

A Panhellenic Woman in a Culturally-Based Fraternal Organization World

Kristen Vega | California State University, Monterey Bay

I work with fraternities and sororities because they are microcosms of larger social issues, creating complex intersections between ethical leadership and social justice. Our beloved organizations are dripping with “isms”: racism, heterosexism, sexism, ableism ... you name it, it’s there. The sooner members learn how to tackle the nuanced problems within their fraternity/sorority communities, the sooner they can apply these lessons to their lives outside of campus. The possibility for deep, meaningful change is what fuels me to show up for students each day.

This passion is probably how I ended up as a Panhellenic woman in a culturally-based fraternal organization (CBFO) world. To be clear, every fraternity and sorority is culturally-based. Failing to name each organization as such is to assume whiteness is not a culture, but the dominant norm, and any experience that deviates from this norm is secondary. This is why I often refer to my sorority as a historically white fraternal organization (HWFO). I joined my HWFO in 2008 on a predominately white campus that did not have any CBFOs. I took on as many opportunities as I could in graduate school to learn about CBFOs because these groups were working to create meaningful change in their communities. Since 2013, I have worked with and advised almost exclusively CBFOs. Over that time, I have gained many insights while advising CBFO organizations as an outsider, which I hope to pass on to other HWFO members who want to do the necessary work to become effective advisers across council lines.

I’ve curated strategies to help you effectively support these tremendous students. These examples are based on my personal experiences. By no means am I an expert on this topic, nor can I speak on behalf of CBFO members. There are hundreds of talented FSL professionals affiliated with a CBFO who have done and will continue to do incredible work to advance CBFOs. I simply hope you can learn from my mistakes so our colleagues and students in CBFOs do not have to expend emotional labor to educate each HWFO member individually. We need to do the heavy lifting on our own.

1. **Do your research.** Speaking of heavy lifting, the internet is crawling with scholarly articles, think pieces, podcasts, and videos relating to CBFOs. Learn about what makes these organizations unique: their founding histories, colors, calls, chants, strolls, etc. Each aspect of a CBFO is incredibly meaningful. Not knowing their founding date or using an incorrect nickname is blatant disrespect. Make flashcards and practice regularly



to ensure you don't walk into a council meeting looking foolish, like when I mistakenly identified a member dressed in black and gold as a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. instead of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. I will NEVER make that mistake again.

2. **Meet with members one-on-one.** Unless you are a member of CBFO, you will never fully understand CBFO experiences. Name that reality and let members know you want to understand as much as possible. Meeting with influential chapter leaders, alumni, and staff will give you an opportunity to build trust, learn about their experiences, and hear what their communities need. Let them decide where to meet because the FSL office may be an uncomfortable, even hostile, place for them.
3. **Educate members of other historically white fraternal organizations.** Every CBFO student I've worked with can share a time when a member of a HWFO asked if their organization was "real." This degrading question invalidates CBFO students' experiences. To be clear, I do not speak for CBFOs. However, it's necessary for me to hold HWFOs accountable for having a baseline understanding of CBFOs. Start by volunteering with your own organization to provide training for nearby chapters. Next, ask HWFO members to describe their relationship with CBFOs. I personally love doing this when my graduate alma mater calls me for donations. A quick three minute "can you donate money?" conversation can turn into a 20-minute dialogue about racism within FSL.
4. **Words matter.** Be hyper-aware of your language. Although there can be overlap between leadership positions, mirroring the language of CBFOs validates their fraternal experience and builds trust. For example, be sure to include both "Dean" and "New Member Educator" when writing policy. Using "New Member Educator" as a catchall term reinforces the HWFO experience as the "normal FSL experience" and paints anything else as "secondary" or "less-than." Better yet, write a different policy addressing the specific nuances of CBFOs.
5. **Recognize CBFOs are not a monolith.** Multicultural-based groups are worlds away from South Asian-based groups who have a very different experience from African American-based groups. Do not lump all CBFOs together because the same issue may impact each CBFO differently. Ask each group what their individual needs are and work incredibly hard to provide equitable support.

6. **Build a staff and alumni coalition.** Representation matters! Include CBFO staff and alumni in chapter training as much as possible, especially if you are an office of one. Their insights and presence lead to more robust curricula and higher engagement from CBFO participants.
7. **Recognize inequities within university policy.** University policies and procedures may affect CBFOs differently than HWFOs. For example, NPHC members I advised wanted to host a post step show dance on campus. University policy required a high number of police officers for the event, especially because the group had a “history” with security issues at step shows. This policy was irrelevant to HWFOs because they host events at their chapter houses and predominately hspaces are rarely seen as “dangerous.” NPHC members did not have the budget to cover the cost of each officer and the relationship between students of color and law enforcement was very strained. Student leadership and I worked with the university to hire Student Union event staff to work the event as an alternative to police officers. This cut the security costs by more than half and, more importantly, helped NPHC members feel more comfortable.
8. **Care about what they care about.** Stay up-to-date with current events because the political climate often impacts CBFO members more heavily than members of HWFOs. If CBFO members are talking about implicit bias, make it part of the all fraternity/sorority risk management training or add it to Panhellenic recruitment training. Additionally, CBFO members are never just members. They are usually highly-involved students who work multiple jobs, hold club officer positions, participate in activism, and support family members all while navigating spaces and systems designed to keep them out. There is a lot going on for these students. Showing up for other areas in their lives helps you see them for all of their complexities. Consider doing the following:
 - a. Attend events and/or dialogues a member coordinates for an identity center.
 - b. Support a LGBTQ+ club fundraiser organized by a CBFO member.
 - c. Ask how their fraternity/sorority membership impacts their campus job.
 - d. Send out the DACA letter-writing event flyer in the all fraternity/sorority newsletter or advertise it on your office door.
 - e. Pick their brains about current events.

If they don't want to talk about current events with you, don't press it. Everyone processes differently and that's okay. Simply let them know that you care about how

they are doing.

9. **Find creative funding sources.** CBFOs do not usually have large membership dues or alumni donations to fund campus-wide programs like many HWFOs. Connecting CBFOs to creative funding sources is necessary. The three Divine 9 organizations on my campus wanted to host a casual gathering designed to help black students create community. They didn't have a budget for the event, but they wanted to supply food for participants. Remembering a conversation I had with a chapter president about voter suppression a week prior, I suggested they ask our civic engagement center for sponsorship. The mutually-beneficial relationship resulted in a \$300 food sponsorship from the center and 23 newly registered voters from the chapters.

10. **Reflect daily.** Most CBFOs are founded around common identities. As such, continuous and meaningful reflection of your social identities is vital to your success as an advisor. How do you show up in CBFO spaces? What biases do you have about a student or a chapter? What perspectives are you missing? Are you uncomfortable and if so, why? Are you being an ally or a savior? How are you showing up for members of CBFOs when they aren't in the room? Name your biases, understand your biases, dismantle your biases, and repeat.

I firmly believe fraternities and sororities are more alike than different. However, these differences matter and need to be validated. Minimizing the importance of these differences builds walls, not bridges. It is our (HWFO affiliated professionals) job to learn about these nuances, support our colleagues in removing systemic roadblocks, and empower CBFO students to design their own destinies.

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Kristen Vega is the Coordinator of Greek Life and Community Engagement at California State University, Monterey Bay. She earned her Master of Science from Miami University in Student Affairs and Higher Education with a concentration in Diversity, Equity, and Culture. When she isn't working to make fraternities and sororities more equitable for all social identities, she is hiking in Big Sur or pretending she is a contestant on the Great British Baking Show.