

**Men's Fraternities Should Be for Women:
A Call to Rethink Gender and Sex in Our Organizations**

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Have you ever wondered whether or not we should be single-sex organizations? I hadn't...until the topics of transgender membership and Title IX exploded in our work in recent years, and I attended a conference session where one headquarters executive responded to an inquiry by affirming that the fight to keep single-sex status would be "the hill they would die on." This response is not necessarily uncommon and represents the sentiments of many. Yet, it has been this undying, fierce hold on single-sex status that has prompted me to ask: why? There has been no shortage of energy spent finding ways to vehemently protect our ability to keep our single-sex status. But, what kind of energy has been invested in exploring the topic more deeply? I love and believe in fraternity. I deeply cherish my fraternity experience. But, if someone were to challenge me on the necessity of single-sex status, I've realized I don't have a great answer. We demand our students know the "whys" behind what they do, but do we? All of this has brought me to one question: Is there an imperative or necessary reason for fraternities to remain single-sex?

At this point, some of you might be thinking, "what about sororities?" I honestly think it would be worthwhile for *all* organizations to have these conversations. But, I absolutely respect and support the need to have spaces for people with marginalized identities – in this case, sororities for women. Therefore, the article that follows will focus specifically on men's fraternities.

When asking, "why single-sex?" we must discuss fraternity origins. At the time, society adhered to sexist and misogynistic ideas suggesting that men and women were fundamentally different and not intellectual equals. With this, the exclusion and discrimination of women from fraternities was intentional. Men *started* single-sex organizations and maintained this discriminatory practice because of a belief that only they deserved such a space (Turk, 2004). To be fair, at the time, it seems few questioned the dichotomy of the two sexes or any apparent inequities – it was accepted as human nature. Either way, this leads us to name a reality: fraternities are single-sex because of sexism (at least, originally).

Next, we might assume there's research to help explain why fraternities are single-sex. But, in my research, I found strikingly few studies on the benefits of or need for single-sex spaces – specifically, for men. Even in studies that were supportive of fraternities, I found little evidence suggesting that being single-sex correlated with or was responsible for any positive results of membership. The majority of research on this topic has been conducted on the value of single-

sex schooling in elementary and high schools and the results are largely mixed (Mael, Alonso, Gibson, Rogers, & Smith, 2005). In summary, the research says fraternities should be single-sex because...it doesn't. Rather, it's limited and inconclusive.

Lastly, we can try to learn from Title IX, which sought to eradicate sexist discrimination from education. When the Office of Civil Rights started to question whether fraternities and sororities violated Title IX, fraternal lobbyists intervened and maneuvered an amendment. The amendment's main sponsor, Senator Bayh, who is also a fraternity member, argued, "Fraternities and sororities have been a tradition in the country for over 200 years. Greek organizations...must not be destroyed in a misdirected effort to apply Title IX" (120 Cong. Rec. 39992, 1974). In diving into the full transcript of the congressional hearing, it is revealed that no further reasoning was given or seemed to be needed other than tradition. The same reasoning we consistently tell undergraduate members is not, in itself, good enough to justify continuing anything was the lone argument we were willing to give in support of passing the amendment. The transcript tells us nothing about *why* fraternities should be able to remain single-sex. If anything, this just seems to highlight the institutionalized power of fraternal organizations, which allowed them to effortlessly sidestep the scrutiny of Title IX. Why are fraternities single-sex? Because they can be.

Through all of this, I haven't found any satisfying answers, either for my own peace of mind or to effectively argue fraternities' case. In fact, I have a lot more questions and some causes for concern. But, if the lack of answers hasn't convinced you, let me offer four more reasons why I believe we should reevaluate our single-sex status:

1. **If we don't do it, someone else will.** Either from increasing social pressure or outright legal challenges, single-sex status does not have a guaranteed future. Despite what many might believe, both the Title IX amendment and Freedom of Association are not foolproof defenses, with neither being explicit about justifying or protecting single-sex fraternal organizations (Tran, 2012). Many single-sex organizations that have been legally challenged on their membership practices lost their cases, with exceptions granted to those that were able to prove how such a status allowed them to remedy existing or past discrimination (Schwartz, 1987). Fraternities have never been put to this sort of legal test and based on those criteria, I don't think they would pass.
2. **Sex and gender are at the root of some of our biggest challenges.** Even today, fraternities continue to perpetuate sexism and are often responsible for reproducing damaging gender stereotypes. Perhaps we can and do offer spaces for men to learn healthy masculinity, but

this cannot be separated from the reality that we were built with sexism in mind and the past continues to reverberate in our organizations today. Additionally, most of the problems threatening fraternities today have a close tie to gender, whether it's sexual assault, hazing, binge drinking, homophobia, or heteronormativity.

3. **We should represent and validate the full identity spectrum.** The argument for single-sex completely ignores the identity spectrum and continues to perpetuate the idea that we exist in binaries – that there are only two sexes and/or genders. And in not differentiating between the two, we imply that sex and gender operate in parallel or are actually the same thing. In reality, we know there are multiple components of our identity and they do not necessarily correlate. Our current approach not only forces our members to conform to rigid ideas of who they should be, but overlooks people who never fit this model in the first place.
4. **We have to consider that the system itself is inherently flawed.** We've been struggling for decades to move the needle. We need to stop thinking in terms of symptoms and behaviors and start to look at the very system which encompasses and informs all of those things – the single-sex framework. Tremendous challenges face fraternities and demand tremendous solutions. We have to step out of the notion that this is the way it is (or has to be) and start exploring the ways it *could* be.

The questions I've posed here are scary. They challenge our very reality. It's been nerve-racking and emotional to dig into the foundation of something I love. My intent is not to end fraternities, rather to challenge us to think critically about our centering of sex and gender. To test our own beliefs in hopes that they might be refined, strengthened, or even evolved. I don't know what direction this will lead us, but I'm confident that if we have the courage to have these conversations, we'll be more focused, impassioned, and purposeful wherever we head.

References

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