

# The DiversiTea On Frats:

## *A Deliberation on Diversity in College Fraternities*



### **Overview:**

For many decades, fraternities, sororities, and Greek life have been a large part of college campus culture. However, despite their long history, fraternities and similar groups have always become sheltered social boxes filled with people that share many commonalities. Contrary to the mission statements of many universities that include promises of diversity and global interactions for students involved, some students reach the university only to immerse themselves in social situations with those that are similar to them.

Today we are here to discuss and deliberate if the diversity, or lack thereof, within Fraternities, Sororities, and Greek Life warrant change. We will be looking at 3 approaches to the topic at hand: 1) keep the status quo; 2) educate on diversity; or 3) encourage university mandates on diversity.

### **APPROACH ONE**

#### STATUS QUO

Fraternities foster a sense of community and create an atmosphere of belonging for people of similar backgrounds. Greek life provides a unique opportunity for acceptance and to find a common identity. On the other hand, this homogeneity creates an exclusionary culture and limits cultural interactions. Moreover, Greek life can be permissive of racism, homophobia, and discrimination.

### **APPROACH TWO**

#### EDUCATION

In order to prevent and extinguish discrimination from Greek life, implementing different forms of education could reduce prevalent issues. For example, this would include adding a "Diversity Chair" and mandatory educational videos about hazing, sexual assault, discrimination for new members and pledges. However, this method is quite expensive and may not be very effective. Additionally, this kind of education could detract from the expected Greek experience.

### **APPROACH THREE**

#### MANDATES

Imposed mandates for Greek life recruitment that correlate to University population percentages could be used in order to increase diversity in Fraternities. This method of enforced quotas allows for immediate action and administrative oversight to ensure diversity. However, this takes away the power from Greek organizations in choosing their own members and would require a lot of combined action from different administrative groups.

# Approach 1: Status Quo

## PROS

- Multicultural Greek life offers support systems for minority students
- Allows religious and minorities to be with others with shared cultural experiences
- Some students prefer to spend time with people similar to themselves

## CONS

- Limits cultural interactions, prevents students from being exposed to a variety of perspectives
- Promotes a somewhat segregated/exclusionary culture in Greek life
- Can be permissive of racism, homophobia, and other discrimination



## Stick to the Status Quo

Proponents of Greek life's homogeneous culture claim that it fosters a sense of community. Many people do meet lifelong friends and even partners through their frat or sorority. The stress of being away from one's previously established identity can lead students to struggle with a sense of identity or belonging in college. Students may rush and pledge during their early years of college, since Greek life provides a unique opportunity to find a sense of belonging. Students can reconstruct their sense of self and acceptance through building relationships with people similar to themselves. This community of like-minded people with similar backgrounds, goals, and shared experiences can be reassuring in a time of distress.

Greek life participants justify its homogenous nature with the explanation that people, regardless of identity, enjoy spending time with similar people. According to this reasoning, minorities, LGBTQ people, and other disadvantaged demographics simply would not want to join predominantly white and heterosexual frats or sororities. Many individuals who do not belong to the dominant social group may choose to join specific Greek organizations for people who have dealt with similar issues, or have had life experiences or a background more similar to their own. The downfall of this homogeneous texture is that members of Greek life are unlikely to interact with a diverse group of people. Within a frat or sorority, students meet and become close friends with their sisters or brothers. They often participate in events, go to school with, and even share living spaces with these same people, and may be less likely to form close connections with non-Greek life participants. This system of limiting interactions counteracts one of the primary functions of college: expanding one's world-view, since many members of Greek life find themselves surrounded by people with similar perspectives, an experience which is by design in this system.

## Positives

However, multicultural Greek life can certainly provide benefits to its participants. Multicultural Greek life offers students the unique opportunity to meet and connect with people on campus who may have dealt with similar social issues or share a similar cultural upbringing. These shared experiences afford members the unique social or cultural understanding to support one another, which may otherwise be difficult to recreate through other aspects of college life among predominantly white institutions. For example, international students face a major adjustment by attending college in another country, and the opportunity to be surrounded by students also grappling with this adjustment can provide assistance through social connectivity during this transition.

## Negatives

Even though proponents of Greek life find its homogeneity comforting, its inherent exclusivity is rooted in a discriminatory history of racism, homophobia, and prejudice. According to a study of Princeton College, 77 percent of sorority members and 73 percent of fraternity members were white. However, 53 percent of the university population identified as people of color. The discrepancy between these two statistics suggest that, in the current situation, Greek organizations either explicitly or implicitly exclude people of color and other disadvantaged populations.

# What would it look like?

In order to diminish discriminating acts within fraternities, fraternities must incorporate a designated "Diversity Chair" that will oversee both the recruitment process and prevent prejudice from occurring thereafter. The "Diversity Chair" should be carefully selected with approval from an Interfraternity Council (IFC) representative to ensure that the chosen chair is not biased and will actively execute his duties (the same rulings can be applied to sororities with Panhellenic Council representatives).

Furthermore, Greek Life organizations can replace typical forms of hazing (often demeaning, dangerous, and/or inappropriate) with an informative period consisting of educational videos covering topics ranging from the avoidance of committing sexual assault to inclusivity and promotion of diversity. Various videos, speakers, and quizzes should be present to guarantee that pledges and newly recruited members of both fraternities and sororities understand the standards of the organization and that there will be consequences if an individual does not abide by them (i.e. they will be kicked out of the organization and perhaps reported to the university or national/international council representing the greek organization).

## Positives

Supporters of diversity education argue that it effectively solves the root cause of prejudice. While such programs have not been instituted in fraternities, general diversity education has positive effects on participants. Hogan and Mallot found prejudice "was lower in students who completed a diversity course specifically addressing race and gender issues." Elizabeth Allan, a professor of higher education and a hazing researcher at the University of Maine, argues schools should engage the entire college community through hazing prevention programs. She believes universities should be "more proactive about providing mandatory training on hazing, including orientation sessions, and be more transparently consistently collecting and reporting data about how they respond to hazing" (Reilly).

"We've typically seen that responses to hazing are reactionary," [Allan] said. "It would be really impressive to see a plan that was comprehensive in nature, research-informed and sustainable" (Reilly).

Furthermore, education seems to be the least invasive method in comparison to quotas and the other one. This is because it doesn't set rigid restrictions on the layout of the fraternity, but rather adds to the already existing framework. Thus, it may be more likely to receive support from those within the fraternity resistant to rigid university control.

Finally, diversity education could aid students in the future: if they understand the importance of diversity in their fraternity, they may be more likely to understand its importance in their work and personal lives.

## Negatives

Though there are positive aspects to an educational solution, opponents could argue that it simply isn't enough -- or that it isn't effective. Through programs like New Student Orientation and freshman seminars, the university already provides education about the importance of diversity on our campus. Still, prejudicial sentiments and hazing continue to pervade Greek Life at Penn State. For example, students take mandatory classes about responsible drinking but binge drinking remains a serious issue on campus. Furthermore, it would be expensive, and may ultimately detract from what prospective students perceive as the Greek experience.

## Approach 2: Education

### PROS

- Least invasive → people more likely to support it
- Genuinely solve the problem at its roots rather than simply masking it
- Education could help people past just living in a fraternity
- Education would be the easiest to facilitate and doesn't remove Greek life

### CONS

- Isn't the university already trying to educate its students?
- Would education be enough? We are "educated" on drinking responsibly, but binge drinking still happens



# Approach 3: Mandates

## PROS

- Immediate action (faster than educational approach)— rapid increase in diversity
- Administrative oversight - further safeguard against student bias

## CONS

- Limits fraternities' capacity to choose new members
- Requires administrative action from multiple groups on campus



## University Mandates

The Pennsylvania State University, acting in its capacity through the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, can mandate fraternities to characterize their recruitment process as actively seeking to increase diversity in all outlets such that an incoming freshmen body reflects a requisite percentage as established by the University as “adequately diverse”, and such requisite percentages will be endowed quantitative value equivalent to the measured diversity of the University as whole.

The University's decision to enforce such quotas are informed by intrinsic values held by the Penn State community, such as freedom to choose which freshmen best fit with any given fraternity's socio-cultural norms and the progressive desire to optimize the productivity and safety that would be espoused by maintaining a diverse demographic of fraternity members. The primary authority of these commonplace values is in contention during deliberative conversations about the implementation of a diversity quota mandate. The associated weight of each authority can be determined through dialogue, and therefore can consequentially persuade stakeholders.

### Positives

An advantage of implementing a diversity quota is immediate action is taken, leading to a rapid increase in the diversity of fraternity members.

### Negatives

One glaring disadvantage is each fraternity losing its capacity to choose desired members, as well as an increased amount of administrative work that would be required to develop the mandates.

Greek organizations at the University of Alabama are mandated to submit an annual “Chapter Diversity Plan” to the University's Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, which details the initiatives and educational programs each Greek organization will take to increase their student body diversity that year.

In essence, this approach would require the Penn State Board of Trustees to grant the Office of Fraternity and Social Life the authority to work alongside other involved groups, such as the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, in order to develop a system that actively encourages fraternities to move towards a demographic that more accurately represents the overall student population on campus. These organizations would work in tandem to develop a structure that would ensure that the selection process is kept free from discrimination based on race, orientation, gender, religion, or other such measures.

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