

When Worlds Collide

Shauna Prentice, Kappa Delta Sorority

I am a sorority woman. I am passionate about leadership. I am confident. I believe in friendship. I am committed every day to being my very best. I seek to serve my community, because I know I am capable of giving back. I know communication is powerful and important. I believe in the strength of those around me. I am committed to lifelong growth and learning.

I am a higher education professional. I am passionate about college student development. The chance for meaningful growth, cognitive dissonance, identity development, and exploration of interests and passions is magical to me. College students learn to be leaders, to communicate, and to develop relationships with their peers. College campuses provide a safe space for students' beliefs and thoughts to be challenged, and it exposes them to new people, perspectives, and life experiences. My graduate program saw my transition from someone excited about student leadership to someone challenged by and passionate about social justice and identity development.

At some point on my journey, these lines began to blur. I started to forget which qualities and values came to me through my experiences as a sorority woman, and which ones came to me through my experience working in higher education. I began to notice one influencing my work with the other, followed by frequent double takes. *What world am I working in, again?* It should come as no surprise to anyone working in this field that we encounter overlap between our fraternal experiences and our work with and for students. My nine years as a sorority woman has essentially been another layer of training for this work. However, the ways it has become interwoven has surprised me, and it is a relationship I have begun to appreciate so greatly.

Halfway through my first year as a campus professional, I found myself working with students, colleagues, and projects that required me to tap into a variety of my skills and experiences. I remembered what I had learned about students developing competencies when my officers struggled to make scheduled meetings. I created engaging leadership presentations with well thought-out objectives and strong assessment measures. When one of my students experienced the death of a peer, my graduate program's counseling focus allowed me to 'be with' him in his grief, and that skill was invaluable. That was not all, though. I worked on a staff of mostly women, and I instantly felt a connection to them and their passions. When I had difficult conversations with my students, I approached it successfully by starting from the relationships I had already established. My professional identity was based in my belief that I could have the biggest impact by sharing my strengths and building strong relationships with those around me. *Where did I pick these skills up?* While I learned a lot from my graduate program and from my daily experiences as a professional, I did not learn everything in that setting. It was each of these moments, one after the next that allowed me to realize the woman I have become is thanks to my time as a sorority woman.

Being a sorority woman has provided me with incredible personal growth, leadership opportunities, and identity development. The confidence I discovered as a member of my chapter was life-changing, and impacts the ways I work with those around me every day. I traveled as a consultant for my sorority, and that experience gave me the most in-depth professional

development I could have received. I learned the incredible art of flexibility; I learned to connect with women in chapters with polar opposite personalities and campus cultures; I learned to collaborate with campus professionals and volunteers and council officers; and I learned to navigate airport security like I created the process myself. These are skills I have always pointed to as my strongest takeaways from sorority life, and the experience I sell to students interested in joining a fraternity/sorority. I realize now, though, that my identity as a sorority woman is not just about my leadership skills and the strong relationships I developed. It is about my values, my beliefs about myself and others, and my commitment to a lifetime of growth. And these qualities show up every day in my work in higher education.

As a member of the fraternity/sorority community, I believe strongly in the power of friendship. I joined a Greek-letter organization to meet new people. Now, I recognize those relationships for the power and support they have brought to my life. In my sorority, I had 85 women to support, learn from, and to help me dream up crazy ideas. I had sisters do some of the bravest things, sisters with incredible talent, and sisters who made me laugh. I realized women are incredible, and women who support each other unconditionally are unstoppable. As a higher education professional, I realized I did not need to restrict that support to the women who shared my letters. Carrying that belief into my office allowed me to dream big and instantly trust I was a part of a true team. I had seen the power of a supportive network, and knew I could implement that wherever I was.

As a leader in my sorority, I spent time working through complicated issues, whether they were related to program planning or relationships among those around me. I learned managing conflict or navigating challenging conversations with someone is not impossible, and is not even something by which we should feel intimidated. The relationship setting provided by a sorority allowed me to learn these skills in a safe space. I realized trust, respect, and open communication go a long way in solving these problems. Conflict can be managed successfully if we work from our existing relationship, respect the people we are dealing with, and work together to reach a successful outcome. As I navigated my first year working with college students, I realized this was an area I was comfortable in, and I often found myself as one of the few who felt that way. I was excited to help my students learn these skills for themselves. I loved teaching them that their peers, or misunderstandings, were nothing to fear. I soon realized this was not because I loved conflict (I definitely do not!), but because I had been successfully managing it for years thanks to my time as a sorority woman.

Most importantly, my time as a sorority woman taught me I have a voice. More than that, it taught me how to use my voice. While running for council positions, serving on standards board, and working for ways to improve sisterhood and retention, I learned my ideas had merit. I developed confidence in my thoughts and opinions. I learned to participate in critical conversations without waiting to be invited. I learned to express important or controversial perspectives with grace and respect for the others in the conversation. I learned to not apologize for my ideas or let setbacks quiet me. I know my voice is valuable, and my perspective is needed. Those are the kinds of women I hope to work with and learn from, and those are the skills I have strived to utilize as a higher education professional. When discussing important topics in a staff meeting, making tough decisions about students, or learning from my colleagues'

life experiences, I am confident in my place in the conversation. I owe this to my experiences as a sorority woman.

Though my identity as a sorority woman has found its way into my work as a higher education professional, this intersection of identities is not a one-way street. As a higher education professional, I have been exposed to incredible research about what our students are experiencing and how we can best serve them. I have worked with restorative justice programming that has altered my views on meaningful conduct practices. I have been fortunate to work with incredible social justice educators who have taught me the importance of learning more, asking questions, and being more aware of the world I live in. My passion and belief in higher education runs deep, which also makes me a better sorority woman. As I strive to live out the values of my sorority by being the best version of myself and by continuing to learn and grow, I look to my higher education background to enhance my efforts. As I advise chapter presidents, I think about student development instead of only about the sorority events she is planning and whether she is on time with reports.

As I move into a headquarters-based programming role, I anticipate the relationship between these identities becoming even stronger. I cannot wait to discover the ways I can better serve the women in my organization with a student development mindset. All of us will experience something similar in our work with students; your experiences, education, and passions will overlap and inform your work in one way or another. What will that overlap be for you? Maybe you'll notice your upbringing allows you to better advocate for students similar to you. Maybe your undergraduate degree in political science or your passion for change will allow you to mentor students seeking to learn those skills. Whatever the intersection is for you, I encourage you to reflect on those different aspects of your identity, and make the most of the perspective they give you. Examine how you support and relate to your students, find what sparked your passion, and use that to fill a professional role that is uniquely yours. In my case, I am thankful every day that being a sorority woman means I get to inspire those around me by being my best, and that my passion for student development allows me to do exactly that.