

Brotherhood and Sisterhood Reconsidered: Transgender Resource Guide and Inclusion

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Fraternity and sorority members strive for lifelong relationships while living to a higher standard set by each organization's respective ritual. Relationships formed during the chapter experience take us into adulthood by incorporating a sense of responsibility and accountability that friendships outside of one's affiliation may not contain. One alumnus of a national fraternity identifies brotherhood as a life-changing element. He talks about the role of alumni mentorship to new members as a way to "give back" to the organization. Additionally, he acknowledges the importance of giving back in the form of writing articles for the publications, serving as a mentor, encouraging others to live up to the organization's standards, or writing checks to financially support endowments.

What complicates his relationship with his organization is the fact that this loyal fraternity brother does not get to express loyalty, dedication, or brotherhood publicly. After graduating in 1951 from a major research institution, Eileen began living as a woman in 1972. She stated, "When life got tough, it was the lessons I learned from my brothers that kept me strong, focused, and ultimately able to be successful" (personal communication, August 25, 2008). She continues living to this higher standard of integrity through anonymous donations, writing articles, and serving as an online resource using her birth name. In every other context of her life, she lives as a woman, upholding all that she learned from her fraternity experience.

In coordination with the Lambda 10 Project, an educational initiative of Campus Pride, the *Fraternity and Sorority Transgender Resource Guide: "Beginning the Conversation"* (Fielding & Pettitt, 2008) was created to support fraternity and sorority organizations concerning transgender advocacy and inclusion. The word "transgender" can be applied as both an umbrella term and for individual identity; it describes the disconnect between one's birth-assigned gender and the gender one feels. The term "trans" is as inclusive as possible and can be applied to a wide variety of labels and identities used under the transgender umbrella. When referencing single-gendered organizations, like fraternities and sororities, intramural athletics, and NCAA sports, many federal regulations, funding sources, organizational membership requirements, and departmental reports require specific information sorted by the sex of participants. Interestingly, sex is determined by paperwork and not chromosomal, hormonal, or genital make up. Very few people even have their chromosomes or hormones checked unless they are having fertility or menopausal issues. Otherwise, sex is assigned at birth based on external genitalia. As a person ages, navigates puberty, and learns about the differences between sex and gender roles, we determine how we want to identify and express ourselves. When looking at a single-gendered organization like a fraternity or sorority, what conversations are necessary to develop policies for potential, active, and/or alumni members that transition into a different gender expression than the sex they were assigned at birth? There is not a "quick fix" for any organization determining how to incorporate trans realities, nor are there "how to" answers provided or known for every instance, situation, or case. Better understanding of sex, gender, sexual identity, and the ways sexism and heterosexism support these social constructions leads to a more empathetic approach when dealing with trans related concerns. Organizational standards and creeds can be fortified to best represent and support all intended members of a given community.

Although the *Transgender Resource Guide* was created to aid single-gendered organizations, the conversation has already started in a variety of venues. From threads on the Association of Fraternity Advisors (AFA) online community, educational programming on campuses, or individual decisions being made within individual chapters, it seems that trans inclusion is moving to the forefront. The goal is to provide basic information and answer common questions, address campus-based experiences, and recommend action steps for those organizations who wish to create trans inclusive policies, implement policies that support their creeds, and determine who can be a member. It is not the goal to have all organizations open their doors to all people, but to be able to clearly define who the organization is open to having as members and what to do within a single sex organization when a member's gender identification changes.

The resource guide is broken into three sections: "What is Trans?," "Trans Issues on Campus," and "Next Steps." The guide begins by explaining the difference between sex, gender, and sexual identity. It creates a clear picture of the current climate for potential, current, and alumni members. The guide is complete with assessment tools and action steps to better equip members, chapters, affiliate organizations, inter/national officers and staff members, and alumni groups with the ability to develop policies regarding gender questioning and trans members and the specific organization. There are also questions that target potential members, current members, and alumni members, so that fraternity and sorority professionals are prepared to work with students, staff, and alumni that may change their gender demarcation prior to initiation, during active membership, or after graduation. A good starting point for these conversations would be to ask yourself the following questions: Do you have genitalia, hormone, chromosomal, or documentation requirements for membership in your organization? If so, how are you currently checking this information for all of your members? If you were to implement a policy change, how would you include alumni, current members, and staff members?

Additional resources can also be downloaded to help assist organizations in updating nondiscrimination policies, working with college/university administrators, legal protections, suggested action steps towards inclusion, etc. The *Transgender Resource Guide* was released at the first annual Out & Greek Conference at DePaul University in November 2008. Over eighty lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and ally fraternity and sorority members and advisors from around the country attended this conference. The guides were also available at an educational workshop during the 2008 AFA Annual Meeting. Participants in this session engaged in a training module used to explain the difference between sex, gender, and sexual identity as well as the ways sexism and heterosexism conflate these three elements. Once these terms are defined and understood, it is easier to assess current regulations, policies, traditions, assumptions, and expectations on campus and within our organizations. Barb Kautz, Coordinator of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, commented that, "transgender people face extraordinary challenges when trying to navigate gender segregated organizations like fraternities and sororities." She continued by stating, "I'm excited by this new guide from the Lambda 10 Project ... to learn about how, as an advisor, I can better serve and support all of the members of the Greek community" (personal communication, August 25, 2008).

Indeed, trans advocacy can be cumbersome to navigate. When coming to terms with a lack of knowledge about trans issues, many professionals rely on trans students to teach them about the trans student experience. When seeking to be a trans advocate, one

cannot rely on “them” to catch you up to speed. Whether we are aware of it or not, transgender students, faculty, and staff are among the population we serve. Unfortunately, these individuals may not be able to fully be themselves due to ignorance and fear. We show support for our members through our creeds, love, and respect; but do we make room to understand our assumptions of others? The resource guide identifies a few key questions that will aid professionals in starting these dialogues.

As Eileen shared, it is her brotherhood that taught her how to be a “responsible principled citizen” and helped her to be strong enough to transition from a life as a man to living as a woman (personal communication, August 25, 2008). Her loyalty and dedication to her fraternity is unwavering. As we work with young fraternity and sorority members that represent our traditions, creeds, and missions, we must ask: how do we uphold our organizations’ traditions, rituals, and standards while simultaneously keeping up with the needs of our members? At what point do we as fraternity and sorority leaders, students, staff, and alumni members expect Eileen and those with similar stories to disaffiliate when they truly support the mission of the organization and live as the man and woman they are instead of what was assigned at birth? As leaders who have agreed to be held to a higher standard, we must step forward and take the lead in asking these questions.

The conversation about trans-inclusion may have started nationwide, but it is just beginning on campus and in our organizations. Visit the Lambda 10 Project www.lambda10.org/transgender to download the Transgender Resource Guide and supplemental documents. To keep the conversation going, feel free to contact Jessica Pettitt for advice, consulting, or training at contactme@jessicapettitt.com.

References

Fielding, S., & Pettitt, J. (2008). *Fraternity and sorority transgender resource guide, “Beginning the conversation.”* Charlotte, NC: Lambda 10 Project.