The Bonds of Brotherhood and Sisterhood

Creating A Welcoming Environment

for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Members

– Joe Bertolino

I am the past national Vice President of my fraternity and I am openly gay. While I love my organization and have been proud to serve, being openly gay in my fraternity has not been easy. I vividly recall the day I sat in a room and was asked by my brothers, "How will your being openly gay adversely effect us?" "Will this hurt our recruitment on a national level?" "How will our brothers react?" "Will your sexuality hurt our attempt to raise funds?" "Will we see your partner with you in public?" "What are we going to do about this?" These comments are seared into my mind. For the first time since my initiation I felt abandoned by my brothers and alone in my fraternity. It was clear to me that the bonds of brotherhood did not include me or brothers like me.

Unfortunately, these questions were not asked of me years ago, during a time when sexual orientation was not discussed in public. They were asked two years ago at my fraternity's national convention. Moreover, they were not asked by undergraduates, as one might expect, but by my fellow alumni. I have often reflected on how painful this experience was. If I felt such pain and abandonment from my fellow alumni brothers, how much more pain were my gay, undergraduate brothers feeling?

I am a proud brother who has served as a loyal and dedicated volunteer to my fraternity. I honor my organization's ritual, values, and time honored ideals. However, the truth is that I am not alone. There are numerous brothers and sisters, loyal to their letters, who are not heterosexual. These brothers and sisters, both students and alumni, go to school, work, have families and friends, attend organization events, and participate in the life of their organization both on a local and national level. The only difference is who they love. In my case, I have spent the past 12 years with the same fraternity man.

The truth of the matter is that despite decades of education and efforts in support of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community, both fraternal organizations and campuses continue to struggle with these issues. With current debates raging over issues from gay marriage to equal access, the challenge in creating a welcoming environment, not just for fraternity and sorority members, but for everyone in the campus community, is complex. These challenges exist on campuses with comprehensive GLBT resources and support services as well as campuses with little or no resources. Even on a campus with multiple resources, and in an organization that professes "acceptance," a GLBT student can feel unwelcome and alone. No matter what the level of resources, the basic tenets and challenges of creating a welcoming environment for students remain the same.

While our campuses and organizations may think they are welcoming to GLBT persons, the question remains, "How do we know?" Have we asked our students if they feel welcome? Have we asked how they perceive the campus or organizational environment? More often than not we do not truly know the answers to these questions, as we have not taken the time to gather feedback and assess the welcomeness of our environment towards GLBT students. Moreover, just as we think we have mastered the resources necessary to provide a welcoming environment, we find that the population, the expectations, and the landscape have changed. Thus, there is still much work to do.

Creating a welcoming environment is a process, a journey that is continuous and on-going. Our role and responsibility as college and university administrators is to ensure that our campuses, and our fraternity and sorority communities, never lose sight of this process, and that we continually assess, analyze, and plan. We must survey our students, ask the important questions and collect the data necessary to ensure this creation.

To create a truly welcoming environment we must ensure that our efforts are grounded in good theory and best practices. Carol Gilligan (1993) reminds us that in order to best meet the developmental needs of students, we must continually be focused on what she calls an "Ethic of Care." Our efforts must be grounded in "building relationships – the vision that self and others will be treated with equal worth, that despite differences, everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone" (Gilligan, 1993, p.63). We must be fully cognizant that creating a welcoming environment is more than just a duty and must never be superficial; it must be sincere and real, created out of a sense of care for our students. Student's growth is directly correlated to the relationships they build, to the value we place in them, and to the realization that someone genuinely cares about them and their success. After all, isn't this what rituals profess and what fraternity and sorority life is all about?

Ernest Boyer (1990) complements Gilligan by reminding us that as administrators we have a responsibility to provide a community that is open and just. Our campuses, and thus our organizations, must be places where "freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed. Moreover, they must be places where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued" (Boyer, 1990, p.23). It is at the very core of fraternity and sorority life and the ritual of fraternal organizations that such sacredness of each person is professed to be honored, and should be, regardless of whether or not that brother or sister is gay or straight.

This can only happen if our work is guided by a mission and philosophy grounded in the concepts of caring, openness, and justice. Such is the case in almost every principle and core value that guides both institutions and fraternal organizations. Thus, our actions must match our rhetoric, and those actions must be role modeled dualistically, from the top down and from the ground up. Campuses and fraternities and sororities must ensure that the

resources and the mechanisms are in place to create and maintain a welcoming community; from programs to policies, from rhetoric to responses, from missions to mechanisms, both campuses and organizations must move beyond the awareness and knowledge to developing skills and taking action.

Nowhere better can all of this be achieved than on the college campus and within a fraternal organization. Creating a welcoming environment for all students requires that we support and maintain a discourse that celebrates difference and allows for conversation, dialogue, and debate. Ultimately, our goal is to create an environment that is not only welcoming, but fosters mutual awareness and respect.

Creating such an environment is difficult in almost any campus community. However, it is particularly difficult when working with fraternities and sororities. I am not naïve to the sensitive issues surrounding GLBT matters within the fraternity/sorority community. In fact, I understand the fear and, in some cases, the values surrounding the GLBT issue. Yet, if fraternities and sororities are to profess both an acceptance for and pride in diversity, they must understand that sexual orientation is just one piece of that diversity. Thus, as educators, we must continually challenge our fraternity and sorority members on this issue and ask the tough questions including:

- Do fraternal organizations truly value diversity? If so, are they willing to stand up for the principles of diversity in all its forms?
- Do fraternal organizations truly value brotherhood and sisterhood? If so, are they willing to support their GLBT brothers and sisters?
- Do these organizations truly value their ritual? If so, are they willing to treat others with dignity and respect?
- Do they truly value fraternity and sorority life? If so, are they willing to lead and speak up for their GLBT brothers and sisters?

As a chief student affairs officer, I will take this one step further and assert that fraternal organizations are guests of the institution. Therefore it is incumbent upon both the national organization and the institution to partner with one another in an attempt to educate undergraduate members and alumni on the issue of diversity, including GLBT issues. Fraternities and sororities profess to follow a higher standard. Institutions must be compelled to hold them to that higher standard.

Beyond posing these questions, and holding fraternities and sororities to this "higher standard," as educators, we must focus on creating a welcoming environment for GLBT students. This can be done by focusing on the following:

- There must be a commitment to educating students and alumni on GLBT issues from both the senior administration of the institution and the senior administration of the inter/national organization.
- There must be an ongoing emphasis on creating an atmosphere of support.
- Remember that creating a welcoming environment is an ongoing process; it is a journey, not a destination.
- We must continually educate ourselves, our staff and our students on this issue through trainings, programs, speakers, and new member education.
- Both the institution and the inter/national fraternity or sorority MUST work collaboratively and in partnership with one another on this issue.
- Assessing the campus climate for GLBT students is essential. We must seek feedback, survey the students, and carefully analyze the responses.
- The institution's and organization's mission and philosophy must be grounded in good theory and best practices.
- The discourse and communication on GLBT issues must be respectful and on-going. Additionally, the discourse must acknowledge the sensitivity, fear, and lack of understanding and knowledge on this subject.
- Education must be the focus – never assume that everyone is heterosexual. While this may appear to be basic, articulating the presence of GLBT persons and allies is crucial to supporting a welcoming environment.
- Institutions and organizations must issue statements and create policies that advocate for and espouse social justice, student development, and mutual respect.
- Campuses and fraternity and sorority communities should invest in GLBT materials (i.e. books, magazines, videos) and other resources (i.e. support services, groups, committees, program initiatives).
- Expectations of both the institution and the organization for students and alumni, should clearly state that bigotry in any form will not be tolerated and that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect.

Implementing these strategies will take commitment, dedication, and hard work. Institutions and organizations must be prepared to make a commitment from the top, be willing to navigate the politics and must be prepared to contribute both financial and human resources. By doing so, institutions will set a solid foundation in creating a welcoming environment for GLBT persons.

Nel Noddings reminds us that, "teaching self-respect, how to get along with others, and how to take pleasure in life's celebratory moments is not entirely an intellectual task, and is not aimed entirely at intellectual outcomes. We must always aim to educate for the human experience" (1995, p.55) In doing so, we must ensure that all students are fully welcomed and are treated with dignity and respect. This must be done, not because it is the "fraternal" thing to do, but because it is the "right" thing to do.

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References