

## Finding Your Place in a World Full of Men

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In the 1985 movie, “Just One of the Guys,” the main character believes she lost a writing competition because she is a girl. She changes high schools and poses as a guy to prove herself. I have never had to pretend to be a guy during my tenure working with fraternity men, but I can relate to that character. Learning how to be a strong and confident woman when working with men can bring some challenges; I have found the rewards to be worth the effort. Gender may have an impact on your advising style and approach, but no matter how you identify, it is important to find your place with the students and, for those at a headquarters, connect with your colleagues.

### Fitting In With Students

I grew up in a house with two older brothers. They taught me from a young age how to be resilient when they would take my toys out of my crib because they thought I did not want them. As we got older, I took on several of their interests including watching WWF wrestling and other sports. Naturally, I thought this would make me a great fit to be a fraternity advisor. It wasn't until a few years into advising I realized I was stereotyping men to have particular interests society associates with men.

As a young advisor my approach was simple – meet them where they are. In my mind, 18-22 year old men liked sports, poker and other masculine things. My opening line for a meeting with a student would often be, “Did you see the game last night?” That style was short lived, because many of the men I worked with did not like sports. I quickly learned it was important for me to not make assumptions about men in general, and to take the time to truly get to know the men I worked with regularly. I started to do more reading about men and their identity development, because if I was going to be a successful advisor, I could not lump men into a certain category.

Knowing I had a New York Giants lawn gnome may have made it more enjoyable for some men to come into my office, but it didn't mean I was being an effective advisor. I had many difficult conversations throughout my time as an IFC advisor and chapter advisor. There were times I was called the b-word simply because I was being assertive. But for every difficult conversation, there was one where I created space for a man to be vulnerable and not be judged. That was the best way for me to fit in with the students.

### Fitting In With Staff

Making the transition from IFC advisor to a men's fraternity staff member was different than I expected. Being the first female director at two different men's fraternities was not only an adjustment for me, but for many of their stakeholders as well. Similar to a campus, my stakeholders were the students, alumni, and my colleagues. Many undergraduates have female campus-based advisors, making it easier to work with them from the headquarters perspective. Working with alumni has been a bit more challenging. For some, it seemed strange for a fraternity to hire a woman when there are plenty of men who would want to be in that

position. I am often asked who my husband is, because why else would I choose to work for a fraternity if my husband wasn't a member?

Office culture is different at a fraternity headquarters as compared to a campus office. No, it is not like the locker room after a sports game, but it does resemble some of the better parts of a fraternity house. The majority of the staff members are bound together by a Ritual, and that gives them motivation and direction. At times I have felt like an associate member. I have to prove my love for the Fraternity without knowing some of the secrets and traditions. I can honestly say, while internally I haven't always been sure of my place on the team, I have felt nothing but support from the fraternity men I work with. I have never had to change myself in order to be accepted.

### **Don't Be One of the Guys, Just Be Yourself**

For any woman looking to work with fraternity men, whether at a campus or a headquarters, the most important thing you can do to fit in is be yourself. Learn how to navigate the political waters, but be confident in your skills and talents. Embrace your own identity and do not be afraid to let that shine through. Most importantly, be ready to be challenged in a way that will help make you a better professional than you thought you could be.

For those who want to hire a woman to work with their fraternity men, know there are some differences that may require you to revisit or update your policies and procedures (especially at a headquarters). You will probably hire a strong and confident woman, but help her to understand she is a part of your team not because she can be one of the guys, but because of her talents and love for your organization.