

The Founding of SALT

A History

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In December 1972, Aryeh Neier, then executive director of the ACLU, convened a group of law professors at the ACLU office in New York City. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the need for an association of progressive law teachers to address perceived problems with legal education as well as larger societal issues. Several converging events prompted this meeting: the Nixon era, the newly conservative Supreme Court, the slowing of the national commitment to civil rights and the growing awareness of the arbitrary nature of law school admissions as well as state bar examinations. It was thought that an association of law school professors could provide an organizational base to address these and other pressing issues.

In 1973, Professor Norman Dorsen, who had attended the first meeting, was asked to convene a second meeting, adding additional invitees to the original group. At this and subsequent meetings, the group formulated goals and activities for the new association. These included:

1. Providing a means for law professors to assist in drafting progressive legislation.
2. Encouraging legal education to be more responsive to social needs.
3. Preparing studies, reports, and legislative recommendations on matters of public and professional concern.
4. Evaluating federal judicial appointments.
5. Encouraging greater diversity on law faculties and within student bodies.
6. Combating violations of academic freedom.
7. Monitoring instances of racism and arbitrariness on bar examinations and elsewhere.

The professors who attended these early meetings included highly respected members of the legal education academy: Frank Askin (Rutgers), Derrick Bell (Harvard), Ralph S. Brown (Yale), David

Chambers (Michigan), Thomas I. Emerson (Yale), Ruth Ginsburg (Columbia), Howard Lesnick (Pennsylvania), and Herman Schwartz (SUNY Buffalo). After long discussion they concluded that an association of law professors was not only desirable but feasible.

In early 1973, Norman Dorsen sent a formal proposal for a law professor association to 35 other law professors, which included a questionnaire on the concept of the new association as well as its tentative goals and activities. This proposal made clear that the new organization would not conflict with the AALS, which had recently renewed its intention to remain an association of law schools, not of law teachers. The response to the Dorsen proposal was overwhelmingly positive.

The December 1973 AALS meeting in New Orleans was thought to be the ideal place to launch the new association. Armed with signs and notices, Dorsen and Stephen Gillers, one of his former students and now a law professor at NYU, gathered a group of some 60 law professors, which voted enthusiastically to found the new body. Originally, the name "National Association of Law Professors" was used. Several who attended, in particular David Cavers of Harvard, suggested the term "Society" be used to suggest a more scholarly body. They also thought that the name should include "American". Discussion continued and the term "Teachers" instead of "Professors" was proposed to indicate the broader nature of the group. The group then formally adopted the name "Society of American Law Teachers", and the organization was officially launched. Norman Dorsen was elected SALT's first president, and Stephen Gillers its first Executive Director. Anthony Amsterdam, Derrick Bell, Ralph Brown, and Tom Emerson were named Vice Presidents. Thus, in December 1973, SALT was founded.

Over the next few months, a 31-member interim Board of Governors worked to draft proposed by-laws. In keeping with its democratic aspirations, the new organization set dues at \$25 per year, with a level of \$15 for those making less than \$15,000 a year. By September 1974, 149 law teachers from 69 law schools had joined SALT. At that point, Dorsen wrote a recruitment letter inviting all American law teachers to join. It was also in 1974 that the articles of incorporation were filed for the new society. The original structure of a president, four vice-presidents, a treasurer, a secretary and a Board of Governors.

The thirtieth anniversary of SALT was celebrated at the annual SALT banquet held during the AALS convention, fittingly in New Orleans, on January 5, 2002, at which the organization's founders were honored.