

SGA: A HISTORY

The first flash-light photograph was taken in 1898. New York City was incorporated with five boroughs. H.G. Wells wrote *The War of the Worlds*. One Thousand cars were produced. The Curies discovered radium, and a committee of five seniors successfully petitioned President Mead to form a student government called the Students' League.

With a new dormitory system, old rules did not adapt and seemed unnecessary. Regulations, imposed by the faculty seemed incompatible to the purpose of a Mount Holyoke education, which was to develop spiritually and mentally mature women. Students argued that if they could devise their own rules, they would understand the reason behind them, and therefore be more compelled to follow College regulations. The League was vested with the power to supervise church and chapel attendance, quiet hours and the ten o'clock lights-out rule.

Originally an enforcement mechanism, the League's authority grew. In 1905, the Executive Committee was granted legislative power, and by 1911 the League could expel students. However, all powers were subject to faculty approval. One student wrote in the Mount Holyoke that the "powers have been granted to students in name, but not in reality..." The Student's League had no authority to act independently of the faculty.

Her comment is illustrated by a confrontation between faculty and students over the ten o'clock rule, which required all lights to be extinguished at ten in the evening. In 1905, the League petitioned to temporarily suspend the ten o'clock rule for one semester. As a compromise the petition suggested quiet hours after ten, but residents would be allowed to study in their room. The faculty rejected the proposal because they did not feel a majority of the students wanted the regulation suspended. At the next League meeting, the students unanimously agreed the rule should be abolished. This was also rejected, but next year regulation of House rules was added to the League's responsibility. Thus, the League had the power of supervision, but no real authority.

In 1922, the United Mine Workers were on strike for 6 months, Howard Carter discovered the Tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamen, the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated, and insulin was first used for diabetics. In the same year, the Student's League reorganized itself and in cooperation with the President of the College and faculty, created the Mount Holyoke College Community. The purpose of this new body according to its constitution was "to provide an all inclusive organization through which the various College activities may be coordinated." The Community centralized the decision-making process by establishing joint committees. The body lasted 23 years. The disparity of power between the two groups did not allow the Community's goals of equality to be realized.

For example, lists of approved restaurants and theaters were published by the Community. Movie privileges would be summarily revoked without consulting the student's Representative Council. Students would often have to fight to have such privileges reinstated. The purpose of the Judicial Board (JB) was to hear all infraction of the Honor Code and decide appropriate action even if that included suspension. Unfortunately, the JB was too often by-passed, and faculty punished students without using the JB. Students lost their authority and were relegated to preparing issue-dinners and fundraising for such causes as the China Relief Fund.

In 1945, World War II ended. The first atomic bomb was detonated. The United Nations was founded. It was a year of great change for the country and for Mount Holyoke as well. Student's succeeded from the Community, thus creating the Student Government Association. For the first time, students were responsible for both legislation and enforcement of its laws. According to its present constitution, the purpose of the SGA is to "provide a productive tool for students in governing their nonacademic lives and the academic interests at the College," and communicate students' views to faculty, administrators and trustees. SGA also has the power to levy an activities fee and allocate funds for student activities and organizations through the Ways and Means committee.

Even with organizational change over the last hundred years, some themes have remained constant. Always, student government has striven to be inclusive. Starting with the League, every student was a member. Each government also sought to engage in extracurricular and residential life. The League created hall committees to enforce regulations. The Community's executive committee was composed of presidents of the large activities such as the Young Woman's Christian Association, the Drama and the Outing Clubs. The Senate, the ultimate authority of SGA, is comprised of representatives from seventy student organizations, seventeen dorms and twenty-two committees.

Today's student government is a combination of the two previous organizations. Students have self-government, separate from the faculty and not subject to the Faculty Senate's approval. The cooperation prized by founders of the College Community has been achieved by allowing a collaborative relationship on more equal terms between students and faculty. In the SGA, students are formally involved in the academic life of the College. There are two students on the Academic Policy Committee. The Search Committee for the new Dean of the College has two students. The SGA promotes the ideas of civic responsibility and Mount Holyoke women as agents of change. Self-governance provides students with leadership opportunities to actively participate in the campus community. Today's Executive Board of the SGA are confident that the future of student government can only evolve to a more perfect ideal and serve to create leaders.

*—By Amy Schuppert '98, SGA Public Relations Officer 1997–98
Published in the Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly, Winter 1998*