

A VERY COLD RECEPTION:

ROGUE CHAPTER OF ALPHA KAPPA PSI DEFIES CONVENTION TO ADMIT WOMEN

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Clarkson, Old Main Campus, c.1910, Public Domain

On a small college campus in a remote, rural village in 1974, a group of determined men fought against the prevailing gender norms.

Clarkson College of Technology, as it was then known, was a male-dominated tech school in a Victorian village in upstate New York off the beaten path—north of the Adirondack Mountains and just 20 miles from the Canadian border. Clarkson had gone co-ed just under ten years before, and the percentage of women on campus was tiny (5.7%). Out of 2,183 undergraduate students, only 125 were female. The college had a strong reputation for its engineering programs and its ice hockey team. Clarkson men tended to be first-generation college students. They worked hard, and they focused on getting good jobs upon graduation. They lived up to the school's motto, which came from its namesake's favorite Biblical verse: "A Workman That Needeth Not To Be Ashamed."

This particular campus was an unlikely place for men to take a stand in opposition to discrimination against women in the early 1970s. While many other colleges in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw protests for civil rights, women's rights, student rights, and participatory democracy and against the Vietnam War, Clarkson experienced almost none of that. The few minor protests Clarkson students held against the Vietnam War were peaceful.

The men—and women—of Clarkson's chapter of the professional business fraternity, Alpha Kappa Psi (AKPsi), decided to protest in their own way. They did not hold up signs. They didn't stage sit-ins in any offices. They did not burn draft cards or bras. But they did stand up to the national fraternity which prohibited the admission of women, and they were punished for doing so.

AKPsi was founded at New York University in 1904, and Clarkson's chapter of AKPsi, Delta Chi, was founded in 1958. The men of Delta Chi held annual career fairs to provide students with the opportunity to network with companies where they might eventually land jobs. They performed community service, held social functions, and networked with one another.

In the spring of 1971, Delta Chi started a “Little Sister” program, something a few other chapters of AKPsi had already done. Delta Chi brothers and little sisters had joint professional and social activities, but as they made clear, the little sisters were not members of AKPsi and not present for any of the secret rituals. There were so few women students at Clarkson that only seven were eligible to become little sisters; four ended up pledging.



Student protest, Hamilton Hall Columbia University, 1968, Public Domain.

Despite the chapter’s efforts to avoid anything that would look like female membership, they got a letter from the national office expressing surprise that they were initiating women into the fraternity. The letter further informed them that they would be suspended if they continued to do so. In their response, the Clarkson chapter carefully explained that they were doing no such thing.

In reality, the brothers and little sisters of Delta Chi wanted change. They had hoped that in the national convention in 1971, AKPsi would alter the “men only” requirement for membership. Why? As the chapter’s records put it, the change was needed due to “current social trends concerning women, the growing number of women in the business fields, their advancements therein, and the increasing obsolescence of ‘fraternal’ organizations.”

Despite the efforts of Clarkson and a few other colleges and universities, the delegates to the 1971 national convention voted against the measure to admit women: 126-18.

Delta Chi decided to take matters into their own hands. During the fall of 1973, they began to initiate women as full members. No one seemed to notice until February 1974 when a representative from the national fraternity visited Clarkson. This representative attended a meeting at which women members were present and one, Vickie Liberty, was nominated to be president for the next academic year. Shortly after that, four members of Clarkson’s chapter—including Vickie Liberty—attended a regional conference, where Delta Chi received a “very cold reception” from the national fraternity’s high-ranking officers, as well as from some chapters.

The Clarkson chapter knew that it had violated the national fraternity’s constitution. But the brothers told the national organization that “if we refused to initiate women we would be practicing discrimination.” These young men and women didn’t see themselves as radicals. As they explained, their decision to stand their ground was “motivated by no desire to assume a leadership role in new social movements nor by any sudden conversion to all of the objectives of the women’s liberation movement. Our position is simply that this is a coeducational college, that women are increasingly majoring in accounting, finance and other management subjects, here and elsewhere, and that business careers beyond the traditional role as secretaries and clerks are progressively being opened up to women.”

In deciding to admit women, the chapter had, as they explained to the national organization, “the complete and unqualified support of the faculty and the administration.” The business faculty signed a petition supporting the students, and the faculty advisor wrote a passionate letter defending the chapter’s actions.

The national office moved quickly to suspend Delta Chi. They were ordered to return all of their special AKPsi materials, including their just-earned award for being the friendliest chapter in the eastern region. Eventually, the national office told Clarkson’s chapter that it was a “non-entity.” Two Delta Chi brothers and an accounting professor from Clarkson who attended the 1975 national convention were prevented from voting.

Ironically, less than two years after Clarkson’s chapter was suspended, the national office was forced by law to change its constitution to admit women. But the national organization did not give in without a fight.

In June 1972, President Richard Nixon signed into law Title IX of the Education Amendments, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs or activities that receive federal funding. Professional fraternities would be subject to this law.

But the law was surrounded by controversy. It was debated and modified, and it did not become effective immediately. In 1974, the law was successfully amended to exempt *social* fraternities and sororities, as well as voluntary youth service organizations, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.



Women's Liberation March, Public Domain.

Alpha Kappa Psi banded together with sixteen other professional fraternities to try to get themselves exempted from Title IX. Together these professional fraternities formed FAIR, the Fraternity Alliance for Inalienable Rights, with AKPsi leading the way for the organizations to keep women out. In 1975, AKPsi raised money and lobbied legislators to fight against Title IX, and they had some success. In 1976, Senator James McClure from Idaho sponsored an amendment to limit Title IX to “only programs or activities which are an integral part of the required curriculum of an educational institution.” However, the amendment was defeated. Senator Birch Bayh from Indiana—who had introduced Title IX in the Senate—led the opposition to the amendment, explaining that it “would exempt those areas of traditional discrimination against women that are the reason for the congressional enactment of Title IX.”



Title IX Poster. Public Domain.

In August 1976, AKPsi’s Board of Directors saw the handwriting on the wall and voted to admit women. Just three days later, the person who had previously called Clarkson’s chapter a “non-entity” invited Delta Chi to come back to the national organization. Clarkson’s response: No! As one brother explained a couple of years later, the chapter “said to hell with that.” In fact, Clarkson’s chapter did not return to the national until 1984, a decade after it had been suspended.

Delta Chi was a rogue chapter in AKPsi, the first to go against the national fraternity’s constitution by admitting women. The struggles faced by the brothers of Delta Chi and the stern punishment they received from the national fraternity help us to understand the extent to which integrating women into formerly all-male spaces presented a threat to many. Title IX would not change the culture surrounding relations between the sexes overnight. Perhaps what’s more remarkable about this story is that it shows that the culture had changed quite a bit—so much so that a group of men and women in a small, conservative, male-dominated technological college in upstate New York decided that it made sense for men and women who took classes together and anticipated working together also to be in the same professional fraternity together.

As the U.S. continues to argue over the meaning and implementation of Title IX more than 40 years later, the story of Delta Chi helps us to understand one early and significant struggle over this groundbreaking legislation.

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Yale’s women’s crew team staged a naked protest to claim their Title IX rights, 1976. Public Domain

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