

## CHAPTER TWO GREEK 101

### THE AMERICAN FRATERNITY – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

by

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Fraternalities are uniquely American. Although European schools have clubs and societies, nothing parallel to the American fraternity system exists elsewhere.

The first fraternity was begun at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, on December 5, 1776, when a group of students formed a secret society which they called Phi Beta Kappa, after the first initials of their Greek motto: "Love of wisdom, the guide of life." Phi Beta Kappa existed as a social group for the first 50 years of its life, and chapters were established at other schools, including Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth. It did not become the scholastic honor society we know today until after the anti-Masonic and anti-secret-society agitation of the 1820s.

But Phi Beta Kappa set the tone and instituted many of the characteristics which are considered "typical" of fraternities: a Greek-letter name, a Greek motto, an oath of secrecy, a badge, a ritual, a seal, and a secret grip or handshake. (Undoubtedly the Greek motto and Greek name arose from the fact that all these students studied Greek as an academic requirement).

Other groups that were founded shortly thereafter emulated the characteristics of Phi Beta Kappa in most respects, and fraternity chapters were established at many of our early colleges. Of the 66 men's fraternities that are now members of the North American Interfraternity Conference, 36 were founded in the 19th century.

Education in the 18th and 19th centuries was rigid, structured, and dogmatic. Fraternities filled a need in the lives of these young students by providing friendships and recreation. Although clubs, particularly literary societies, flourished at this time, most of them were too large and too specialized to provide variety and to foster close friendships.

When young women were finally admitted to what had previously been all-male colleges, they too wanted "something of their own." Consequently, after the Civil War, several women's fraternities appeared within a few months of each other. I. C. Sorosis (coined from the Latin word soror meaning "sister") was patterned after the men's groups and was established at Monmouth College in Illinois on April 28, 1867. It later took the name Pi Beta Phi, after the initials of its secret motto. Kappa Kappa Gamma followed I. C. Sorosis at Monmouth in March 1870, but Kappa Alpha Theta was founded as the first Greek-letter woman's fraternity on January 27, 1870, at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. At about the same time and without any prior knowledge of the existence of the others, Alpha Phi was founded at Syracuse University in New York in September 1872 and Delta Gamma

was founded at Lewis School in Mississippi in December 1873. All of these groups were incorporated as “women’s fraternities,” because at that time the word “sorority” did not exist. This term was created for Gamma Phi Beta in 1874 because their advisor, a professor of Latin at Syracuse University, thought the term “fraternity” ill-advised for a group of young ladies.

By the turn of the century, ten women’s fraternities had established themselves as national groups, and in 1902 they organized what is now called the National Panhellenic Conference. Today the conference has 26 member groups.

In 1909, 26 men’s groups founded the National Interfraternity Conference, and it now has a membership of 66 general fraternities. Not all of these fraternities are designated by Greek names; the exceptions are Acacia, FarmHouse, and Triangle.

In 1930, eight national Greek-letter sororities and fraternities united to form the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Five of these traditionally black groups were founded at Howard University: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in 1908, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority in 1913, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority in 1913, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity in 1914, and Omega Psi Phi Fraternity in 1911. The remaining sorority in the council, Sigma Gamma Rho, was founded in Indianapolis in 1922 and granted its first collegiate charter at Butler University in 1929. Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity was founded at Indiana University in 1911, and the oldest NPHC fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, was founded at Cornell in 1906.

American fraternities were created as social organizations and they retain this characteristic to the present day. Even the so-called “professional” societies, which select their members from a particular discipline, have a distinct social function.

But in the middle of the 19th century, a change occurred on the American campus that caused fraternities to acquire a secondary characteristic: the fraternity house. Because of many factors and circumstances (most of them economical), a number of schools were unable to maintain housing for their students. Consequently, campuses were ringed with boarding houses where students secured their own lodging and meals.

By this time many chapters had grown too large to meet in a student’s room and had started renting halls. And in 1854, at the University of Michigan, Chi Psi built a 20 by 14-foot-long cabin in which to hold its meetings.

So the students’ reaction to this double need—for meeting rooms and for living quarters—was to lease, and finally to build, their own homes. Thus evolved the fraternity house and the substitution of the word “house” for the word “chapter” as in “What house do you belong to?” This expression is common today even on campuses where there are no housed chapters.

The effects of going into the housing business have been many and varied. Owning and maintaining property required the cooperation of the alumni and alumnae, many of whom in

the past had simply graduated and disappeared. Now they became involved with the management of the chapters, which indirectly benefited the colleges by keeping alumni and alumnae interested in the school. Likewise, private ownership of these houses relieved many schools of the financial burden of building dormitories. In fact, this willingness on the part of sororities and fraternities to assume responsibility for housing has gradually led to many arrangements on the part of the institutions, such as "leased land" agreements, whereby the school owns the land and the fraternity constructs the building.

But the change from being a group that "met" together to being a group that "lived" together was a real turning point in the fraternity movement. It altered the entire concept of fraternity—with all its advantages and disadvantages. It strengthened unity, discipline, activities, and friendships. On some campuses the fraternities fostered the extracurricular activities, such as athletics, the newspaper, homecoming, and school dances. Many colleges concerned themselves solely with the educational process and took no responsibility for the other facets of student life.

It is estimated at present [1976] that only 60 to 70 percent of our fraternities and sororities live in their own houses—either leased or owned. The rest have lodges or suites or rent meeting rooms. But the spirit of unity engendered by the "house" concept is evident even with un-housed chapters. [Editor's note: In the early years of the twenty-first century, probably less than 50 percent of fraternity and sorority chapters are housed].

From the earliest days of the fraternity movement, rivalry among the groups to pledge members led to excesses in "rushing" practices, and finally to charges of exclusiveness and snobbery, resulting in several legal disputes regarding the right of fraternities to exist. Beginning in the late 1870s, several schools passed anti-fraternity rulings and some state legislatures prohibited fraternities in state institutions. Litigation, in various forms, has persisted to the present time, although the charges have gradually shifted from "secret societies" to "discrimination."

Beginning at the close of World War II, when fraternities experienced a decided rise in popularity, many educators expressed the opinion that restrictions in membership based on race, color, or creed had no place on the campus. As private organizations, fraternities maintained their right to select their own members, but several federal commissions and acts of Congress threatened fraternal rights, and the campus upheavals of the 1960s led to a serious decline in fraternity membership. Although Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibiting sex discrimination in the schools was amended in 1974 to exempt membership practices of social fraternities, many schools demanded that discrimination based on race, color, or creed be discontinued if the fraternity were allowed to remain on the campus. Many groups founded along religious beliefs were adversely affected by these demands. Nevertheless, such restrictions have been eliminated, although membership selection is still the privilege of the individual chapters.

The "national" character of fraternities (and many of them are "international" with chapters in Canada) evolved gradually. Before the Civil War, as a rule, chapters were independent and

did as they pleased. In fact, it was common for a chapter at one school to establish a chapter at another school and not even bother to inform the rest of the fraternity. But gradually authority for the "government" of the groups was vested in convention--usually a type of reunion--and one chapter would be designated as the "Grand" or "Presiding" chapter, to be responsible for information. Sometime in the 1870s, fraternities began to elect national officers, a practice imitated from their beginning by the sororities. After the turn of the century, one by one the groups established national offices. Many now own their own buildings.

Although sororities patterned themselves after fraternities, and their structure is parallel, there are tremendous differences between sororities and fraternities. And, yes, it begins with differences between the sexes.

Men's fraternities, generally, have followed a "laissez-faire" or "free enterprise" philosophy. The national organization tends to allow the chapters to run their own affairs as much as possible. The national offices are run by paid professionals who supervise a staff of paid professionals who oversee the chapters. There are, of course, volunteer advisors to the chapters and volunteer house corporation boards, but the men's groups do not have a tradition of constant supervision which characterizes the typical sorority chapter.

Sororities are managed with a somewhat "maternal" philosophy. Each chapter has a board of alumnae advisors--all volunteers--that supervises the chapter and is directly responsible to the national organization. The national officers, also volunteers, supervise the various departments of the sorority.

There is not a "fault" on either side; it is merely the difference between the men's philosophy and the women's. When the National Panhellenic Conference was formed in 1902, the first thing the ladies did was draw up agreements--practical statements of fair play--that no one would belong to more than one group, that a pledge was binding for a specified period, that no one would be pledged before she was enrolled in college, and so on. The men's groups had no such agreements and felt no need for such strict observances.

Fraternities and sororities were created by students to fill a void in their lives--to foster friendships, to encourage sociability, to provide an outlet for free expression. Few students looked upon them then--or look upon them now--as agents for philanthropy, as instruments for self improvement, or as training in leadership. And yet that is what they have become through the friendships, the sociability, and the free expression. Because a student must attain a satisfactory academic average before initiation, attention to scholarship is emphasized. The chapter provides an excellent laboratory for leadership training because chapter affairs demand responsibility.

Currently all groups are going through a period of intense self-appraisal. All associations connected with fraternity management--NIC, NPC, FEA, NPHC, and AFA among them--are demanding an end to hazing and irresponsible social behavior. Although this will not be achieved overnight, signs of improvement are evident. Some colleges and universities have

threatened to eliminate the fraternity system. Some have already done so. And many national groups have expelled or put on probation chapters that have not observed proper standards.

But these young people are human beings, and the human animal has always sought companionship, preferably with those who are congenial. If the fraternity system were eliminated today, tomorrow something would rise to take its place. And it would rise without 200 years of tradition to mold it, without strong national organizations to supervise it, and without the intense loyalties which have perpetuated fraternities.

The American college and university would be bereft of one of its most unique institutions—the fraternity—which has grown and developed by the side of American education.

## THE UNIVERSITY'S COMMITMENT TO THE GREEK COMMUNITY

In recognizing the potential for a healthy Greek community, many colleges and universities provide support and assistance to ensure fraternities and sororities on their campuses will be a positive part of the total education experience. Some of the programs and services that are typically provided include the following:

1. Designated university staff members to act as fraternity and/or sorority advisors with preference going to individuals who were undergraduate members of a Greek organization and who have prior Greek advising and/or headquarters experience with a national fraternity or sorority, as well as a master's degree.
2. Encouragement or financial support for an adult-in-residence program for all chapter houses.
3. Office space, supplies, and funding for the Interfraternity, Panhellenic, NPHC, and other governing councils.
4. Budgeting and accounting assistance and other related services to councils and chapters.
5. University resources for academic learning skills, health education, publications, public relations, recruitment, alumni/ae relations, etc.
6. Educational workshops and resources on topics such as learning skills, health and wellness issues, career counseling, gender relationships, alcohol use and abuse, eating disorders, etc.
7. Statistics for the Greek community such as scholarship, membership, retention, etc.
8. Communication opportunities for chapter advisors, recruitment advisors, and house corporation officers through listservs, roundtable discussions, periodic mailings, and get-togethers.

9. Reinforcement for council judicial action regarding hazing, risk management, and other concerns.
10. Facilities and support for community service and philanthropic activities.
11. Greek resource library for chapter programming.
12. Opportunities for Greek leaders to attend leadership conferences.
13. Recognition and awards for individuals and chapters that excel in a variety of areas.
14. Inclusion of fraternities and sororities in university admissions and orientation programs, activities, visits, and publications.
15. Support and services including monthly meetings with house directors.

## **WHY SHOULD THE UNIVERSITY SUPPORT HOUSE DIRECTORS?**

1. House directors are asked to do many of the same things that residence hall directors do, yet unlike the residence hall staff, there is little or no built-in support network from the university.
2. House directors are on the front line in the fraternities and sororities. If they are personally acquainted with university administrators, including the Fraternity and Sorority Affairs staff, they are much more likely to keep them abreast of situations in the chapter house or of trends and issues that may affect the university's students.
3. Studies have shown that chapter houses with house directors are much less likely to cause trouble with their neighbors or to let social events get out of hand. An informed, educated, and connected house director will be able to make knowledgeable decisions AND she/he will know what the university and Greek policies are.

## **WHAT SHOULD THE UNIVERSITY PROVIDE FOR HOUSE DIRECTORS?**

- A directory of contact information for all house directors on campus. The directory should include contact information for all the house corps presidents and all the fraternity and sorority chapter advisors.
- A directory of key players in the university administration (e.g. fraternity and sorority advisor, assistants, and graduate assistants; dean of students office; student health center; alcohol education office; counseling center; campus/community police; etc.).

- Faculty/staff ID cards for house directors (which allow privileges such as parking, reduced ticket prices to sports and cultural events, library usage, recreation center access, etc.).
- Monthly meetings with the campus fraternity and sorority advisor to provide information regarding the fraternity and sorority community as a whole (e.g. current activities, issues and concerns, updates on IFC and Panhellenic policies, etc.). It is suggested that the meetings can take place in various campus areas to introduce the house directors to resources available to the students.
- A fall workshop for new and returning house directors.
- Use of campus e-mail and a campus e-mail address.
- An e-mail listserv for house directors.
- Invitations to a social event once a term, perhaps hosted by the IFC, Panhellenic, and NPHC officers and/or chapter presidents.

## THE FRATERNITY AND SORORITY CAMPUS ADVISOR

At nearly every campus with a fraternity/sorority community, the university hires a fraternity/sorority advisor to advise, educate, and direct the activities and programming of the fraternities and sororities. Although the job description varies, the fraternity/sorority advisor (and his or her staff) generally has the following responsibilities:

- advises the Interfraternity, Panhellenic, and other governing bodies, their officers, and all related committees
- advises the Greek honoraries
- Advises fraternity/sorority-related organizations (e.g. GAMMA–Greeks Advocating Mature Management of Alcohol, Up 'til Dawn, Adopt-a-School, etc.)
- attends all meetings of the councils, executive boards, and committees
- Counsels individual chapter officers and members on legal issues, finances, chapter standards, date rape, suicide attempts, philanthropy projects, house director concerns, etc.
- coordinates fraternity and sorority recruitment activities
- meets with chapter consultants from headquarters and national/regional officers
- meets periodically with chapter advisors, financial advisors, recruitment advisors, and house corporation/alumni association officers
- receives and responds to all noise complaints from the campus and community police departments
- solicits house director applications, does the initial screening, conducts an annual house director training workshop, and meets with house directors monthly
- serves as a university department head in the student life area
- serves on several university committees

- meets with prospective students and their parents during summer orientation and throughout the year
- speaks at chapter dinners and retreats
- conducts programs and retreats for councils and chapters
- speaks about the fraternity/sorority community to local and state civic clubs and alumnae Panhellenic organizations
- Maintains the fraternity/sorority statistics (e.g. scholarship, membership, finances, pledging, initiation, chapter officer and advisor directories, etc.)
- serves as the chief financial officer for the fraternity/sorority office and the councils
- prepares briefings for university administrators prior to their speeches at fraternity/sorority functions
- distributes news releases
- Serves as a spokesperson for the fraternity/sorority community to university administrators, media, city government, zoning board, etc.
- trains university admissions representatives about the fraternity/sorority community

Many fraternity/sorority advisors have additional job responsibilities in other areas (e.g. student government, student activities, etc.). ALL fraternity/sorority advisors recognize the valuable role that house directors play, and although they may not have time to meet frequently, they do know that house directors make the fraternity/sorority advisors' jobs easier!

## **POLITICALLY CORRECT FRATERNITY AND SORORITY TERMINOLOGY**

### *Correct term*

Chapter  
Fraternity or Sorority  
Recruitment  
Recruitment Events  
New Member/Associate  
New Member Educator  
Semester/Winter Break  
Men/Women  
Fraternity  
Residence Hall  
Potential Member  
Initiated Member  
Greek Community  
Headquarters or (Inter) National  
Recruitment Advisors

### *Incorrect term*

House



Greek - letter Organizations

Rush

Rush Parties

Pledge

Pledge Trainer

Christmas Break

Boys/Girls

Frat

Dorm

Rushee

Active

Greek System

Nationals

Rho Chi