
Opinion

Another View: The AAUW has empowered women since 1881

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Since its first meeting in 1881, AAUW has been a catalyst for change. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) is a nonpartisan, non-profit national organization with over 170,000 members and supporters, as well as 1,000 local branches and more than 800 college and university partners.

Throughout its history, AAUW members have examined and taken positions on the important issues of the times: education, social, economic, and political. Each month this year members of the Rockford Area Branch AAUW will tell the story of the milestones both nationally and locally of AAUW's important role in women's history. Let's start at the beginning.

On Nov. 28, 1881, Marion Talbot and Ellen Richards meet in Boston with 15 alumnae from eight women's colleges to discuss the needs of recent college – educated women. They decided that it was necessary to help broaden opportunities for women in academia. They also discuss the possibility of the formation of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae.

On Jan. 14, 1882, 65 alumnae of the eight “sister” colleges formally establish the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (ACA), the predecessor of AAUW. They draft the Articles of Incorporation, which outline the purpose of the organization. “For practical education work, for collection and publication of statistical and other information concerning education, and in general, for the high standards of education.”

In 1884, branches are admitted as local groups that will carry on the work of the national organization in addition to their local work. Washington, D.C. is home to the first branch. New York, Pacific/San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Boston branches are formed in 1886.

In 1885, the ACA produces its first research report in conjunction with the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor. This report, “Health Statistics of Women College Graduates,” establishes that, contrary to the popular belief, women's health is not adversely affected by attending college.

In 1888, AAUW's long tradition of supporting women in higher education begins when Ida Street receives the first fellowship from the Western Association of Collegiate Alumnae, one of the predecessor organizations of AAUW.

In 1907, the ACA begins the study of Equal Pay for women. At the ACA's 25th anniversary meeting, Ellen Richards, one of the founders, presents her study which details the status of college women a quarter century after the organization's founding. She questions whether college educated women are receiving equal compensation for their work and urges the ACA to "ensure that where women of college training are concerned...they should receive recompense equal to that of any other similarly engaged".

The ACA publishes a report in 1913 with the cooperation of the Washington D.C. branch's study of civil service jobs. It details that women in 13 governmental departments are paid 78 percent of what men make in similar jobs and with similar education and experience!

The ACA continues to help women access further education by providing fellowships. One of these fellowships is awarded to Marie Curie who would become a Nobel Prize winner. With this financial help, she was able to purchase one gram of radium to continue her research. Her daughter later returned some of the unused funds to AAUW which is used to create the endowment that today funds the Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship.

In March 1921, the Southern Association of Collegiate Women (founded in 1903) and the Association of Collegiate Alumnae merge to form the AAUW. AAUW purchases a building for its headquarters two blocks from the White House. AAUW now has a permanent home in the nation's capital where it remains.

In 1931, on its 50th anniversary, AAUW has 521 branches, including Rockford's, and 36,800 members.

AAUW-Rockford Branch is celebrating its 90th anniversary in 2019. It is a non partisan organization and open to both women and men with at least a two-year college degree. For more information, visit <https://rockfordarea-il.aauw.net>.