End the Trend: Why We Need to Abolish Minimum Member Limits

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Over the past several years an increasing number of fraternity and sorority communities have implemented policies and/or requirements for organizations to have a minimum number of members (generally 10 or more members) to maintain institutional recognition. While some of these policies may be aligned with the same member minimums for institutional recognition of other (non-Greek) student organizations, many are not. The authors have heard a number of reasons for these minimums, everything from "easing" the chapter burden to complete inter/national organizations' requirements, to the amount of (perceived) time it takes to advise a small chapter, to not having enough members on the ground to recruit more students into the organization. While these may sound like legitimate reasons to a fraternity and sorority life director, they tend to be color-blind in their approach. More often than not, the chapters that are most challenged by minimum member policies are chapters of culturally-based organizations. This is not to say that institutions are purposely seeking to eliminate or remove culturally-based chapters from their campuses, but they may not fully understand the effect their institutional policies have on their culturally-based chapters. We propose institutions reevaluate their minimum member policies with particular attention to the negative effects their "equal" application can have on culturally-based organizations.

Family Structures

For first generation students who have no family members to support them with reliable college knowledge, culturally-based fraternal organizations provide them with a network of undergraduate and alumni mentors to guide them through their collegiate experience. To be more specific, Latin@[1] Greek-letter organizations provide a family atmosphere on colleges campuses (Miranda & Martin de Figueroa, 2000). These organizations serve as a home away from home for their members and provide the social network and social capital necessary to navigate an institution and utilize its resources. In a study focusing on the ethnic identity development of Latino fraternity members at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), participants emphasized how their membership within their organization has allowed them to learn about their "Latino" identity, rather than their specific ethnic identity, resulting in stronger familial connections amongst other Latinos on campus (Guardia & Evans, 2008). In contrast with chapters of even 50 members or more, family-sized chapters of 10 members or less have an opportunity, and a structural need, to develop deep, lasting relationships with all chapter members. They also have the challenge of maintaining institutional requirements (e.g. "standards of excellence" or "chapter assessment tools"), but with far fewer members to diffuse individual responsibilities.

More than Just Chapter Numbers

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[1] The @ sign is used to provide non-sexist, more inclusive language beyond the binary

We must not forget that culturally-based/influenced fraternal organizations were established because these students have historically not had access to the existing, predominantly White, fraternities and sororities on campus. Latin@ students established organizations to meet their specific needs and they designed them in their image. Different from their peer organizations, culturally-based organizations tend to have a smaller average chapter membership, and that membership is much more likely to consist of a majority of first-generation, low-income, and minority students when compared with much older fraternities and sororities. These students are also more likely to be commuter students who live at home with their families.

Culturally-based organizations also tend to have much smaller dues structures than older, and larger, fraternities and sororities who have houses, headquarters, and recruitment staffs to maintain. Quite the opposite, culturally-based organizations do not have houses, and a majority of culturally-based organizations are supported by working boards of alumni who *volunteer* significant amounts of time to the *daily* work of the organization, and to facilitate requests from campuses and umbrella organizations like the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) and the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA). While a few organizations do have full-time staff, Lambda Theta Phi included, this luxury is limited to the organizations with the largest memberships and is in much smaller quantity (often one staff member) when it is available. In the age of the Internet, it may appear culturally-based organizations have a sophisticated leadership structure, but often times their structures and support mirror that of their undergraduate entities. When viewed in their entirety, it is clear culturally-based fraternities and sororities are, indeed, very different from their larger and older peer organizations.

The Institutional Perspective

As members of a culturally-based organization, we are acutely aware of the challenges we face on campuses across the country. As higher education researchers and professionals, we are also aware of the changing dynamics that may coerce fraternity and sorority life programs to impose minimum member policies. Many such offices derive their funding from an auxiliary structure using semester dues assessed, per member, to each chapter. Simple arithmetic says that the more members a chapter has, the more "healthy" a fraternity and sorority life office will be—both in population numbers and financial contributions to support staff and overhead costs. Public institutions are especially hard hit with ever-shrinking state contributions that only squeeze auxiliary units even further. Therefore, it seems rational that fraternity and sorority life offices would seek to ensure their existence by requiring chapters to maintain a minimum number of members and, therefore, a minimum dues contribution. This is only further exacerbated by the current inter/national aversion to Greek-letter organizations with regard to issues of hazing, racism, and elitism. Culturally-based organizations are perfectly positioned to be the unfortunate casualties of these policies, as they have traditionally sustained themselves with much smaller average membership numbers, have far fewer inter/national resources to quickly enhance (and sustain) membership numbers, and may even view large membership sizes as antithetical to their organizational culture and origin. Advisors may think they are "challenging" chapters to do better, but may instead may only be adding additional burdens to students who are already over-extended (participating in chapter events, maintaining a full academic load, and commuting to campus—while working half-time or more).

One might think that institutions would jump at a chance to engage chapters that cater to underrepresented students, who are often leaders within their student community—and many have. Some of the authors are national board members, and we have had many conversations with supportive fraternity/sorority directors who seek to extend recruitment deadlines in order to "keep a chapter on campus." However, these individuals are working against an institutional wave that is getting closer and closer to shore. At some point they must relent to the pressure from deans and administrators, or they eventually leave the office—and take their advocacy with them. So what is the way forward?

Culturally-based organizations can do their part to adapt to the changing environment; however, we must encourage an equitable application of standards, not the equal application of standards that campuses have most commonly pursued. While it may be easier, and politically expedient, to address chapters as equals, we know they often differ greatly with respect to purpose, origin, dues structure, and membership. While the authors are members of a culturally-based organization, and issues affecting culturally-based organizations are dear to us, we must be clear that membership minimums affect all types of fraternities and sororities—not just culturally-based ones. An approach that supports all chapters individually, regardless of size, can benefit the entire community by providing access to the fraternity/sorority experience to as many students as possible, in as many ways as possible.

As Peter Smithhisler, President and CEO of the NIC, has said: "fraternity, when done right, is the premiere leadership development experience on a college campus" (Pinkard & Rehm, 2014). We could not agree more. However, it is imperative that fraternities, sororities, and student affairs professionals work together to craft a way forward that prioritizes and promotes *access* to this premiere experience for all students, and especially for those students who have not historically been served by fraternities and sororities. This will take a creative reimagining of how chapters that enjoy the familial structure can grow manageably without fundamentally changing their character and purpose, just as it will also require creative approaches from fraternity/sorority professionals to support both large and small chapters without incentivizing one approach over another. To achieve success, we must work collaboratively together to provide students access to organizations that create a support system and encourage their personal and social development, regardless of the size of the organization, in order to meet the educational mission of the college/university.

References

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