

What I continue to learn from culturally based organizations?

Jessica Pettitt | Good Enough Now

My first experience with any fraternal organization was in graduate school at the University of South Carolina. I chose to do a practicum in the Greek Life Office because I had not had any experience with fraternities and sororities. I wanted to expand my knowledge as I began to apply for jobs in higher education. As a white, cisgender, not out (at the time) queer woman, I learned a lot. During my practicum, I affiliated with a historically white NPC organization, Delta Gamma, and “advised” a chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. within the NPHC Council. The Delta Gamma chapter was re-organizing due to drugs, bad grades, hazing, and other problems. The Omega chapter had a small number of very dedicated undergraduate, graduate, and alumni members that were deeply involved.

Since 2000, I have supported the fraternal movement while working at large research institutions, and then in 2005, I began to speak, train, and work as a consultant with organizations across five councils, on all different kinds of campuses, and at the national level. I continue to learn a lot. My history and personal identities are important as my fraternal experience is extremely limited and from an outsider point of view across two councils, over a few weeks towards the end of my graduate program.

New fraternities and sororities are developed to meet the needs of populations and to challenge the “norms” of the larger more predominate councils’ cultures on individual campuses. The common pattern that all fraternal movement organizations have is, a group of people around similar identities and/or values gathering together and supporting one another, filling a void among others in their community, and building networks for life. It is apparent that the historically white organizations (HWOs) function as a lens on how culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs) are advised, understood, supported, and challenged. For those that aren’t familiar with diversity and inclusion work, it is common that a white lens is used to interpret organizations, both consciously and unconsciously. In the case of fraternity/sorority life (FSL), white men’s and then women’s organizations formed first and continue to be the larger organizations on most college campuses and the overarching foundation for the fraternity/sorority experience. Furthermore, this lens usually centers the white men’s experience in conversations.

For example, National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) chapters often plan their calendars around the Inter-Fraternity Council (IFC) chapters and the social capital is gained, maintained, or, *the horror*, lost, to the interdependency of the support of the historically white men’s

organizations. It does seem to be the case that this white and often male lens is at the root of how campus professionals look at recruitment, growth, expansion, of all organizations including CBFOs regardless of differences as to how these other councils and chapters are developed.

What I see in CBFOs is a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood that extends both up and down within the same affiliation across age, class, and geography, and a camaraderie across organizations in the same council and even across campuses. Even at the conventions I have attended for many different HWOs, I have never experienced the internal support across age, class, and geographical distance that I witness in CBFOs, even between two strangers in an airport wearing letters. I often have to remind alumni members of HWOs that they affiliated for life, are still a member, and we are kin of a sort. This concept would solve a lot of the concerns if it were lived on all of our campuses and within our alumni groups today. Therefore, as campus professionals, we could benefit from adopting a CBFO paradigm that focuses on siblinghood of a group instead of on size of membership.

There is a lack of competency with CBFOs as well as problematic terms used in HWOs to describe growth, recruitment, discipline, and closure of chapters. I would suggest a note be taken on the tendency to use words like “expansion,” “colonization,” “probation,” and “underground,” and how these same words describe the history of the United States. Once a member of a HWO, if one were to leave the organization due to financial concerns or take a leave of absence from school while still an undergraduate student, I have heard this being described similarly to someone being excommunicated or banned/shunned from a religious institution and is often seen as a betrayal or at least poor judgment. From my “outsider” experience and observation, this isn’t the case with the CBFOs as one is seen as a sister or brother for life regardless of paying dues or current standing with a chapter (when done right).

Instead of recruiting new members into a secret organization of rituals, I learned that prospective CBFO members are noticed, observed, supported, and educated about their own history and how this history is honored through an education process that involves other students as well as alumni and community members. This is in stark contrast to HWOs essentially initiating new members and then leading them through an education process about the very organization they have already pledged affiliation to. Along the way, the new folks interested in CBFO affiliation are honored, understood, supported, and welcomed into a larger community of existing organizational members, at all levels of leadership and tenure, that ultimately determine if someone is worthy of wearing their letters for life. Once a member, the process is reciprocal and can continue to be so as elders are valued advisors and mentors.

I watch, listen, and have learned the language of CBFOs isn't used regularly by majority white campus professionals unless they have had direct advising experience or are personally affiliated with a particular CBFO. The language of our publications, presentations, professional development, and practices default to the HWOs terminology. Since I didn't have an undergraduate or professional experience with any fraternity or sorority, I needed to learn to be inclusive of those under the fraternal umbrella. It was frustrating that as a speaker and consultant, I have access to few books about CBFOs to better educate myself.

I find that CBFOs are much more open and practiced at explaining to those outside of their membership the nomenclature used to describe their practices and organizations (i.e. cross, neophyte, prophete, etc.) Despite my self-directed education on CBFO terminology and customs, I find HWO's language is more commonly used in our profession. I find this to be unfortunate because by learning about many different fraternity/sorority cultures I rarely present a bias in the language used and this has been a strength to build an inclusive FSL conversation.

It has been my observation that new campus-based professionals with experience working with and/or personal affiliation with HWOs are hired with the assumption that they have the skills to advise and support CBFOs and learn along the way. This is very different for campus-based professionals with deep experience advising and mentoring CBFOs who are required to learn the HWO systems before being taken seriously as a FSL professional. I also take note of FSL professionals of color are often slated to advise only CBFOs, regardless of their affiliation (if any) and therefore unlikely to gain the necessary experience of working with HWOs to be promoted professionally within the field. The irony is that on one hand FSL professionals are fighting for recognition of professional legitimacy within student affairs, yet FSL doesn't recognize the professional experiences across councils equally.

I also notice how deep conscious and unconscious bias enters the conversation regarding hazing. I have worked with HWO chapters across this country that have a deeply rooted culture of new members having to *earn* respect with common knowledge of very dangerous behaviors and traditions. When I speak with folks at all levels, and even *townie* baristas and hotel clerks that aren't affiliated, I can easily find out which chapters are known for problematic behaviors and high-risk traditions. Quite often HWOs are named. In casual conversations with campus professionals, house directors, and outside consultants, folks will knowingly talk about how they know when to not visit certain areas of campus, or how they drive different routes during

certain times of the year to avoid witnessing the poor behaviors of their own HWOs. Since most CBFOs don't typically have houses on Greek Row, I know these folks aren't thinking about *them*. Yet, when I have been involved in conversations about hazing or patterns of violence and risk management, it seems those experiences associated with HWOs are forgotten and excuses for their HWO members' behavior are given.

The active conversational assumption seems to be that what happens in culturally-based organizations is egregious. CBFOs aren't perfect but they aren't alone. HWOs are thought of and monitored/policed differently. I feel like I get a, "Yes this was bad, but do you know what XYZ group does? That is just awful." As long as we can utilize our bias to hold something as "worse than," the original behavior in question won't register as a problem. This is how confirmation bias works. It has been my experience that CBFOs are "monitored proactively" (i.e. policed) while historically white organizations are monitored, tolerated, or ignored. Conscious or not, this practice fuels a sense of racism rooted in fear and violence, where people of color are assumed to be making bad choices and are dangerous, when we know for a fact that this isn't true. We as professionals need to notice our bias.

Ask yourself how you respond differently and how you can take responsibility for this bias. Which councils do you target for education on certain risk management areas? Where does your bias lead you astray when making choices? Everything we do filters through our biases. *Let's say you get a call – someone has just been rushed into the ER and they are wearing Greek letters. Considering the list below, which chapter on your own campus do you think of and what council do they belong to?*

- *Rape survivor*
- *Burn victim*
- *Stabbing or gunshot victim*
- *Drug overdose*
- *Alcohol poisoning*
- *Anorexia or bulimia*
- *Extreme loss of blood*

I have done this exercise before with campus professionals and boards of directors, and the truth is we avoid thinking about these elements being real in *ALL* of our organizations. We program for each of these emergencies differently. Women aren't the only targets of sexualized violence or disordered eating habits. Alcohol and drug abuse aren't aligned with racial

identification, but our biases sort different kinds of substance abuse out by race to affirm our stereotypes.

Because the “new member education process” varies across the different fraternities and sororities this sorting process doesn’t make sense. HWOs have a lot to learn from what I believe is a better and more supportive model of siblinghood, traditions, and choices made by high functioning culturally-based groups. Because there is less campus-based professional knowledge and understanding of CBFOs, I feel they are often judged more severely and/or differently than HWOs who often have more members, houses, and less oversight from advisors and alumni members. As student affairs professionals, overcoming vernacular barriers and increasing awareness and familiarity with different ways of managing, growing, and supporting CBFOs should be a top priority of professional development. This will continue to increase in importance as our campuses diversify student, staff, and faculty populations.

Like CBFOs, FSL professionals and student affairs as a whole can use our historical experience to guide our own education process while we monitor current trends. We can rely on our elders, professional advisors, and outside experts to increase our success and safety. We can learn from the very organizations that have learned from those that came before and have learned how to do better. We can be reminded of why we are relevant by the tiny in number and strong in community values that form because no one else sees them as relevant. We could cross, but only once those that came before us have determined that it is the right time and that we are ready to serve the greater fraternal movement and not just ourselves.

Take a minute to notice if your inner dialogue is coming up with very specific examples of wrong doing on the part of CBFOs. Notice your own reactions to dismiss the bias in our professional field. Take a step back and notice what you don’t know you don’t know. If you don’t know, phone a colleague. Pick up a book. Have conversations with those that have experience with CBFOs different from your own. Even in writing this piece, I vetted my own observations with my own friend circle because I don’t know what I don’t know and I don’t know what I do know. It is our responsibility to do better and learn from those that may make us uncomfortable. Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable is the least we can do so that our entire FSL community can do better. Otherwise, what are we fighting for? How can we convince others we are relevant when do collectively don’t value the experiences of all of our colleagues equally? We have more learning to do and those with the knowledge have been doing the teaching since I have been involved in the fraternal movement. Even phenomenal teachers require willing students.

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*Jessica Pettitt has stirred up conversations for the past 15 years and hopes to inspire folks to be the do the best they can with what they have some of the time – it is better than nothing never.
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