

No Letters? No Problem! Or Is It?

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As a woman who began her experience with fraternities and sororities with a pitiful knowledge and respect for them, I often wonder how I came into the position of being the main campus professional overseeing 21 fraternities and sororities. Before I arrived on campus as a young and impressionable freshman, I only knew the stories movies told. As a result, I was somewhere firmly between ambivalent and apathetic to the idea of sorority membership.

Through my first few years in college, I became heavily involved in multiple student organizations and areas of campus life. Everywhere I looked, I was surrounded by peers who were members of our campus's fraternities and sororities. I was intrigued by the secrets they all seemed to know. By junior year, I signed up for recruitment but was afraid of not being deemed elite enough to join the ranks of the Panhellenic sorority women. Everything went well until the third morning of the recruitment weekend when all my fears were confirmed – for whatever reason I had been released from the recruitment process.

I swallowed my bitterness and disappointment and realized, for whatever reason, I was not destined to be a part of this community.

Flash forward to my first professional position as the director of student activities for a small, private, religious institution. Fear again crept into me as I realized part of my duties were overseeing the fraternity/sorority community on campus. I had some knowledge of how they worked, but I didn't know how I was supposed to advise them, especially as many of these organizations were local chapters. The fear of looking incompetent in the eyes of seasoned professionals kept me from picking up the phone or reaching out via a simple email. After all, I hadn't been good enough for the community when I was in college – why would now be any different?

A twist of fate had me returning to my alma mater in a position that had nothing to do with Student Life – until I was informed I would be assisting the Greek Life office, specifically in the area of Panhellenic Formal Recruitment. Again, fear swept over me. I didn't understand recruitment; I'd been released before being able to finish. The only thing that kept me from running out of the room in sheer terror was that the current Greek Life Coordinator was a good friend from college. I was just there to assist my friend...until two months before formal recruitment when he took a promotion on the other side of campus. All of a sudden, I found myself sitting in the Greek Life office with the realization that I was once again advising a fraternal community.

In the following weeks, I spent a lot of time contemplating how I wanted to approach working with nationally affiliated students as an unaffiliated woman. I began putting pressure on myself which was driven by the fear that I had no place in this new role. I loved working with students and seeing them build rich life stories full of experiences. I already knew being a member of a

fraternity or sorority was pivotal in this process as I had seen it happen to my friends over the years who were now taking the bar, doing their residencies, and otherwise fulfilling the dreams we had talked about. Through the previous few months of assisting the fraternal community, I had gotten to know many of the men and women who were changing our community through their affiliations. I didn't want to let them down – yes, another example of fear.

I could take my love for students and their experiences, and even my lack of affiliation, and use it to my advantage, or I could let my insecurities render me ineffective.

Day by day, I got to know the council and chapter leaders through one-on-one meetings. I built their trust and got to know who they were both inside and outside of their organizations. One day, I realized I was no longer thinking about it in a “me versus them” way. The conversations began to be filled with “we,” “us,” and other language that spoke to the ways the students and I wanted to see a better future together. It truly became a community when the students saw past my “letter-free chest” and were able to see my heart and how it was always trying to work towards their best interest. I truly had become part of the community. At the end of the day, the students don't care what sorority I am or am not a part of; they just care that I care about them.

Fear is a powerful thing. It is what still makes my heart tighten every time I get asked the question, “What is your affiliation?” and I have to answer, “I'm not.” – the fear that I will get called out for pretending or being an imposter. It can be overwhelming, causing me to sit in the back corner, not offering a word, especially when I am around other fraternity/sorority professionals. But then I try to remember why I am doing what I am doing.

Being unaffiliated in the fraternity and sorority world can be frightening because of my own feelings of inadequacy and feeling like an outsider, but only when I make the focus all about me. At the end of the day, all of us work with these young adults because it isn't about us. It's about them. And for that, I don't have to wear letters.