

Why I Advise As Openly Trans

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Six years ago when I joined the brotherhood of Lambda Theta Phi Latin Fraternity, Inc. I had significant doubts about being a member of a fraternal organization. At the time, there were few individuals on my campus who openly identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and were in fraternal organizations. Fewer still were the folks who identified as LGBTQ in a culturally-based fraternal organization. In addition to conversations around sexual orientation, by the end of my senior year I was coming to terms with my gender identity. I tried on and now use different gender expressions and gender pronouns (they/them/theirs in place of he/him/his) through explorations in my graduate work. As I pursued graduate and professional endeavors as a fraternity/sorority advisor, I hesitated to share my identity as a Lambda because I did not want my membership to come into question nor did I want Lambdas to be perceived as less than other fraternities with me as a brother.

I share part of my story to emphasize that transgender experiences in fraternities and sororities matter. Before I go much further, I want to acknowledge that when I use *transgender* (and at times *trans*) I use the umbrella term that describes folks who challenge the expectations of male and female (Beemyn & Seifert, 2013), including folks who transition and those who do not. Transgender students experience a variety of connectedness to those within and outside of their trans community and seek to engage in college life in the same ways their cisgender peers do (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). The opportunity for trans individuals to be accepted into a lifelong brotherhood/sisterhood in a fraternal organization as their authentic gender can be a powerful experience.

Transgender inclusion had an entire *Essentials* issue back in September 2014. Most of the articles talked about action steps and discussions on best practices for organizations. When I panel presented alongside Stevie Tran, Jessica Pettitt, and Beth Stathos during “Title IX: Can He Join My Sorority?” at the 2013 Annual Meeting attendees packed the room to find out how their organization/campus should prepare or react. A handful of organizations are investigating the option to create (or now have) inclusive policies that support the recruitment and retention of transgender students and alumni. Doing so significantly helps transgender students identify where they are welcome. What is missed when the focus of inclusion revolves around policies is the experience of the individuals that are transgender. I worry about the timeline of impact from policy decision day to induction night for the members.

Colleagues I have worked with on transgender inclusion have mentioned multiple issues that occur in recruitment, education/intake, and retention of interests, members, and alumni. Where some issues have been lower in risk (not receiving a bid after multiple attempts to join the community or removal from organization), others have been more problematic (policing gender and demanding sex identity verification). It pains me to think that there are transgender members out in fraternal organizations across the U.S. that are waiting to be accepted by or removed from their fraternal siblings.

While it is not the experience of every transgender person, many of us worry about the consequences of our authenticity. This reflection would be unjust if it did not address the

violence happening against the transgender community. Eight individuals – Lamia Beard, Ty Underwood, Yazmin Vash Payne, Taja DeJesus, Penny Proud, Bri Golec, Kristina Gomez Reinwald, and Sumaya Ysl (may their names rise in power) – have been murdered since January 1 of this year. These conversations on transgender inclusion cannot be left to policy makers and inter/national boards alone. The conversations, education, and research on transgender experiences in fraternities and sororities inter/nationally is necessary and overdue.

That, in part, is why I advise as openly trans. Some students ask more questions because they notice my name is different and are confused by how ‘them’ can be used in place of ‘him.’ I would rather have a thousand and one of these conversations over one involving transphobic hazing. Investigating the attitudes that student leaders in fraternities and sororities have about transgender inclusion helped me understand the ways that conversations can and should happen about the LGBTQ community in my office and then some.

I am committed to continuing my work with fraternities and sororities as openly trans because I believe in the potential of each and every one of our chapters. I hold on tight to that because of Lambda Theta Phi. I had a positive experience coming out as trans to several brothers in national positions at this past Annual Meeting, and I believe that the conversations will be positive moving forward. When I enter fraternity/sorority members’ spaces, I bring with me the lessons of resilience, the education of inclusive excellence, and the determination to build a better fraternal movement.

That matters.

Transgender experiences matter.

I matter.

References

- Beemyn, G., & Seifert, A. (2013). Transitioning to AND in college: The experiences of trans* students [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://www.umass.edu/studentsuccessconference/PresentationPDFs/2013Beemyn.pdf>
- Dugan, J. P., Kusel, M. L., & Simounet, D. M. (2012). Transgender college students: An exploratory study of perceptions, engagement, and educational outcomes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(5), 719-736.