Conversations with Early Leaders of Eta Sigma Gamma

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Abstract

Anniversaries are often a time to reflect on the past. With that in mind, interviews were conducted with early key leaders of Eta Sigma Gamma to explore their perspectives of the organization’s growth and development as well as their hopes for the future of ESG. The individuals interviewed included the surviving founders of Eta Sigma Gamma, and two students who were involved in the early development of the organization. Respondents answered seven primary questions; four were related to ESG’s growth and accomplishments while three elicited views of the organization’s future. These retrospective and prospective views may provide direction for the continued development and improvement of Eta Sigma Gamma.

“Forty Years On”
(Bowen & Farmer, 1872)

Forty years on, when afar and asunder
Parted are those who are singing today,
When you look back, and forgetfully wonder
What you were like in your work and your play,
Then, it may be, there will often come o’er you,
Glimpses of notes like the catch of a song –
Visions of childhood shall float them before you,
Echoes of dreamland shall bear them along,
Follow up! Follow up! Follow up
Follow up! Follow up
Till the field ring again and again, . . .

Anniversaries are occasions for reflection on the past and during the 40th Anniversary of ESG, we wanted to explore how Eta Sigma Gamma came to be and what the organization will become — Forty Years On. We interviewed seven individuals who were involved in the founding and early development of the honorary. Our purpose was to examine their perspectives of Eta Sigma Gamma’s growth and their hopes for the future of the organization — Forty Years On. We express our gratitude to our interviewees for taking the time to share their memories and views with us. The interviews were an enjoyable learning experience and we hope that readers find the results as beneficial as we did.

Authors’ note: Direct quotes appear in italics and are identified with the respondent’s name. Liberties were taken to synthesize and summarize responses for clarity and brevity.

The Interviewees

The individuals selected to be interviewed for this project played significant roles in the establishment of Eta Sigma Gamma. William Bock and Robert Synovitz, along with Warren Schaller, were the co-founders of the organization while all three were professors at Ball State Teachers College in 1967. “Dr. Schaller’s and Dr. Synovitz’s membership in a professional honorary [sic] in the 1950s at the University of Wisconsin at LaCrosse, and Dr. Bock’s experience in an honorary [sic] in education, influenced them in their vision for a similar organization for health educators” (Bensley, 1997, p. 9).

Warren Schaller and Robert Synovitz attended separate high schools in the Milwaukee metropolitan area, and came to know of each other through sports. Both attended the University of Wisconsin at LaCrosse and became friends as undergraduates. Schaller was the first of the three founders to arrive at Ball State Teachers College. Robert Synovitz was working at Eastern Kentucky University when a position at Ball State University (BSU) opened and Schaller encouraged him to apply. William Bock came to BSU after completing his doctoral degree at Ohio State University. Synovitz left BSU in 1968 to become department chairperson at Western Illinois University and retired from higher education in 1987. Warren Schaller was chair of the Department of Physiology and Health Science until his untimely death in 1987. In 2007, Dr. Bock began his 43rd year in the Department of Physiology and Health Science. He accentuated his successful teaching career by recently serving as the ESG-Alpha chapter sponsor.

Wayne Payne and Molly Wantz were both students at Ball State University during the time the founders were formulating the ideals of Eta Sigma Gamma. Wayne Payne was studying biology and had the opportunity to take a personal health class from Robert Synovitz. I was so impressed with Bob’s unique teaching style and his enthusiasm and energy that I gravitated into the department for much of my course work (Payne). Molly Wantz was an undergraduate physical education major, and while completing a minor in health education, she had her first contact with Warren Schaller. Molly and Wayne were graduate students at Ball State University as the documents for Eta Sigma Gamma were being written and they assisted with the initial writing of those documents. Both Molly and Wayne went on to become faculty members in the Department of Physiology and Health Science at Ball State University, and are presently experiencing the joys of retirement.

Loren Bensley served Eta Sigma Gamma as the Historian and Director of Chapter Development from 1982 to 2004. After a successful career at Central Michigan, Loren retired...
from higher education in 1989. Brenda Smith documented the history of Eta Sigma Gamma in her doctoral dissertation and published portions of it in the *Eta Sigma Gamma Monograph Series* (Smith 1987b; Smith, 1989). Brenda Smith is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Promotion at University of Texas at El Paso, Texas. Billie Kennedy was the first Executive Director of Eta Sigma Gamma’s National Office from 1978 to 1990. Billie went on to become the administrative assistant for the Department of Physiology and Health Science at Ball State University, where she continues to work today. [Authors’ note: For further historical details of the founding of Eta Sigma Gamma, see Bensley, 1997; Bock, 1997; Smith, 1987a; Smith, 1987b; Smith, 1989.]

**The Past**

Interviewees were asked to respond to the following questions regarding the organization’s past:

1) Eta Sigma Gamma has grown from a single chapter in 1967 to over 100 chapters today. What do you believe contributed to the success of the organization?
2) In your opinion, what has been the largest obstacle the organization has overcome?
3) What do you consider to be the greatest accomplishment of the organization?
4) Have the goals and aspirations of the founding fathers of Eta Sigma Gamma been achieved?

In addition, we asked Brenda Smith to comment on recommendations for Eta Sigma Gamma derived from the membership survey she reported in her 1987 dissertation.

**Success of the organization.**

Leadership was consistently identified by respondents as a key factor in Eta Sigma Gamma’s success over the first 40 years. Beginning with the leadership of Warren Schaller, Eta Sigma Gamma has had the privilege of being guided by many outstanding leaders in the field of health education. In addition to the leadership, high expectations and timing have aided in the success of Eta Sigma Gamma.

Loren Bensley believes three important factors have contributed to the success of the organization. *I think we’ve had tremendous leadership out of the national office. In the early years, it was Warren Schaller. . . who believed in the organization, had a vision, who always wanted to go one step further in terms of providing a good professional experience outside of the classroom for students. I think that we have also had great leadership from our Executive Committee, our Board of Directors over the years, [and] individuals . . . that kept the thing going. . . . I think we have chapters that have been outstanding chapters year after year. You know why they have been successful year after year? . . . It can be summed up in three things. One, you have a chapter advisor. . . who believes in Eta Sigma Gamma, who believes in students and serves as an excellent mentor for the students. Second, you have a department and a department chairman who is supportive of Eta Sigma Gamma, and thirdly you have student leaders. . . . Overall success . . . of Eta Sigma Gamma nationally starts at the chapter level and moves on up.* (Bensley)

William Bock believes that *the leadership of those involved and the opportunities that have been provided by chapters for leadership development* (Bock) has contributed to the success of Eta Sigma Gamma. Robert Synovitz believes the success of the organization had a great deal to do with timing—the field of health education was growing, and physicians were approaching patient education with a greater focus on the total person . . . and the health education field was exactly [a] perfect [fit at] that time (Synovitz).

**Obstacles the organization has overcome.**

While success breeds success, opportunity and beginnings often come with growing pains [for] *any new organization* (Bensley). Eta Sigma Gamma was no exception. Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles for ESG, to this day, is membership and helping chapters stay active. Loren Bensley said *the toughest obstacle is chapters going inactive. I think that if you have a surge of chapters going inactive, something is wrong . . . The National Office has done everything that they could to stabilize chapters in trouble, help chapters, and support; yes, there have been chapters that have gone inactive, for a variety of reasons. Some reasons have been good reasons, but overall 40 years ago we started with one and now we have over a hundred, so the stabilization of chapters at the local level, keeping them intact, keeping them going, which I think has been a challenge, [and], always will be* (Bensley).

In addition to chapters going inactive, *keeping membership and getting more chapters [were] major problems* (Kennedy) faced by Eta Sigma Gamma.

At times identity may have been an obstacle the organization has had to overcome, or *maybe we are still in the process of overcoming . . . . Clearing the confusion*

**Providing an identity for health education separate from physical education and education is really one of the major contributions the honorary provides.**

*William Bock*
surrounding the use of the term health science (Bock) has at times been a challenge, but this identity issue has also been a major contribution of Eta Sigma Gamma to the health education profession. Providing an identity for health education separate from physical education and education is really one of the major contributions the honorary provides (Bock). Along with developing our own identity as a profession have come greater visibility and a positive image of the health education profession.

The field of health was growing. Teachers were going into health education, as well as physicians. As physicians developed a holistic focus, health education became more important in the practice of medicine (Synovitz).

Accomplishments of the organization.

Perhaps the single greatest contribution Eta Sigma Gamma has had is the opportunities provided to young professionals. Eta Sigma Gamma focuses on giving opportunities to be better than you could be otherwise (Synovitz)...it has contributed to the growth and development of thousands, from service learning opportunities to volunteering opportunities (Bensley). As a result, [Eta Sigma Gamma is] a training ground. Not academically, not from a standpoint of knowing this, that, and the other thing to make me knowledgeable, but it’s the opportunity for individuals to develop as a professional . . . To be able to become leaders, be able to learn how to lead, because these are the individuals on boards of directors of our many, many, health education organizations. If you look at outstanding teachers of public schools, you look at outstanding professors throughout the higher education system, a lot of them; a lot of them have been Gammas at an early time in their life. Did that make a difference in terms of their success? It did, at least a wee bit. Did that make a difference in terms of the profession itself, their contributions because of their experience with Eta Sigma Gamma? Yeah! . . . and so I think that’s what our contribution has been (Bensley).

Several of the interviewees also cited the invitation to join the National Coalition of Health Education Organizations as an important accomplishment of the organization. It was seen as recognition or pat on the back, a hand shake (Synovitz) for the role of Eta Sigma Gamma in the profession. Eta Sigma Gamma can provide an important role in leadership, leadership . . . in developing the agendas and identifying items at the national level (Bensley).

Goals and aspirations.

Successes, obstacles, contributions to the profession—the many accomplishments of Eta Sigma Gamma—but have the aspirations of the founding fathers been achieved? According to our interviewees, the answer was an emphatic, yes. Bob Synovitz, one of the founding fathers said, oh yes, yes . . . absolutely. Time and time again, and I think it’s going to continue (Synovitz). Billie Kennedy, speaking of her memory of Warren Schaller, said, yes it definitely has. When [Dr. Schaller] was gone, I was really concerned that the organization would not continue, . . . but it has had great leadership over the years and it’s stronger now than it ever has been, and I know that he would be very, very pleased (Kennedy). Loren Bensley believes the accomplishments of Eta Sigma Gamma have been more than what they ever dreamed. I think that they got together and they said, here’s an opportunity to do what other academic areas are doing, that’s to establish a professional honorary with the opportunity for students to be given a chance to get out in the real world before they are out in the real world. They helped them develop leadership skills to make themselves proud of themselves, proud of their chapter, and as a result, that has happened. But it’s far, I really think it’s far beyond that. And I think . . . they will say that it’s gone beyond what their expectations were (Bensley).

Recommendations for Eta Sigma Gamma

Data from a membership survey conducted by Brenda Smith (1987b) identified three suggestions for the organization. Explore ways for greater opportunities for member participation, create a computerized membership roster, and improve the publications were the suggestions for Eta Sigma Gamma 20 years ago. Smith was asked to respond to the extent to which she believes those suggestions have been addressed. When I was doing the dissertation, the Monograph Series had just a few issues. The Eta Sigma Gamman has evolved to what is now The Health Educator. I think in terms of publications, I see much stronger publications than what originally started as [a] newsletter. I believe there is still room for improvement of
membership beyond graduation. The chapter-at-large and the professional membership are still confusing (Smith). Clarifying how to transfer membership between chapters and better marketing of membership transfer were seen as something that still needs improvement. Eta Sigma Gamma continues to lose members as they transition from the academic setting to their first place of employment, which continues to be a priority of the organization. Members can make an address change or transfer membership on the web page, by phone, or by mail. Eta Sigma Gamma has also partnered with the American School Health Association to help students transition from student memberships to professional memberships, while maintaining their membership with Eta Sigma Gamma.

The Future

... Bases attempted, and rescued, and won, Strife without anger and art without malice, -- How will it seem to you, forty years on? (Bowen & Farmer, 1872)

Where Eta Sigma Gamma will be Forty Years On was a key purpose of this project. To this end, we asked our interviewees to respond to three questions:
1) What are your dreams for Eta Sigma Gamma in the next 40 years?
2) What do you think makes for a successful chapter?
3) If you could communicate one message to the current and future members of Eta Sigma Gamma, what would the message be?

Dreams: A vision for Eta Sigma Gamma.

When the interviewees were asked to express their vision for Eta Sigma Gamma, common themes of sustainability and growth emerged. Most of the interviewees indicated that many of the current activities of the organization are very positive and expressed a desire to see these activities continue. Brenda Smith expressed support for the increased visibility of Eta Sigma Gamma. I have really seen a lot more visibility of Eta Sigma Gamma. When I was doing my dissertation, they had just begun doing sessions on a regular basis at AAHE and SOPHE... I like the fact that we are reaching the members through different professional organizations (Smith). Growth opportunities were also seen in the affiliation with other honoraries. There is a National Association of Honor Societies that Eta Sigma Gamma can play a role in. We can learn more about that process [through] affiliation with other honoraries and... regional activities that can be strengthened (Smith).

Bensley’s dream for the next 40 years would be a lot more of the same, ... the leadership coming out of the National Office and the national officers, a commitment to make sure that chapters succeed. There was the hope that there would be a chapter in every state and chapters in other countries. Other ideas of growth included the use of technology to enhance communication and the growth of the organization. I could also see, ... in any one particular university, an exposure to two different groups of Gammans. One is their own chapters and through electronic technology [the other is] ... a connection between all chapters throughout the United States. Through distance learning, teleconferencing, push a button and I can get in touch with someone from another university; I can listen in on the National Board meetings (Bensley). Providing a student voice to the Coalition of National Health Education Organizations was another suggestion for the organization. I would like to see a student representative that would be nominated by their chapter and selected by their president and two or three appointees. That individual would sit shoulder to shoulder at the table with the national presidents or their designee and the two of them would engage in dialogue (Bensley).

Chapter success.

Loren Bensley was the chapter advisor to Eta Chapter (Central Michigan University) for 12 years. During that time, Eta Chapter was recognized 10 times as the Chapter of the Year, and had seven members recognized as Gamman of the Year. In response to the question about chapter success, he said: First of all, the [faculty advisor] needs to be committed; it’s just not something that’s assigned to you. You’ve got to want it, and you’ve got to want it to be good, because so much depends on your leadership as a chapter sponsor. You may have anywhere from five to 45 Gammans [in your chapter] that have an opportunity to do some outstanding things, and if the chapter does not have direction, they may, they may not become involved in some exciting things. The other thing is never, ever let your chapter do something which they will fail at because failure breeds failure, and they become discouraged. They will... find more important things to do on campus. So be very careful with what your chapter chooses, sometimes they want to do big things but their not challenging enough or they don’t have the resources they need. Sometimes they want to do things, which are very minor things and they will not be recognized for that they have talent that they could do, so you need to

Do an internship. Get experience, do two internships! Volunteer. Molly Wantz
draw that line of what they can do and succeed at and what they want to do, but could do much more (Bensley).

Messages for future Gammans.

Our final question asked the interviewees to articulate a message for future Gammans. The interviewees provided a variety of responses. Some of the responses suggested how the individual students might improve their professional development, while others suggested involvement in their chapter. Do an internship. Get experience, do two internships! Volunteer. There are very worthy activities to do while you're in undergraduate school. Because . . . it gives you experience, it makes you more marketable (Wantz).

Interaction with faculty outside the classroom is important to a student’s professional growth. Students taking responsibility for the initiation of these interactions was suggested. Take advantage of every opportunity to [get to] know the faculty of the department in which you are studying health education. I think to a degree faculty may have less time to be interactive with students. But I can only tell you that the lengthy coffee breaks I had with Dr.

Synovitz, Dr. Schaller, Dr. Bock, and [others] were significant to my professional growth. You learn a lot from your faculty in the actions other than the classroom. The second thing would be to look carefully at not only the undergraduate major as a major, but how it will be actualized out in the field. Eta Sigma Gamma can really be helpful by giving students an early opportunity to know about people who came before you and are now doing the work of health educators that you aspire to do (Payne).

For his message to Gammans, William Bock referred to an often cited poem entitled “A Fence or an Ambulance” by Joseph Malins (1895). The message of the poem emphasizes the importance of prevention over treatment.

. . . . Then an old sage remarked, “It’s a marvel to me
That people give far more attention
To repairing results than to stopping the cause,
When they’d much better aim at prevention.

Let us stop at its source all this mischief,” cried he,
“Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally,
If the cliff we will fence, we might almost dispense
With the ambulance down in the valley . . . .

The importance of a strong chapter and the connection between the chapter’s accomplishments and their individual professional growth are connected was another shared message. I would like to say, you know you’re in a good organization. Be proud of what we are, what we have done and what we’re going to do, and take pride in your own chapter. Take pride in your chapter, take pride in yourself, and furthermore never forget, if you’re a Gamman, you’re a professional. You’re a professional and certain standards apply, and those are easy to live by, and you will enjoy it, and I’ll say don’t just enjoy it, love it, because it’s a lot of fun . . . . (Bensley).

Closing Remarks

Eta Sigma Gamma is what it is today because of a strong vision for the organization, dedicated members who care about mentoring students, and effective leadership. The early growth of Eta Sigma Gamma was nurtured by Warren Schaller and a supportive Ball State University faculty. Robert Synovitz, William Bock and others provided leadership as the organization transitioned to a professional organization directed by a board. The growth of the organization was led by elected leaders and committed board members. During the past 40 years, Eta Sigma Gamma has made a significant impact on the health education profession through strategic planning and effective leadership.

How will it seem to you, Forty Years On? Given the success this organization has experienced during the first 40 years, the authors believe Eta Sigma Gamma has laid the groundwork for a bright future. But in order for the organization to continue on this successful path, we must make sure we use this opportunity to learn from the founders, early leaders of the organization, and history. As was noted many times throughout this project, leadership has been a key reason the organization has been so successful. This leadership must continue if we want Eta Sigma Gamma to be what it has been for many of us and what we hope it to be for those that come after us.

As was stated earlier, leadership must begin at the chapter level by nurturing our young professionals to become our future leaders. We must mentor our chapter advisors to help them develop or improve their skills in leading our young professionals. Finally, we must ensure the leadership of the organization at the national level continues and grows to include members from all health education settings, our young professionals, and others with a vision for this organization and health education. Eta Sigma Gamma must continue to be an active member of the larger vision for health education, by working with other health organizations, advocating for policies that improve the health of our communities, and nurturing the next generation of health educators.

How will it seem to you, Forty Years On? What will your role be in the next 40 years? How will you be involved? How will you work to improve the health of your community? These authors invite you to reflect on your role and what you will do to contribute over the next 40 years. You can support a local chapter, volunteer to serve on the board, or
mentor students and young professionals as they begin their careers.

The founders, early leaders and those committed to Eta Sigma Gamma today understand the valued role of service in their professional lives. To mentor students and see them grow and develop as young professionals is indeed one of the most meaningful contributions one can make. Though it pays little monetarily it enriches the soul and continually reminds us of what is really important.

References


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Founding Fathers of Eta Sigma Gamma

Robert Synovitz

Warren Schaller

William Bock