Working with Diverse Sororities: Insights for Practice

Professional and Volunteer Practitioner Guide

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The following guide is taken from the Piazza Center's Understanding NPC Sorority Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Within Diverse Chapters at Predominantly White Institutions study, a collaboration of the University of Georgia Mary Frances Early College of Education and the National Panhellenic Conference.

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of NPC sorority women in racially/ethnically diverse chapters situated at predominately White institutions (PWIs). Study content included member experiences with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), chapter DEI work, and what drives DEI work in NPC sorority chapters. The findings of this study were based on interviews with 12 students and 11 staff members at 15 colleges and universities throughout the United States as well as 33 chapters' social media posts from 2019 to 2022. In summary, sororities are a space where members in supportive environments explore a deeper commitment to DEI through programming, chapter operations, recruitment, and social media.

Findings

Collegians identified the DEI work "shows up" in their chapter in four distinct avenues:

Programming
This included dialogue events, religious diversity programs, speaker events and training (e.g. LGBTQ+ safe space) and badge/pin programs.

Chapter Orientation
Participants shared having an approachable executive board and standards/honor board as a priority.

Recruitment
Members believed inclusive questions, language centered in values-based recruitment and not coded-language, and eliminating legacy policies were examples here.

Social Media
Participants shared how social media is a platform to discuss and inform chapter membership, the campus community, and others about DEI. Participants were proud when making a statement through social media while also being critical that these posts sometimes felt performative. They shared frustration when "you don't see yourself" represented and challenges with needing approval from inter/national offices with posts.

Putting Findings into Practice

Use these findings to drive researched-based initiatives. If your organization or campus has already created some of these elements, this may serve as validation, encouragement and a way to continue communication on resources for chapters they may already have but don't always use.

Programming, Training & Support

- Developing programming for chapters is the first step in ensuring members have the resources and support for DEI they are seeking from inter/national or campus fraternity and sorority life offices. Members shared they are looking to learn DEI language, are struggling with difficult conversations, and need the tools to discuss racial and ethnic diversity and racism.
- Ensure members know about and use national programming and campus programs. Participants shared that it's easier to find resources on their own than ask inter/national office or campus professionals for assistance.
- Develop a DEI officer position and provide training, advising, and support for that role. Including a consultant like person to talk through nuanced definitions and challenges may be additive.

Chapter Operations

- Support chapters in holding members accountable for negative behavior related to DEI. This could mean better training for standards/honor boards to know how to approach DEI-related incidents and/or develop an alternate structure to the standards/honor board system to approaching DEI incidents, like mediation or restorative justice practices.
- Train executive board officers on being approachable and balancing the "business" of running a chapter within the environment of sisterhood. This training should consist of instruction on how to have difficult conversations and practice with various scenarios.
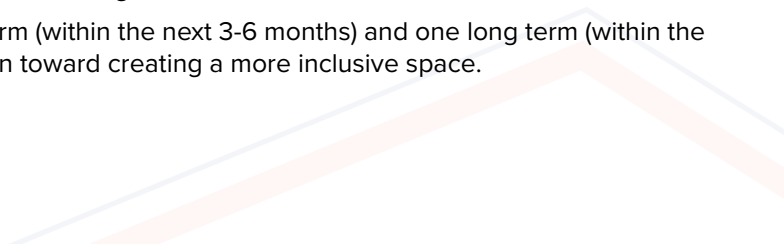
Recruitment

- Provide recruitment chairs and members with the tools to continue to focus on values-based conversations by asking inclusive questions, eliminating bias, and ensuring membership selection is based on membership criteria.
- Encourage sorority leaders to challenge coded language when they encounter it.

Social Media

- Ensure national social media channels represent the organization's membership make-up, and it is used to discuss and inform followers on DEI topics.
- Empower chapters with guidance on how to create DEI-related social media posts.
- Make statements based on the organization's social media philosophy.

Reflection Questions

- What is your organization currently doing in the area of DEI that centers students immersed in rich diversity, equity, and inclusion? What areas of growth do you see related to DEI?
- What practices align with these research findings?
- Which of the four areas described above would be the best starting point for your organization?
- Which, if any, current programs or practices could you build on to integrate DEI work?
- Within the four areas described above, identify one short term (within the next 3-6 months) and one long term (within the next 1-3 years) action step that could move your organization toward creating a more inclusive space.

Future Research

In spring 2023, the Piazza Center will be launching a subsequent study entitled Understanding NPC Sorority DEI within Racially/Ethnically Diverse Chapters at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). Replicating both studies and expanding data collection will develop insights for sound professional and volunteer practice. Further, the Piazza Center intends to use the findings of these studies to inform a national survey instrument and conduct quantitative studies in the future.

References

Martin, G.L., Goodman, M.A., & George A. (2022). Understanding NPC Sorority Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Within Diverse Chapters at Predominantly White Institutions