

Complicit: Let's Do Better

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On September 25, 2018, I made the following statements on social media relative to fraternity and sorority life advising:

Raising a point in this group for awareness and dialogue. It is important that our field be committed to ensuring FSAs aren't one-dimensional. It's a disservice when FSAs have little to no knowledge of any of the communities that comprise fraternity & sorority, but in particular, I'm talking about culturally-based fraternities and sororities. The days where you could land a job with no knowledge of culturally-based fraternities and sororities should be a thing of the past, but they aren't. It is well known, amongst FSAs who are people of color, that you can be gainfully employed and have zero knowledge of and/or experience with culturally-based fraternities and sororities. That is not the case when it comes to the baseline expectation that we have knowledge of and experience with historically/predominantly white fraternities and sororities. It's not just frustrating, it's oppressive. It negatively affects students in those communities when you show up with zero understanding of their cultural norms. It hinders collaboration between campuses and national volunteers/staff of culturally-based fraternities and sororities. It shows up in a lot of different ways, like expectations that organizations operate like the IFC and Panhellenic without respect to their unique identities. So be better about education and hiring. I'm not saying you need to enter the gate knowing all there is to know, but if you've not taken the time to educate yourself (there are countless resources) and/or those you hire, it's a problem.

That post was the outgrowth of a conversation amongst professionals of color in fraternity and sorority life. A headquarters colleague had asked for advice in navigating a difficult dialogue with a campus-based professional who was imposing norms of historically/predominantly white fraternities and sororities on their culturally-based organization. It was the continuance of what has been and continues to be an oppressive practice within our industry.

Let's be frank, as a profession we are complicit in shoring up oppressive structures. I say "we" because I own the role I play as someone in this field, doing this work. I can write an entire article about how we uphold the gender-binary, maintain classist notions of exclusivity, and reify racist infrastructures, but they've already been written and by folk most deeply affected by it. My focus here will be on the impact of ignorance on students of color and those who

affiliate with culturally-based fraternities and sororities. This is in part personal narrative and experience as a member and having advised culturally-based fraternities and sororities.

In my experience, and the experiences of students I've served, it is not uncommon to hear about how little time professionals invest in our communities. There is a lack of learning about the nuance of culture within historically black, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA), and multicultural fraternities and sororities. There is almost no knowledge about their norms and traditions, which often lead to poorly informed classifications of traditions as frivolous at best and hazing at worst. This coupled with the imposition of dominant culture on these groups is often incredibly damaging. It diminishes the very rich history and importance of practices meant to affirm cultural identity.

I remember serving as an alumni advisor to a chapter of my fraternity at a predominantly white university in the northeast. In dialogue with the new FSA on the campus, I was informed that many of the practices our fraternity had would no longer be allowed on campus. While I was receptive to changes in practices I knew were dated and necessary to eliminate, I was disappointed with what this advisor tried to identify as solutions. All of their recommendations would require us to adopt practices rooted in how historically/predominantly white fraternities and sororities operated. Our most deeply held practices tied to learning of Latinidad and culture were being erased under the guise of uniformity and liability management. I don't want FSAs to allow practices that culturally-based fraternities and sororities have practiced that are harmful under the guise of cultural enrichment and tradition, but this wasn't it. And recommending practices held by IFC and Panhellenic as an alternative was insulting.

I've been guilty of this myself. While advising the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) at a previous institution, I made the mistake of acting without knowledge when creating a policy and procedures manual for new member education. By failing to include my students and stakeholders in my process for its development and implementation, I created tension that was unproductive and led to a lack of trust and appreciation for any other works we attempted with them as an office. Even after having spent time to build capacity, understanding, and relationships, it remained a really challenging environment to move things forward. The work to get back from that place took an entire year and while things got better, they were never really the same. It wasn't my intention, but I had adversely affected the students under my care.

I have been in spaces where the individuals around me have shown a lack of regard for the needs of culturally-based fraternities and sororities. They've failed to show up to experiences students hold dear, like new member presentations. The importance of presence when supporting students within these communities is critical to our success in supporting them. And let me be explicit about our duty to students of color in IFC and Panhellenic communities as well. When we operate from dominant perspective we hurt them too. When your colleagues in Multicultural Student Affairs send opportunities for students of color to you and you don't share them out with all councils but rather MGC and NPHC solely, you contribute to the erasure of students of color in IFC and Panhellenic as well. Again, as FSAs we have a responsibility to show up for those students who exist in every space our work reaches.

Lastly, we really need to hold up the impact these experiences have on our colleagues who affiliate with culturally-based fraternities and sororities. As was stated previously, we know our experiences aren't valued equitably within this field. Our affiliation is viewed as "other." The expectations placed on us to know the cultural norms of IFC and Panhellenic are real. We are pegged as only being able to advise culturally-based fraternities and sororities. We don't work to expand the horizons of professionals who affiliate with historically/predominantly white fraternities and sororities in the same ways we expect it of those who affiliate with culturally-based fraternities and sororities. Our colleagues affiliated with IFC and Panhellenic organizations can have zero experience and knowledge of our communities and serve at the highest levels of leadership within our industry.

We need to stop privileging folk in this way. We have to invest in everyone's education, and we need to name these realities while working to address them. Consider this the next time you create the professional development plan for you and your staff. Think about what you don't know and how you're going to invest in learning. There's more than enough opportunity to do so if you're willing to acknowledge the ways in which you're complicit in this system.

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Keith D. Garcia currently serves as an Assistant Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life at the Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. In his role, he advises the Multicultural Greek Council and its chapters. He also advises chapters across the Interfraternity Council, National Pan-Hellenic Council, and Panhellenic Association. In addition to his advising he is primarily responsible for harm reduction education within the fraternity and sorority community on campus. His education includes a Bachelor of Business Administration from the City University of New York's Bernard M. Baruch College and a Master of Arts in Educational Administration-



Student Affairs from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He is a member of La Unidad Latina, Lambda Upsilon Lambda Fraternity, Inc. having served in various capacities from the chapter to the national levels. Most recently he served as the fraternity’s representative to the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations.