

THE HISTORY OF THE DRAKE UNIVERSITY ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

"A University is known by the character of its Alumni." These words, spoken by Drake University's fifth president, Arthur Holmes, signify the importance of alumni in an institution's past, present, and future. As alumni, students have a continuing role in the fortunes of the University. Drake's founders recognized this fact by organizing an alumni association even before the university was officially established. The first Drake alumni did not graduate from Drake University itself. On June 12, 1881, the Board of Trustees declared that all Oskaloosa College alumni that wished to declare allegiance to the new Drake University would be able to elect two members to the Drake Board of Trustees, giving them a voice in the newly formed institution. These "borrowed" alumni continued to elect members to the Board until they were lost in the larger tide of "true" Drake alumni.

The Alumni Association was in the beginning a purely volunteer organization, formed in the spring of 1913 with its constitution adopted during that year's Commencement week. Its basic purpose was to maintain contact with alumni of the university, which it met by publishing the *Drake Alumnus* each month during the school year. The first *Alumnus* was issued on November 14, 1913, with Marion H. Morrison as its editor. It contained sports news, alumni stories, reunion information, Drake traditions, campus events, and "News of the Classes," dating from 1871 on!

In 1917 alumnae in Des Moines met to start an endowment campaign to underwrite women's housing on Drake's campus. The first local alumni chapter was born out of this meeting. Although their effort to raise funds was unsuccessful, the chapter served as a important model for future local chapters.

As the alumni pool grew each year, the volunteer Alumni Association found it more and more difficult to remain in contact with the diverse and separated groups. The university began to realize that an official organization was needed to keep the relationship with its alumni members from deteriorating. The impetus to start an official Alumni Association came after World War I when the Greater Drake University Campaign brought together the names and addresses of approximately two thousand graduates and former students.

On December 19, 1919, the President of the Des Moines Alumni Association chapter, Rev. W. A. Shullenberger, and the President of the Drake Alumni Athletic Association, F.W. Swanson, met at the Grant Club in Des Moines to consider the possibility of organizing one all-embracing alumni association. The idea was enthusiastically received by both associations and a request was brought before the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees of Drake University. The committee representing the associations requested the Board to authorize an all-encompassing Alumni Association. Its membership was to include all former graduates of Drake University, all former students, their husbands and wives, and others given an honorary membership.

The Board of Trustees was also asked to take immediate steps to secure a general secretary, including a budget for his salary, traveling expenses, and office supplies. The office of general secretary was to hold an exalted position, reporting directly to the President of the University. Yet the organizers saw the secretary role being filled by a man of "marvelously varied talents and supreme ability far beyond the comparatively meager equipment of the usual college president" (*Drake Alumnus*, Jan. 1920). The secretary was to be in charge of enrolling members, collecting dues, editing the alumni journal, and traveling across the country to organize local chapters within the newly formed Alumni Association.

The goals of the Alumni Association were also clearly defined. Not only would it assist its alma mater in every possible way, but it would assist every individual member. The alumni were challenged to advance Drake University by encouraging potential students to attend the university, publicizing Drake's activities, and giving money to help fund university events. The Alumni Association, in return, would give alumni an official channel for complete information about university events, activities, and future plans. The association was also viewed as a networking opportunity for recent graduates looking for employment from past alumni.

The first General Alumni Secretary was Robert L. Finch, a 1910 Drake graduate who gave up a promising insurance career to "mould together the children of his Alma Mater in an organization that will literally reach all over the world" (*Drake Alumnus*, Aug-Sept. 1920). He was appointed in 1920 and wasted no time in putting together a strong alumni program for the university. In December of the same year, he appointed secretaries of respective classes in the College of Liberal Arts to serve as liaisons between the Alumni program and class members. These secretaries were charged to keep in active touch with members of their classes.

The first member of the new Alumni Association to turn in his membership card and pay his dues was Professor Charles O. Denny of the class of 1889. He said, "I am glad to become a member of the new Drake Alumni Association in the faith that it will prove to be the effective organization toward which many have looked almost from the beginning. Surely the full development of the progress outlined as the goal of the new Alumni Association ought to enlist everyone who still remembers the thrill of the old days when his blood warmed to uphold the fair name of Drake in every crisis."

The alumni were called upon to secure Drake University's future in 1921 as the first Alumni Fund was established. The Fund was initiated to cover the annual deficit, student aid loan funds, Alumni office expenses, athletic expansion, and to start a new buildings sinking fund among other things. Each alumni was encouraged to pledge an amount to start this fund. This was the beginning of the tradition to call upon alumni for financial aid to support the betterment of Drake University as a whole.

The present alumni structure dates from 1953. The Drake University National Alumni Association was established as a semi-autonomous body to serve as a link between alumni and the university. It works to meet five objectives: the keeping of records and recognition of achievement, the dissemination of information, assistance in placement of alumni, the recruitment of new students, and building up the Alumni Annual Fund. These objectives are still important in the present, but the areas of student recruitment, fund raising, and programming are especially emphasized. No dues are required today to be a member of the association.

Today graduates are reminded by the alumni board president that they are entering the ranks of alumni during commencement. They have a tie to the university, which the Alumni Association was created to maintain. As Howard J. Clark said in 1921, and which still holds true today, "Henceforth the future of Drake University is in the hands of its Alumni."

Written by Renee Ahrens, Carpenter Scholar, July 1994