DWYSYWD: EVEN ONLINE, AND ESPECIALLY WHEN YOUR MEMBERS ARE TRANSPHOBIC
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Content Warning: This piece contains excerpts from a global fraternity Facebook page and displays language that is transphobic, sexist, and describes sexual assault and violence.

In 2016, I opened my Facebook to an alarming thread of comments in my fraternity’s global group. The original post contained an article about fraternities voting to allow transgender men, and posted the question, “Is this something being considered by Pi Kappa Alpha, or supported by Pike undergrads?” While I believe the person who posted did so with positive intent, the responses were quickly jarring and offensive. Specifically, many of the responses were racist, sexist, and extremely transphobic. One member commented, “I’d rather my chapter be unrecognized by the campus than be forced to change traditions carried down by generations. Our forefathers would turn in their graves.”

While I can come up with about two hundred other things which might cause our forefathers to turn in their graves, I like to believe this is not one of them. The Preamble of Pi Kappa Alpha (1868) reads, “For the establishment of friendship on a firmer and more lasting basis, for the promotion of brotherly love and kind feeling; for the mutual benefit and advancement of the interests of those with whom we sympathize and deem worthy of our regard; we have resolved to form a fraternity, believing that, thus we can most successfully accomplish our object.”

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Some members wrote with differing opinions, including one who noted that transgender men who exuded the values of scholarship, leadership, athleticism, and being a gentleman (additional organizational values), and expressed a genuine interest in joining the brotherhood, he would “welcome him with open arms.” I was comforted by the individuals who spoke up for the inclusion of transgender members, and who engaged back-and-forth with several people. One person reflected and asked, “As long as they’re a positive asset to the fraternity. Does it matter?”

And through a sea of additional commentary calling out the “ignorant statement[s]” and a disbelief that people would think this way, one member shared his direct response to the question in the post. It read, “The answer is yes. Unequivocally. And if you are against this, you’re part of the reason fraternities are dying. It isn’t the 50s. Move on from your bigoted ideals. … Further, why do people care. And before someone spouts off something about historical tradition, mind yourself that I wouldn’t have been allowed in once upon a time myself.”
I imagine there are Pi Kappa Alpha chapters who do have transgender members, and who do espouse and enact inclusion as a core value associated with their local chapter. I salute these groups, and at the same time, I worry for their member(s) who may not receive the larger organizational affirmations they so deserve — or, who do not see such a toxic space being challenged and disavowed. I worry about who watched these interactions online and wondered if they could ever be their true self among their fraternity siblings. Further, I wonder about accountability and why such comments and perspectives were not challenged by the organization, or at least by more people in the group. What would it have looked like for the organization to say, “This is not friendship on a firmer basis; this is not promoting brotherly love, or kind feeling. This is not ok.”

Of course, the organization did not do this, nor would they. As a student affairs educator, and someone committed to the work of equity and justice, I am often left wondering, “How do I fit into this picture as a member of my organization, and as a person who believes we should be treating folx equitably (no matter how they come to our organization)?” I love what my fraternity has given me, and while my experience was not perfect, it provided me an additional set of values to subscribe and aspire to and it gave me a group of friends that I believe can be a similar offering to so many others.

The national organization was quick to distance themselves from the Facebook group, asserting that it was created by and run by members. Still, with thousands of active and alumni members, I wonder how we can allow such language and incongruence to exist in our organization(s), especially in 2021 when we have moved more deeply into online and virtual spaces. Where is the accountability for what members do and say online, even if not governed or overseen by the organization? I understand the national organization is not connected to the Facebook group, and that not every brother — even outside of the Facebook context — lives with the values of respect and integrity. Having said that, it is hard to ignore the extreme transphobia represented on that page. It is hard to imagine why, five years later, no work in this area seems to have materialized within the organization’s new member, member, or alumnx education. From what I understand, no accountability existed in that online space — not then, not now.

For the past few years, the sentiments in that Facebook group have continued to frustrate me as I wondered about the values of our organization as I saw them at odds with such statements of transphobia and homophobia (and racism and sexism displayed in other statements not pulled forward in this piece). I also wondered why it took individual members to call people out and not the national organization. This, too, is accountability. To demand values congruence, the national organization, and the members within, must be courageously fearless and bold. We must be accountable to each other, and to the organization.

**DWYSYWD**

When I first attended the Undergraduate Interfraternity Institute (UIFI), a facilitator wrote, “DWYSYWD” on a piece of flip-chart paper. Students reacted in the room, attempting to sound it out as an acronym and trying to make meaning of what the letters represented.

“Do what you say you will do,” the facilitator stated firmly. “Do what you say you will do.”

I come back to accountability as a way to rethink and reframe the posts in that Facebook group. If part of our object is firmer friendship and the promotion of brotherly love and kind feeling, wouldn’t any deviation from these be, then, incongruent with our values, and thus, a calling for accountability? And if we care about the way our values are lived beyond the borders of a campus (e.g., online, and/or into the alumnx realm), what constitutes a calling to intervene or course-correct? If our values only exist as espoused, were they, then, ever needed?

I imagine one could read the first half of this piece, replace “Pi Kappa Alpha” with another fraternity of their choosing or affiliating, and come to a similar conclusion of frustration and disappointment, as well as wonder and hope. While I am frustrated,
I am also hopeful. I am hopeful because I believe accountability is a calling-in of even the very entities we love and value. Much like the colleagues did in the Winter 2019 edition of Delta Gamma’s ANCHORA, naming a painful past or problematic part of our current existence is necessary, if we want to be and do better for the future. Here, we are calling people into what they have already said they would do. Here, we are saying, there is work to do — there is accountability in that naming. And while ahead there is work to be done, there is still accountability in that naming.

More than a calling-in, this is also a calling-to. I am calling out to other fraternity/sorority affiliated people to (and continue to) challenge incongruence as it exists in spaces such as these — online groups where people will often say what they want without facing repercussions. Individuals may see their comments as insignificant, yet they are significant to the whole. Hold these people accountable. Hold our (own) organization(s) accountable. In this, I am asking for a confrontational structure associated with organizations, starting at the top. If we want to be better, more inclusive, more just; if we want to build people to become better people, we also have to name when words and behaviors do not line up with what we said we would do when we promised to enact firmer friendship, brotherly love, and kind feeling — especially, though not exclusively, when they are violent. This also means having the courage to call-out, and step in, when members are not living up to such values.

We have an opportunity to examine the various ways accountability should exist within multiple dimensions of our membership(s). As I think about how to do this, and what could have been better as a result of the posts I mentioned in that Facebook group, several thoughts come to mind in the form of questions for future direction:

- What type of equity and justice education programming exists at regional and inter/national leadership programs? Is it designed-across-all, or is it intentionally crafted to consider the different ways individuals and individual chapters show up (e.g., pre-assessment to gauge cultural competency, threading diversity, equity, and inclusion across all elements rather than one, single, portion).
- Do you have a board, committee, or working group to address issues and topics around diversity, equity, and inclusion? Who is represented on that committee, and what power do they hold to re/direct the organization? Do they have accountability capabilities? Are they listened to, and trusted?
- In what ways are you publicly declaring inclusion as essential to your organization? Are you updating intake and new member education expectations? Are you naming the painful past associated with the organization or how members were not held accountable in the past, but should certainly be now (e.g., the ANCHORA article that named and grappled with a history of racism in Delta Gamma)?
- What responsibility do you hold when someone messes up under the frame and boundaries of the organization? What do your public statements say? Who helped craft those? Why do those matter? And what happens when alumx disagree with such a statement? Are you willing to confront them? To lose their donor dollars?

“Do what you say you will do.”

This is not solely about my own fraternity, or any specific fraternity even. This is about accountability. Now that everything we do is online, it is that much more important for us to hold members accountable within these spaces. As an industry, we have to be accountable to the very individuals who make up our membership (and across multiple generations of that membership). This is an evaluation of how values congruence can exist within the realm of how we articulate and support our members and our future members. This is about what and who gets a pass when their words and behaviors are not
aligned with the values we say matter. This is about leading, even when it means challenging members and alumnx. This is about being meaningful and direct. This is about the future of our organizations. To be values congruent; to be bold; to be actually — in practice — doing what we said we would already do.

DWYSYWD.

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