

Whose Home? Critical Perspectives on Homecoming Programming

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As student affairs educators, we play an important role in helping students find their place on campus. Whether it be through joining a student organization, fraternity or sorority, hall council, or community organization, student success is dependent on students' sense of belonging and connection with others and the larger campus community. Sense of belonging refers to "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). It becomes pertinent, therefore, to identify ways to foster and strengthen students' sense of belonging through programming, trainings, and leadership development initiatives.

Perhaps one of the most well-known programs and traditions on a college campus is homecoming. Homecoming celebrations became popular on college and university campuses in the U.S. in the early 1900s, and by the 1920s homecoming had taken root as a way to engage alumni and current students in promoting school spirit and increasing attendance at athletic events (Cramton, n.d.). Today, homecoming presents a rich opportunity to deepen students' belonging through active and engaging programs and activities. However, what happens when our students, specifically with minoritized identities, do not feel at "home" during homecoming? Working at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) in the South, I hear this phrase often from our students of color and members of our LGBTQIA+ community. Simply put, our minoritized students on campus do not feel as connected to homecoming as their peers. And truth be told, why would they? The structures and models that undergird our homecoming programming initiatives are not designed to serve our minoritized students. They are designed to serve the majority of the student population and alumni returning to campus. So, when you work at a PWI, guess who the majority is? That's right ... White people. Add to the mix that homecoming is steeped in traditions that serve to reinforce the gender binary (i.e. king and queen competitions), and you have another layer of privilege to untangle. I argue that in order to deepen students' sense of belonging, we must develop action steps toward a more inclusive programming model of homecoming. As such, I believe that fraternity/sorority life professionals are positioned, both structurally and informally, within our institutions to challenge and lead these efforts. In the following sections, I offer thoughts to help us engage in this process.

#1: Let's get critical. If our aim is to reimagine a more inclusive programming model for homecoming, we must first be willing to challenge the status quo. Otherwise, we end up

recreating programs and activities that reinforce dominant ideologies. This is why it is important for us to anchor ourselves in critical theory and perspectives. For most of us, we stopped reading and learning about theory after graduate school. This was certainly the case for me early in my career. It was not until I started my doctoral program a few years ago that I re-immersed myself in readings and conversations about theory. In particular, I have found critical theory to be essential to my work in campus activities. Essentially, critical theory sheds light on the systems and structures of power that maintain dominance and social injustices in society. Critical theory specifically supports individuals in their understanding of issues regarding equity, power, and oppression (Giroux, 1997; Apple, 2004). Critical theories range from Marxist perspectives to Critical Race Theory (CRT), Queer Theory, theories of intersectionality, and much more. Critical theory provides a robust and fresh perspective of examining our programming models with the ultimate goal of dismantling and challenging hegemonic (common sense) norms about social life (Kincheloe, 2005). Using critical theory will help us to challenge what we have always done and imagine a new direction for student programming.

#2: One size does NOT fit all. We are taught early on that it is our duty to “meet students where they are.” Rather than taking a blanket approach to advising, we must understand the needs, desires, growing edges, and development of each student to fully support them. With this in mind, why do we think it is okay to take a blanket approach to programming? Believe me, I totally understand staff and fiscal resources are limited, and we cannot sustain hundreds of programs each semester. However, when is the last time we actually re-evaluated our homecoming programs to make sure they are meeting the needs of students, specifically minoritized students? Rather than simply duplicating events from previous years, we need to stop and ask ourselves “*why?*” Why are we doing this program and who is it serving? We must engage our current students in what they want and how homecoming programming can serve as a vehicle to deepen their sense of belonging on campus.

#3: Challenge the Gender Binary. At most institutions, homecoming competitions serve to reinforce the gender binary by making students select either male or female on applications, but some people do not neatly fit into these categories. This is most evident in homecoming king and queen competitions whereby students are selected based on their gender, academics, involvement, and votes by their peers. Rather than creating programs that reinforce the gender binary, how can we be more inclusive towards our students who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming? A first step is to examine the language on websites and advertisements to make it as inclusive as possible. For example, rather than king and queen, what about homecoming court or homecoming royalty? At Appalachian State, we no longer

crown a homecoming king or queen. Rather, we select the homecoming court (8 students total) based on an application and interview process, and we do not reserve a certain number of spaces per gender. This allows us to recognize our top students while embracing a gender-inclusive process. One student from the homecoming court is selected by their peers and announced as “Top of the Rock” at the homecoming football game. Several other universities across the country are moving in this direction to challenge the gender binary as part of homecoming activities.

#4: Promote Collaborations Outside Fraternity/Sorority Life. We can all agree that collaborations are critical to fraternity/sorority life (FSL), but sometimes it is easier said than done. In order to deepen students’ sense of belonging, we must seek partnerships outside of FSL. Although collaborations within the FSL community are important, it remains insular and does not promote a spirit of inclusivity. Since homecoming is one of the most energetic times of the year, it creates an opportunity for new collaborations. This might include working with your multicultural affairs, LGBTQ center, and/or women’s center on hosting a new event or co-sponsoring a tailgate together. Rather than FSL chapters having mixers or social events with one another, why not host a social event with another student organization on campus? Another option could be to collaborate with your student programming board to bring a diverse artist or entertainment to campus. The possibilities are endless, and our fraternity and sorority leaders have a strong voice to make this happen.

Ultimately, our goal is to help all students feel valued and connected, and homecoming provides opportunities to do just that. As fraternity/sorority professionals, we must honor differences while at the same time develop and promote shared values within a diverse campus community. Campus culture does not change overnight, but we must continue to challenge the status quo to create more inclusive and welcoming programming for all.

References

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