

Expansions & Mergers, GPA Standards, Open Constitution

EXPANSIONS & MERGERS

One month after the 1879 Convention, the important union with Alpha Sigma Chi was consummated at Ithaca, New York. Through this union, Beta secured a much-desired eastern wing, which it had been unsuccessful in developing previously. Five new chapters were added to the rolls: Cornell, Maine, Rutgers, Stevens and St. Lawrence.

The former secretary of Alpha Sigma Chi, William Raimond Baird, *Stevens 1878/Columbia 1882*, a prominent architect of the merger, was appointed district chief of the new district, beginning many years of outstanding service to Beta Theta Pi.

These events prompted the historian of another fraternity many years later to write:

“Beta Theta Pi is one of the authentic leaders of the Greek world. It and one other share the distinction of having made the largest and most valuable contributions of new and useful ideas to the Greek world. Beta Theta Pi’s history is the story of a magnificent movement which, originating in the West, invaded the South, captured the East and, in 1879, grasped undisputed leadership of the Greek fraternities.”

The rapid expansion of the Fraternity continued and, by 1888-89, correspondence concerning union had sprung up between interested Betas and the three surviving chapters of the *Mystic Seven Society*. For years, this Society had enjoyed a splendid reputation but recently had suffered reverses due, in part, to the Civil War, leaving but three active chapters – Davidson, North Carolina and Virginia. In 1888, an agreement was reached and was approved by the 1889 Convention.

These bold mergers, when joined with the assimilation of several local societies such as Zeta Phi at Missouri, have added tremendously to the roll and success of Beta Theta Pi. The vision and pioneering spirit, particularly exhibited by William Raimond Baird, left a lasting mark on the Fraternity.

GPA STANDARDS

Beta Theta Pi has known cultivation of the intellect as a principle object since her early days with origins in literary societies. Members would participate in this popular extracurricular activity reciting essays, critiquing classmates and debating important questions. This character of the organization adopted from literary roots shaped the Beta experience to augment a student’s education. John Reily Knox, *Miami 1839* was first in his class. Francis W. Shepardson, *Dennison 1883/Brown 1883* was a member of Phi Beta Kappa. The Fraternity has boasted more than 80 Rhodes scholars. High achievement of mind, in and out of the classroom, has been interwoven in Beta’s history.

By the early 1900s this expectation was translated into standards. Beta Theta Pi began requiring for membership that a student achieve the minimum GPA to graduate. This had a positive effect in codifying the expectation that Betas be scholars through and through. As Seth R. Brooks, St. Lawrence ’22 noted, “without devotion to the high standards which Beta has always held we cannot have great chapters.”

In 1984, Beta exercised her pioneering spirit by establishing the first fraternity GPA standard for chapters at 2.5. The president of another international fraternity called this action, “a quantum leap in fraternity history.” The Fraternity again asserted leadership in 1997 by establishing a minimum GPA of 2.5 for individual members to remain in good standing. In 2006 the delegates increased the standard for

chapters to 2.7. Finally in 2012, Beta adopted a 2.8 minimum GPA – or the campus All Men’s Average – for a chapter, whichever is greatest – giving Beta Theta Pi the highest academic standard among Fraternities.

Each of these moves reaffirmed the Fraternity’s commitment to its founding value of devotion to the cultivation of the intellect. Further, they have illustrated the Fraternity’s consistent commitment to her pioneering spirit and setting standards for all Betas to meet.

OPEN CONSTITUTION

It may seem peculiar that the early constitution of Beta Theta Pi was secret, but it was superstitiously believed that the revelation of the constitution of a society would cause its immediate dissolution. It is then all the more impressive that in 1879 Beta Theta Pi led the Greek world in publishing its constitution for all to see and thereby creating a separate ritual containing the parts of the Fraternity.

What was the problem with secrecy? Betas of the time rarely realized that while *they* knew what the Fraternity was about, nobody outside did, especially the faculty. University faculty and administration (one and the same at the time) believed Greek organizations to be subversive, possibly deriving from the common public sentiment against Freemasonry and the fact that their quantity was unknown. Therefore they enacted strict rules prohibiting Greek societies.

In their extensive report to the convention of 1878, a committee composed of Wyllys C. Ransom, *Michigan* 1848, Olin R. Brouse, *DePauw* 1866, and Amandus N. Grant, *DePauw* 1874 stated that the:

“feeling of antagonism, it is believed, has not a general rule, sprung from hostility to secret societies upon general principles, but from the mistaken idea that college secret societies were in matter of fact but little better than juntas or cabals organized among the students for the purpose either of elevating the “Ancient Henry” [slang for raising the devil], of regulating college politics and appointments in personal interest, or of affording organized interference with the proper enforcement of Senate discipline and rules. Entirely in the dark as to the objects and purposes of such organizations, it is, perhaps, not strange that they should have regarded them with suspicion or as of a doubtful utility – especially in those instances where the character of the members was not entirely “sans peur, sans reproche” [without fear, without reproach]. Nor has the feeling of years served other than to intensify this feeling...”

Therefore, this committee recommended the removal of all the esoteric aspects from the constitution. They reasoned that some drastic step had to be taken to avoid the growing anti-fraternity actions of the faculty. This report was adopted by the convention of 1878 and approved by the convention of 1879, giving Beta Theta Pi the first open constitution, and permitting it to be published to the world.

The adoption of the open constitution was a remarkable event in Beta, and the first such action undertaken by any fraternity. The initial feeling that the removal of the esoteric parts was little short of sacrilege, if not an actual catastrophe, gave way and almost all other fraternities have since done the same.