

School has rich history with SGA

By William Shannon
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NORTH ADAMS — After sifting through decades of yearbooks, one thing Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts senior Katie Collins noticed about the students involved in its student government over the last 100 years is that they have always held common goals.

"We've always had the goals of representing the student body, getting more people involved on campus and shedding a good light on students," she said last week.

Collins, who serves as the parliamentarian for the college's Student Government Association (SGA), researched its past leaders for a slide show on the history of the organization, which she presented during last month's alumni reunion weekend.

She said the various student government groups, which evolved into the current organization over the last 100 years, were primarily dominated by women throughout the years. She also learned that Margaret Hart, the first black student to graduate from the college, once served in the organization.

According to Sue Denault, the college's archivist, the first student government group was informally founded in 1909, when the college was known as North Adams Normal School, with students working out of a dorm room in Taconic Hall — which stood adjacent to Murdock Hall at the time.

In 1927, an official student council was formed with just seven members, with then biology professor Wallace Venable — who Venable Hall is named for — advising the group, according to Linda Kaufmann, the college's public services librarian.

Currently, the SGA has 28 members, with an executive cabinet consisting of eight upperclassmen, a student trustee, nine "at large" student senators, seven class senators, and three special representatives, all of whom generally meet every Monday in the Amsler Campus Center when classes are in session.

Collins has been a member of the student government for the last three years — beginning as a senator and as vice president of her class before taking on the role of parliamentarian.

The position of parliamentarian in student government is generally held by a student who has previously served other positions and knows well how the SGA operates and gets things done for the student body. As parliamentarian, Collins often gives explanations and clarifications when confusion arises among SGA members at meetings and offers advice to members whenever needed.

Collins had only good things to say about her time serving in the SGA.

"It's definitely honed my leadership skills," she said. "It's something I would never change about my college experience."

Taking leadership positions on

campus, she said, allows a student to grow personally while feeling a sense of responsibility and achievement through helping clubs operate and working with administration.

"This is a really good avenue to learn about yourself," Collins said. "I've learned so much about myself."

SGA office manager Diane Collins agreed, saying that she has seen students blossom during their tenure in student government.

"It is quite a growth experience," she said. "I've seen freshmen come in with low self-esteem, then a couple years down the road, they are so sure of themselves. It grows confidence."

Diane Collins, who has worked with the student government since 1983, said she has turned down higher paying positions to stay with these student leaders.

"It's the fact that I really get something from this job," she said. "I learn a lot from the students."

SGA President Jessica Krason, a senior from Easthampton majoring in business administration, said her role has taught her to be patient and to help her classmates by putting the needs of others ahead of her own.

"It's been a great learning experience," she said.

She served as a student senator, class treasurer and public relations chair for the SGA before becoming its president.

Petra Hejnova, assistant professor of political science and public policy, said that taking part in student government can lead to personal growth — teaching students everything from public speaking to negotiating interests.

"It prepares them for the job market, and also makes them more articulate citizens," she said. "Whether they want to participate in politics, public service jobs or business, it definitely helps. It serves as a voice. It provides a bridge between the students and the administration."

Hejnova added, "We tend to have this view that everything is black and white. These student leaders go in and realize that it's not always black and white, and they become more in tune with all the nuances of the issues facing them."

As for Katie Collins, a biology major, she said she may eventually go into the public service realm, but will likely look for jobs at Boston-area colleges where she can help guide student leaders, following graduation next year.

"I still have my doors wide open," she said. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to go into student affairs, because I'm not ready to let SGA go."

Looking back on a long history of student leadership organization, she said, she now sees her role with a heightened sense of importance.

"It's pretty substantial being a part of something that's been around for so long," she said. "Being on the 100th executive board has been really exciting."

