

That's So Greek!

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Often times, I hear people negatively stereotype the fraternity and sorority community. They use words like “Frat boy” and “Soro Ho” to describe individuals that they assume must be fraternity or sorority members maybe because they are wearing khakis or heels in bad weather. Then there are the really frustrating stereotypes and assumptions like, we buy our friends, have access to all of the tests and papers of alumni so we make the grades and are really dumb; of course Greeks are alcoholics and use a lot of drugs – either to party or to stay thin and pretty; we are also slutty, easy, players, teases, never go to class, throw parties with date rape drugs, - this is just the tip of the iceberg. Although stranger things have happened on a college campus the stereotype exists that these events are characteristics of “group think” or of “Greek Life.”

Now before anyone gets their letters in a twist, yes, it is hard to hear that we are negatively stereotyped. It may be even harder to see how you may actually contribute to these stereotypes. If someone saying “That's So Greek!” bothers you, then why is “That's So Gay!” seemingly common language on college campuses? Maybe if people who were not fraternity or sorority members knew a little more about actual Greek experiences, they would be able to check their own stereotypes, judgments, assumptions, and behaviors. Maybe if we Greeks understood more about the language used in the LGBT community we could do the same.

In the shadows of a politically correct movement, many are trying to use the most inclusive and supportive language to describe others. These words are often even created

as the political pendulum sways from left to right or steadies in the center, it also changes depending on the community you are in or the company one is surrounded with.

However, it is important to also note that language and language preferences are very individual things determined by personal identity, community membership, and politics.

Language also varies by age, gender, class, race and ethnicity, and region of the country.

So what are you to do? Recently, I have had a number of conversations about my language choices so I thought I would share with you and then you can decide where to go next.

I use LGBT to name the non-heterosexual community. I sometimes even use 'gay' as the umbrella term. What is the difference and who cares? To some, Gay only refers to homosexual white men. This can feel marginalizing to women and bisexuals not to mention the transgendered community, because usually there are strict social constructs set in place as to what it means to be a man or a woman and unfortunately our society often leaves little wiggle room. Then there was GLBT, I mean GLB, actually, GL. The modern gay movement was visible through active white gay men and a few lesbian women (G and L) that bravely signed their real names during early equality protests and marches. To be more inclusive to women and their involvement in the movement (again, I am implementing the same rigid social constructs as to what it means to be a woman), L was placed first and the B added due to the silencing and invisible status of the bisexual community. T was added much later on to include the trans (transsexual and/or transgendered) population in the movement even though many trans people identify as heterosexual. Both the B and T often find their home in "not the norm" but then are kicked out again from the "norm" in the non-heterosexual community.

Queer is a perfect example of a historically negative and derogatory label that has been reclaimed by a significantly younger population of the LGBT population and signifies an inclusive community of non-heterosexual people, but often includes allies as well. Why does this matter? When a population or individual is unfairly labeled, that matters greatly to the individuals who are working very hard to reclaim their own collectively identity.

Why does any of this matter? The fraternity and sorority community is sensitive about language and is also prone to being stereotyped, much like the LGBT community. Therefore, it is important for members of the fraternity and sorority community to lead by example, be mindful of the language they use, and work to understand its potential impact. What I mean by understanding and tracking language used is simply realizing the words you use and how you use them. Ask yourself: Are you making any assumptions about the person, couple, or population by using that word? Have you ever asked those that you are labeling you are using the correct or preferred word? While it may be uncomfortable, the step of asking the proper language to use can go a long way to building relationships and breaking down barriers. This way you don't misrepresent someone's identity, use the wrong pronoun or name, or miss an opportunity to play match maker. When you hit bumps, recognize perfection can't be attained by everyone or it would cease to be perfect.