

If Greek letter organizations are to be effective learning communities, they must be prepared to meet the challenges associated with recruiting and retaining members of underrepresented populations, as well as educating all members about diversity issues.

The Future of the Greek Experience: Greeks and Diversity

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The college student population has changed dramatically since 1776, when Phi Beta Kappa was founded at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Historically white fraternities and sororities were established on predominantly white campuses at a time when the student body was primarily white, Christian, and male. Now, however, the college student population is more diverse than it has ever been (Hodgkinson, 1985; Kuh, 1991). If Greek letter organizations are to survive and flourish within the modern college and university, it is imperative that they understand the importance of diversity.

Campus Demographics Today

Although the meaning of *diversity* varies by region and institution, it is undeniable that student populations are far from homogeneous. Among today's college students, some have disabilities; are of nontraditional age; come from different countries; have different sexual orientations; or have varied religious, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Rendón and Hope (1996) predict even more significant changes in student demographics by the year 2012. Distance-learning opportunities, such as classes on the Internet, and an infusion of even larger numbers of adult and part-time learners will further change the composition of the student body, and, therefore, institutions' educational priorities.

Persons of color are a growing percentage of the total United States population. Projections show that "between 1990 and 2030, the population of whites in the United States will increase about 25.0 percent, the black population about 68.0 percent, the Asian American, Pacific Island American and the

American Indian population about 79.0 percent, and the Hispanic population about 187.0 percent" (Manley, 1990, p. 1). Students in higher education—now and in the future—reflect these demographic changes.

The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac reported the following data on students attending college in 1996: 55.0 percent of undergraduate students were women, 24.6 percent were members of an ethnic or racial minority, and approximately 36.0 percent were above age twenty-two (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1996). With the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, the number of college students with physical and learning disabilities also increased.

Diversity in the Institution

Much of the research about student diversity has noted that students from previously underrepresented groups feel alienated from the rest of the campus community (Fleming, 1984; Evans, 1985; Smith, 1989; Rendón and Hope, 1996). Many of these students feel that the campus community is hostile rather than welcoming and is unaware of their interests and needs.

There is increasing emphasis on creating campus climates that embrace diversity in its broadest definition (American Council on Education, 1988; Rendón and Hope, 1996; Smith, 1989). At the same time, administrators, faculty, and students are addressing and redefining the meaning of *learning community*. What is community? What defines a community of learners? What makes a community healthy, vibrant, respectful, compassionate, and engaging? How does a learning community support and provide environments and experiences that value diverse perspectives and abilities? How can the need for shared meanings and purposes be balanced with the need for a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives?

These questions are also relevant to student organizations, including sororities and fraternities. What role do student groups play in creating and sustaining a campus climate that welcomes diversity? How do students influence the campus learning community? What roles do Greek letter organizations play in creating—or inhibiting—a campus climate that appreciates and includes differences? How have sororities and fraternities addressed the range of needs and issues directly affecting the development of a diverse learning community? For example, what prevents students of diverse backgrounds from joining Greek organizations?

Two issues of context have bearing on this discussion: (1) all institutions have a context and (2) Greek letter organizations are private in nature. Both of these contexts affect how people on campuses regard diversity.

The Institutional Context. When attempting to answer the tough questions raised by increasing student—and societal—diversity, one must consider the context of each campus (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates, 1991). Higher education institutions in the United States can be public, private, religious,

military, historically black, or single-sex. They can specialize in liberal arts or technology. This institutional diversity does not guarantee, however, that a particular institution has as diverse a student body as it might desire. In some cases, the institutional mission might limit student diversity. Other factors include geographic location, physical characteristics of the campus, flexibility of programs and services, and institutional priorities. Thus, to have a so-called diverse learning community means many different things across institutions (Smith, 1989).

An institution is also defined by its culture, including its history, traditions, values, and beliefs (Kuh and Whitt, 1988). Each of these factors then influences the environment and how individuals and groups interact within that environment. Institutional responses to diversity are therefore shaped by cultural factors within the institution.

Student groups, including fraternities and sororities, help shape the institution's character and culture; conversely, those institutional characteristics influence student groups. Students' roles in fostering a positive climate for diversity must be viewed in this larger context.

Has the institution made a commitment to diversity? If so, how has this commitment been communicated and implemented? Has the institution involved students and student organizations in discussing this commitment and its expectations of students in regard to diversity? How do institutional leaders, administrators, and faculty model this commitment? Do the campus community members, programs, and leadership demonstrate respect for diversity? What about the facilities and any artwork on campus?

Students learn from what institutions do, not just from what institutions say (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates, 1991). Gaps between what a campus espouses and what it enacts with regard to diversity communicate important lessons to students about inclusion, multiculturalism, and integrity. Students can be expected to act on those lessons.

The Privacy of Organizations. Greek letter organizations are private, voluntary, self-governing entities. Students can select an organization's members, elect their own officers, and administer their own operations. Although fraternity and sorority members have the power to govern themselves, they are still accountable in many ways to alumni, the university, and the Greek governing organizations on campus. Colleges and universities cannot tell fraternities or sororities whom to select as members, but they can provide a vision, culture, and support systems that explicitly and genuinely support diversity.

The Greek Role in Embracing Diversity. Colleges and universities need to embrace diversity and create hospitable and inclusive learning communities. Part of the challenge for institutions is to team with Greek letter organizations in this effort. In the remainder of this chapter, we consider why Greek letter organizations ought to be concerned about diversity. We also offer strategies for helping Greeks face this challenge.

The Importance of Caring

Why should Greek letter organizations care about issues of diversity? First, fraternities and sororities were founded on principles of friendship, scholarship, leadership, rectitude, and service. These are honorable values that provide a strong foundation for any learning community. Many students from under-represented groups share these values and seek experiences based on them but feel alienated from the general campus community and many student organizations (Madrado-Peterson and Rodriguez, 1978; Loo and Rolison, 1986). The expansion of fraternity and sorority membership to more students who share the organization's values can enhance the Greek experience for all members.

Second, diverse memberships expand the educational and learning opportunities among and between fraternity and sorority members of different cultures, abilities, and backgrounds. Diversity in organizations helps prepare members for working and living in a highly diverse society. The National Study of Student Learning (Pascarella and others, 1996) found, however, that "Greek affiliation had a significant negative effect on openness to challenge and diversity for both men and women." The researchers speculated that one explanation of these results was the homogeneity of Greek groups. Greek letter organizations must address this problem seriously and quickly. Those that do not will likely find themselves in a position that is incompatible with institutional goals and values. In most cases, these same groups face a loss of institutional support and recognition. Even worse, from an educational perspective, is the hobbling effect of homogeneity.

Third, the traditional-aged white student will become the minority on campuses in the next fifteen years (Rendón and Hope, 1996). To remain healthy and viable, fraternities and sororities must actively seek members from within a diverse student body. The groups that do not expand their membership pool will not survive. At best, these groups will become small organizations with little impact on campus student life.

Fourth, fraternities and sororities espouse values of brotherhood, sisterhood, and community. The Greek community, however, cannot exist apart from, or in opposition to, the college or university community. Policies, mission statements, standards, certain traditions, and goals all define what it means to be a member of a college community; these proposals often include expectations of diversity and inclusion. To continue to be part of the college community, Greek letter organizations must conduct themselves according to these goals.

Thus, it is clear why Greek letter organizations should be concerned about diversity. The learning and success of student members, as well as the survival of Greek organizations and the college community, depend on it.

Strategies for Working with Greeks on Diversity

The job functions and role of the senior student affairs officer have changed dramatically in the past few decades (DeWitt, 1991). Students' demands for

the vice president's time have increased as students' lives have become more complex. Many senior student affairs officers indicate that an inordinate amount of their time is spent on damage control for activities and events within fraternity and sorority chapters, especially fraternities (Heida, 1990).

To work effectively with Greeks, senior student affairs officers need to understand the role the Greek community plays—and has played in the past—at their particular campus. The senior student affairs officer, as well as members of the Greek affairs staff, should also be familiar with who their Greek students are. That includes their numbers, backgrounds, academic achievements, community contributions, persistent problems.

Finally, the senior student affairs officer should know about Greek organizations' national and international headquarters and governing body activities. The officer should have a rapport with their personnel. When student affairs officers work with undergraduate chapters on difficult matters, such as promoting openness to diversity, they should view these groups as partners.

Fraternities and sororities face the challenge and opportunity of responding to the changing composition of the undergraduate student body (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983; Winston, Nettles, and Opper, 1987). Not unlike other segments of the university community, such as academic departments and faculty and campus leadership, Greek organizations need to be educated about how student characteristics are changing. They must learn about the importance of creating diverse learning communities. Sororities and fraternities also need to understand the impact of their current programs, practices, and cultures on the campus climate for diversity. Furthermore, they need to understand the individual and organizational advantages they will obtain if students from previously underrepresented groups join their organizations.

Greek letter organizations must go beyond gaining an understanding, however; they need to take action. They must commit to creating diverse learning communities within the Greek system. They should also evaluate and change recruitment, education, and social programs to reflect the interests, needs, and sensitivities of the changing student population.

We offer the following suggestions for senior student affairs officers working with the Greek community and the institution to address the issues of diversity. It is important that Greek letter organizations take responsibility for implementing these strategies. The senior student affairs officer can, however, support these groups. This support can take a variety of forms—fiscal resources, staff involvement, program ideas, and so on. The key for the senior student affairs officer is to work with the Greek letter organizations to help them understand and confront the myriad issues involved in embracing diversity.

1. Make a commitment to diversity—as an institution and as a Greek system. This commitment must be articulated to the entire campus community in many venues so that the expectations are clear. This should be done with integrity, of course. That is, the Greek student leadership must follow through on their commitment and be willingly held accountable for acting or not acting on this stated commitment to diversity.

2. Encourage others to invest in this commitment to diversity by involving key representatives from the Greek system, academic and student affairs, and other students in all educational efforts, assessment processes, and planning activities. The success of any effort depends on how involved interested parties are in understanding and confronting issues, challenges, and opportunities.

3. Assess the institution and the Greek community. The goal of this assessment should be to develop a current and accurate picture of the climate for diversity. This diversity assessment should go beyond gathering and comparing demographic data. It should also assess campus climates; institutional and Greek policies, programs, and practices; and physical environments. The assessment should seek information from faculty, staff, administrators, members of the Greek community, and non-Greek students. A comprehensive assessment should produce a better understanding of activities, behaviors, and attitudes that support, or conflict with, the commitment to diversity. Sample assessment questions can be found in the appendix later in this chapter.

4. Design a plan to address whatever the assessment has identified as needing more attention. This can be done by giving Greek representatives and the university leadership the opportunity to review and discuss the assessment findings jointly; they can identify the emerging issues and themes and develop strategies for improvement. The Greek members who helped design the plan can choose the important messages to be communicated. They should communicate this plan to fraternity and sorority alumni, headquarters, advisory boards, current members of Greek organizations, campus leaders, faculty, and staff. Greek chapters that improve the learning community for students of all backgrounds should be recognized.

5. Inform this process with research on student learning and principles of student development. Everyone has something to learn about what makes a learning community effective, but this is a particularly crucial developmental process for students. Appropriate strategies focused on diversity education should be employed to help students at every level gain a greater appreciation and understanding of diversity issues.

6. Be prepared to allocate adequate resources to build strong and effective educational and support mechanisms. This involves both money and time. Memberships in these student organizations turn over regularly, and efforts to make long-lasting impacts in terms of diversity must not ignore this dynamic.

Concluding Thoughts

One of the biggest challenges for today's senior student affairs officers is to engineer positive and developmental change from within the Greek chapters. At the same time, few tasks are as important as shaping colleges and universities into diverse and effective learning communities. Greek letter organizations play a critical role in the campus climate for diversity. What will help senior student affairs officers in meeting these challenges is to view the activ-

ities of Greek letter organizations as providing teachable moments and opportunities for experimentation and growth (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates, 1991).

Appendix

The following questions provide a beginning framework for self-assessment by Greek letter organizations and the institution. Each campus should develop its own assessment questions. These questions go beyond simply gathering demographic information about the student body. They illuminate experiences, community and climate issues, student needs, and critical practices that must be looked at comprehensively if the institution and Greek organizations are to address the diversity needs of their campus.

An assessment of the Greek community must be conducted in the context of the institution. Information and data gathered from the institutional perspective, as well as from the Greek perspective, will have more meaning. The data collected from this will allow for a greater understanding of any issues, needs, and themes that emerge. Areas in which the two perspectives concur and conflict will become more evident.

Institutional Self-Assessment

1. Who are your students? (Are they studying at the undergraduate or graduate level? Are they part-time or full-time students? What is their race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, gender, and age? What disabilities do they have?)
2. What physical barriers exist for students with disabilities?
3. How has the student body changed in the past three to five years?
4. What student needs and issues have emerged?
5. Has a campus climate assessment been done recently? If so, what did it say?
6. What are the institution's recruitment priorities?
7. What are the campus artifacts and traditions? What messages do these campus artifacts and traditions send about the campus community? Do these artifacts and traditions reflect appreciation for a community with diverse students, faculty, and staff?
8. What attitudes do faculty, staff, and students have toward a diverse learning community?
9. What is their commitment to a diverse learning community?
10. How does the administration communicate this commitment?
11. What policies and practices should be reviewed to ensure a commitment to diversity?
12. How are behaviors addressed when they are inconsistent with a diverse learning community?
13. What attitudes do the administration, faculty, and non-Greek students have toward the Greek community?

Greek Self-Assessment

1. What is the current relationship between the Greek community and the institution? How is that relationship defined?
2. Is there a written Greek relationship statement? If so, what does it say?
3. What written and unwritten institutional expectations apply to fraternities and sororities?
4. What kind of educational programming has been provided to the community regarding the changing student body and diversity needs?
5. What institutional support is there for the Greek governing association student leaders and Greek life staff to provide diversity education and other critical services?
6. What is the demographic makeup of the fraternities and sororities?
7. How does the Greek community define diverse membership?
8. What has been done to increase the number of students of different ages, races, religions, ability levels, and nationalities in Greek letter organizations? How successful have these efforts been?
9. What are the barriers to membership for students of diverse backgrounds?
10. Which fraternity and sorority behaviors, traditions, activities, symbols, practices, and values alienate individuals of diverse backgrounds?
11. What kinds of outreach programs have been conducted to educate students from these different backgrounds about the benefits of Greek membership?
12. What are the written and unwritten values of the Greek community?
13. Have policies, practices, and programs been reviewed to reflect a value of openness to diverse memberships?
14. How has inappropriate behavior that reflects insensitivity toward diverse populations been addressed?
15. What attitudes does the Greek community have toward non-Greek students?
16. Are the chapter facilities able to accommodate persons with disabilities?
17. Are programs flexible enough to appeal to students who work, who are of nontraditional age, or who have extensive academic commitments (for example, internships, study-abroad programs, or research fellowships)?
18. How welcoming is the Greek community for individuals whose sexual orientation or ethnic or racial background is not a part of the majority culture?
19. What has the membership experience been like for students of diverse backgrounds who have joined Greek letter organizations?
20. What is working well for these students? What is not supporting their success as individuals?

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