Identity Impacted: Bridging the Chasm Between Cultural Centers & Fraternity/Sorority Life Office
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Race. Class. Gender. Sexuality. These words are buzzwords in divisions of diversity and inclusion on college campuses across the country. Race, class, gender, and sexuality are words that guide missions for spaces that seek to support, challenge, and address identity. They are often at the heart of the values found in places like Latinx Cultural Centers, LGBTQIA Centers, and indeed African American or Black Cultural Centers. If we are being honest, race, class, gender, and sexuality are also at the heart of the work of our fraternity/sorority life offices.

Sometimes we forget we are talking about race as we engage homogenous campus chapters about proximate physical inclusion with our fraternities and sororities on campus. Sometimes we forget we are talking about class when we question how first-generation students will be able to pay fees and dues to join organizations in our area unit. Sometimes we forget we are talking about gender, even as we wrestle with statistics about sexual assault or gender violence in mostly single-sex organizations. Sometimes we don’t realize we are talking about sexuality when we ask people to reconsider their language and how they treat prospective members. Every day in fraternity/sorority life we are talking about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Unfortunately, some of us are operating at a deficit in terms of what we know, what we understand, and what we see as privilege. Much of this can be traced back to deficits in knowledge, due in part, to an education industrial complex that treats race, class, gender, and sexuality as caveats, favoring instead “hierarchy of needs.”

We find ourselves having left formal education without a tool bag that helps us consider William Cross’ Nigrescence Theory, Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectionality, or Beverly Tatum’s understanding of inclusion. When we arrive at our jobs in fraternity/sorority life, we are unable to hear black students in NPHC say their values don’t align with IFC or NPC. We see stepping as a cultural commodity for NPHC to trade, without asking what variables of cultural appropriation are present. We talk to students who make decisions about fraternity/sorority life after spending a lifetime being tokenized in predominantly white spaces, and who find themselves in the position to join more of the same, or to “cross over” into an unchartered territory — a space where minoritized students of color actually are majority.

We may not ask questions like, “what is the impact of NPHC on black student life at my school?” Or, “why isn’t the Black Student Union president or the SGA president considering joining a fraternity or sorority?” Many of these questions can be answered if we are willing to walk outside of the silos of our offices and consider the impact of our work in the context to both cultural and identity centers. One of the major challenges in higher education is we don’t often see our work as impacting others’ work. It is only through intentional collaboration that we can fully understand the depth of our work and how it impacts student experience, achievement, and
identity. Unfortunately, far too many cultural centers and fraternity/sorority life offices have antagonistic relationships that are built on territorial understandings of students, even though we know they live at a variety of intersections. Our inability to create spaces for meaningful collaboration with peers who have a different vantage not only hurts the students we are trying to serve, but it inculcates our biases and stereotypes about the work we think the other is doing.

On the other hand, when we work together, we learn from each other and we see differences in our work. We see the much larger pictures of the impact of our work. We teach students they get to bring their full identities to the table; black, queer, sorority woman, and middle class. When we see cultural centers as spaces that expand the definitions of identity and help students acclimate into new spaces, we are able to see the parallels in our work with formal and informal recruitment, intake, and neophyte presentations. When we see the cultural center as allies in the development of students, we enable students to see cultural centers as a place for exploration, not hostile lectures or menacing antagonistic programming for a select group of students. When they see the work of a fraternity/sorority life professional, they get to see work that borders on every possible field imaginable from compliance, to alumni affairs, to community relations. Maybe one of the most powerful things we can do in Black History Month is to see the cultural or identity center as we would want to be seen and treated; as a valuable co-collaborator who brings with them a wealth of skills and ideas to learn from and to be appreciated.

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