

Helping Fraternity and Sorority Members Understand Ritual

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*Note: Information for this article was taken from Mari Ann's Dissertation entitled *Sorority Rituals: Rites of Passage And Their Impact on Contemporary Sorority Women*. The actual study was conducted by interviewing National Panhellenic Conference undergraduate women. The information presented in this article can be applied to fraternities and sororities.*

WHY RITUAL?

I became a fraternity/sorority advisor in 1991. At that time, FIPG was a fairly new acronym and such things as kegs, hazing, and the philosophy on "pledge" education were daily topics. As a young fraternity/sorority advisor, it seemed that there was so much to do. Some of you may be thinking: What has really changed? As I was searching for answers to my many questions, I was fortunate enough to encounter two people who have had a major impact on me, as well as on so many others — Maureen Syring, Delta Gamma, and Ed King, Sigma Chi. As I traveled with students to conferences and attended various professional conferences, the messages shared by Maureen and by Ed had such an impact on me. I thought that if I could learn from them and try to teach my students values and ritual, then maybe

we could change some of the behaviors that I was experiencing. Part of the problem with that concept was that I was not very educated about my own fraternity's ritual nor was I educated about what ritual was really supposed to mean to fraternal organizations. As a result, I began to research the meaning of ritual. I began talking with many people in the sorority and fraternity world to say "what does all of this mean". In 1996, I presented my first program on ritual. Since that time, I have made it part of my mission to learn and to educate others on the importance of ritual and how the role of ritual, if taught, can make a difference in our members during their years in college and beyond.

Each year thousands of young women and men seek membership in sororities and fraternities on college campuses throughout the United States and Canada. These memberships are often appealing because of their legendary commitments to friendship, sisterhood, brotherhood, and loyalty (Callais, 2002). Whipple (1998) states, "Greek letter organizations have prospered for many years, largely because of their capacity to unite students in friendship and shared purpose. Being affiliated with a fraternity or [sorority] means belonging to a group of 'brothers' or ['sisters'] who care about one another" (p. 1). These bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood are often formed through friendship and may be maintained through ritual ceremonies that build the foundations of a fraternity or sorority if the importance of the ritual ceremonies is taught (Callais, 2002).

Today, institutions of higher learning must justify all facets of campus life. These include curriculum development, the physical environment, student involvement in co-curricular activities and the effects that involvement has on student learning. One area that has become a focus of much discussion and debate on many campuses is the impact of fraternity/sorority life and the value that involvement in sororities and

fraternities has in the development of students and the campus culture (Shaffer & Kuh, 1983; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001). "Social fraternities and sororities are a very visible, and often controversial, aspect of undergraduate life" (Pascarella, et al., 2001, p. 280). Whipple (1998) states, "As college and university leaders question the value of Greek membership, the message to Greek letter organizations is clear: if they want to be taken seriously as active partners in students' education, their current practices must change" (p. 1). This is so that host institutions, non-members, campus community members and others will value fraternities and sororities as groups that enhance the educational environment. Fraternities and sororities must be consistent with following their stated purpose and mission. This can be accomplished by integrating the purpose and mission into all aspects of fraternity/sorority life.

FRATERNITIES/SORORITIES AND RITUAL

Rituals within the fraternity and sorority world are rites of passages through formalized ceremonies that were developed at a time when ceremonial transitions were a way of life (Callais, 2002). Ritual was intentionally developed to be a part of these organizations. At different stages in their growth process, young men and women knew that there would be various expectations of them. Whether it was turning eighteen years old, getting married, receiving a religious rite of passage, or having to take responsibility for one's family, one knew that growing up was part of a transition, whether ceremonial or not (Rayburn, 1999). Founders of fraternities and sororities recognized the need for ritual ceremonies that would mark transitions through one's growth in the organization.

The vision of founding members of fraternities and sororities was possibly far beyond their own understanding. The



following excerpts, although from women's groups specifically, provide an excellent example of the intent of organizations' rituals:

The symbolism of Phi Mu is a heritage from our founders, and has been the source of inspiration to all succeeding initiates. It takes for granted allegiance to lofty ideals, it stimulates worthy and purposeful achievement, and in the personal equation, it challenges the best in all of us (Lamb, 1982, p. 222).

One of the most effective descriptions of why and how rituals developed comes from the Alpha Delta Pi History Workshop I written by Hensil (1994) that states:

A strong foundation for the Alpha Delta Pi sisterhood was laid in the 1850's. Our motto, constitution and bylaws and ritual have withstood the test of time. There have been slight modifications to reflect change in terminology and social pressures of the day. The ritual has gone through slight revisions, becoming more elaborate in the 1880's. The secret societies, inspired by the Greeks, derived much of the essential elements of their rituals from Greece, Roman literature, and Christian scriptures.

In the 1880's, the era of romantic preoccupation with the exotic, sorority rituals began to stress mystery and theatrics in presentation. When the exotic became passé, ritual again began to concentrate on the ideals of knowledge, love, loyalty and truth. The basic components of Alpha Delta Pi ritual remain unchanged. The ideals remain unchanged (p. 4).

Driver (1991) writes, "ritual is moral territory, sometimes secular, sometimes religious, that has been staked out. Ritual marks the boundary at which wilderness, moral desert, or profane life stop" (p. 47). Whether referred to as rituals, rites of passage, or pathways, research indicates a need for ceremonies or life changing events that transition people from one phase in their lives to another (Driver, 1991; Nuwer, 1999; Turner, 1969).

Driver (1991) states, "we need rituals to give stability to our behaviors and to serve as vehicles of communication" (p. 23). He

makes two specific points as it relates to ritual and behavior. He explains:

Not only are rituals behaviors, since they are patterned and repetitive, they can be employed as signaling devices, an important enough point in itself. Equally if not more significant is that ritualizations can be used to store and transmit information, across time and across generations (p. 26).

If this is so, then rituals may be a key factor as to why fraternities and sororities have lasted through time. Driver's description of rituals also helps to put into perspective the importance of ritual ceremonies to fraternities and sororities as well as to the university.

Administrators, parents, other non-affiliated students, and the public question the value of membership in fraternity/sorority organizations often. Each year, institutions across the United States and Canada question and evaluate the effectiveness of fraternities and sororities in assisting with the promotion of the college or university's mission and purpose – and some of those determine that fraternity/sorority organizations are not in line with the campus ideals. Recently, Santa Clara University has decided to end its fraternity and sorority system over the next two years (Kellogg, 2001) and Alfred University's Board of Trustees decided to eliminate the fraternity/sorority system on campus (Alfred University Press Release, May, 2002). Members of higher education listservs such as the Association of Fraternity Advisors (AFA), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) receive articles that discuss campuses and the status of their fraternities and sororities on those campuses. In addressing these and other concerns, many leaders of inter/national fraternities and sororities have verbally commented that going back to the ritual is one way to educate our members as to the original intent and expectations of fraternities and sororities.

The basic concept of "going back to our roots" is intended to bring men and women back to the concept that fraternities and sororities were established as an intellectual outlet and as an opportunity to share common feelings, ideas, and beliefs, thereby enriching the personal lives of their members while developing bonds of brotherhood, sisterhood, and friendship. Ford (1999) describes a back to basics philosophy that he believes to be taking hold and emerging as the forefront for the future model of chapters present on campuses throughout the country. "In the highly litigious society of the '90s, the 'back to basic' concept will only be of benefit. Living the sum and substance of the ritual...will serve everybody well" (Ford, 1999, pp. 12-13). Ritual was designed to be shared and as an avenue for those concepts to be passed on from generation to generation.

REFLECTIONS FROM UNDERGRADUATES

Throughout the past several years, I have had students who have said that ritual is not performed correctly in their chapter and has no meaning in their chapter experience. In my study, conducted with NPC undergraduate women only, there were several comments expressed by the students that I feel were reflective of both the male and female students that I encounter. Some say that the ceremonies are "boring and long." Several of them indicated it might take all day to initiate some of the large groups of new members. The rituals were written at a time in the history of these organizations when the groups were much smaller in size than some of the chapters have become today. It may be that the inter/national organizations need to evaluate if the rituals written in the early days of the fraternities and sororities can apply to groups the size of some of the current chapters. The ways in which these ceremonies are taught to the chapters and how they are performed based upon the size of a particular chapter is a crucial aspect of the performance of ritual.

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Ritual should be explained and taught to the chapters possibly by a national officer or a local alumnus or alumna. Fraternities and sororities cannot assume that ritual is understood to be an important part of an undergraduate chapter's experience. Many of the participants indicated that some members in their chapters do not even understand the ritual, much less apply it to their daily lives. They want it to be different but do not know how to achieve that.

FRATERNITY AND SORORITY ADVISORS CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT

Students have a desire for a better understanding of the ritual ceremonies. Fraternity and sorority advisors can provide support to those chapters that want to have a deeper understanding about who they are and what role ritual has in their fraternity or sorority experience. Part of this support might be to provide resources such as videos, written information, educational speakers, and programs, as well as to assist in educating collegians as to how to facilitate discussion about ritual. The concern by the inter/national organizations may be the secrecy of the ceremonies, however, it is possible to discuss the meaning of ritual and how to incorporate it into other aspects of the students' lives without revealing the individual organization's secrets. Providing support and an opportunity for dialogue may be all that some of the members need to open these discussions with their chapter (Callais, 2002).

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES TO DISCUSS RITUAL

1. As part of a chapter development or retreat, have them place their ritual equipment in the middle of the room, and discuss what those symbols mean in their everyday life.
2. Suggest that chapter officers and/or advisors communicate to the chapter that anyone can read their ritual unless otherwise designated by their inter/national organization – many of the members do not know that they can read their ritual books – they believe that only the officers have access to their ceremonies.
3. Encourage them to have an advisor, alumnae/alumni to come in and discuss the meaning of the ritual ceremony and how

they are living the ritual of their fraternity or sorority in their daily lives.

4. Suggest that when holding members accountable for their actions, that instead of telling them that they violated a rule or standard, place their promises in front of them and ask them which ones did they not live as they had promised.

SUMMARY

In summary, undergraduate members, advisors and alumnae/alumni, inter/national organizations, and university administrators need to increase their understanding of their role regarding the education of the ritual aspect of fraternity/sorority life. Perhaps our undergraduate members have gotten so focused on the social and competitive aspects of fraternities and sororities that they have lost sight of the purpose of the ritual ceremonies. It might be that inter/national organizations have taken for granted that chapters understand their ritual ceremonies, perform them correctly and with care, and chapter members are teaching importance of ritual. Furthermore, it may be that university administrators have perceived the education of ritual to be a chapter or inter/national responsibility and have assumed that the role of ritual is understood within the chapters.

Alumni/alumnae, inter/national officers, and even university administrators can be involved in the education of the meaning and purpose of the rituals of fraternities and sororities as well as the importance of the performance. The reason that the students do not understand ritual may be that they have never been taught the ritual's role in their fraternal experience. Some suggestions that may aid the chapter members include having good conversations with them, sharing your personal stories and experiences and just getting them talking about how living their ritual is about being good people who live out their personal values. Help them to see that being fraternity and sorority members is about who they are, not just what they do. Their membership in a fraternity and sorority is not just an activity, but a way to live one's life.

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