

Successes, Challenges, and Recommendations in Creating Fraternity & Sorority Transgender-Inclusive Policies

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Common interpretation of Title IX by many fraternal organizations and host institutions has led to uncertainty regarding policies and definitions of gender identity among members in traditionally single-sex organizations, particularly with regard to transgender individuals. It is frequently believed that fraternal organizations are required to sustain single-sex membership to maintain “compliance” with Title IX; however, Title IX was solely designed to ensure federally funded academic institutions provide equality in educational programming and activities. Through a clause that protects institutions that host fraternal organizations, the institution is exempt from applying Title IX requirements to social sororities and fraternities which are exempt from taxation (501(a) exempted organizations) or whose membership is primarily composed of students. From an institutional perspective, compliance with Title IX does not require restriction of membership in fraternal organizations by sex but rather that membership be composed of active students. As an organization, determining requirements for membership and eligibility remains at the discretion of the organization unrestricted by Title IX.

As a relatively young organization, Delta Xi Phi (DXP) was in an ideal position to reflect on Title IX as its membership practices were less institutionalized. Established in 1994, Delta Xi Phi was founded on values of sisterhood and multicultural awareness, among others. The organization developed a commitment among its membership for awareness, acceptance, and inclusion of people from all aspects of cultural identity. While a “multicultural” identity is often interpreted as diversity in race or ethnicity, the organization expands this idea to include aspects such as sexual orientation, disability, religion, and gender identity.

In 2010, a chapter expressed interest in initiating a potential new member who was a transgender individual undergoing transition (male to female). This led to development of a national policy to clarify membership requirements related to gender identity and expression. While striving to “maintain its female gender identity in accordance with tradition and the desire to develop sororal bonds,” DXP’s National Policies and Procedures Manual was developed to include a definition of female to help establish guidelines for membership. “Female” in this governing document is described as any person that self-identifies as such regardless of sex at birth, gender expression, or the perceived expression of her gender (Delta Xi Phi Multicultural Sorority, Inc., 2011).

As Arrowsmith and Tran (2013) mention, “most organizations do not define the terms ‘male,’ ‘man,’ ‘female,’ or ‘woman’ in their governing documents,” creating confusion for transgender individuals seeking to become potential new members. By amending inter/national governing documents to include such definitions, an organization not only provides clarity in who can or cannot become a member but creates opportunities for transgender individuals to feel comfort in seeking membership. Such policies may allow transgender individuals to feel like a potential brotherhood or sisterhood will be a safe, supportive environment and help answer questions that may be uncomfortable to ask directly (Fielding & Pettitt, 2008).

Adoption of these new definitions and policies allowed Delta Xi Phi to integrate transgender individuals among its membership and those members reported feeling welcomed by fellow members, both locally

and nationally. Transgender members stated they felt supported in their individual journeys of self-discovery and personal growth, which is an experience DXP hopes to provide for all members. One of the greatest successes during the implementation of this policy was the resulting education, insightful discussion, and engagement from members regarding transgender individuals and the values members attributed to the organization.

Fraternities and sororities can reap benefits from the successes of creating policies regarding membership criteria but can expect challenges along the way. A potentially significant obstacle is the current membership—particularly in organizations built on tradition and a cohesive identity which has been established for decades. For Delta Xi Phi, our biggest challenges came from interpretation of policies at the institutional level. During our first experience addressing a transgender individual after adoption of the policy, the decision on an organization level was clear. The potential new member self-identified as female and as such was eligible for membership. We were asked to clarify our national policies and provide the staff offices with an explicit response from the national organization that the individual was, under our policies, eligible for membership. The larger challenges arose when the time came to address other campus issues, such as housing.

Delta Xi Phi also included stipulations that note existing membership will not be lost due to a change in gender, expression, or identity. As the organization first and foremost values sisterhood, this provides an understanding that any ongoing or future transitions of gender expression or identity are not causes for member removal. Without clearly mentioning this in inter/national governing documents, policies, or bylaws, organizations stand silent on this issue and are ambiguous in their definitions of “conduct unbecoming of a member” (Arrowsmith & Tran, 2013). It would be advantageous for organizations to include such wording in governing documents to let current members and alumni know they will not be exiled from the organization if they so choose to undergo transitions or reveal their transgender identity. Additionally, members will know they can continue to be active with the organization, and the organization will continue to gain the benefits of alumni engagement.

Resources exist to assist organizations, universities, and their respective staff members in regards to creating transgender-inclusive policies, such as the Lambda 10 Project Fraternity & Sorority Resource Guide, “Beginning the Conversation” (Fielding & Pettitt, 2008). In addition to referring to literature, organizations and universities can work together to share policies and ideas. Sigma Phi Beta Fraternity, Gamma Alpha Omega Sorority, Inc., and Delta Xi Phi are a few organizations that currently have transgender inclusive guidelines in their governing documents (Arrowsmith & Tran, 2013).

In beginning to consider implementation of similar policies, an organization can start by reviewing current governing documents to identify areas of weakness or silence within the text. Does the organization specify its definitions of male, female, woman, or man? Will the organization let a potential new member self-identify or will it require legal or medical documentation? How will policy changes be announced to the organization’s current members? How will they be communicated to the institutional staff to allow appropriate advising for transgender students on membership options? How do we ensure our staff members are comfortable and informed to have these conversations with prospective members?

Organization staff members leading policy changes may consider introducing educational programming related to gender identity, expression, and transgender individuals. Chapters should be encouraged to connect with campus resources such as their fraternity/sorority life staff, multicultural centers, and LGBTQ offices to develop member awareness and education on these topics.

It is hopeful organizations that currently misconstrue implications of Title IX and lack clear policies will feel empowered to enhance their governing documents in efforts to be more inclusive and provide clear expectations and criteria for membership. The benefits of membership in a fraternal organization are widespread and should be available to every student regardless of the individual and societal components that create their personal identities.

References

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