

## Research Spotlight: Women’s Organizations and Social Change

Research conducted by Southern Illinois University Edwardsville political scientists Dr. Anne Boxberger Flaherty and Dr. Carly Hayden Foster provides new insights into efforts to racially desegregate women’s organizations in the border town of St. Louis, MO during the civil rights movement.

The town nicknamed “The Gateway to the West” perched not just between east and west, but also north and south. As such, it sat on the border between the legacy of a slave state and a free one. Racial segregation was not written into law in St. Louis to the same extent as most southern cities, but it still occurred in practice and was a part of dominant social norms there in the 1940s.

In 1949, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) changed its bylaws to require local branches to admit all women with degrees from approved institutions. This move was meant to usher in the racial integration of its local affiliates but was met with resistance by some of its southern affiliates.



Dr. Flaherty and Dr. Hayden Foster investigated efforts to racially desegregate the St. Louis branch of the AAUW in the lead up to and aftermath of this decision. They reviewed organization minutes and correspondence between group members from the 1940s and 1950s and also conducted interviews with women who were branch members during that time.

They unveil a history fraught with division between those who applauded the move and those who fought against it. This division led to a branch split and a series of lawsuits over the ownership of the branch house.

Their findings serve as a reminder that successful social change often involves great struggle.

Although unsuccessful in their lawsuits, the actions of the women who fought for the racial integration of the St. Louis branch of the AAUW inspired others, and helped promote broader civil rights in St. Louis.

“The story of the St. Louis branch’s disintegration and rebirth illustrates the social tension inherent in racial integration, and also the courage and commitment of women who believed in doing their part for social justice,” wrote Dr. Flaherty and Dr. Hayden Foster.

*This research spotlight discusses insights from research in Dr. Anne Boxberger Flaherty and Dr. Carly Hayden Foster’s working paper “Gateway to Equality: University Women, Race and Civil Rights in St. Louis, 1940-1960.”*