

Chi Omega has been a leader among Greek organizations since the early 1900s. The tradition continues today. In this column, *Greeks Speak*, you'll find information about the latest developments and accomplishments in the inter-fraternal world and how Chi Omega is making a difference.

Fraternities, Sororities, and Our Hellenic Heritage

—by Kristy Oberlander Stevenson, Alpha Kappa/North Carolina State U

Familiarity with Greek and Latin have long been the epitome of higher education, hence their use in group mottos. Many of today's fraternities and sororities (from the Latin, *frater* and *soror*, meaning "brother" and "sister" respectively), including honor and academic

This 5th century B.C. Greek coin with the likeness of Demeter is in the Chi Omega Archives at Executive Headquarters.



societies, social, and service groups, use Greek letter names. These organizations were created to foster close friendships and provide an outlet for free expression in a time when Greek was very much part of the curriculum. They've evolved into respected agents for philanthropy as well as instruments of self-improvement and leadership. But how did we officially become Greek letter organizations? There is no definitive answer, but history suggests it may have been a matter of precedent.

"You can't know where you're going
unless you know where you've been." —Aristotle

The 18th edition of *Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities* (dedicated to Chi Omega's Mary Love Collins "for whose example of character and exercise of wise leadership the entire Greek-letter world is profoundly indebted") identifies the origin and evolution of Greek culture in the mid to late nineteenth century when students began forming groups to debate and discuss current events and literature. These students—both men and women—wanted to learn about a greater variety of topics than were offered in the classroom, explore other academic venues in more detail, and be able to express ideas freely. Many began as debating and literary societies that progressed into deeper relationships. By the end of the nineteenth century, fraternity life was still centered on intellectual conversation, but it had socially expanded to organize dances, sporting events, and other recreational activities.

When fraternities launched, their ceremonies often stemmed from combinations of: ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and literature; Jewish and Christian scripture; chivalric tradition; military codes of honor, precepts and forms of Freemasonry; and scientific history from the Ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism and Greek philosophy.

The Phi Beta Kappa society is recognized as the first Greek letter student group in North America. It was founded in 1776 by John Heath, after he failed at admission to the two existing Latin letter fraternities at his college. Greek was also chosen as the language for the group's motto due to the classical education of the time and Heath being known as "the

best Greek scholar" in an era in which it was an academic requirement. Phi Beta Kappa set the tone and instituted many of the characteristics of modern day fraternities: a Greek letter name and motto, an oath of secrecy, badge, ritual, seal, and a secret grip or handshake. Other groups founded shortly thereafter emulated the group's characteristics; Phi Beta Kappa did not become the scholastic honor society we know today until the 1820s.

Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu were founded in 1851 and 1852, respectively. However, they were originally known as the Adelphean Society and the Philomathean Society and did not adopt Greek letters until the early 1900s.

After the Civil War, several women's fraternities appeared within a few months of each other. In 1867, I.C. Sorosis (also from the Latin "soror") was patterned after the men's groups and later became Pi Beta Phi. Kappa Alpha Theta organized in 1870 as the first Greek-letter society for women. The term *sorority* was created for Gamma Phi Beta in 1874 as their advisor thought the word *fraternity* imprudent for a group of young ladies. By the turn of the century, national groups had established themselves and organized what is now called the National Panhellenic Conference.

Today there are more than 1,500 fraternities and sororities in existence that use Greek letters in their names, although many are informally known more by their nicknames than their letters. They derive their Greek letters from secret meanings or heritage that make each group unique, yet it's these letters that connect them all through a common origin and bond.

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