

## HELPING FRATERNITY AND SORORITY MEMBERS UNDERSTAND RITUAL<sup>1</sup>

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*This study addresses the role of fraternity/sorority rituals in the lives of undergraduate members and is based upon a qualitative study that asked the following question: "Does ritual have an impact on the values and behavior of contemporary sorority women?" Addressing this question requires an understanding of the role ritual ceremonies play in the fraternity/sorority experience. This research primarily examined the impact of ritual ceremonies as it related to individual behavior.*

### Why Ritual?

I became a fraternity/sorority advisor in 1991. At that time, FIPG (the Fraternal Information & Programming Group, an organization dedicated to promoting sound risk management policies and practices) was a new acronym and such things as kegs, hazing, and "pledge" education were daily topics. As a young fraternity/sorority advisor, it seemed that there was so much to do. As I was searching for answers to my many questions, I was fortunate enough to encounter two people who have had a major impact on me, as well as on so many others - Maureen Syring, Delta Gamma, and Ed King, Sigma Chi. As I traveled with students to conferences and attended various professional conferences, the messages shared by Maureen and Ed had such an impact on me. I thought that if I could learn from them and try to teach my students values and ritual, then maybe we could change some of the behaviors that I was experiencing. Part of the problem with that concept was that I was not very educated about my own fraternity's ritual nor was I educated about what ritual was really supposed to mean to fraternity/sorority organizations. As a result, I began to research the meaning of ritual. I began talking with many people in the sorority and fraternity world to say, "What does this all mean?" In 1996, I presented my first program on ritual. Since that time, I have made it part of my mission to learn and to educate others on the importance of ritual and how the role of ritual, if taught, can make a difference to our members during their years in college and beyond.

Each year thousands of young women and men seek membership in sororities and fraternities on college campuses throughout the United States and Canada. These memberships are often appealing because of their legendary commitments to friendship, sisterhood, brotherhood, and loyalty (Callais, 2002). Whipple (1998) stated, "Greek letter [sic]<sup>2</sup> organizations have prospered for many years, largely because of their capacity to unite students in friendship and shared

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<sup>1</sup> Information for this article was adapted from the author's dissertation entitled *Sorority Rituals: Rites of Passage and Their Impact on Contemporary Sorority Women*. While the actual study was conducted by interviewing National Panhellenic Conference undergraduate women, the information presented in this article can be applied to both fraternities and sororities. This article is a revision of the author's article in the Fall 2002 issue of *Perspectives*.

<sup>2</sup> Since not all organizations adopted Greek letters, it is now customary to refer to such groups as fraternities rather than Greek-letter or Greek organizations.

purpose. Being affiliated with a fraternity or [sorority] means belonging to a group of ‘brothers’ or [‘sisters’] who care about one another” (p. 1). These bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood are often formed through friendship and may be maintained through ritual ceremonies that build the foundations of a fraternity or sorority if the importance of the ritual ceremonies is taught (Callais, 2002).

Today, institutions of higher learning must justify all facets of campus life. These include curriculum development, the physical environment, student involvement in extracurricular activities and the effects that involvement has on student learning. One area that has become a focus of much discussion and debate on many campuses is the impact of fraternity/sorority life and the value that involvement in sororities and fraternities has in the development of students and the campus culture (Shaffer & Kuh, 1983; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001). “Social fraternities and sororities are a very visible, and often controversial, aspect of undergraduate life” (Pascarella, Flowers, and Whitt, 2001, p. 280). Whipple (1998) stated, “As college and university leaders question the value of Greek membership, the message to Greek letter [sic] organizations is clear: if they want to be taken seriously as active partners in students' education, their current practices must change” (p. 1).

So that host institutions, non-members, campus community members and others will value fraternities and sororities as groups that enhance the educational environment, fraternities and sororities must have congruence between their actions and their stated purpose and mission. This can be accomplished by integrating the purpose and mission into all aspects of fraternity/sorority life.

### **Fraternities/Sororities and Ritual**

Rituals within the fraternity and sorority world are rites of passages through formalized ceremonies that were developed at a time when ceremonial transitions were a way of life (Callais, 2002). Ritual was intentionally developed to be a part of these organizations. At different stages in their growth process, young men and women knew that there would be various expectations of them. Whether it was turning eighteen years old, getting married, receiving a religious rite of passage, or having to take responsibility for one’s family, one knew that growing up was part of a transition, whether ceremonial or not (Rayburn, 1999). Founders of fraternities and sororities recognized the need for ritual ceremonies that would mark transitions through one's growth in the organization.

The vision of founding members of fraternities and sororities was possibly far beyond their own understanding. The following excerpts, although from women’s groups specifically, provide an excellent example of the intent of organizations’ rituals:

The symbolism of Phi Mu is a heritage from our Founders, and has been the source of inspiration to all succeeding initiates. It takes for granted allegiance to lofty ideals, it stimulates worthy and purposeful achievement, and in the personal equation, it challenges the best in all of us (Lamb, 1982, p. 222).

One of the most effective descriptions of why and how rituals developed comes from the Alpha Delta Pi History Workshop I written by Hensil (1994) that states:

A strong foundation for the Alpha Delta Pi sisterhood was laid in the 1850's. Our Motto, Constitution and Bylaws and Ritual have withstood the test of time. There have been slight modifications to reflect change in terminology and social pressures of the day. The ritual has gone through slight revisions, becoming more elaborate in the 1880's. The secret societies, inspired by the Greeks [sic], derived much of the essential elements of their rituals from Greece, Roman literature, and Christian scriptures.

In the 1880's, the era of romantic preoccupation with the exotic, sorority rituals began to stress mystery and theatrics in presentation. When the exotic became passé, rituals again began to concentrate on the ideals of knowledge, love, loyalty, and truth. The basic components of Alpha Delta Pi Ritual remain unchanged. The ideals remain unchanged (p. 4).

Driver (1991) wrote, "Ritual is moral territory, sometimes secular, sometimes religious, that has been staked out. Ritual marks the boundary at which wilderness, moral desert, or profane life stop" (p. 47). Whether referred to as rituals, rites of passage, or pathways, research indicates a need for ceremonies or life changing events that transition people from one phase in their lives to another (Driver, 1991; Nuwer, 1999; Turner, 1969). Driver (1991) stated, "We need rituals to give stability to our behaviors and to serve as vehicles of communication" (p. 23). He made two specific points related to ritual and behavior:

Not only are rituals behaviors, since they are patterned and repetitive, they can be employed as signaling devices, an important enough point in itself. Equally if not more significant is that ritualizations can be used to store and transmit information, across time and across generations (p. 26).

If this is so, then rituals may be a key factor as to why fraternities and sororities have lasted across time. Driver's description of rituals also helps to put into perspective the importance of ritual ceremonies to fraternities and sororities as well as to the university.

Administrators, parents, other non-affiliated students, and the public often question the value of membership in fraternities and sororities. Each year, institutions across the United States question and evaluate the effectiveness of fraternities and sororities in assisting with the promotion of the college or university's mission and purpose – and some of those determine that the fraternities/sororities are not in line with the campus ideals. Recently, Santa Clara University decided to end its fraternity and sorority system over a two year time period (Kellogg, 2001) and Alfred University's Board of Trustees decided to eliminate their fraternity/sorority system (Alfred University Press Release, 2002). Members of higher education listservs, such as the Association of Fraternity Advisors (AFA) listservs, receive articles that discuss campuses and the status of fraternities and sororities on those campuses. In addressing these and other concerns, many leaders of inter/national fraternities and sororities have verbally commented that going back to the ritual is one way to educate our members on the original intent and expectations of fraternities and sororities. The basic concept of "going back to our roots" is intended to bring men and women back to the concept that fraternities and sororities were established as an intellectual outlet and as an opportunity to share common feelings, ideas, and beliefs, thereby enriching the personal lives of their members while developing bonds of brotherhood, sisterhood, and friendship. Ford (1999) described a back to basics philosophy that he believes to be taking hold and emerging as the forefront for the future model of chapters present on campuses throughout the country. "In the highly litigious society of the 90s, the 'back to basic' concept will only be of benefit. Living the sum and substance of the ritual . . . will serve

everybody well” (Ford, 1999, pp. 12-13). Ritual was designed to be shared and as an avenue for those concepts to be passed on from generation to generation.

### **Reflections from Undergraduates**

Throughout the past several years, I have had students who have said that ritual is not performed correctly in their chapter and has no meaning in their chapter experience. In my study of National Panhellenic Conference undergraduate women only, there were several comments expressed by students that I feel are reflective of many of the students (male and female) that I encounter. Some say that the ceremonies are “boring and long.” Several of them indicated it might take all day to initiate some of the larger groups of new members. The rituals were written at a time in the history of these organizations when the groups were much smaller than some of the chapters have become today. Perhaps inter/national organization officers should evaluate if the rituals written in the early days of the fraternities and sororities apply to groups the size of some of the current organizations. The ways in which these ceremonies are taught to chapter members and how they are performed based upon the size of a particular chapter are crucial aspects of the performance of ritual.

Ritual should be explained and taught to chapter members by an inter/national officer or a local alumnus or alumna. Fraternities and sororities cannot assume that ritual is understood to be an important part of an undergraduate chapter member’s experience. Many of the participants indicated that some members in their chapters do not even understand the ritual, much less apply it to their daily lives. They want it to be different but do not know how to achieve this goal.

### **Role of Fraternity and Sorority Advisors**

Students have a desire for a better understanding of the ritual ceremonies. Fraternity and sorority advisors can provide support to those chapter members who want to have a deeper understanding about who they are and what role ritual has in their fraternity or sorority experience. Part of this support might be to provide resources such as videos, written information, educational speakers, and programs, as well as to assist in educating collegians as to how to facilitate discussion about ritual. The concern by the national organizations may be the secrecy of the ceremonies; however, it is possible to discuss the meaning of ritual and how to incorporate it into other aspects of students’ lives without revealing the individual organization’s secrets. Providing support and an opportunity for dialogue may be all that some members need to open these discussions with their chapter (Callais, 2002).

### **Activities to Discuss Ritual**

1. As part of a chapter development or retreat, have chapter members place their ritual equipment in the middle of the room, and discuss what those symbols mean in their everyday life.
2. Suggest that chapter officers and/or advisors communicate to the chapter that anyone can read their ritual unless otherwise designated by their inter/national organization – many of the members do not know that they can read their ritual books – they believe that only the officers have access to their ceremonies.

3. Encourage chapter members to have an advisor or alumnae/alumni come in and discuss the meaning of the ritual ceremony and how he /she is living the ritual of their fraternity or sorority in his/her daily life.
4. Suggest that when holding members accountable for their actions, instead of telling them that they violated a rule or standard, place their promises in front of them and ask them which ones did they not live up to as promised.

### Summary

In summary, undergraduate members, advisors, alumnae/alumni, inter/national organization staff members, and university administrators need to increase their understanding of their role regarding the education of the ritual aspect of fraternity/sorority life. It might be that our undergraduate members have become so focused on the social and competitive aspects of fraternities and sororities that they have lost sight of the purpose of the ritual ceremonies. It might be that inter/national organizations have taken for granted that members understand the ritual ceremonies, that they perform them correctly and with care, and that the chapter members are teaching one another the importance of ritual. Furthermore, it may be that university administrators have perceived the education of ritual to be a chapter or inter/national responsibility and have assumed the role of ritual is understood within the chapters.

Alumni/alumnae, inter/national officers, and even university administrators can be involved in the education of the meaning and purpose of the rituals of fraternities and sororities as well as the importance of the performance. The reason that the students do not understand ritual may be that they have never been taught the ritual's role in their fraternal experience. Have good conversations with them, share your personal stories and experiences and just get them talking about how living their rituals is about being good people who live out their personal values. Help them to see that being fraternity and sorority members is about whom they are, not just what they do. Membership in a fraternity and sorority is not just an activity, but also a way to live one's life.

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