philosophy statement and format for the society. A founders' group was established and Sister Claire was appointed a member. The Reverend John Elbert of the University of Dayton in Ohio became the first DES president.

A constitutional convention was held in Kansas City in April 1939 in conjunction with the annual meeting of the National Catholic Educational Association. At this meeting, Father Fitzgerald, now Secretary-Treasurer of DES, gave a speech explaining the philosophy and goals of DES. He quoted President Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago, who had issued a challenge to Catholic educators to revive the Catholic ideal of education and culture:

Catholic colleges have copied the worst features of secular education — vocationalism, athleticism, and collegiatism, but they are not imitating the better features of true education: recognition of high scholastic achievement, encouragement of scientific research and development of an intense intellectual activity.

Fitzgerald added his own comments as to the purpose of DES:

Its purpose would be to recognize and encourage scholarship, friendship, and cultural interests, and its members would be chosen from the undergraduates in colleges of liberal arts and sciences on the basis of high scholarship, liberal culture and good character.

He mentioned more than a hundred Catholic colleges and universities “singling out their choicest graduates as potential intellectual leaders in the social and spiritual regeneration of our people.” These graduates were to be major contributors to both church and state. The aspect of service, which was to become stronger over the years, was thus suggested but not made explicit.

A letter from Father Fitzgerald to Sister Claire, dated April 15, 1940, notified her that CSB was granted the Omega Chapter in DES. The franchise fee was \$25, with a \$2 fee for each inductee. Sister Claire responded in a letter of May 9, 1940, informing him that two senior students were elected to DES: Mary Jane Loso and Elsie Tahnk, along with three faculty members — Sister Mariella Gable, Sister Luanne Meagher, and Sister Claire Lynch, all Benedictines and alumnae of the college.

Sister Claire, first president of the Omega Chapter, gave an address at the induction ceremony on June 7, 1940, announcing that “four of the six Catholic colleges of Minnesota are among the charter members of DES.” There were thirty Catholic college members nationally at the time. Membership was offered to students at the beginning of their senior year so that they could attend chapter meetings and “keep constantly before the minds of the under-classmen the specific purpose for their being in a college, namely the development of the intellect.”

The second annual convention of DES was held in New Orleans on April 18, 1941. Thirty-five chapters were represented, Sister Claire attending on behalf of CSB. That same year, Sister Mariella Gable, CSB English professor, was elected president of Omega Chapter, while the Reverend William Dillon of St. Joseph College for Women in Brooklyn, New York, became DES national president.

Minutes of the June 9, 1941, chapter meeting summarize motions that the members voted into action, such as students in the senior class — possibly juniors, too — holding a B- average be invited to a chapter meeting in the first semester. Another motion ruled “that lectures on Newman be given the entire student body and that faculty members give more lectures.” The motion indicated that such lectures were to be given in campus clubs, not just in classrooms. Of greater interest to us today is the motion that “more written papers be required of all students with greater correlation of all the subjects studied.”

In June 1942 Omega Chapter elected Sister Incarnata Girgen, CSB history professor, to membership and also as the new president. At this meeting, a request was sent to the dean “that more recognition be given to new members of the chapter at commencement exercises

by mentioning their election to DES.” This decision was carried out and continues to this day. For the first time a suggestion was made to invite a guest speaker every spring to address the chapter on the occasion of induction of new members. Father Conrad Diekmann of Saint John’s University was invited for the April 1942 convocation.

The DES newsletter in 1943 noted that there were 50 chapters nationally, with a total of approximately 700 members. The national president, Reverend Francis J. Furey of Immaculate College in Pennsylvania, although pleased with the growing numbers, explained that “membership shall be limited to those students enrolled in a liberal arts course.” This explicitly excluded students whose course was primarily technical. In the winter of 1942, Sister Luanne had written to the national office asking if membership was allowed to every major, as at the College of Saint Benedict a student with a Home Economics major was being nominated. The reply she received was that students majoring in non-liberal studies must have 105 total credits in liberal arts subjects. This issue remained disputed well into the 1950s, but eventually DES accepted a minimum of 90 credits of liberal arts subjects for any inductee.

Six new members entered Omega Chapter in 1943 with an average GPA of 2.3. Members were encouraged to do extra reading, mainly in Catholic literature, and to report on their insights orally and/or in writing. Book reviews were solicited for publication in the campus journal, *The Benet*. This practice remained a constant throughout the decades.

Omega Chapter usually held its Honors Convocation in either March or April. First on the agenda was a guest speaker. Then the candidates took the pledge and were presented with a certificate and key. A reception, called a “tea,” was held for all attendees, followed by a special meal later for the inductees and other DES members. The convocation usually took place around 4:30 or 5 p.m. on a weekday. The practice of holding the reception on Sundays began in the 1960s.

Omega Chapter held three regular meetings each year — two in fall and one in spring. One was for reading and discussion, one for electing new members, and one for the induction. Three yearly meetings remained fairly constant well into the 1960s. The fall 1945 minutes give suggestions for a reading list and how to get more publicity for DES on campus. A committee made lists of possible books for a four-year program. The list contained all spiritual readings by such authors as Gilbert K. Chesterton, Abbot Cuthbert Butler, Abbot Columba Marmion, Hilaire Belloc, Abbot Anscar Vonier, Dom David Knowles, and Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. It was heavy reading indeed.

Saint John’s University established a DES chapter too, but it held only sporadic meetings. Mention was made in the February 1946 Omega minutes of inviting the Saint John’s Mu Chapter to the spring Honors Convocation. Although the invitation was issued, apparently nothing came of it.

The November 1946 Omega Chapter minutes note that the office of president and vice-president would be extended to two years rather than the usual one year. Sister Enid Smith

held the position of president for three years, and in 1951 she had the distinction of being elected national vice-president of DES.

A letter from the national DES office dated December 31, 1946, listed 56 chapters with a total of approximately 1,200 members. Sister Luanne informed the office in a letter dated March 20, 1947, that Omega Chapter counted 20 members with four new ones to be inducted.

From 1940–1959 Omega Chapter presidents were all Benedictine sisters, either faculty members or administrators. Professor Angeline Dufner, CSB English Department, was the first lay woman to be elected president (March 1959). Two sisters succeeded her and then the second lay woman, Patricia Gitz Opatz, took office in 1965. From that year on, Benedictine sisters and lay women held the presidency, with lay women slightly outnumbering sisters. The position of secretary-treasurer was mostly lay women after the 1940s. Today neither office exists, but an on-campus moderator chairs a selection committee, whereas applications and all correspondence are handled by the academic dean's office.

Book discussions and reviews were the major program activity for Omega Chapter throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, and into the first two or three years of the 1970s. Biographies, autobiographies, and spiritual reading books dominated. By the mid-1970s, however, fewer Omega members were showing up for these discussions because many were able to pursue such reading in their regular studies. But a reading list was maintained, even without ensuing discussion.

Speakers for the annual chapter Honors Convocation tended to be university faculty from large institutions, such as Catholic University, Notre Dame, the University of Minnesota, and St. Louis University. Other speakers were mainly authors and politicians at both state and national levels. Among them were Frank O'Malley, Allen Tate, Walter J. Ong, Columba Cary-Elwes, Marshall McLuhan, Vance Packard, and James P. Shannon. By the 1970s, DES and the Warner Lecture Program frequently shared sponsorship of a speaker since expenses had escalated considerably. Travel expenses were paid plus a stipend averaging \$250–\$300. A few of the speakers paid their own transportation costs.

A letter from the national DES president in 1958 gave the total national membership as 4,000, but he thought this an undercount since not all DES chapters were sending in annual reports. As of 1959, the DES constitution and by-laws were allowing induction of juniors rather than limiting election to current seniors. This change gave young women a longer time to become acquainted with DES values and help raise awareness of the society among more students. The national office suggested that every DES chapter have a minimum of two meetings a year. Omega held three yearly into the 1960s, though attendance was sporadic by that decade.

As of 1961, Omega Chapter listed a total of 79 members. Prior to 1963, the lowest GPA for membership was 2.0, representing a B. In fall 1963, Omega Chapter voted to raise the

cut-off point to 2.5. (Before 1964, the College of St. Benedict used a three-point system: A = 3; B = 2; C = 1; D = 0; F = -1.) By the 1970s, the GPA of DES candidates at CSB averaged 2.7; in the next two decades it rose to 3.0. The initiation fee was \$10 by the 1960s, and the key-pin came to another \$7 per inductee.

Saint John's University Mu Chapter had dissolved by the 1950s. In an October 1963 letter, Father Dunstan Tucker told Sister Mariella Gable, again president of Omega Chapter, "We are going to revive our Mu Chapter of DES." He asked about possible joint meetings and about the election processes of Omega Chapter. Sister Mariella's reply informed him that there were eight CSB faculty members who were DES members, and that a faculty member usually served as chapter president. She mentioned the Omega Chapter had a hundred members as of spring 1963. There is no evidence of any joint chapter meetings. *The Record*, SJU student newspaper, refers to Mu Chapter once more in April 1967, but no further mention recurs after that.

In 1963 Sister Mariella sent a letter to Omega members, dated September 9, asking their help in nominating students for membership. She listed four requirements for membership: high scholarship, good character, liberal culture, and promise of making the ideals of Catholic culture prevail. That same year Vatican II Council opened, and two books that Omega Chapter opted to read and discuss were *The Nun in the World* and *The Emerging Layman*.

A report in fall 1963 notes that "the present National Constitution places no express limit on the number of candidates that can be elected in any one year." Until then, Omega Chapter averaged three to five new members annually. By the 1970s, the average was eight to ten. Twelve inductees, eleven of them juniors, were accepted in 1964 — the largest number to date. Until spring 1964, all chapter expenses were paid by the college, with the exception of insignia (pins), which the new members paid for themselves. Yearly chapter dues were still \$2 though a raise was mentioned, ranging from \$3 to \$5. No vote was taken on this matter.

The 1965 silver jubilee of the founding of Omega Chapter coincided with the completion of the Benedicta Arts Center. The featured book was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *The Future of Man*, with Sister Mariella as discussion leader. She was known as a Teilhard de Chardin scholar and promoted his works throughout and beyond the campus. Held in the BAC Forum, the discussion meeting was open to guests. From this time on, the convocation lecture was open to the public.

At the March 1965 meeting, much discussion ensued about the nomination of faculty members to DES membership. The single specific requirement in the national constitution is an "existing appointment to the teaching staff." Membership in DES, according to Sister Mariella, "is not an honor for a faculty member, but rather a means to obtain necessary faculty guidance and support." Minutes show that the only Omega Chapter faculty mem-

bers not elected as students were Sister Mariella (a charter member), and Sisters Enid and Incarnata, both of whom were elected while serving as academic dean.

The minutes of October 11, 1970, refer to the future of the Omega Chapter. A question arose: Should we continue to have an active Omega Chapter? Under consideration were the weak financial status, the poorly defined relationship of the chapter to the college, and the general lack of support and interest from both faculty and students. Omega Chapter, it was said, had not done all it could to promote good public relations. A committee of volunteers was chosen to clarify and improve the relationship of the chapter to the college community and to try to reach DES members who were not attending meetings or paying dues. The committee gave a report dated November 30, 1970. Recommendations were that the Honors Convocation be held at a time more conducive for students — perhaps not on a Sunday, or perhaps later in the evening—and that there be better publicity and better preparation of new members.

A letter from the Omega president on March 17, 1971, brought up a new issue: “We have chosen nine prospective members . . . four of the students reject the idea of a public induction ceremony.” These students wanted a private one, for members only. The national DES president said in reply that the students’ request did not surprise her. She also suggested that each chapter should proceed at it saw fit. In November 1972, Omega Chapter voted to keep the induction ceremony public. The consensus was that any nominees for Omega Chapter who wanted only a private ceremony should be dropped.

In the summer of 1976, a new system of selecting DES members was presented by the Omega Chapter president: “. . . obtaining the names of seniors with a 3.5 GPA or above and informing them that they are academically eligible for membership in DES. If the student feels that she has the leadership qualities necessary for admission into DES, she fills out a detailed application and must obtain two recommendations from faculty members at CSB or SJU.” DES members in the area were then invited to meet to review the applications and make recommendations. This self-nomination process has continued to the present.

A letter from the Omega Chapter president dated March 13, 1978, noted that the fall meeting included a discussion of the future of Omega Chapter. By now, Omega Chapter had limited itself to two functions per year: a fall book discussion and a spring induction ceremony. On-campus chapter members felt that they had ample opportunities for book discussion in their regular courses as well as through participating in campus-sponsored programs.

By the 1980s and 1990s, grade inflation was common nationally, affecting the GPA requirement for admission to DES. In 1981, for example, 41 students were eligible to apply for DES membership. Twenty-five of the 41 actually applied. The average GPA of the four selected was 3.75. In the 1990s, however, the number of students receiving a GPA of 3.5 and above had swelled so much that the potential pool of applicants to Omega Chapter became

unwieldy. Consequently, in 2003 a GPA of 3.9 became the norm for application to DES, remaining so to this day.

DES annually offers national scholarships for the best undergraduate essays. Omega Chapter averages one or two essays in national competition each year. Our success rate is high: nine awards over the past twelve years (1993–2005). In 1993, 1995, and 2001, Omega had two winners each year. The scholarships are worth \$1,000 and are intended to help defray tuition costs.

The motto of the DES society, taken from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and, translated from the original Greek, reads: "It is the mission of the wise person to put things in order." When DES was founded in 1939, more emphasis was placed on intellectual excellence and pursuits. But early on the organization began to connect intellectualism with public service. The rite of induction carries the statement that the chapter, in choosing new inductees, does so with "a sincere desire to obtain the best possible membership of persons devoted to scholastic achievement and to the corresponding responsibility of service to others."

Although Omega Chapter has been less visible on campus in recent years, the organization remains a viable, vital one, attracting a large number of student applicants annually. From 1998 to 2005, applications for admission averaged 14 per year, peaking at 19 in two of those years. Students clearly see value in being members of this honor society, and they compile impressive documentation to meet application requirements.

For the past eight years I have been closely involved with both the fall selection of Omega Chapter candidates and the spring induction ceremony. It is a delight to read the many files describing the applicants' thinking, goals, and actions. To say they are impressive is an understatement; the applicants are extraordinary and their files leave one in awe of their achievements and their plans. Academic Dean/Associate Provost Rita Knuesel takes an active role in the induction ceremony, reading summaries of inductees' accomplishments to an audience of family, friends, faculty, and administrators. She states repeatedly that she takes great pleasure in highlighting the inductees' outstanding intellectual and service records. It "leaves a positive glow," she says. I concur wholeheartedly.

Omega Chapter may not be in headlines daily or monthly, but it is alive and well. Commitment to the criteria of intellectual excellence and service to others remains as strong today as it was at the founding of the organization. One of the 2003 inductees, commenting on the criteria, wrote in her application essay: "It may be harder to continue with these intellectual and service activities once I leave the nurturing, supporting setting of St. Ben's and St. John's, but my experiences have taught me that these activities are important. So I will find a way to integrate them into my life once I leave this place. I will find a way to make a difference."

Making a difference is what DES expects of its members and Omega Chapter has enrolled and plans to continue to enroll hundreds of women who embody well both DES and Benedictine values.

Archival Sources

1. **AC 07.77 Box 01** Contains a history of DES and the Omega Chapter, program descriptions, lists of inductees, minutes of chapter meetings, and correspondence. Especially useful are letters and minutes describing how Omega Chapter evolved over its first dozen years. There are also lists of all inductees from 1940–2004 and chapter officers from 1940–1975. Material in this box covers mainly the years 1940–1963. (*Note.* Some photos of DES members are scattered throughout the first three boxes.)
2. **AC 07.77 Box 02** Contains chapter minutes, correspondence, lists of inductees and some program descriptions. The years cover 1964–1976.
3. **AC 07.77 Box 03** Contains chapter minutes, correspondence, lists of inductees and some program announcements. And, for the first time, inductee application forms are included, along with letters of recommendation — though only beginning in 1982 for the latter. The years cover 1977–1983.
4. **AC 07.77 Box 04** Contains some chapter minutes, lists of inductees, program descriptions, correspondence, and some inductee application forms with letters of recommendation. Material is sparse, much of it missing for the years 1987 and 1988. The years cover 1984–1993.
5. **AC 07.77 Box 05** Contains only inductee application forms and letters of recommendation. The years cover 1994–1999.
6. **AC 07.77 Box 06** Contains a few memos, though mostly inductee application forms with letters of recommendation and some program descriptions. The years cover 2000–2004.

AC = Accession number