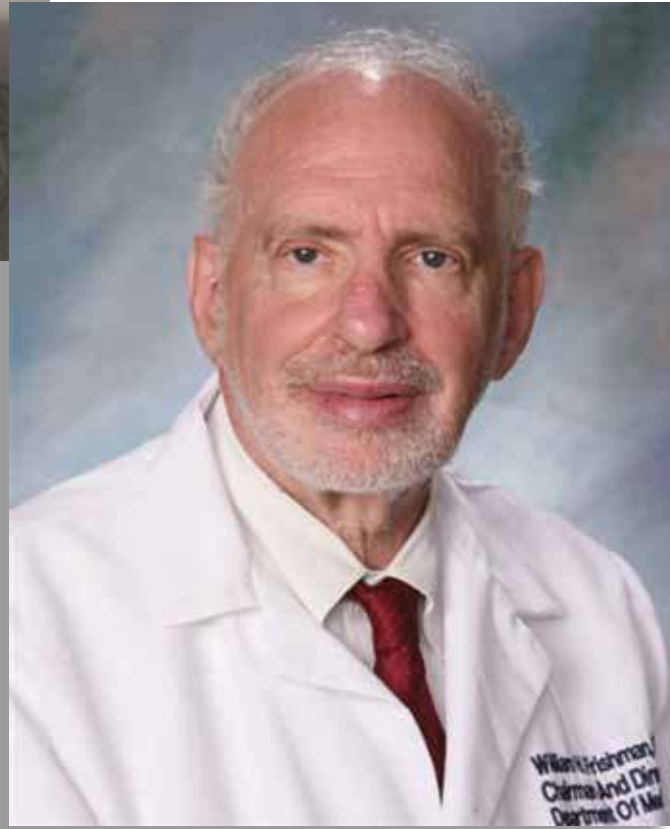




A thirty-five-year odyssey of an Alpha Omega Alpha chapter councilor



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In June 2013 I will be completing my thirty-fifth year as an Alpha Omega Alpha (AΩA) chapter councilor. According to the AΩA constitution, the councilor is a member of the

faculty and of the society appointed by the Dean on the recommendation of the chapter to serve a term of three years. The councilor may be reappointed to successive three-year terms, and is responsible to the school's faculty and the national officers of the society for the operations and well being of the chapter. The councilor guides the chapter's election process of new members and works with student members to plan and conduct chapter activities.

I have served as chapter councilor at two medical schools: Albert Einstein College of Medicine (Kappa New York) from 1978 through 1997, and New York Medical College (Iota New York) from 1998 until now. Over my years as councilor, I have helped to officiate in

the induction into AΩA of more than 1,100 students at these two schools. Most of them have gone on to brilliant careers in academic medicine or clinical practice.

I became an AΩA councilor in the late 1970s, a time that saw rising opposition among students on many medical school campuses to the concept of comparative ranking of students, including the very idea of an honor society. In 1978, the viability of the AΩA chapter at Einstein was threatened, with students clamoring to dissolve the chapter. In a panic, Dean Ephraim Friedman, who had been my ophthalmology professor in medical school, asked me to address the newly elected AΩA students to try to save the chapter. I was a thirty-one-year-old

internist-cardiologist and assistant professor of Medicine, two years out of the Army Medical Corps, and a popular teacher. In my meeting with the students, I told them there was nothing wrong with exceptionalism and being recognized for a job well done. I gave examples from the military, where medals and citations are often awarded for extreme heroism and for going the extra mile. I pointed out that the granting of an award made all soldiers try to perform better, and that this was also true for medical students.

The students agreed to keep the chapter active, and laid out two conditions for the dean: they stipulated that I should be the AΩA faculty initiate, and wanted me to be their AΩA councilor. They also insisted that the induction ceremony be modest in scope, and for many years the AΩA lecture and induction ceremony was held in the school's auditorium, followed by a dinner at the school's cafeteria (albeit with white linens and flowers on the tables). The AΩA induction speaker during my first year as councilor was Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, a noted bioethicist from Georgetown.

In 1997, when I moved to New York Medical College (NYMC) to become chairman of Medicine, world-famous trauma surgeon Louis Del Guercio was the AΩA councilor. Within a few months he stepped down, and given my experience as councilor at Einstein, the dean approved me as his replacement, just in time to plan the induction ceremony.

My experiences as AΩA councilor at two different medical schools give me a unique vantage point from which to comment on the roles of the councilor in guiding the chapter, and to offer some perspective on the successes and failures the society has had with its various activities, such as student and faculty elections and community service projects.

Student elections

Election to AΩA recognizes

students in the third and fourth years of medical school who have excelled academically, demonstrated professionalism, and have shown the promise of becoming leaders in the profession.

When I started at Einstein, a faculty group of all course leaders, both in basic science and clinical rotations, served as electors. I oversaw the election but was not a voting member. The process was fair, in that every student had at least one advocate, but at the end class rank was the largest contributing factor. There was always great difficulty in deciding on the last two or three students to be elected, as they often had academic records quite similar to those just below them. It was here that we looked at other qualifications, such as community service, to set some candidates apart. (Even though we were an active research school, research accomplishments were not part of our AΩA election process.)

Initially, election to junior AΩA membership at Einstein was based on basic science grades only, but we quickly learned that some of these students performed less well on ward rotations. Election of seniors to AΩA included information from the third-year clerkship combined with basic science scores. Every AΩA nominee had to have passed USMLE Part 1. Ultimately, we decided to hold one election in the early part of the senior year and to not elect juniors. We eventually developed a point system formula in which the first two years of basic science counted for a maximum of one-third of the points, and the clinical clerkship year counted for two-thirds of the points. A student thus could be elected on a strong clinical performance alone, but could not be elected on a strong basic science performance alone. At NYMC, the election process also uses a point system, giving a greater weight to the clinical clerkship year than basic science course work, even for the third-year elections.

The main problem with the Einstein election process of only seniors was

that it occurred late; with the pressures of finding house staff jobs, this resulted in the chapter becoming less active. Electing only seniors also meant that Einstein had no AΩA student officers and no chapter continuity other than faculty and house staff.

Thus, when I became councilor at NYMC, I had already recognized the value to a chapter of electing junior AΩA members, both in chapter activity and continuity. In 1999, the NYMC chapter was awarded the AΩA Chapter of the Year Award because of our service efforts.

Election of other categories

At the same time the chapter inducts students, it also nominates two faculty and two alumni. Faculty who do small group teaching can miss being nominated because they are not known to the entire student class. To balance the nomination process, students choose one faculty nominee and the faculty and administration recommend another with the students' consent.

Alumni nominees are identified through the Alumni Association and by faculty and students who might be familiar with the nominee's accomplishments.

The chapter has nominated distinguished individuals for honorary membership. One who was elected by the board of directors of the society to honorary membership was Dr. Attilio Maseri, a noted cardiologist from Italy, and the physician to Pope John Paul II.

Chapter finances

Local AΩA chapters do not receive funds for their campus activities from the national organization, except for specific awards programs. At Einstein, the AΩA chapter was supported by the dean, especially to fund the induction banquet and the induction speaker if we had no AΩA Visiting Professorship grant. At NYMC we do not receive direct support from the school because we are not an organization that includes all students. We raise money

by assessing all AΩA faculty members on campus and the different academic departments. These funds support some community service programs on campus sponsored by AΩA and pay for the induction banquet, which is a grand affair.

Awards from the national office

AΩA national headquarters supports a number of programs on campus, including the Carolyn Kuckein Student Research Fellowship and the Administrative Recognition Award. The NYMC chapter coordinator and my administrative secretary, Carol Ruggiero, has received *two* Administrative Recognition awards for her outstanding work at both the Kappa Chapter of Einstein and the Iota Chapter at NYMC, the only coordinator in the country to receive this award for work at two chapters. In previous years we received the Medical Student Service Project awards to support a highly successful AΩA tutoring program on campus, and a smoking cessation program at local community schools.

At NYMC, the most popular AΩA program has been the Visiting Professorship Program, which has allowed us to host a distinguished medical educator, scientist, or health policy leader each year. The visiting professors have included national and international figures; the chapter and councilor expend much effort in selecting each year's visiting professor. The visiting professor gives the valedictory address at the induction ceremony and banquet where NYMC's third- and fourth-year AΩA nominees are inducted.

NYMC also elects an individual for a volunteer clinical faculty award, usually a small group teacher. These individuals are presented at the AΩA induction ceremony. We do not elect residents to AΩA, because NYMC has half a dozen hospital sites for student training, making it difficult to objectively select a resident for induction. The same situation existed at Einstein.

AΩA national headquarters

presents the Robert J. Glaser Distinguished Teacher Award at the annual meeting of the Association of American Medical Colleges. I was a recipient of the award in 1997 as I left Einstein to join NYMC.

Other service projects

NYMC's AΩA chapter also prepares the school's student handbook and a directory of off-campus student electives. The chapter also sponsors a successful advisory program for students applying for various house staff programs. The councilor helps to oversee these activities, which are undertaken independently of the AΩA national office.

Relationships with other societies on campus and nationwide

The Gold Humanism Society recently instituted a chapter at NYMC. As AΩA councilor, I work closely with the Gold Society's faculty advisor to plan common programs and to avoid redundancy.

The AΩA councilor represents his school's chapter, but also maintains frequent communication with other chapters and the national headquarters. Chapter councilors serve as sources of information for other councilors, and can mentor new councilors. I served as a Councilor Director on the Board of Directors of AΩA from 2004 to 2007, and also was the regional councilor for the Northeast region (which included the American University in Beirut) when that program was in place. While serving on the Board of Directors, I reviewed applications for the Carolyn Kuckein Student Research Fellowships, and, as a past recipient of the Glaser Award, have been a member of the selection committee for the Distinguished Teacher Award.

Final thoughts

What a grand adventure and privilege it has been to serve as an AΩA chapter councilor at two medical schools over a thirty-five-year period!

I have worked with more than 1,100 student inductees, many of whom have gone on to the distinguished careers predicted by their election to AΩA. The president of our university was a student inductee of mine at Einstein in 1979. In addition, I have worked with another 5,500 students who were not elected to AΩA as undergraduates, but who have distinguished themselves and hopefully will be recognized for their accomplishments by election as faculty and alumni members. Later recognition by AΩA may even be more significant since it reflects a lifetime of achievement.

Among my accomplishments as an AΩA councilor: I saved a chapter from being dismantled and helped to see that chapter flourish, and I served at another chapter that flourished as well. After all these years I think we have developed a good election process for students and faculty. I watched the great changes in medical education and health care that have occurred since 1978, and I can reiterate what I told the students at Einstein: there is nothing wrong with receiving a medal for working hard, aspiring to do your best, and going the extra distance. Election to AΩA is a great honor and makes all of medicine better at the end. The AΩA chapters at Einstein and NYMC have truly raised the academic standards of each school for all students and faculty.

I served for six full terms as councilor at Einstein and was well into my seventh term when I left for NYMC. I am now completing my fifth term in the NYMC chapter and wouldn't mind serving another thirty-five years if the dean and students will have me. Being an AΩA chapter councilor has been one of the best jobs I have had in my academic medicine career.

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