

Book Review by
Linda P. Rowe,
Assistant Dean for Student Affairs,
University of Illinois College of
Medicine at Peoria

Eugene G. Schwartz (Ed). (2006). *American students organize: Founding the National Student Association after World War II: An anthology and source book*. American Council on Education/ Praeger Publishers. Produced by the USNSA Anthology Project. 1212 pp. ISBN 0-275-99100-8 (\$135)



Anyone who seeks to translate research into narrative—particularly when that research focuses on a subject of great personal significance—will sympathize with a plight common to historians and biographers: What to leave out? Eugene G. Schwartz acknowledges confronting this dilemma when he set out to produce a relatively concise and straightforward “trade” book about the founding of the National Student Association (NSA). He eventually abandoned the idea of a trade book, chose the comprehensive route, and embarked upon a project of nine years duration, involving 23 contributing editors, over 90 contributing authors, and \$400,000 in funding from individuals and major foundations. The end result, *American Students Organize*, is an encyclopedic anthology of memoirs, references, images, and primary source material assembled for the purpose of telling the whole story of the NSA from perspectives of those who witnessed it firsthand.

Schwartz, an editor, writer, and publishing consultant, had intimate firsthand knowledge of the NSA. As a GI Bill student at City College

of New York, he served NSA as vice president for educational affairs from 1948–49 and was an “observer” at the World Student Congress at Prague in 1950. He enlisted as many former NSA members as could be located to help direct and assemble the most thorough and complete accumulation of material on the NSA in existence.

Readers who have never heard of the NSA may be forgiven for their ignorance. Histories of higher education often give the impression that not much happened on the student organization front between the youth communist leagues of the 1920s and early 1930s and the activism of the 1960s and early 1970s. Brubacher and Rudy (1997) didn’t mention NSA at all. Neither did Horowitz (1987), although Horowitz’s analysis of student cultures immediately following WWII helped place the NSA’s activism in context. Moreover, NSA members were a minority on campuses where their chapters existed. They were activists and intellectuals in a decade of popular history associates with a quiet “mainstream” of postwar students whose interests tended toward the personal and domestic tasks of building careers, social connections, and families.

According to editor Schwartz, the NSA was a vehicle for students who sought to strengthen self-governance on their campuses and who aspired to shape world events. In the prologue to a “Synopsis” leaflet that accompanies his hefty volume, Schwartz says, “The close of World War II was the impetus for NSA’s formation. American Students attending the August 1946 World Student Congress in Prague found a need for an American student voice in post-war international student forums; they returned determined to create one” (Synopsis, p. 2). Efforts to form national unions of students predated and postdated the NSA, but it is unlikely that any of the NSA’s predecessors or followers nurtured more diverse and influential leaders of American social and political institutions in such a short span of time.

American Students Organize is itself meticulously organized. The table of contents alone would consume the word count allotted to this review. Over 1,200 pages long, this large-format text with a price tag of \$135 arrives complete with a summary and reader’s guide, a separate “Synopsis” leaflet, a timeline of U.S. Student and Youth Groups, extensive prologue, historical sidebars, appendix, and

multiple indexes. It is lavishly illustrated with photographs and reproductions of original documents, such as the NSA charter, posters, and campus newspaper articles. It is organized thematically into six major sections.

Part 1 offers a detailed chronology of NSA events, beginning in London in 1945, and looking at NSAs conception, historical progress, membership and finances, structure, and at its role and meaning from internal and external perspectives. Part 2 recalls in detail the “Domestic Programs and Activities” of the NSA, including its civil rights agenda, its cultural programs, its commitment to academic freedom amid anticommunist frenzy, and the roles that educators and political mentors—Eleanor Roosevelt among them—played in supporting the student organizers. Part 3, “Searching for Paths to Peace,” dissects the central vision of NSA’s founders: To harness the energy and idealism of students to build global understanding in a postwar, cold-war world. It addresses the challenges and compromises created by ideological differences among members, as well as by governmental pressures. The NSA’s student travel and exchange programs are described as forerunners to the Peace Corps. A special editorial task force unblinkingly analyzes the covert involvement of the CIA in NSA activity, a scandal of sorts that was not revealed until 1967.

“Student Voices Influencing the NSA” are heard in Part 4, which categorizes student perspectives according to political leanings, religious affiliations, veteran status, and collegiate activities. Original writings and contemporary reflections by past NSA leaders illuminate the sociodemographic forces at play during NSA’s development. Part 5 looks at NSA’s intercollegiate networks and leadership from inside each of nine geographic regions, and from within seven different types of colleges. It pays tribute to 16 educator-mentors who helped nurture NSA on their campuses. Part 5 also touches on “the lighter side” of NSA life—not to diminish the anthology’s “seriousness of purpose” the editor cautions—with essays about members’ student days. Part 6 is an “Epilogue” of collected material about how the organization evolved and changed after 1953, and eventually reformed as the United States Student Association in the late 1990s. A delightful “Afterword” offers insight into the historian’s methods and the paths that lead to serendipitous discoveries and insights.

The intended audience for *American Students Organize* is, judging from its major underwriters, students of the U.S. political and educational scene. It is also styled as a tribute to the NSA members themselves, none of whom could have enjoyed so comprehensive a view of their organization while they were students. Thus, it is hardly a volume “from the field” or even *for* the field of Student Affairs. Nevertheless, Schwartz and his contributors display a gratifying awareness and appreciation of the role of Student Affairs in nurturing students to act as change agents within and without higher education. Before the storied protests and sit-ins of the 1960s, NSA members also pushed, albeit less physically, for student involvement in institutional decision-making. Student affairs advisors championed their efforts, frequently in the face of opposition from academic leaders.

NASPA members will recognize, about one-third of the way through the book, the familiar face of Robert H. Shaffer, former editor of this journal—to name but one of his many contributions to the field. In 1952, while assistant dean of students at Indiana University, Shaffer served as NSA’s national advisor. His essay places NSA in familiar historical and philosophical contexts and points out that while deans and advisors may have assisted NSA, NSA likewise helped shape student affairs. Shaffer describes how the NSA’s “Bill of Student Rights” “finally evolved into the ‘Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities’ approved by NASPA, among other organizations (p. 327). Gordon John Klopff, a student personnel advisor to NSA, recalls how student affairs deans created a multiorganization committee to audit NSA in 1953 and establish that NSA was neither a communist front nor a threat to the academy. Klopff’s musings on what he learned as a young dean barely older than his earnest advisees, and on what he might have done differently, will resonate with new professionals today.

American Students Organize furnishes student affairs professionals with information, if not conclusive evidence, about the connections among student participation in leadership activities and student success in later life. Former NSA leaders, many whose names are recognizable, comprise a roster of movers and shakers in education, government, industry, and social justice. Did their individual “gifts” for leadership nurture the NSA, or vice versa? Would they have been as successful in life without the NSA? The book as a whole does not attempt to address

the question, although many of the authors cite a synergic effect between talented young adults and the opportunities college life afforded. Despite Schwartz's near-apology for including the "lighter side" of NSA, these insights into personal lives should be highly instructive to Student Affairs professionals because they explicate how the social attractions of collegiate life bring students together, and how young adults' affiliation needs can propel them to engage in learning and vocational pursuits.

We hear in the students' firsthand accounts the heady excitement that accompanies immersion in a cause. We gain insight into youthful eagerness to sacrifice money, creature comforts, even academic progress, to become involved in something bigger than oneself. We are reminded of the transience and diversity of students and their projects. If this book teaches nothing else, it should teach us to back away from the temptation to institutionalize student leadership programs and structures. That the founders of the NSA were unaware of their predecessor organizations reveals that students don't necessarily need or want to be bound by the history that shapes administrative policy. As contributor Miriam Haskell Berlin, a career academic and original NSA member, reminds us, "the glory is in the doing" (p. 12).

In summary, Schwartz and his associates' editorial choice to ensure a balanced perspective by including *every* perspective enables *American Students Organize* to fulfill its promise to serve as a "source book." The widespread use of photographs and original documents gives the book an almost scrapbook-like quality. It achieves the stated goal of "putting a human face on the NSA."

Comprehensiveness and thoroughgoing organization are the anthology's strengths and, conversely, the qualities that make it rather daunting to pick up—not to mention that it weighs six and a half pounds. Should one attempt to read *American Students Organize* from cover to cover, one will discover a narrative that repeatedly folds back over itself, looking at NSA through multiple lenses. The book is best treated as a reference work. (Readers seeking a concise summary of NSA at its arguable zenith, 1951, should flip immediately to page 312 for a reprint of an article by Barbara Witten that appeared in *Mademoiselle* in November of that year.) Although its tables and

indexes are extremely helpful, *American Students Organize* is an ideal candidate for electronic formatting, which would speed up cross-referencing and improve searchability. The cost may render *American Students Organize* an unappealing option for the private library, but it definitely belongs in every college's collection where students of higher education history can access it.

References

- Brubacher, J. S., & Rudy, S. W. (1997). *Higher education in transition: A history of American colleges and universities* (4th ed). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Horowitz, H. L. (1987). *Campus life: Undergraduate cultures from the end of the eighteenth century to the present*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.