

Active Ways to Help Make Fraternity/Sorority Life More Inclusive

Ace Hilliard, University of Wisconsin-Madison

It is 2017 and the fraternity/sorority world is finally starting to pick up one particular topic: transgendered inclusivity. The fraternity and sorority community is known as being an institutional holder of two things: exclusivity and binaries. Fraternity/sorority life heavily operates under the notions of men belonging to and existing within fraternities, and womxn belonging to and existing within sororities. They are exclusive groups of individuals in which the current membership has the power to select who joins. Since current members have this power, they are able to determine who is a “good fit” based on their own expectations around looks, brains, or gender performance.

The present day question asks about membership of those individuals who defy gender normality and the status of being cisgendered that has been set by the founders of the organization. Some of the organizations in existence today were created over 150 years ago, and I would bet a shiny penny they did not have a discussion nor a debate surrounding the membership of transgendered individuals.

My name is Ace. I am a transmasculine person existing within the sorority framework of Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Inc., and I have had a wonderful experience being trans and in a sorority. I have seen the positive and negative effects on those around me who have been part of various sororities and fraternities and they experienced nowhere near the love, support, and positivity I was afforded in my journey seeking my truth. What is to follow are some suggestions I have to help make fraternity and sorority life more inclusive and accepting to those who are transgendered. This is not an all-inclusive list, but they are some small steps that could mean the world to those who are seeking a community and might look for it in a fraternity or sorority.

Chapter Governing Documents: Every chapter has governing documents. They are the foundation of the organization. When you read them, is there binary language, such as, “chairwoman,” “chairman,” “he,” or “she”? An easy and inclusive fix can include getting rid of binary language and making it gender-neutral. Here are some examples of language that can be used alternatively to still get the message across while not alienating anyone in the process:

- Chairperson, Chairbeing
- They, Their
- Personhood
- Womxn

Chapter Facilities: Some fraternity and sorority chapters are afforded chapter facilities. Those who are can make a few changes in order to be inclusive to their membership and potential guests they may have. In my experience, facility bathrooms have always been labeled. There is always a picture to accompany the “gender” of whom the bathroom is for. Instead of having cisgendered pictures, why not make bathrooms gender-neutral or all-gender? This will

eliminate the feeling of assimilation by chapter members who are openly or not openly trans. How many places on campus have just as much access to gender-neutral bathrooms as they have access to stereotypically gendered bathrooms? Given how hard it is to exist on campus as a trans person already, members should be able to come home to a community they are a part of and not also have to be concerned with how they take care of their business in a bathroom that does not suit who they are.

A huge concern regarding bathrooms occurs during social events. When having social functions, it can be easy to provide a third option of bathrooms accompanied by signs which make them easy to find and identify. People can navigate comfortably and go to the bathroom they feel meets their needs. Womxn can go to womxn's bathrooms, men can go to men's bathrooms, and those who are not part of the binary can go to those labeled gender-neutral. If you need a sign for a gender-neutral bathroom, see below for a few possible examples.



Chapter Apparel: One of the easiest fixes I have found for chapters to become more inclusive is changing the way chapter apparel is approached. Everyone loves having shirts, jackets, bags, and more with their letters on it. I recommend having unisex apparel instead of apparel created specifically for men or for women. Members can get sizes that fit how they want while still having the ability to show pride in their organization.

Gain More Knowledge: The best way for a chapter to learn how to be more inclusive and to be better allies to those in the trans (and broader LGBT) community is to seek opportunities to learn more about the subject. This can be realized in a few ways:

- Seek out and collaborate with your campus (or local) LGBT Center. See what trainings are offered and how they can be tailored toward fraternities and sororities. Upon completing any trainings, make sure to process takeaways and discuss how members can take personal responsibility for being more inclusive with those who may identify differently than they do.
- Create programming (for your chapter members or for the community at-large) around trans and broader LGBT issues, topics, and allyship. You can provide an opportunity for other fraternities and sororities to become involved, as well as staff, administrators, and above all, the general student body. Make learning a community project. Fraternity and sorority students are leaders of the community and this is a perfect leadership

opportunity to advocate for inclusivity in very gendered spaces, organizations, and campus environments.

Pronouns: Sharing your pronouns can be as common as letting people know what your name is, what chapter you are from, or where you grew up. Normalize sharing your pronouns when you introduce yourself to others and help them make it a part of their own introductions. Cisgendered people might feel as if it is common sense to know their own and others' gender identities and they might not understand why they should share their pronouns. But, when cisgendered people are willing to open the doors themselves for the conversation around pronouns, it takes the heavy load off of those who identify as trans and have to speak up every time they introduce themselves to avoid being misgendered. Make it normalized, make it collective. We all have to take a piece of the puzzle to make it inclusive, to make it whole.

The second part to this would be to make sure to uphold preferred gender pronouns. If you or someone else makes a mistake, we need to acknowledge it, apologize for it, and correct ourselves. Do not use someone's pronouns only when in contact with the person and then revert back to pronouns that do not define who they are when talking about them with others. Respect them, learn them, and always use them. When you come across someone who isn't using them, correct them, and if needed, explain why it's important. Allies are some of the strongest resources and advocates when normalizing pronouns and pronoun usage.

Reach out to National Organizations: This recommendation is very important. It is one thing for a prospective member to potentially join a chapter. But, the reality is that these chapters most often function within national organizations as well, which must be taken into consideration. Reach out to the headquarters' of these national organizations and ask about their stance on trans members being included in their organization. Ask if there are any national policies against or in support of non-cisgendered people becoming a part of their organization. This is not to ridicule them or challenge them, but to offer better resources and guides for prospective members in knowing which national organizations are accepting of transgender individuals, in addition to illuminating where support may be needed for trans members who are part of national organizations that are not accepting.

Having to navigate the fraternity/sorority world while transitioning can be a difficult process, but trans students don't have to do it alone if we as fraternity/sorority professionals can work with them in collaboration to make the best choices for them, their holistic being, and their awareness.

Ace Hilliard is a second year Masters Student studying Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is a transmasuline brother of Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Inc. and works as the Greek Graduate Advisor for the Multicultural Greek Council, as well as within Student Life for the Multicultural Student Center.