

Panhellenic Formal Recruitment: What if we are the problem?

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Panhellenic formal recruitment can often be a polarizing issue in the world of fraternity and sorority life: folks either love it or hate it. This idea of “values-based” recruitment has become more of a trend, and I think it is more of a fraternity/sorority buzzword than a real call to action.

I want to go back to our “why” as organizations. Why do Panhellenic sororities exist on college campuses, and are our recruitment practices aligned with that “why?” We all know the impressive history of our organizations—the fearless and courageous work of our founders to create a place for women to discuss real issues and form relationships deeper than friendship. In looking at many formal recruitment (or any recruitment) practices across the country, I cannot see the congruence between the work of our founders and perfectly rehearsed chants, petit-fours, and color coordinated outfits.

Many would agree that Panhellenic recruitment needs some re-vamping. In its current state and without some real change, I do not think that Panhellenic formal recruitment has the potential to be a values-based process. Many fraternity/sorority professionals are making great progress in changing campus recruitment rules to abolish more frills each year. Talented and engaging speakers travel to college campuses and talk about a more values-based process of new member intake. The National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) reviews national guidelines and implements changes. Yet something still isn’t working. I think that we, as fraternity/sorority professionals, headquarters staff, alumni volunteers, and advisors might be contributing to the problem. And here is why:

1. Formal recruitment processes prioritize placing as many women as possible over organizational fit and needs.

I love the idea of giving as many women as possible an amazing, values-based experience in our organizations, but some women simply do not belong there in the first place. The current priorities are to retain as many potential new members through the process as possible and to place as many as we can in chapters on our campuses. We place women without truly getting to know and assess their fit within the organization and subsequently end up with members who do not contribute to the chapter.

2. Our undergraduate members are not the loudest voices in the room when it comes to making decisions about a more values-congruent recruitment process.

When we look at who has influence over formal recruitment on campuses, there are many stakeholders involved who all have separate (and sometimes competing) priorities. Undergraduate women have increasingly been willing to adhere to and even advocate for a more values-based recruitment process, and at times, they have been met with resistance. Earlier this year, we saw undergraduates at the University of Alabama stand up against advisors and alumnae volunteers, and even more recently witnessed Panhellenic executive board members speak out against the formal recruitment process at Dartmouth. It seems many women who seek out a sorority experience want values-based things: sisterhood, leadership, academic achievement – so how can we support our members in showcasing those elements during recruitment? As undergraduates our founders challenged the norm when they created our organizations, so let’s allow students to take the lead now to create a values-aligned process.

3. Chapters are rewarded for numbers and consistency in membership but not necessarily values-congruence.

Inter/national organizations tend to reward chapters for achieving quota or maintaining total on their respective campuses, but rarely do we see an award for the most values-based chapter that is not dependent on membership size. What if we rewarded the most values-congruent chapters instead of those that make quota? One could argue that chapter members should not be motivated by awards, but what we reward sends a message to members of what the organization values and they will strive to meet the criteria we set. It might change undergraduates' perspective of what is important to their inter/national organization and therefore change behavior.

4. The recruitment process itself creates systemic barriers to who can and cannot join our organizations.

The Panhellenic recruitment process is not currently set up to provide an inclusive, welcoming environment for women on campuses. The undergraduate women at Dartmouth recently pointed out that their formal recruitment process is not inclusive for women of color, women who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and especially not for women who identify as trans or non-gender-conforming. While this is a larger cultural issue within our Panhellenic groups, we could make significant progress in providing a space for these women in recruitment. If a woman does not see herself reflected in the membership of our organizations it is unlikely that she will feel welcome and want to be a part of that group. How could we work with chapter members to make them feel comfortable talking about diversity and multicultural competence even if the chapter is not already diverse? Our current practices also cater to women who are of higher socio-economic status, partially due to the financial cost of membership. We teach chapter members to cite scholarships and mention payment plans as ways for women to financially afford membership, but are we really doing the best we can to accommodate those women? Or are we content with just having members who are privileged enough to pay dues? Our organizations (and potentially universities and college Panhellenics) could do a much better job of working with women of a lower socio-economic status to provide them with a values-based sorority experience.

5. Our chapter members struggle with being values-congruent (or at least talking about it).

I think our chapter members struggle with aligning their actions with the values of their organization for many reasons, but we certainly do not help the cause with the way we recruit and introduce new members to our organizations. Even if chapter women have reflected on organizational values versus personal values and use those metrics to make decisions, those women are likely not talking about it in recruitment "parties." Our members often are not comfortable talking about what their organization believes, why Panhellenic sororities exist, or how the chapter has truly made them better women. We are not helping things when sorority consultants, headquarters staff, or alumnae volunteers visit the chapter before or during recruitment and their first questions are numbers-based, ask for insight into the reputation of the chapter on campus, or promote competition between chapters. What if consultant or staff visits focused on training students to have values-based conversations during recruitment and not on things that do not influence potential new member (PNM) decision-making? Of course we want PNMs to choose our chapters, but we want them to select us because our organizational values align with their personal values. How can we expect PNMs to ask about what organizations value if no one around them is having meaningful, thoughtful conversations?

I have tremendous respect for the women who founded the organizations in the National Panhellenic Conference. They were brave, intelligent, articulate women who founded organizations that have over 150 years of history on college campuses. I worry that through

impractical recruitment structures and practices, we are teaching women to be the opposite of what our founders were; I worry that we are teaching women to conform to a specific “type” through hollow, surface-level conversations in recruitment, instead of embracing difference, encouraging meaningful and values-based conversations, and challenging our organizations to recruit those who will make them achieve greater.

So where do we go from here?

I work with Panhellenic women every day and see such potential in them as leaders and as sorority women who make wonderful examples of what it means to live by one’s values. But I think we, as campus-based professionals, headquarters staff members, chapter and recruitment advisors, alumnae volunteers, etc., need to better align our priorities and answer some tough questions. What are our goals? Are we striving to provide a sorority experience for everyone who seeks it? What type of sorority experience are we promoting? Are we willing to challenge our current recruitment practices and really promote a values-aligned process for intake of new members? How can we create an inclusive environment for all women who would be fantastic additions to our chapters? Although many would argue that there is a “values-based recruitment movement” on campuses, we have not yet arrived at a true values-aligned process, and you can’t expect different results without a change in the process. I think it’s time for us to change.

References

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