

The Alumni-Initiate: Member and Resource

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We all chose to join our respective fraternities and sororities for reasons that resonated with us and likely continue to resonate with us now. I attended a small, southern liberal arts college where, during my first year, 80% of the undergraduate population was affiliated. I played my part and joined in the recruitment festivities. After receiving zero bids, I resigned myself to being involved in other ways. After a second failed recruitment season, I started to work with the fraternities and sororities on our campus rather than try to join them. I was consistently impressed by the ability of even the most rapturous party chapter to give an otherwise lost student a sense of belonging during their college years.

Because of my admiration for fraternities and sororities, I was excited when, the summer before I began graduate school, the University of Vermont (UVM) put out a call for chapter advisors. I immediately volunteered. The fraternity and sorority advisor at UVM gave me a choice: work with a chapter of one of the largest fraternities, or a colony of a relatively small, primarily regional fraternity. I suspect I never really had a choice, only the opportunity to choose correctly. After reviewing their national websites and asking around about them, I chose to work with the Nu Gamma Colony (now Chapter) of Phi Mu Delta.

After a semester as their advisor, their president casually asked if I might be interested in becoming a member. I didn't hesitate. I was inducted as a new member in January 2012 and initiated as a brother in April. Nothing substantially changed: I was still their advisor and was seen as a professional with the same amount of accorded respect. Early in the Fall 2012, I had reason to pull one of our younger brothers in to talk about something he had done. After he left, I realized my language had indeed changed: it was "we" and "us" not "y'all," and I referenced how he and I were "brothers."

Phi Mu Delta has honorary or alumni initiates, but it would be incorrect to say we have honorary alumni brothers. We have brothers, period. Other than advising my own chapter, I have facilitated at our national leadership academy, served on our expansion and nominating committees, and currently am building our internal and external outreach to the LGBTQ+ community. Brothers who joined as alumni initiates have also served on our national council. Beyond formal volunteer roles, perhaps one of my favorite roles in Phi Mu Delta is following up with many of our younger brothers, particularly those in college and graduate school. As an alumni initiate, my calling as an educator and a community builder was recognized. I try to bring those callings to the benefit of the fraternity.

Another role I have fallen into is helping the fraternity remain inclusive to members of all identities. Of particular interest and salience to me are our LGBTQ+ members. Part of that work has been formal: developing and revising our policies on transgender and gender queer/gender-nonconforming inclusion. More of that work is bringing together our Queer members in affinity spaces and building bridges among all of our brothers. I want other organizations to look to us as a model.

I often hear one cannot really understand a college fraternity or sorority unless they have been an undergraduate member. As an alumni initiate, I push back against that idea. There are definitely experiences one has had as an undergraduate member that I will never experience. However, as a member of the chapter that initiated me, I do know what my brothers experience. I worked with them to develop recruitment materials, attended recruitment events, worked with the executive board on a range of issues, and though an advisor and alumnus, I was in the trenches with them. I also became a confidante and big brother to many younger brothers simply based on the difference in our experiences. Because I have close connections and build bonds with undergraduate brothers, I have as good of a

grasp on what defines a college chapter as many of my alumni brothers who were initiated as undergraduates.

Having said that, how can FSL professionals—both on campus and in (inter)national offices—support alumni initiates? Before I was initiated I asked: what changes for me as a member? It is easy to answer by discussing access to ritual and perhaps different modes of engagement with undergraduates and their families, but we are still members. When I was initiated, a representative of the chapter's alumni association was present to formally welcome me. Simple gestures like this can go a long way to making the new alumni member feel not only included, but a part of the greater whole of the (inter)national organization. Chapters and colonies offer leadership and service opportunities to their new members immediately. Whether an advisor who continues to advise or a friend of the organization who can be involved with the chapter in some way, do the same for your alumni members. One of greatest losses for a chapter is to honor a person with initiation and then fail to cultivate the person as a member.

Though I imagine many graduate students and others have struggled to enter FSL offices and trade their organization-specific hat for a broader FSL hat, one of the peculiar areas for alumni-initiates, at least for me, is transferring my organization-specific experience to other involvement in the fraternal movement. Recently, while working with two chapters of different fraternities, I began to track how many of my suggestions were of the order: "my fraternity does this..." As a student affairs professional my first resource was professional journals and my FSL colleagues, but I think there is definitely a need for FSL professionals to help alumni-initiates make that transition and continue to be resources for the wider fraternal movement.

While each organization determines how, when, and why people may join as alumni initiates and how they serve once they are members, alumni initiates—alumni *members*—are excellent resources in a number of ways. Initiating a person as an alumni member should not be seen in the same light as conferring an honorary degree with little or no expectations. Rather, initiate your alumni members with an expectation that they will contribute not because you asked, but because they are members of your organization. The proof is in the people and what they can bring to your organization and to your campus.