

Do You Understand the Words that are Coming Out of My Mouth? Language Accessibility and International Students in Fraternity and Sorority Life

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According to a report from Institute of International Education (2011), over 3.3 million students studied abroad in 2008. The United States remains the top destination for students studying abroad, with approximately 690,000 studying abroad here in 2011. With interest in studying abroad at an all time high and international enrollment averaging 4% of the U.S. undergraduate population, it is important for the fraternity and sorority community to focus on international students (Tidwell, 2007).

While a small percentage on some campuses, international students are a prime population to target for membership. They have much to gain from joining fraternities and sororities, and can offer tremendous benefits to chapters and communities (Barber, 2003; Tidwell, 2007). While the benefits are clear, many international students and chapters are not taking advantage of this experience. Furthermore, retention of international students at colleges and universities is lower than the overall student population (Andrade, 2005).

Research shows language as the number one concern for international students. Language barriers are the main reason they do not get involved in social activities outside the classroom (Andrade, 2005; Barber, 2003; Grayson, 2008; Sam, 2001; Walters, 2011). This is attributed to their concern and anxiety surrounding social interactions outside their culture, and their need to put more time toward coursework to maintain academic standards.

While overcoming language barriers may seem like an insurmountable task, there are a number of initiatives and strategies professionals, volunteers, and students can employ to attract and retain international students. Additionally, many of these techniques can help reach non-international students who may speak English as a second language or are unfamiliar with fraternities and sororities.

During the recruitment/intake process, it important to remember the following in promoting the fraternity and sorority experience to international students:

Use accessible language in all promotional materials and presentations.

Look intentionally at the words used to ensure materials are not confusing to those who speak English as a second (or third, etc.) language. Words that have been appropriated by the fraternity and sorority community sometimes have different meanings than their primary definition and may cause confusion. For example, the word rush, which many still use to describe some recruitment processes, may confuse international students. They have learned this word to mean, "to move forward, progress, or act with haste or eagerness or without preparation" (Rush, n.d.). Therefore, when they see or hear the word, they do not associate it with the process to join an organization. Using terms and phrases they understand, such as "Join XYZ" or "XYZ Recruitment," will allow them to more easily interpret the message. Other words such as pledging, mixers, formals, "pref," philanthropy and other campus specific

language may not be commonly used language or may have different primary meanings than intended.

Always refer to the community as fraternity & sorority life, not Greek life; always refer to members as fraternity/sorority members, not Greeks.

This has nothing to do with potential negative connotations. More so, it is typical for international students to immediately associate the term “Greek” with people from Greece. If they are not from Greece, this may alienate them. If they are, they may have different expectations of your organization. While you may have to explain what a fraternity or sorority is, it will reduce confusion.

Build a relationship with the office on campus that works most closely with international students.

Work with them to understand what your international student population looks like and how you can best get to know them. Have them look over your marketing materials to ensure the international student population will be able to understand them.

Prepare members to be able to talk to international students in recruitment settings, formal and informal.

Many times, students in recruitment settings talk very fast and use many terms they assume everyone understands. It is important for them to understand the needs of international students and ensure they are explaining things in terms those students will understand. The best advice is to slow down and allow the student time to answer. It may seem awkward, but allowing them time to think about your question and answer will reduce anxiety and allow for a better conversation (Harbison, 2012).

The challenges do not end once a student accepts his/her invitation and starts new member education. Language will continue to be an issue as they begin to experience new member education lessons and specifically rituals, many of which were written a hundred or more years ago. If they do not understand the oaths they are taking and the commitment to values they are making, how can you expect them to live by those values? To help engage and retain international student members and new members, try the following:

Schedule extra time into the new member process to ensure international students understand the material.

This is especially important following any Rituals. Some language in a Ritual can be confusing to those speaking English as a first language, so imagine how much harder it must be for international students. Have definitions of archaic language or words not used in everyday conversation ready to assist students who may not understand them. Specifically, following the initiation, walk through the Ritual a second or third time with anyone who may need to hear the information again in addition to post-initiation education you are doing for all members.

Take specific and lengthy notes at all chapter meetings.

For many students learning English as a second language, reading and writing may come easier because they have time to understand and read at their own pace. Note taking on the other hand can be quite difficult. While you may not be able to slow down chapter meetings, detailed notes allow international students to review them later and ensure they understand everything covered. Using graphs and other visual aids during meetings can also lessen confusion. This can also be implemented at inter/national leadership trainings and conventions (Harbison, 2012).

Implementing the above items will not eliminate all language barriers and intercultural confusion in developing the international student experience in fraternity and sorority life, because language is just the tip of the iceberg. However, they are effective first steps to increasing accessibility for international students in our community.

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