

I'm a Sorority Woman, but I'm not Straight

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In the wake of the Orlando shooting, the statement: “I am a sorority/fraternity member, but I am not straight,” warrants more reflection now than ever. There are members of sororities and fraternities who identify with one or both of the identities targeted on the early morning of June 12 at Pulse nightclub in Orlando: LGBTQ and Latinx. The intersecting identities are important to emphasize as they become even more intertwined with sorority and fraternity identities and the differing experiences of each person in their membership. A recognition, naming, and ownership of privilege is also crucial to this dialogue and does not go unnoticed. For this piece, there is a focus on the LGBTQ community (speaking only to sexual orientation), as incorporating the experiences of the transgender community would be a misrepresentation.

I would like to applaud the sororities and fraternities who made statements of support for anyone affected by the tragic events in Orlando. The lack of response on the part of many organizations about this violent attack was felt. A recognition that members or friends of the organization may be processing through some pain seems simple; however, the opportunity to show support, at least publicly, was missed by many organizations. By remaining silent, these organizations show their lack of awareness of who represents them and who they represent. While I cannot speak to the internal communications of all organizations, now more than ever, efforts towards inclusion show our organizations are still relevant. It is crucial members whose sexual orientation doesn't fit into the historically heteronormative culture of fraternities and sororities feel empowered, supported, and embraced.

Unfortunately, the lack of acknowledgement can turn, “I am a sorority/fraternity member, but I am not straight,” into, “I am an LGBTQ-identified individual, but I am not out because I fear the reaction of my fellow members and organization.” Generally, the reactions won't be negative, and this is a relief. However, the silence around inclusion leads us to live in a space of not knowing. Public displays of acceptance would ease some of the fears of individuals, model inclusion, and build the capacity of our undergraduate chapters to be open to those different from them. A capacity many of them already employ. To highlight the need for this space, I reached out to some of my colleagues and am grateful for their insightful contributions, which are shared below:

- *“My chapter had previous members who were openly gay, but I rejected the idea of being ‘the gay sister.’... [My experience] has afforded me many conversations with women who are living the lies I lived during my undergraduate chapter years. Conversations of, ‘I’m gay and my sisters don’t know.’” – Dee Hawks, Member of Delta Gamma*

The fear felt by members struggling to step into their truth can be prevented. There should never be shame associated with being the (insert sexual orientation other than heterosexual here) sister or brother. It does not make us any less of a member. While we can coach our LGBTQ members to come out, this conversation includes empowering all members to appreciate differences. In many of our spaces, the heteronormativity has become so prevalent that non-LGBTQ members feel it okay to tokenize those members who bravely live authentically rather than doing their own work to step out of their comfort zone. It is our responsibility as we develop our membership to empower everyone to live honestly and respect the authenticity of others.

- *Regarding her own sorority experience, Karol Martinez-Doane of Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc. said: "I didn't know what they were going to think. However, I felt completely supported through my journey...they used inclusive language, explicitly talked to me that they embrace all identities in the sorority, etc."*
- *Regarding the overall sorority/fraternity experience, Karol said: "The majority of members are straight, but it's also important to keep people in the minority or subordinate groups in mind especially when many of the events rely on the assumption that the members are straight (for example, formals)."*

In a lot of ways, our organizations uphold the worst parts of heteronormativity—assuming members are straight until proven otherwise. These assumptions burden our LGBTQ members with how and when to express their identity in a way that complicates their identity exploration altogether. As a woman who joined my organization before I began questioning my sexual identity, I have felt this. I have felt the pressure to perform. It's about fitting in and feeling like you belong. The pressure to conform as a way of belonging is not supportive. To be the keepers of our sisters and brothers means to ask them only to be who they are in the hopes they and we can grow to be better versions of our truest selves.

- *"The structures in place at my alma mater, and in my chapter, were set up in a way that anything other than straight was considered unacceptable." – Michael Goodman, Member of Pi Kappa Alpha*
- *"I always had regret about not joining [an] NIC group as a student and I thought I missed my chance when I left my undergrad." Adam Cantley joined Kappa Kappa Psi, National Honorary Fraternity as an undergraduate and Sigma Phi Epsilon as a graduate member. On his membership post-graduation, he says, "...I just had to wait for the organization that would embrace me. I would have gladly waited another 10 years for that experience and the way it has enriched my life."*

These are enriching experiences. The fraternal movement, when done well, improves and develops and engages its members in life-changing ways. So let's allow for the opportunity to be seen as an option for all students without fear of non-acceptance. This means publicly

embracing our members for all that they are to show potential members they can feel safe from discrimination in our spaces.

- *“...we need more organizations to follow the lead of the students and chapters who are paving the way for folks to feel included on their campus and in their organization...We need more organizations to help normalize the reality that there are queer members of our organizations.” – Michael Goodman, Member of Pi Kappa Alpha*

I couldn't agree more! While I enjoy building relationships with queer students who need guidance in sharing their LGBTQ sexual orientation with their peers, I want to have less of those conversations and more about how they are **already** accepted. I want the spaces in which they exist to be more inclusive earlier in their collegiate career and development rather than when it's too late.

Our organizations should not be microcosms of the homophobia we see in our larger society, but a catalyst to promote acceptance and respect. Queer individuals are already members, whose contributions we have accepted for decades, while identities were acceptable only behind closed doors, if that. Can we knowingly continue to acknowledge only parts of our members this way? I hope we can agree our values are contrary to that. They ask us to be open, civically engaged, and welcoming sisters and brothers. I urge us to collectively learn how to stay true to our traditions while adapting to maintain relevancy in this ever-changing world. It's about who our members ARE, not who they are not.

I am a sorority member, but I am not straight. Rather, I am a sorority member AND I am a queer woman.