

PLATO PAST AND PRESENT

Where We Came From and How We Grew

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We have Bob Elsas, a CPA from Madison, to thank for our origin. He visited family in Los Angeles in 1986 and experienced UCLA's Perpetual Learning and Teaching Organization, PLATO, there. When he returned to Madison he embarked on a quest to start a similar organization here. It took persistence. Not until he visited Dean Harland Samson of the University of Wisconsin's Division of Summer Sessions and his Associate Dean, Nancy Abraham, did he gain interest and support from the university.

In October 1986 Associate Dean Abraham invited Elsas and a few friends to launch PLATO here, and offered strong support from the Division of Summer Sessions. With this institutional backing, Elsas and a few friends forged ahead. By the winter of 1987 PLATO was able to offer three study/discussion groups and had recruited 39 members. The University of Wisconsin, through its designated liaison, Alice Dubois, did almost everything but the programming, which was developed by Elsas and his friends. Dubois arranged for leaders of the fledgling PLATO group to pitch the idea of their new organization at the Division of Summer Sessions's Guest Tea. She also designed a flyer for the organization, helped PLATO members register as UW guest students, collected course fees, wrote news releases and articles about the new group and more. Membership fees were initially \$3 per class, then jumped to \$15 per year.

Deans Samson and Abraham kept close track of the new organization. In May 1987 Dean Samson was reported in the minutes of a PLATO planning committee meeting as telling the group that "more structure is needed." The founding members, led by Norman Jacobson as president, took his advice seriously, and by late in 1987 were developing a constitution, by-laws and a committee structure. During the year the group broadened its curriculum, enlarged its membership and increased its fees. In 1990 Bob Elsas, in a review of PLATO's beginnings, stated, "PLATO owes a debt to its University sponsors who have subsidized its early years to provide a solid base. Deans Samson and Abraham and Advisor Dubois should be particularly mentioned."

From the start, member-led study/ discussion groups were the heart of UW-Madison's PLATO - named the Participatory Learning and Teaching Organization. By 1989 the organization had 72 members and operated six study/discussion groups that met for five weeks each. The leaders also developed guidelines for group coordinators. During the 1990/91 programming year PLATO held its first preview, lengthened the time study/discussion groups met to 12 weeks, and developed a Manual of Policies and Procedures. The group had a mailing list of 125 names, 105 members and 80 active participants in programs. The organization held two distinguished lectures, one by James Doyle and one by Paul Soglin. The latter was attended by 120 members and friends.

But apparently not everyone followed the organization's procedures on time that year. UW liaison, Mary Jo Biechler, who succeeded Alice Dubois as UW liaison, was prodding PLATO leaders in writing on housekeeping and programmatic issues.

By 1992 the size and activity of PLATO was causing workload problems for Ms. Biechler. In May 1992 she wrote Associate Dean Patrick Runde, who replaced Associate Dean Abraham, with these concerns:

Due to the size and nature now of obligations (financial, logistics, coordination, national affiliation, and curriculum) and the fact that as retired people they do not seek nor want nor expect new work assignments or administrative tasks, the question has to be asked "how much can the University of Wisconsin-Madison DSS/ICP invest in this organization which was fostered and encouraged in 1987."

Biechler's concerns led PLATO to fund a part time position at the UW to help with the administrative workload. That arrangement has morphed over the years into the current UW-DCS/PLATO division of membership dues in a 30/70 ratio. (Since 1997 Wendy Kerr has carried out the administrative duties for PLATO, and since 2001, when Biechler retired, Kerr was the UW administrative liaison to PLATO. In 2005 Sarah Schutt became Director of Senior Learning at DCS and works closely with PLATO.