

A Call to Action: Disrupting Assimilation and Colonization in Fraternity and Sorority Life

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“Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430).

The purpose of the following article is to give professionals working in or with organizations that identify as Historically Native American Fraternities and Sororities (HNAFS; Jahansouz & Oxendine, 2007) ways to improve and effect change in the fraternity/sorority community. I provide this story based on my experiences as a member of an HNAFS, but also as a student affairs practitioner, scholar, national executive board member for twelve years, and student affairs graduate preparation faculty member teaching about these and related issues. As mentioned in the opening quote of this article, stories make up theory and are real and legitimate. Brayboy (2005) further states, “Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change” (p. 430). I would extend this quote to apply not only to scholars but, maybe more importantly, to practitioners as well, for our work is based in the practical application of theory. So, I will share my story in an effort to bring awareness and dispel the common problem in our profession of “you don’t know what you don’t know.”

Since my very first experience with higher education, as well as a member of a sorority, it has been a constant learning experience and there have been struggles. As a charter member of the Oklahoma State University (OSU) chapter of Alpha Pi Omega, the chartering experience was new territory for us as Native students to be forthright about our right to exist as an organization and seeking out help with what we needed to be successful. This was also a vulnerable time for us as students as we had to teach our fellow fraternity and sorority members, students, staff, faculty, and administration what it meant to be Native American people first, and Native American students next, and last, what it meant to be a Native American sorority. It also meant teaching the Native community what it meant to be a Native American sorority. Once I became a student affairs educator, national executive board member of my sorority, and a published author of HNAFS scholarship, I thought the struggles would ease. Unfortunately, that isn’t the case.

In the late 2000s, I was attending an AFA meeting where a well-respected author and scholar of fraternity and sorority life gave a keynote and talked about how culturally-based emerging organizations had a “founder’s complex.” That these founders wanted to start something just to start something, thereby having the privilege of saying they were founders! Now, I will concede that this is possible and perhaps there are some organizations founded on such a concept. However, I challenged myself to think about what makes HNAFS different. The definitive answer is intent.

The founding of Alpha Pi Omega was an act of decolonization. Colonization refers to how “European American thought, knowledge, and power structures dominate present-day society in the United States” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430). Furthermore, specifically for Native Americans, education has been used as a way of colonization, and the goal “sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, of interactions between the dominant U.S. society and American Indians has been to

change ('colonize' or 'civilize') us to be more like those who hold power in the dominant society" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430). The founders of Alpha Pi Omega, and many of the other HNAFS, were intent on creating organizations rooted in tribal values, customs, and traits, as a way to decolonize the experiences of Native students within higher education. Our founders didn't start Alpha Pi Omega, the nation's first Native American Greek letter organization, for themselves. They said, "Wow, why are all the Native students leaving UNC-Chapel Hill?" They noticed the institution wasn't doing enough. So, they founded Alpha Pi Omega only after receiving the permission and blessing of community elders. They founded Alpha Pi Omega for future generations to combat the retention issues at the university and to do it in a way that was culturally rooted in tribal values and traditions.

The same is true for me when I founded the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC) at Oklahoma State University; it wasn't just to have a place for Alpha Pi Omega. Creating the MGC was for other organizations already at OSU that didn't feel a sense of belonging and ensuring future organizations would have a place where they felt they would belong. What does a sense of belonging mean? It means to have a place where you feel valued, to not just be allowed but appreciated, to do more than just say "you are allowed here" but to say "we want you here because you matter" (Oxendine, 2015).

Working with student affairs educators in fraternity/sorority life, national associations, institutions of higher education, and other fraternal organizations, the perception of HNAFS is by and large not a positive one. The structures that form the foundation of the fraternal community in higher education, both formal and informal, along with policies and procedures, either consciously or unconsciously, create an environment that reinforces power, privilege, and oppression as they were built by and for mainstream majority organizations. This system continues to invalidate and delegitimize HNAFS.

There are many examples of how these systemic practices have manifested themselves for HNAFS. For instance, the following are prevalent experiences many HNAFS have encountered in our work:

- Requiring membership in a national umbrella council (NPC, NIC, NPHC, NMGC, etc.) for expansion, thus excluding HNAFS and many other organizations. The reality is, for many HNAFS, we lack the resources and capital to create and maintain these types of organizations. And the burden of creating an umbrella council simply to fulfill an arbitrary requirement predicated on the notion that organizations without an umbrella council are too high of a risk and cannot be held accountable, is unnecessary.
- Implementing a minimum membership requirement for starting and maintaining a chapter. The effects of this policy in praxis perpetuate that a "quality" membership experience cannot happen with a low number of members; I question, though, whose notion of "quality" do these policies privilege? Furthermore, Native Americans make up less than 1% of the total postsecondary student population, and although we do have members who are non-Native, this is the predominant population. Does the number of students required lend itself to supporting populations that are already a minority in higher education?
- Requiring approval of other chapters, possibly even other councils, on campus for allowing expansion. As student affairs educators, the foundation of our profession

centers on enhancing student learning and development through practical applications in higher education such as developing student autonomy, leadership, and identity. As such, I wholly support the concept of shared governance and transparency with our students. However, this approval process reinforces an unconscious gatekeeper mentality that often produces negative consequences.

- In many standard programs on campuses, there is implementation of “equal” requirements or percentages, based on organization membership numbers, for attendance at various events throughout the year. Many of the institutional policies seem fair because they are considered equitable; however, equal distribution doesn’t take into account the unique needs and differences of individual organizations. These requirements exponentially burden those who are in smaller organizations, as the demands of their physical and psychological energy is divided between maintaining academic achievement along with their chapter requirements, not to mention any other academic or social involvement.

The time to enact change is long overdue. But we need look no further than our own profession to find ways to change. It is imperative the fraternity/sorority community dismantle structures reflecting colonization and that professionals within higher education educate themselves about the practices and policies that continue to perpetuate oppression – especially for minoritized communities including Native Americans. Moreover, almost all of the graduate preparation programs from which student affairs educators graduate from do not teach at all about the cultural, legal, and political identities of Native, Aboriginal, and Indigenous people. Furthermore, because of this lack of formal preparation, it is our responsibility as practitioners, no, it is our DUTY to first to educate ourselves on the student populations we serve. Then, once we have educated ourselves to the best of our ability, we can go to the HNAFS and listen to their experiences at our institution, given the campus climate, the community contexts, and the tribal diversity that manifests uniquely in these student’s lives.

In order to decolonize the system, institutions and practitioners must closely examine their infrastructure and confront the policies, processes, practices, procedures, and their own beliefs that are based in colonizing systems. It is important to emphasize that these assessments and subsequent changes will not compromise the commitment to excellence and standards for the fraternal community within our institutions. Our efforts to decolonize the fraternity and sorority system in every sense should not be done simply to say we practice justice, fairness, and equity, but because it is our moral and ethical responsibility to do so.

In conclusion, we need to go forth and do more than just accept the status quo as acceptable. As professionals, we ask our fraternity and sorority members to understand what living to a higher standard means and earn their letters everyday by embodying the organization’s values and supporting all fraternity and sorority members regardless of affiliation. However, we must also challenge ourselves to do the same. My hope is that this article brings more than just awareness, but it truly brings about change for the better. Now that you have heard the story, you can no longer say you don't know.

GV (Wado/Thank you)

References

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