

Psi Chi: 75 Years of Scholarship and Service

In September 2004, Psi Chi, the National Honor Society in Psychology, will celebrate 75 years of scholarship and service in the psychology community. Its history has been a rich and colorful one. It began with a brief conversation between two students at the University of Kansas late one night in 1927. The charter that formally created the organization was signed at Yale University in 1929. At first, Psi Chi grew slowly, but it began flourishing after World War II. When Ruth Cousins took over the leadership in late 1958, the society experienced an immediate infusion of energy and purpose. Her spirit remains a dominant force today. The latest challenge facing Psi Chi will be to respond effectively to the enormous changes among psychology students in the new century.



On September 4, 2004, Psi Chi, the National Honor Society in Psychology, will celebrate the 75th anniversary of its founding. There is much to celebrate. Only a few years earlier, in 2001, it inducted its 400,000th member. In 2002, it installed its 1,000th chapter. During the last decade, an average of almost 20,000 new members were inducted into the organization each year, making Psi Chi one of the largest honor societies in the world. Even before these milestones were reached, the organization had been the largest psychology-related society in the world. But size alone does not begin to tell the story of Psi Chi's contributions.

Psi Chi sponsors speakers and programs at regional and national meetings, publishes a student research journal and a quarterly news magazine, supports research through a program of grants, and supervises a wide array of student, faculty, and chapter awards. It has an Executive Board drawn from every region of the country and a national office in Chattanooga, Tennessee, that oversees the multifaceted work of the society. Many of its leaders and supporters have been nationally recognized psychologists. On a local level, Psi Chi promotes leadership, scholarship, fellowship, and service through its individual chapters and their activities. Virtually every psychologist and psychology student in the United States is aware of Psi Chi and its work. Despite its current high visibility, the intentions of the founders were modest and the organization was not well known for many years.

The Beginning

The idea for Psi Chi began late one fall night in 1927 at the University of Kansas. Edwin Newman and M. H. (later Fred) Lewis, students at the university, were conducting separate pieces of research in the large basement laboratory of the Department of Psychology. As the evening wore on, they met over a hot drink and engaged in polite conversation. Lewis lamented the fact that, unlike several other academic specialties, there was no national student organization for psychology. Newman challenged him to do something about it. With that challenge, the idea for Psi Chi was born.

Lewis and Newman contacted friends at other colleges and universities and began to hold meetings to explore the possibilities for a national organization. In May 1928, a group met at the regional APA conference in Madison, Wisconsin, for further discussions. Based on that meeting,

a survey was sent to major colleges and organizations throughout the country to determine the status of student psychology organizations and to gauge interest in a national organization.

The response was mixed. Approximately one-third of the 100-plus returns favored a new organization, an equal number were against it, and a final third of the respondents were uncommitted. One of the most negative responses came from E. G. Boring, the famed Harvard professor, who sent a three-page, single-spaced letter highly critical of this newly proposed "psychological fraternity." On the other side, a strongly positive letter was received from June E. Downey of the University of Wyoming, one of the pioneer women of psychology who is best known for an early personality test that bears her name.



From left, Frederick Howell Lewis (Psi Chi founder), Ruth Cousins, and Edwin B. Newman (Psi Chi founder).

Despite the mixed response, the organizing committee continued to contact other members of the psychology community and to request their input. In December 1928, at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association held at Columbia University, a 16-member group called the National Council for a Psychological Fraternity was convened. The group was composed of individuals who had responded to the earlier mail survey, both pro and con, and included undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. The purpose of the meeting was to make a final decision regarding the merits of founding a national psychology society.

In short order, it became obvious that the response of the group was a favorable one. Almost immediately, a steering committee began to lay the foundation for the organization, including writing a constitution. It should be noted that although the word "fraternity" was frequently used to refer to the organization, membership was open to women from the beginning.

After completing its initial work, the steering committee proposed to sign the charter for the new organization at the annual APA meeting in 1929. However, the APA had something special in mind for that year: it wasn't going to hold a meeting. In its place, the APA was playing host to the Ninth International Congress of Psychology, the first such congress to be held in the United States. The Congress, scheduled for September 1-7, 1929, at Yale University, had set aside time for APA President Karl Lashley to deliver his presidential address. However, the program was under the control of the Congress, and APA has never counted this meeting as one of its own. By all accounts, it was a breathtaking event for psychologists. Seven hundred twenty-two APA members attended-almost three-quarters of the APA membership. In addition, there were 104 representatives from 21 countries present (Hilgard, 1987). Among the luminaries visiting from Europe were Ivan Pavlov, Charles Spearman, Jean Piaget, Wolfgang Kohler, and Henri Pieron.

On September 4, 1929, during this extraordinary meeting, representatives from 11 colleges and universities signed the charter creating the new society. Three other institutions signed the charter by proxy. In addition, the constitution provided that chapters accepting membership by January 1, 1930, would also be considered charter members, thus increasing the charter group

by seven more chapters. The initial 21 colleges and universities represented were Drake University; Iowa State College; Nebraska Wesleyan University; Ohio University; Rutgers University; State College of Washington; University of Alabama; University of Arkansas; University of California, Los Angeles; University of Chicago; University of Denver; University of Georgia; University of Kansas; University of Montana; University of Nebraska; University of Pennsylvania; University of Southern California; University of Washington; University of Wyoming; Washington and Lee University; and Wittenberg College.

Several of the institutions already had psychology clubs when they elected to change their name and join the national association. In some cases, members had to be dropped from membership in the local group because of the national requirements. Many chapters consisted of a mix of undergraduate and graduate students.

The original name of the society was not Psi Chi, but Sigma Pi Sigma. However, a search revealed that the name Sigma Pi Sigma had already been taken by an honor society in physics. The name Psi Chi was adopted for the honor society in psychology at the second annual meeting in 1930. According to the society newsletter, the name was chosen chiefly because of its similarity to the name of the field (Lewis, 1931, p. 3).

Building a Society

The first elected officers were Edwin B. Newman, president; Paul E. Martin, secretary; and Frederick H. Lewis, historian. The officers were spread throughout the country (Pennsylvania, California, and Maine respectively) and communication was sometimes difficult. Nonetheless, the officers set about creating an association.

The national constitution was revised by Theodore H. Cutler and ratified in December 1929. It provided for delegates and national officers to meet bi-annually in connection with the meetings of the American Psychological Association. However, Psi Chi has met annually during the meeting of APA since its beginning, and the constitution was eventually changed to reflect that schedule.

A mimeographed newsletter was begun in 1930, mostly to share information about local chapters. The initial paragraph of the first newsletter expressed the philosophy of the organization: "It was formed with the avowed intent of furthering research and high scholastic achievement in the field of psychology through co-operative effort, but without involving a burdensome and complicated set of administrative machinery" (Lewis, 1930, p. 1). In that newsletter, Lewis pointed out that the original officers, who were also the current officers, were no longer active with chapters. He called for the nomination of new officers, with their election set for the December 1930 meeting in Iowa City. In addition, he called for the nomination of honorary members, a suggestion that would be the subject of much discussion later on.

The second annual meeting of the association took place on the evening of December 29, 1930 at the University of Iowa. For the first time, the association invited a "distinguished" speaker to address the gathering. He was Professor Karl M. Dallenbach of Cornell University, who spoke of his editorial responsibilities with the *American Journal of Psychology* and the role of publications in professional success. Following dinner, a business meeting was held and selections were made for national officers for 1931. Those selected were William Varnum, University of Southern California, president; J. P. (Ruth) Guilford, University of Nebraska, secretary-treasurer; and F. Howell Lewis, Bates College, historian. For the first time, a system of regional vice-presidents was put in place, consisting of Edwin B. Newman, Bryn Mawr College, Eastern Region; V. M. Sims, University of Alabama, Southern Region; Belford B. Nelson, Ohio

University, Midwestern Region; and Paul E. Martin, University of Southern California, Western Region.

Also at this meeting, petitions for membership from two schools were accepted: Southern Methodist University and Pennsylvania State University. Because of the proximity of the latter to the charter deadline, it was granted charter status at its request.

The position of secretary-treasurer was made a permanent one, and the dynamic Ruth Guilford was chosen to fill the role. This was a crucial decision for the organization. The position of secretary-treasurer would go through several name changes during the years that followed, i.e., executive secretary, executive director, and executive officer, but the role would always be a central one to the organization. In the case of Guilford, she established many office procedures that put the organization on a more efficient basis and spearheaded several new activities. On June 30, 1930, Guilford reported that initiation fees had been set at \$1 per member and that total income consisted of \$221, plus \$2.63 interest.

Continued growth and development. The organization continued to grow, but very slowly. By 1934, the society consisted of 27 chapters (2 had been dropped for inactivity) and 612 active members. There were 1,920 members in all classes of membership (active, honorary, associate, alumni). Many basic issues concerning the conduct of the organization were still being discussed. Chapters debated the use of rituals and whether the association should have a strong central regulation. In the beginning, the use of specific induction rituals was left up to the local chapter. At this stage, the national organization exerted only minimal control over the chapters, insisting on national standards but encouraging the chapters to develop their individual style and activities.

Questions arose about exclusivity and who should be invited to join. In the early years, the organization consisted almost exclusively of larger schools with Wittenberg College, a charter member, being the exception. Members debated whether the association should be limited to schools with graduate programs, since research had always been part of its mission.

The organization remained a small one—all of its records were kept in a single box (Porter, 2000). At the suggestion of the University of Alabama chapter, the national office purchased three 16mm films that were made available to chapters for a nominal rental charge. Two of the films concerned the famous research by the Kelloggs and the chimpanzee they raised with their infant son. The third film was made by Karl Dallenbach for his own film library and consisted of informal shots of prominent psychologists such as Titchener, Thorndike, Koffka, Piaget, Pavlov, and Washburn. Psi Chi was able to duplicate the two reels of this film with Dallenbach's permission.

A committee, with the distinguished J. P. Guilford as chair, was established to explore the possibility of founding a research journal, but the members concluded it would be too expensive. (The subject was brought up several more times in the following years and was rejected each time. However, Psi Chi began publishing a student research journal in the 1990s.)

In 1936, another discussion began among the officers and members regarding entry requirements. Eventually, it was decided that membership should be open to all students and colleges, with the requirement that the colleges applying had an acceptable psychology major, their faculty had appropriate credentials, and there was some indication that the group was stable and relatively permanent. These entrance criteria are not substantially different from the criteria used today.

In 1940, the National Council agreed to raise the annual stipend for the secretary-treasurer from \$125 to \$200, still an extremely modest sum for the time. In 1941, as World War II approached, Psi Chi had grown to 34 chapters. Except for two new chapters installed in 1942, no additional chapters were added during the war. National meetings were canceled during these years, but chapters continued to function. Not surprisingly, several national officers were called to service.

Soon after the war ended, Psi Chi began to experience a period of enormous growth, more than doubling the number of chapters in the four years following the end of the war. Of course, it was not just Psi Chi that was growing. Through the G. I. Bill, higher education had been opened to returning veterans, and the discipline of psychology itself was becoming more acceptable, not only at colleges and universities, but in the workplace as well.

Psi Chi had organized a program of research papers for presentation at the Eastern Regional meeting as early as 1936, but this practice was not continued. A few years later, the Midwestern Region also experimented with such a program. However, beginning in 1946, the practice became a permanent part of the Psi Chi program at both the national and regional meetings. The practice has continued to this day, and is considered by the National Council to be one of the most important activities of the association.

During the period immediately following World War II, the National Office was swamped with work, and there was some question as to how long it could continue without additional help. In the five years between 1950 and 1954, 38 new chapters were granted charters, increasing by half the number of chapters chartered up until then. National business meetings that in the past had taken a few hours now took several days.

Although Psi Chi usually met in conjunction with the annual APA meeting, there was no formal arrangement between the two groups. However, at the APA convention held in Washington, DC, in 1952, their relationship changed. During that meeting, the APA Committee on Student Activities met with the Psi Chi Executive Committee to explore ways in which the two groups could work together. Immediately following the meeting, several proposals were presented to the APA Council of Representatives and were passed. Among other issues, it was agreed that in the future, APA would provide space in the *American Psychologist* for news about Psi Chi and that, beginning with the next annual meeting in Cleveland, some provision would be made for Psi Chi at the convention.

In the following years, the relationship between the two groups continued to grow stronger and, in 1956, Max Meenes, then Psi Chi national president, appointed a committee to explore that relationship again. With the assistance of Fillmore Sanford, the executive secretary for APA, and Roger Russell, his successor, the APA Council of Representatives voted to admit Psi Chi as an organizational affiliate in 1958. There were some immediate effects related to the vote. For example, since the Psi Chi regions were not completely consistent with those of APA, some chapters had to shift regions. More important to student members, fees for the annual convention were waived, subscription rates to APA journals were available at a discount, and time was set aside in the APA program for Psi Chi presentations.

Enter Ruth H. Cousins

In 1958, the society was again searching for a new secretary-treasurer. The position continued to be the central one in the association, and its occupants had been very hard working. But the post was poorly paid and the financial benefit was not a great inducement to continue in the position. Most office-holders left after a few years, several of them soon after marriage. The longest office-holder had stayed with Psi Chi for six years. When Ruth H. Cousins took over the

position in December of that year, not only did the society gain a strong innovator and advocate, but it entered into a relationship with her that was to last 33 years.

Georgia-born Cousins was a married graduate student with two young daughters when she was offered the position. Eva Johnson, a favorite professor of hers from George Washington University, explained that Psi Chi was in desperate need of help. Cousins reluctantly accepted, but her plan was to stay with the job for only a year until the society was able to get back on its feet.

Her husband, James F. Cousins, encouraged her, and lent his considerable expertise to the venture. He was a business executive, with a background in law and accounting. Moreover, he had specific knowledge about non-profit organizations. At his insistence, the society filed a return with the IRS for the first time. His prescience was striking. The IRS made a call only a few days later inquiring about the tax status of the organization. Happily, they were satisfied with the recent filing. Jim Cousins also made other contributions to Psi Chi, at one point literally supplying the organization with stamps so that a mailing could take place. Tragically, he died of complications from appendicitis only nine months after his wife came to Psi Chi.

In the wake of his death, Ruth Cousins grappled with many responsibilities, including her children and several family businesses. In the end, she elected to stay with Psi Chi. In retrospect, she came to Psi Chi at exactly the right time. She saw a potential in the organization that others did not. One of the most important things that she did was to negotiate the change from an "honorary" society to an "honor" society. Prior to the change, membership in Psi Chi was largely through invitation and depended on a favorable vote from members of the relevant chapter. As an honor society, members could apply based on their credentials. In addition, Psi Chi was able to affiliate with the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS), a status that would have been denied to them previously.

When Cousins first broached the subject of an honor society with a high-ranking member of the Psi Chi National Council, she was rebuffed. His belief was that Psi Chi was essentially a place to store one's name. Cousins said that she was very discouraged by his attitude. She knew that the society could be so much more. But when Wayne Dennis became the national president a short time later, he was very supportive of the idea, and encouraged Cousins to pursue it. She did the necessary background work and received encouragement from other members of the Psi Chi National Council. In 1962, Psi Chi officially became an "honor" society and an affiliate of the ACHS, and it remains so today.

Cousins had already been working in other ways to bring new life to the association. Almost immediately upon joining the organization, she began a program of inviting distinguished speakers to the annual meeting. Initially, she was interested in speakers who had written textbooks in psychology. She thought it would be helpful for students to meet such people. Later that invitation was extended to other distinguished psychologists. One of her first invitations was to Edwin G. Boring, the Harvard professor and historian of psychology who had reacted so negatively to the original suggestion for the founding of Psi Chi. He accepted the invitation and remained a strong supporter of Psi Chi for the remainder of his life. Through the years, scores of distinguished psychologists have spoken on behalf of Psi Chi, several of them multiple times. B. F. Skinner, the most frequent national speaker, accepted six invitations to speak on behalf of Psi Chi.

One of Cousins' principal concerns from the beginning of her tenure was to put Psi Chi on a firm financial footing. Her goal was to set aside a year's expenses to ensure the continuity of the

organization in case of hard times or changing student demographics. This was not always easy. She said that for years she was never certain if the organization would be able to meet its financial commitments. When the organization finally was able to establish a substantial reserve fund, the Psi Chi president decided to return the additional money to the chapters (Cousins, 2000).

Cousins stayed with the organization through many difficult times, often engaging her children as helpers. They filed cards and packaged the membership certificates in the attic office of the old APA building where Psi Chi was then located (Tracy, 2000). Cousins frequently worked in ways that were unseen or unknown. For example, the periodic histories of the organization that were published, supposedly written by one Psi Chi officer or another, were almost always written by Cousins herself (Wertheimer, 2000). She was thrifty with the income, and yet spent it wisely, acquiring up-to-date computers before the APA did. In her day-to-day conduct of the association, she was able to develop friendships with some of the leading psychologists in the United States.

Another of Cousins' goals was to establish an honor society for two-year colleges. At the time, the ACHS did not permit membership for two-year colleges, but Cousins felt that such an organization would be useful, even essential. From a practical point of view, a substantial number of the best students from two-year colleges went on to four-year colleges and became Psi Chi members. A two-year honor society could provide a pipeline into Psi Chi. Cousins had difficulty finding someone to take on the leadership role for such an organization. Eventually, Psi Beta was formed, with Carol Tracy-Cousins' daughter-as the executive director.

At the 1990 Annual Convention, Raymond D. Fowler, the chief executive officer of the APA, presented Ruth Cousins with an Honorary Life-Time Full Membership in APA, the first time such an honor had ever been given (Cousins, Tracy, & Giordano, 1992). Not only was the honor well-deserved, it underlined the important ties between Psi Chi and the APA, the two largest psychology related organizations in the world. By the time Cousins left office in 1991, she had helped Psi Chi grow into a substantial organization with a regular office staff and a sizeable budget. She had finally managed to secure more than a year's operating expenses in a reserve fund and had overseen the move of the national headquarters to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where the organization found the space it had long needed. More than 60 years after its founding, largely through Cousins' efforts, the society had finally reached maturity.

Shortly before his death, Edwin B. Newman, the co-founder of Psi Chi, wrote a letter to the national office. In that letter, he addressed Cousins and wrote: "Far more than most people recognize, Psi Chi is not what we founded, it is what you have made it" (Lewis, 1991). Indeed, it is easy to characterize Cousins herself as a co-founder of the organization.

The 1990s, and into the Future

Before Ruth Cousins retired, the groundwork was laid for her successor. Kay Wilson was hired to succeed Cousins and they worked together for the final year of Cousin's contract. Although Wilson was not a psychologist, she had experience working with nonprofit organizations, and the transition proceeded without any major difficulties. In the decade that followed, the National Council, with Wilson's guidance, strengthened its old activities and initiated several new ones.

A series of national service projects were begun, with a different target project each year. Research grants were offered to students, often providing equipment and software for the intended research. Since the treasury was now on a solid footing, the National Council began experimenting with ways to give back more to the chapters. A mini-convention was instituted

and ran for several years in the period just prior to the APA meeting. Awards were initiated for selected papers at regional conventions, in addition to the national awards already in place. A vigorous but, ultimately, unsuccessful attempt was made to establish Psi Chi as an international organization. Sadly, both economic and cultural factors worked against it. Recognition awards for chapters and faculty leaders were begun as well, including the Psi Chi/Ruth Hubbard Cousins National Chapter Award, presented for the first time in 1992.

To celebrate the 70th anniversary of Psi Chi, a meeting was organized at Yale in September 1999, the site of the founding. Among those in attendance were Yale President Daniel Levin, several ex-Psi Chi presidents, a host of faculty moderators, and a score of students from surrounding areas. There was even a birthday cake. It was a striking tribute to an organization that had begun with such limited resources and modest aspirations. But it was also an opportunity to reflect on the future of the organization. A sadder and more dramatic opportunity would come a few years later.

Kay Wilson died on June 6, 2003. She had been a strong advocate for Psi Chi, and her death left a void. She had made many friends among the member of the National Council, and those friendships endured until her death. Her ability to run the organization had been recognized by the Association of College Honor Societies, which elected her its president. Soon after her death, the Psi Chi National Council established a scholarship program to be named in Wilson's honor. The office continued to run efficiently after her death-many of the staff had been hired and trained by Wilson.

Concluding Remarks

The recognition that Newman and Lewis had hoped to achieve for their discipline has long been accomplished. But psychology has changed dramatically since the conversation in 1927 that led to the birth of Psi Chi. It is not only the enormous growth that was surprising, but the shift away from experimental psychology and the development of specialties. Perhaps, more important, the students of psychology had changed. Undergraduate psychology majors now constitute one of the largest groups among all academic majors, with more than 70,000 majors graduating each year. But most of those students do not go on for advanced training in psychology, and those who do so are much more likely to be interested in applied areas, particularly clinical or school psychology, than in research. Since its beginning, Psi Chi has stressed the research aspects of psychology, almost to the exclusion of its applied aspects. Can it find a way to address the applied interests of its constituents without minimizing the science that underlies it?

Psi Chi has also become an organization composed mostly of undergraduate students, as opposed to the mixture that characterized the early chapters. Indeed, the needs of graduate students have long been taken over by the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students, and although graduate students are still welcome in Psi Chi, they constitute a very small percentage of the active membership. As a result, the Psi Chi membership has become more distanced from the mature science and practice of psychology that it once was. Can a society founded to address the research and professional needs of its student members genuinely flourish in an undergraduate environment, or is some further adjustment necessary?

The Psi Chi National Council continues to grapple with the changing needs of its constituents. How can it best serve this changing student population in a meaningful way? What kind of impact can it have on future psychologists? Should it address more emphatically the non-psychological activities of its student members? These are only a few of the questions that face the National Council on this special anniversary. The future of Psi Chi is in their hands.

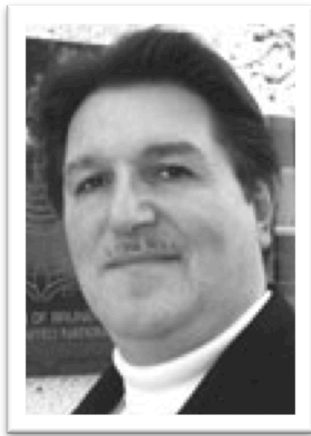
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Harold Takooshian, PhD, has served on the psychology faculty of Fordham University since 1975. His work as an applied psychologist has led to many diverse roles--teaching in Latin America (1983-1985), a U.S. Fulbright to the USSR (1987-1988) and, more recently, a research consultant with the United Nations and the NYC Citizens Crime Commission. Within Psi Chi, Takooshian founded the Fordham-Lincoln Center chapter in 1983. From 1993-2000, he served on the Psi Chi National Council to implement many new Psi Chi programs--such as the five national mini-conventions, and new award programs (Hunt, Erlbaum, Regional Conferences). With Psi Chi's Historian John D. Hogan, he organized the historic Psi Chi Convocation at Yale University on September 3, 1999, where Psi Chi was begun by students 70 years earlier.

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