

The Elephant in the Room: Calling out Privilege in the Profession

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Imagine this. You are in a conference room with your team of about ten people. There is a massive elephant in the room – breathing on your documents, blocking the natural and iridescent light, the trunk is hanging over the middle of the table, and you can barely see everyone in the room. What would you do? Would you call it out? Do you progress through the meeting and ignore this massive animal in the room? Do you go to another room, hoping it won't follow you? What if you choose the later? Then, surprise – another elephant is in that room, too.

As a profession, we have attempted to engage in an environment completely ignoring the elephant in the room; operating around, under, and over the elephant refusing to acknowledge it. While it is no secret the elephant is there, the profession has become immune to folks saying they have no knowledge of culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs), is blind to micro-aggressive comments related to CBFOs, and is unbothered in discussing ways to take ownership in the roots of the fraternal industry. This is in direct conflict with the values, pillars, and competency areas we hold as a profession. In this article, I discuss this dichotomy of conflict through understanding microaggressions, implicit bias, and tokenism.

Microaggressions

When facilitating dialogue around the notion of intent versus impact, I utilize a video created by Fusion that illustrates microaggressions as mosquito bites. Essentially, the moral of the video is that well-intentioned comments can impact people negatively based on the multifaceted identities they hold.

Connecting the dots to the industry, here are a few examples to consider: is it sorority recruitment or Panhellenic sorority recruitment? Is it Greek Week or really just a couple of councils organizing events? Does your website say, “sororities, fraternities, and culturally-based organizations”? Or, have you ever witnessed a member of a CBFO randomly being asked to stroll/step in an environment not conducive to stepping/strolling?

Whether it was explicitly written or passively said, language holds power. For example, utilizing othering language and/or referring to the Interfraternity Council as the “mainstream” or “traditional” fraternities can further perpetuate a hierarchical council structure. As a profession, we must be conscientious about the ways in which we choose to communicate within our organization, on campus, or within our platforms.

Implicit Bias

Implicit bias shows up in multiple aspects including hiring practices and within the onboarding processes. Professionals have been granted the opportunity to advance in the industry having little to no experience or understanding of CBFOs. Ask yourself this truly: *Would someone be hired in a fraternity/sorority advisor (FSA) position advising all councils or asked to speak on a campus if they had little to no experience with Panhellenic sororities or understanding of fraternities affiliated with IFC?* After asking this in a session presented at the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) annual meeting in 2017, 2016, and a 2017 regional drive-in, the response from professionals was always *no*.

This clearly outlines the covert double standard of expectations related to competence and experience in the industry. It is evident our profession has become immune to tools of incompetence in the form of excuses from colleagues. Folks have been given a pass in their learning by placing blame on the curriculum within graduate programs instead of placing a mirror to ourselves and critically analyzing how we better equip professionals in their development as it relates to cultural competence.

Taxing the Token

Professionals affiliated with CBFOs are often taxed to always discuss their experiences, educate their team members, and/or be the answer to all things cultural. The reality is, professionals sharing their lived experiences as an opportunity for someone else's professional development is a practice rooted in privilege. Thus, relying on professionals affiliated within CBFOs to help advance the diversity mission of the organization, office, or company is an ineffective approach as we work to further dismantle systems of power and oppression. *Especially when they are not being compensated to do so.*

When dismantling systems of power, it is on the dominant group to educate the dominant group to understand their privilege and role in the equation. In this case, CBFOs should not be the primary educators. Instead, folks who do not hold affiliation within a CBFO must educate and equip their member organizations to be cognizant of this topic.

Adopting inclusive practices in which cultural competencies are woven into the fabric of the holistic experience is a more sustainable and efficient approach. For example, this does not mean a separate cultural competency training for staff. Instead, cultural competencies would be infused into the various discussions and topics throughout staff training rather than a stand-alone topic.

The elephant isn't new.

The elephant in the room is merely indicative of our evolution over the years as a profession. The truth of the matter is – the elephant has been in the room since the inception of CBFOs as many were created because of the lack of inclusivity into groups that already existed. Thus, CBFOs have been operating in a system that was never designed for them to navigate in the first place.

Understanding that the historical perspective of our industry is rooted in oppression, exclusion, and privilege is an important aspect of doing this work. Here are a few questions to begin the dialogue within your team:

- How is your team educated on cultural competence in connection to better understanding the demographics of councils and the organizations you support?
- Is the compensation structure equitable in relation to council advising? What messages, if any, does that send?
- How does the language utilized in marketing efforts, educational materials, and/or professional development expose any implicit biases?
- What are examples of times in which your intentions were positive/good and your impact was not?
- How can you leverage your power/privilege (affiliation, volunteer role, agency, job title), if any, to address the elephant in the room?

For more than a decade there have been discussions centered around privilege and systematic injustice within the structures of fraternal organizations at the collegiate level but not so much within the profession. As an industry, defining our roles as practitioners, lifelong learners, and educators as it relates to calling out privilege in the profession is the first step in moving forward. The time is now that we must decide to engage and begin to infuse privilege into our professional curriculum through development experiences, onboarding, and daily conversations in an effort to truly address the elephant in the room.

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increasing cultural competence. Hailey has a passion for creating spaces and opportunities in which people can make meaning of their multifaceted identities.