

# Your Collegiate Section History Is Waiting to Be Discovered

The convergence of the Society of Women Engineers' 60th anniversary and their own 50th anniversary — both happening in 2010 — inspires University of Illinois collegiates to uncover their section's history.

BY KALEV LEETARU, SWE AND JESSICA WOOD, SWE

**T**he University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Collegiate Section will mark its 50th anniversary in 2010, the same year that the national Society of Women Engineers turns 60. Toward these milestones, our collegiate section has begun an ambitious project to learn more about our half-century of exis-

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Our initiative has three interlinked components: writing a narrative that summarizes our history; publishing digitized copies of all of our historical materials; and reconnecting with alumni to learn about their experiences at UIUC SWE.

## The local background

When it was chartered in 1960, UIUC SWE became the fourth collegiate section in the United States, the second in the Heartland region, and represented a national organization just celebrating 10 years of existence. Our research revealed that interest and support in a women's engineering organization on the campus predated SWE. One of SWE's forerunners, the American Society of Women Engineers and Architects, was registered on campus as early as 1945. This little historical gem was one of many that were lying dormant, waiting to be rediscovered.

At the time we began our history project, the section's diversity initiative was looking at the evolution of attitudes regarding diversity and tolerance within the College of

Engineering. This fueled our desire to learn more about what it was like to be a woman in engineering at UIUC throughout the years.

We concluded the primary research phase in spring 2008, with all available material on the section's history compiled, and we are now beginning to pore over this material and write a comprehensive history of our section. We will be publishing all of this material, with a brief narrative already posted to the UIUC section's Web site at [web-space.ncsa.uiuc.edu/swe/history.html](http://web-space.ncsa.uiuc.edu/swe/history.html), together with an archive of materials we have digitized.

## Searching the section archives

Our first step was to find historical records in our possession. This involved searching

## SWE's National Archives

In 1993 SWE moved its records to Wayne State University's Walter P. Reuther Library in Detroit with the mission of preserving them and making them available to researchers and SWE members alike. By establishing the SWE archives, both SWE and the Reuther Library have committed themselves to preserving and promoting not only the history of SWE but also of women in engineering professions. The SWE archives at the Reuther Library house the organization's historical, organizational, and headquarters records, as well as related records from the American Society of Women Engineers and Architects (1919-1946), the International Conference of Women Engineers and Scientists, and the personal diaries of Emma Barth, P.E.

These collections document SWE's growth and success as an agent of social change. However, this very success and the immense growth in the organization over the past six decades makes it difficult to fully document the rich history of each of SWE's professional and collegiate sections. SWE began as and remains essentially a grassroots organization, and much of its history lies in the actions, activities, and members of its individual sections. SWE encourages each of its local sections to help enrich the collective history of the organization and the legacy of women in engineering by recording and promoting their local histories to current and aspiring women engineers.

*By Troy Eller, SWE Archivist*

cabinets, drawers, bookcases, and every other nook and cranny of the section's office. We had just completed a massive cleaning and reorganization, which helped turn up hidden historical bits and pieces.

If your section doesn't have an office or has moved from a previous location, contacting present and past faculty advisors could be useful, as they may have archival documents.

Some records may be readily identifiable, such as a binder labeled "Officer Minutes 1960-1990," but others may consist of a small box tucked away in the back of a drawer with photographs. Officer books, archive binders, scrapbooks, or boxes of old photographs often provide rich glimpses into the past. Older sections may find that earlier generations of officer boards, especially those of the 1960s and '70s, tended to keep extensive, formal typewritten summaries of meeting minutes.

With the spread of e-mail in the 1990s, most correspondence occurred through this medium and was rarely archived. This has left a large gap in the past 10-15 years of sections' histories. This problem is not limited to SWE, and is one that archivists in general are wrestling with.

Today's sections should establish archiving standards for important e-mails, perhaps by

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printing copies and/or periodically summarizing all important correspondence and notes into a summary document that is printed and filed with the rest of the records.

#### Campus resources

Most institutions have a repository to house their historical records. This repository could be

part of the institution's library system, a separate university archives, or an outside records management company. Ask a librarian at the reference desk where the institution houses its historical records. A reference librarian, archivist, or records manager may also be able to direct you to relevant departmental records and other sources of information, such as back issues of student newspapers, department newsletters, and university press

releases. The engineering college may also have a records office of its own.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the Registered Organizations Office oversees registered student organizations and requires that they reregister with the office each year; provide the names of the president, secretary, and treasurer; total number of members; the mission statement of the organization; available funds; and other details.

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The campus student organization offices may keep records for several years before sending them to the campus archives, so it is important to check both.

In our case, the university archives held nearly 20 years' worth of records, from the first officer board of 1960 through the late 1970s. This enabled us to compile a list of our key early officers and trace out ebbs and flows in membership throughout that formative period.

### Digitization

Poring through historical documents and writing a summary narrative is one way to document a section's history, but a scanned PDF of 30 years' worth of meeting minutes is just as easy to share with the world as a one-page narrative. Narratives are important for putting everything in perspective, but it is the incredible wealth of "little details" in the original materials that are often the most fascinating.

For example, a description of events held over the years can

If you have an alumni newsletter, start including a few scanned photos in each issue and let those images work for you.

link to scanned photographs of those events. A discussion of gender equity can link to a 1961 newspaper clipping marveling how a "blonde" engineer is part of the space program — this was one more gem we found in our archives. Yet another way to make history come alive might be posting the founding officer minutes from 50 years ago, where the officers debated over the early structure of the Society, or perusing descriptions of engineering open house projects from the 1970s.

UIUC SWE has posted all of our historical material on our Web site in searchable format, which has opened our history to our members and to the world at large.

When digitizing historical material for your section's Web site, security and copyright are impor-

tant considerations. Security simply refers to the fact that any digitized material that is posted to the Web site should first be vetted to ensure that it does not contain any potentially sensitive information, such as a bank account number listed in the minutes from an officer board meeting.

Copyright is more problematic and refers to the fact that many materials are protected by copyright restrictions that prohibit your scanning and republishing

them on the Web. The Library of Congress Copyright Clearance at [www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov) is one comprehensive source of guidance, but we also recommend Cornell University's Copyright Information Center's site at [www.copyright.cornell.edu/public\\_domain/](http://www.copyright.cornell.edu/public_domain/)

### Connecting present and past: alumni association

The written record of an organization can tell only so much about its history: The vast majority of the stories and events that gave it its life are preserved only in the memories of its alumni, whom we have begun to contact with the help of the alumni association.

While we are still in the beginning stages of this final cornerstone of our initiative, early results are encouraging. We will be devoting considerable efforts to

## 60th Anniversary Celebration

As part of its upcoming 60th anniversary celebration in 2010, SWE is working to help local sections capture their histories and preserve their records locally. A Section and Region Records Guide is available on the SWE Online Communities Archives Community, and SWE members are invited to join the community to discuss the archival process and their section histories. The StoryCorps® Door-to-Door Project recorded interviews between the eight pairs of SWE members at the WE07 conference in Nashville, and StoryCorps is slated to return to the WE08 conference in Baltimore. Also at the conference this year, SWE Archivist Troy Eller will be hosting a workshop on writing section histories, and the WE09 conference in Long Beach will include a workshop on conducting oral history interviews. Participating sections are encouraged to send copies of their written and oral histories to the SWE archivist for inclusion in the national archives.

In addition, awards for the best section histories and oral histories will be presented at the 2009 and 2010 conferences, respectively.

By Troy Eller, SWE Archivist

this project in the fall, with the hope of sending letters to alumni asking if we could talk further with them about what SWE was like in their day. While we are very fortunate to have an established alumni relations program on our campus to tap into, it is likely other sections will find their own alumni associations to be useful resources in trying to track down less-recent alumni.

### Stirring up interest in the process

Not everyone enjoys reading through pages of old meeting minutes, so it is usually easier to find people interested in looking through scrapbooks and piles of old photos. Photos are also a fantastic way to engage alumni. Scan more-recent photos and send them to recent alumni asking if they recognize anyone. This will bring back memories of their collegiate days, and they will often forward the photos and requests to others with whom they keep in touch. If you have an alumni newsletter, start including a few scanned photos in each issue and let those images work for you. ■

*Kalev Leetaru is coordinator of information technology and research at the University of Illinois Cline Center for Democracy where he established and oversees its mass access digitization center. He has worked extensively with digital history projects and advises a number of digitization and digital history initiatives.*

*Jessica Wood currently serves as a Region H collegiate representative for SWE after a year and a half as president of the University of Illinois SWE section, where she helped lead its diversity and history initiatives.*