

Our Nonbinary Voices on Binary Realities & Our Changing Future

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The number of published declarations naming an organization's inclusion of transgender and/or gender nonbinary members since 2004 is less than 20. As volunteers with Campus Pride's steering committee for the Lambda 10 Project, we are happy to see the growth since we joined our respective organizations. And as nonbinary alumnx¹ of our organizations, we also know there is quite a ways to go with our members, stakeholders, and community on what we mean when we hear of/read these announcements. We helped create a document with recommendations on policy changes for those organizations looking to be trans/nonbinary inclusive (Campus Pride, 2017), with the first one being the reason we are writing today: a policy change is only one part of a trans inclusive culture.

Members at the undergraduate, graduate, and alumnx levels have varied degrees of understanding when we say trans/nonbinary – something we've experienced first hand in current/former roles within fraternity and sorority offices. For the purposes of this article, we name trans/nonbinary to include all folx² who identify as a different or other gender than the one they were socialized to be. This includes folx who transition from/to man or woman, as well as those who live outside of those genders – nonbinary, agender, genderqueer to name a few. It is important and necessary to tell parts of our story from trans/nonbinary perspectives, discuss why trans/nonbinary inclusion in our organizations matters, and what the future of fraternity/sorority life can look like.

I, Xajés, joined a Latino fraternity knowing I didn't fully identify as cisgender, but the men of the chapter, my brothers, looked out for me when few else would and did. Struggling to find language and an image in college, in both undergrad and grad school, was tough. I hid my affiliation from folx when presenting at regional/national fraternity/sorority life conferences because I didn't want to negatively impact my fraternity. Even in my role at Colorado State University, I often went back and forth on how to approach students and employees who

¹ The term alumnx has been adopted by some to allow for a gender-neutral alternative to alumnus or alumna.

² The term folx is a variation on "folks" with the intent to disrupt assumptions of group identities, including non-normative genders and sexualities (Peters, 2017).



misgendered me. I also need to acknowledge that my name changed while working at CSU, and some students and employees had trouble using my pronouns, my new name, and erasing from memory my dead name. My passion in fraternity/sorority life wavered when a student told me that my identities and my need to talk about social justice and inclusion did not matter. Was this chapter president the brave voice saying what dozens, maybe hundreds, of other students thought of me? I'm glad that from my neophyte experience to now I've had wonderful opportunities to name my queer, trans/nonbinary, Latinx³ self to many of the members in my fraternity, and they have, in their words, much respect and support for me.

I, jay, have opted to leave my identity out of the equation as a new professional in fraternity/sorority life. While it shouldn't be something I have to do, I recognize that fraternity/sorority life is a field that regularly reinforces the gender binary and often contributes to the erasure of nonbinary and genderqueer individuals. As a nonbinary person with fluid identities, it is too taxing to explain my identities and rationalize why someone who is assigned female at birth (AFAB) and femme-presenting would use gender neutral pronouns. Being in a Latina sorority, as a Native non-Latinx nonbinary person, I have had a lot of opportunities to educate my sisters and share my lived experience. While it has taken patience from myself and my sisters, I have never felt that I am less than or felt like I shouldn't be a part of our sisterhood. True sisterhood has shown me unconditional love, support, and respect and allowed me to find my voice to advocate for inclusion within Greek-lettered organizations.

Although we are members of culturally based fraternal organizations (CBFO), we have challenges similar to larger and older organizations when talking about transgender inclusion. Some CBFOs and their members understand trans/nonbinary folx and support changes toward a more inclusive lifelong experience. Others, however, may have as rigid (if not more) expectations for a brotherhood/sisterhood that uphold cisnormative⁴ behaviors, and practices. Trans/nonbinary potential and initiated members may be in our organizations now, asking "what will happen if I tell the chapter I'm trans/nonbinary?"

Our experiences are two of the many narratives that exist for trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming members of fraternities and sororities. We bring new perspectives and understandings that contribute to the ever increasing diversity of our organizations. When we name the number of organizations with published policies, we do so because there are

³ The term Latinx is used in lieu of saying Latino or Latina. The "x" makes the word gender-neutral in order to be more inclusive of agender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming individuals of Latin American descent (Reichard, 2015).

⁴The term cisnormative is derived from cisnormativity, the assumption that almost all (if not all) people are cisgender (The Queer Dictionary, 2014).

members like us who don't know what will happen if they join (or are already in) and want to live authentically. Many potential and initiated members worry about being accepted/affirmed as they join, continue in, and stay involved in the organization past their college experiences. Knowing this, how can inter/national staff and volunteers and campus based professionals work to create trans/nonbinary inclusive spaces? How would an organization's language and practices change? What should change on campus knowing that trans/nonbinary folx are going through recruitment/intake? In what ways might our gender based programming limit or exclude nonbinary folx? How do we become role models for change in a system that still struggles to go beyond "brotherhood" and "sisterhood"?

The beauty of including trans/nonbinary folx is that it will enhance, and not detract from, the organizations our founders helped envision. When we spend too much time focused on policies and logistics, we lose sight of the real humans, interests/PNMs, and siblings who are committed to the visions our founders have given us. A future where all of fraternity/sorority life welcomes, values, and empowers trans/nonbinary folx will shift what fraternity/sorority life looks like in 50 years on college campuses and in the U.S. Honestly, we're counting on it.

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