

Beyond the Binary: From Sisterhood to Siblinghood

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During the freshman year of my undergraduate career, I, MR Zimmer, had the privilege of being inducted as a sister of a small, local sorority founded over a century ago. When I graduated, three years later as a five-term executive board member, I was a sibling who helped bring our membership policies into a more inclusive era. In the beginning of my junior year, my sorority moved to accept trans members. Our constitution reads that our membership will “include all cis women, trans women, and non-binary people and to protect those who may identify as trans men or cis men at a later time.” The change was necessary for us – our unwillingness to remove one of our own because of their identity compelled us to change quickly. Therefore, this transpired without much intention or planning.

Breaking the gender binary in a system that relies so heavily on the binary for activities like recruitment meant significant trial and error. As a local organization, we had a lot of room for flexibility in our policies and decision-making. All day-to-day decisions and constitutional changes are voted on by the current members, with input/advice twice a year from our alumni board. Our recent growth from ten members to over 50 in just three years (as we implemented these changes) convinced the board that the move was not only right, but necessary for our organization’s growth and survival. This is not to say the organization, or the alumni, were (or to this day, are) in complete agreement. The process of revisionary change takes time to win over all hearts and minds.

Fraternity/sorority life is facing national backlash as numerous scandals, from hazing to discrimination, make primetime news. It is the perfect, and essential, time for fraternal organizations to rebrand themselves nationally as the progressive, leadership-building organizations they are. Acceptance of trans members is only a part of that rebranding, but it can have huge effects on recruitment. Branding ourselves as unique, progressive, and individualistic (in a system that often gets pinged for its homogeneity and regressive traditionalism) appealed to many members who joined hoping to become transformative leaders.

Fraternities and sororities currently recruit from the ~20% of campus individuals already interested in membership. By rebranding ourselves, we were able to recruit from the additional ~80% of students who thought fraternities and sororities were a monolith, but became interested in fraternity/sorority life precisely because we were different. Our chapter reached many potential members who felt left out of the system, not just because of their gender, but because of their values.

While changing our membership policy in the constitution was the first step, it was far from the last step in working to make a real siblinghood for all of our members, where everyone feels accepted not just tolerated. The following points are just some of what we, a sorority member

and a fraternity/sorority advisor, learned was required to make the organization and fraternity/sorority community a home for all our members:

- **Thoughtful and clear policy regarding who you accept:** Trans inclusion should not be forced on chapters/communities that are not ready to fully embrace these students as members, nor is there only one acceptable policy on trans inclusion. However, it is critical for every organization at every institution to have a clear gender inclusion policy. Trans individuals should not have to show up to every door and out themselves to find organizations that will accept them. Rather, administrators should make it a priority for every fraternity/sorority to include their specific policies regarding trans membership in their governing documents, held on file with the institution, or better, placed on a website for easy access. This allows trans students considering membership to come to the administration to find out where they are eligible for membership.
- **Changing the Language:** Overhauling the language so every position, document, and song can be enjoyed by everyone and so everyone can celebrate momentous occasions together is also important. Some potential terminology changes: “songmistress” to “song leader,” “sister” to “sibling,” and “sisterhood chair” to “fellowship chair.” This is the most difficult change, as the songs, documents, and positions are part of century-old traditions that alumni members often hold dear. Organizations should remain firm in the necessity of these changes, with the support of their institution and administration. Try to involve alumni in making the language changes as much as possible, so they can help choose the future of these important traditions.
- **Protections for Trans Members After Joining:** If an organization chooses to be welcoming of trans siblings, there must be measures in place for protecting members who may transition or come out after joining. No trans sibling should feel they cannot come out to their fraternity/sorority family because of their gender identity and a need to transition. Governing documents should state that members who choose to come out, even outside the constraints of original membership eligibility, will not be expelled or have their status otherwise revoked.

Another important protection for trans members includes not sharing their pronouns, names, or gender identity on the organization’s website or social media without consent, so as not to publically out these members. It should also be clear to all within the organization that even if they are a cis-woman or cis-man, they should refer to themselves as a “sibling” (or other chosen designation), not “sister” or “brother.” To have certain members within the organization be called “sisters/brothers” and others be called “siblings” automatically outs the individuals who are not “sisters/brothers,” by their exclusion from the latter terminology. The entire organization must shift to being siblings for the protection of the most vulnerable among them.

- **Rethinking clothing:** It's important to purchase clothing and require ritual attire that all members can wear and feel comfortable in. Simply allowing trans members to wear alternative attire in group photos also has the potential to out them. Things to consider are: purchasing unisex t-shirts for recruitment or socials; purchasing robes for ceremonies so members can wear the clothing of their choice underneath; selecting a shirt/top that all members would feel comfortable wearing for composite pictures instead of requiring shirt and tie or velvet drape.
- **LGBTQAI+ training for the new and old:** It is critical for organizations to recognize that not all members, or new members, will have the same level of education about LGBTQAI+ issues; we recruit from the pool of "general society" and general society has wonderful individuals at all levels of awareness (or lack thereof). Therefore, to make these changes successfully and have them sustained as the organization grows, LGBTQAI+ training such as SafeZone training should be incorporated into new member education and renewed yearly by all members. Organizations could also work with their trans members and advocacy groups/faculty resources to develop a module for new members that is specifically tailored to that organization. This allows all members entering, with the best of intentions but not equal levels of awareness, to become educated on how to best respect the identities of all their new siblings before entering positions or general meeting spaces without an appropriate education.

Chapter-level changes cannot happen in a vacuum. Community-level changes to policies, practices, and programs need to be acknowledged. Here a few areas Wendi identified:

- Provide education and awareness, such as SafeZone training, to all fraternal organizations. Also, ask questions like, "What can be done to help ensure trans members feel included, not just in their own organization, but in the larger fraternal community?"
- Utilize the department website to provide information and resources to transgender individuals seeking membership or who are already members. Link to external resources such as Out and Greek, Lambda 10 Project, and your institution's LGBTQAI+ office. List those organizations on your campus with trans-inclusive membership policies so that students do not have to out themselves to find this information.
- Update policies, forms, resources, brochures/publications, and programs to use gender neutral language, preferred/chosen name of members/new members, and provide similar guidance to guest speakers/facilitators. Roster forms should list a member's preferred/chosen name, for example, especially when such documents are automatically generated by student management software. Guest speakers should be informed about terminology that may be specific to your campus, such as siblinghood. Partnering with your LGBTQAI+ office to do an audit of your publications, forms, and resources can be a comprehensive way to insure you are using gender neutral language correctly and consistently.

All of fraternity/sorority life benefits from the inclusion of our trans siblings. Their life experiences and skills are critical to our organizations' continual capacity for leadership in a diverse world. However, we must make sure that fraternity/sorority life is not benefiting from these individuals without giving them something back in return: a home, and a family, which is truly accepting and safe.