Universal Principles of Inclusivity & Equity in the Sorority/Fraternity Joining Process

Phired Up | **TechniPhi**

phiredup.com

695 Pro-Med Lane, Suite 205
Carmel, Indiana 46032

Universal Principles of Inclusivity and Equity in the Sorority/Fraternity Joining Process

As fraternities and sororities enter a modern age, questions of diversity, equity, and inclusivity become increasingly important. As historically and proudly exclusive organizations (yes, "exclusive" has many different meanings), can these groups become inclusive? And if all fraternities and sororities truly prioritized inclusivity and equity as core values, might this transform our organizations into better, healthier, more in-demand experiences that can make an even greater impact on the world?

Yes. We believe that while many interventions will be needed to advance this large, complex, and old industry into a modern age that matches the expectations of a new generation of students (and the expectations of an evolving society), a key intervention will be to focus on the pre-member experience. We frame the "pre-member experience" as everything from the first impression someone gets of sorority or fraternity all the way through their moment of full initiation into their organization. This "pre-membership" time frame, which we'll also refer to as "the joining process" is a powerful lever our industry can pull to alter the machinations of sororities and fraternities overall. To create the future of fraternities and sororities to be more inclusive and equitable, we must transform the way people join to exemplify those principles.

Phired Up's growth related education, strategy, and technology has always had the spirit of inclusiveness and equity baked into it. However, that "spirit" and intention has not always been prioritized (and we fully own up to that truth and the problems it has contributed to). That said, the art and science of organizational growth that Phired Up and TechniPhi helps sororities and fraternities implement is the infrastructure upon which a truly inclusive joining process can be engineered. This resource should serve as another layer that needs to be added to Dynamic Recruitment and Social Excellence to clarify a vital objective of the process.

Honest or Polished?

It is time to air the dirty laundry of our organizations. Honesty is the best policy. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. All of that. Many fraternities and sororities have histories (and current members/systems that contribute to a reality) of racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression. We, as an industry, must publicly name our history and our challenges in this area. The skeletons in our closet will be shared eventually (if they aren't being whispered about already). Use your willingness to have difficult conversations as a strength instead of your fear of having them being unveiled as a weakness. Ignoring them doesn't help anyone. Justifying them because "the times were different" means your organization is likely stuck in those times. And using a "slippery slope" argument of, "Well, if we admit to this, doesn't it mean we have to admit to every little detail that has ever been problematic?" is without true merit.

A major contributing factor to the fact that fraternities and sororities have oppression baked into them is our obsession with image. We have a history of playing defense against the negative stereotypes we perceive to be thrust upon us by outside forces. This feeling of victimhood and desire to seem polished, impressive, and perfect disempowers our members from taking control of the future they can create if only they'll honestly name it.

Intentional or Incidental?

Who are you marketing to? Who are you inviting? Who are you meeting, connecting with, and building real relationships with?

If many fraternal organizations are honest, the answers to those questions are incidental not intentional. In other words, we engage with whoever shows up to engage with us. And whoever shows up is based upon the pre-built system and culture of fraternity/sorority life?

On the other hand, what if every marketing effort, every outreach, every campaign to network on campus, every event, every choice about when/where to show up… What if all of those choices were intentionally made to prioritize diverse perspectives and lived experiences? What if all those choices were *intentionally* made with inclusivity as a primary factor?

Most of the marketing, recruitment, and joining processes of all fraternities and sororities right now are incidental and not intentional -- especially when it comes to inclusivity.

This seems like a good place to mention the concept of "intent vs. impact." A simple and relevant way to think about these terms here is to consider that it doesn't matter much if you don't intend to be discriminatory if the impact is such that people experience discrimination. If you are a student leader or a headquarters professional or a volunteer, please read this: These observations and recommendations are primarily about the system, not about you. Nobody is suggesting that you are intentionally creating oppressive joining processes (well, you might be contributing to these things, but that's not what we're talking about here). The sooner we move beyond taking critiques around diversity, equity, and inclusion work personally, the sooner we'll be able to objectively correct our own biases, and effectively alter our system to truly offer the opportunity to receive the gift of siblinghood to all.

Intention and impact both matter in this work to make our organizations' joining processes anti-oppression.

Outside Perspective or Inside Imperception?

"Sometimes an outside perspective is the clearer perspective," said author Shannon A. Thompson, and rightly so. Especially within our deeply personal and pride-filled organizations, an outsider's perspective is very important to create true inclusion. Seeking a professional or well-informed volunteer to provide external analysis at all levels of your community or organization regarding bias, discrimination, and inclusivity should be a required step for all of our organizations. Seek a full assessment and analysis of your level of inclusivity and equitability. This is an area our industry has needed to invest in for some time.

Of course educating our individual members on diversity, equity, and inclusion is important. The individual members of each of our organizations will surely benefit from consistent and meaningful (not perfunctory) education and development opportunities that broaden their perspectives… education and development that helps students build empathy and understanding of lived experiences outside of their own. The ability of the individual members within a chapter to create a culture of true inclusion (which might lead to more inclusive growth and retention efforts) will ultimately determine whether any other efforts are successful. This might seem like an obvious recommendation (and even one that a reader might skim over), but consider your answers to these questions: How are you measuring the awareness of others' perspectives held by your members? How can deep education around diverse perspectives, inclusivity, and anti-oppression efforts prepare your members for success in their future careers? Is this education and member development consistently included in new member education experiences, regional and national events, on-line resources, written publications, etc.?

Infusing ideology, principles, and education on inclusivity into the normalcy of our organizations will be an essential step. It's not just up to the member with the "diversity and inclusion" or "outreach" position in the chapter to lead these efforts. It should be woven into the fabric of our existence, operations, and overall being.

Symptoms or System?

It is important to be able to identify and understand the symptoms of bias and oppression that manifest within the fraternity/sorority joining process. We'll list some below. But these are just symptoms. The system must be the focus of the solution. Reengineering the very infrastructure upon through which fraternities and sororities attract, select, and secure members is where the long-term solution lies. (But if you can eliminate some symptoms right away, then by all means…)

Here are 25 symptoms of systems of oppression, discrimination, and bias in sorority/fraternity joining processes:

1. Cultural appropriation in marketing and recruitment efforts. Historically white fraternities and sororities have appropriated other cultures for their own marketing and recruitment purposes in plenty of ways. A quick internet search will turn up examples.
2. Letters of recommendation and legacy policies can be problematic. While it can be a beautiful thing to gift fraternity/sorority away to a family member, it can also be a barrier for others in the form of nepotism. This is done wrong when potential members have priority for membership because of a legacy connection. This practice negates the lived experiences of students who don't have families/parents, are first-generation college students, or that have no connection to fraternity and sorority. Because many times the majority of these legacies (of historically white fraternities and sororities) are from white families, the mathematical possibility for a person of color to gain admittance to a historically white fraternity/sorority chapter on some campuses is exceptionally low. The same math holds true for referral pipelines and letters of recommendation, and this practice adds an extra layer of classism and elitism as first generation students and students from socioeconomic backgrounds that do not provide easy access to influential letter writers are excluded.
3. Culturally-based fraternities and sororities being drowned out or placed at the back of the brochure. Incoming students are often given very early opportunities to "sign up for recruitment," but really what that means is to sign up for historically white organizations. Panhellenic and IFC groups get top billing (especially during the summer and early fall) in promotion and support.

4. "We have groups for you over there." Students of color, students from certain religious backgrounds, and/or students that are perceived to have specific interests are often told (explicitly or implicitly), "There are groups for you over there." Or perhaps they're asked, "Have you checked out NPHC or MGC groups on our campus?" While in the same vein, students that are white who ask to learn more about joining a fraternity/sorority are often directed to the IFC and Panhellenic councils. The issue lies within assumptions of bias, association, interests, and affinity.

5. Microaggressions felt by prospective and current members during the joining process related to hair, clothing, heteronormative or transphobic comments, and so many others. Examples abound of students being "othered" both publicly and privately during the joining process.

6. Lack of non-tokenized representation in marketing efforts, membership experiences, and leadership positions. Consider the identity of the members in specific positions within the leadership of the chapter and the consistent theme that may be present. Consider how specific members are used only in certain contexts for events, advertising, or engagement.

7. Recruitment conversations that strategically match people together based on the color of their skin or their perceived sexual orientation or their perceived religious background. This practice could inhibit the opportunity for authentic connection and erases the holistic identity of both the potential member(s) and current member(s).

8. The cost of not only membership, but also the cost of participating in the joining process (registration costs, clothing costs, etc.) can immediately exclude individuals from different socioeconomic groups and backgrounds.

9. Accessibility disparities are often present in joining processes for people with disabilities, including wheelchair access to event locations, appropriate accommodations for people with visual impairments, closed captioning or interpreters, etc.

10. Language like "colony" and "expansion" which is central to fraternity/sorority inter/national growth efforts conjure ideas of European imperialism and the genocide of indigenous peoples.

11. Attractiveness or "looks" as a significant factor in member selection is often based on perceived implications on standards of beauty or attraction, and for some, rooted in Eurocentric biases.

12. Conversations that members have during the selection process can be full of code words and phrases like "fit," "vibe," "he might not mesh with the guys," or "she's not going to feel like this is a place for her" that members use to justify the fact that race, gender expression, sexual orientation, or a lived experience different from the majority membership is, for some chapters, a factor in selection. Equally as problematic is the general "trust your gut" approach to member selection which is certainly dominated by the biases all members carry.

13. Blackballing continues to exist as both policy and practice. Chapters throughout North America still use literal "blackball" systems of selection which allows one quiet racist or otherwise discriminatory member in the chapter to keep BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students or students from marginalized identities from being invited for membership.

14. Evidence of oppression can be found on display in many fraternities and sorority houses, without any acknowledgement of the problems caused thereby. A prospective member can walk into some fraternity houses across the country and see symbols of the confederacy on display over fireplace mantles and within fraternal paraphernalia. They might see pictures of men marching at night in hooded robes. They will often see old (and recent) composite pictures with nothing but white faces that tell a story about a chapter's past and infer what selection criteria might be.

15. Discriminatory, violent, racist, and harmful acts of oppression featured in the news, social media, or within the stories individuals share about their interactions or experiences with some members or chapters. or on social media. Fraternities and sororities have been featured as perpetrators of terrible acts of hate related to racism, homophobia, anti-semitism, and violence against many oppressed groups on college campuses in recent years. Potential members, supporters, or family members can read or listen to the news and related stories to create a perception of fraternities and sororities rooted in reality.

16. The very nature of fraternity and sorority organizational structure places gender and race at the center of our industry's stratification.

17. Professionals who support fraternity/sorority growth often do not fully understand the joining processes, policies, and practices of all types of fraternities and sororities (with culturally-based fraternities and sororities almost always getting the short end of the stick).

18. Many members (of especially historically white fraternal organizations) lack basic knowledge about culturally-based fraternities and sororities on their campus, including sometimes a complete lack of awareness of their existence. For example, this can be most evident when marketing or collaborating with "all sororities on campus", when what you might really mean would sound like "all the panhellenic sororities on campus."

19. Chapter members demonstrating a high value being placed on symbols of socioeconomic status (brand name clothing and accessories, promotional videos featuring luxury vehicles, etc.)

20. Some alumni that have undue influence over marketing, recruitment, and selection of members based on oppressive attitudes and beliefs.

21. Limitations and formulaic assignment of appropriate new member class sizes that value parity over individuality and place pressure on chapters to excel at recruiting from a homogeneous pool of prospective members.

22. Chapter members that water down the concept of "diversity" to be demonstrated by members with different majors or from different hometowns.

23. Recruitment event concepts that create potentially unsafe (or the perception of unsafe) experiences for students such as sexualized imagery, violent games/activities (gun shooting, paintball, etc.), heteronormative experiences, required outfits during certain events, etc.

24. Knowledge of oppressive past. Many historically white fraternities and sororities were founded during a time when only white students were allowed to enroll in universities, and following that period many organizations had written policies that specifically allowed only white, Christian members. This history is not only known by many, but also features as a primary plot point in the story of why culturally-based fraternities and sororities exist.

25. Lack of effort. Put simply, many fraternities and sororities just don't try very hard to recruit and retain students from identities different from the demographic(s) most present in their membership. It doesn't seem like a priority to include perspectives and experiences that aren't already overwhelmingly represented in fraternities and sororities.

Exclusive and Inclusive?

Sororities and fraternities should actively work to be both INTENSELY SELECTIVE and INTENTIONALLY INCLUSIVE in their joining processes. Our selectivity is a significant factor in our unique organizational value and experience. We are not advocating for groups to be less selective, simply more inclusive.

By "selective," we mean organizations should have clear, standardized, fair, objective, values-based, equitable selection processes they use to determine a prospective member's eligibility for membership, potential riskiness, alignment with the organization's purpose, and willingness to commit to the expectations of membership. Some groups have this; most do not.

By "inclusive," we mean they should consider the obstacles to membership that might exist (probably exist) for certain groups of students on their campus — consider those of different race, different native language, different ability, different religious

and cultural experiences, different sex/gender expression/sexuality identification, different socioeconomic background, and so on…. And actively work to deconstruct those obstacles that might keep excellent members from joining (and staying) that are based on oppressive systems or behaviors.

Selectivity and inclusivity can exist in unison, but we believe that only works well when there is real purpose attached to the organization. Otherwise the selectivity can simply be high school lunchroom table picking. We believe this requires an organization to have absolute clarity around their mission, vision, and values. Three simple questions must be answered so that an organization can understand fully what being selective and inclusive at the same time means for them.

Who are we for?
What are we about?
How do we treat each other?

WHO ARE WE FOR? The people we attract, select, and secure for membership in our organizations (and how we do that) will determine our future. They will either be a distraction and a liability, or they will be our greatest asset. We are built from our parts. We must decide on smart ways to ensure that only the right people are attracted, selected, and secured for membership. We can make our organizations significantly safer and healthier if we make clear WHO WE ARE FOR. We can make the choice to open our doors only to people who are mature enough to handle the responsibility of membership.

WHAT ARE WE ABOUT? We must be about more than cliché tropes like "leadership, scholarship, service, and brotherhood/sisterhood." Today's students are demanding a clear return on investment. Today's (and tomorrow's) students want worldly, cause-focused, impact-driving opportunities for involvement. And your current members will find empowerment and pride in clear direction, purpose, and differentiation. What are you about? Where are you going? Are you an organization with a mission, or are you an organization on a mission? How can you ensure that all of your efforts are aligned with your answers to these questions?

HOW DO WE TREAT EACH OTHER? The little things add up to the big things. Do your members encourage each other and lift each other up? Or is yours a culture of snark, and jabs, and cutting each other down (even if just for fun). Do you talk about important stuff every once in a while, or is it always pop culture, sports, and fun stuff? Do your members show up on time? Do your members take the small rules and responsibilities seriously or not? It's your culture, make it what you want… but remember the little things add up to the big things. What jokes are okay? What comments are tolerated? What do you allow, and therefore endorse (whether actively or passively)? What are the non-negotiable cultural norms you, as a leader, are naming and reinforcing?

Static or Dynamic

Phired Up's systemic philosophy of fraternity/sorority growth features a concept we call "Dynamic Recruitment." This philosophy is applicable to all fraternities and sororities (no matter the council or umbrella group) and all campuses (no matter the joining structure in place). Dynamic Recruitment is one end of a continuum of how a fraternity/sorority chapter attracts, selects, and secures its new members. The other end is called "Static Recruitment."

Static Recruitment is the "let's see who comes to us" approach. Static Recruitment depends upon a chapter being impressive. Static Recruitment outsources control of the prospect pool to someone else. Static Recruitment always seeks the quick solution. Static Recruitment seeks to maintain the status quo. Static recruitment picks from the default options. Static recruitment repeats previous patterns. Static recruitment accepts what has been as what will be. (Consider how the very nature of "static" recruitment contributes to an oppressive system).

Chapters that do Dynamic Recruitment demonstrate, in their own way, the following beliefs:

Dynamic Recruiting chapters believe that **authentic relationships** — real human connection — must be at the center of their system. Everything they do creates, nurtures, deepens, and maintains genuine relationships between the members of the chapter and non-members.

Dynamic Recruiting chapters believe in being **proactive**. They take ownership over their own potential and results. They are active, never passive, in their growth efforts. They take responsibility for their interactions, their story, and the experiences they provide.

Dynamic Recruiting chapters believe that they must be **intentional** in their conversations, relationship-building activities, data gathering, and recruitment tracking to ensure the RIGHT members join their chapter. They are intentionally inclusive and welcoming. They are intentional in the way they seek key information about potential members and the way they convey information about their chapter experience.

Dynamic Recruiting chapters believe that **quantity drives quality**. The more people the chapter knows, the more likely it is that the chapter will find the right members to join, stay, lead, and live the values of the organization. They believe that the chapter only benefits by meeting more people and being highly networked into their campus community, and they believe that being selective leads to healthier, safer, and more successful chapters.

Dynamic Recruiting chapters believe that joining a chapter for life is a **serious matter**. It deserves thoughtful consideration, generous dialogue, and transparency that ensures all parties understand the expectations of membership.

Dynamic Recruiting chapters believe in **personalized systems**. Repeatable systems outlast and ultimately outperform temporary leadership and talent. The system, however, is only as valuable as the amount of personal care and attention it provides for each individual potential member.

Dynamic Recruitment is not defined by tactics or gimmicks or policies or structure. It manifests differently for different organizations on different campuses and within different systems and cultures. But Dynamic Recruiting chapters always make choices that reflect these 6 core beliefs.

Socially Average or Socially Excellent

Fraternities and sororities are in the relationship business. Our members' ability to connect with other human beings in authentic, trust-filled, meaningful ways determines our ability to attract, select and secure the right members to our organizations. For a long time, Phired Up has taught a philosophy to do just that called "Social Excellence." Read the definition and more here.

Social Excellence challenges fraternity and sorority members to engage prospective members with intention – always seeking real human connection. Social Excellence reminds fraternity and sorority members that every person we encounter is full of a lifetime of stories and lessons that we can connect with if we choose to be curious. Social Excellence pushes fraternity and sorority members to be real, authentic, not-fake, sincere in all our interactions with potential members (because then they'll be that way with us). Social Excellence gently encourages fraternity and sorority members to choose to be vulnerable in our interactions with prospective members because they aren't seeking a club to join, or a t-shirt to wear, or a house to live in – they're seeking belonging and purpose, and those things can only be shared with a healthy dose of vulnerability.

Are your members known for reaching out as authentic connectors on campus, or are they more known for spending most of their time with folks who are familiar and comfortable for them? Do your members show up in spaces and at events that are led by people who are different from them? Do your members actively and consistently engage with people who are different from them or not? If they do, are those engagements rooted in curiosity, generosity, authenticity, and vulnerability? As much as these are the ingredients for any positive human interaction, they are also the ingredients for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue and relationship building outside of one's social comfort zone.

Social Excellence infers a need to understand and honor a person's whole identity. Social Excellences leads to connection that is inherently inclusive. Social Excellence challenges members to lean into empathy and discomfort for the benefit of others and the betterment of society.

Every moment is a choice. We can choose to engage with the people around us or not. Especially those who are different from us. We can choose to care about every person and every conversation or not. We can choose to open ourselves up to others or not. We can choose to be average or not (but our founders didn't create our organizations so that we could be average together). You're a member of a social fraternity or sorority (or at least that's part of what your organization is about). Don't be socially average. Be Socially Excellent and watch how that transforms your relationships and your organization.

What We Were or What We Will Be?

It's time to graduate from phrases like, "We're about quality, not quantity." Let's try, *"We envision a future where systemic oppression is eliminated from our organizations, and it starts with the way we attract, select, and secure new members. This will be a top three priority for our chapter/council for the next five years at least."* Naming it as a top strategic goal gives it power. From there, we can create the culture we crave.

In order to address the problematic practices within our organizations, we must work to positively and appropriately shift the narrative and reality to one that is more conducive to what we strive to be. We must name the culture we intend to create. When organizations can build a culture that truly values and celebrates all dimensions of diversity - one that provides equitable opportunities for people to grow, learn, and advance - it creates an environment where everyone thrives and where people can experience a true sense of belonging in their membership.

The culture may take time to fully shift, but nonetheless, positive change can still be addressed in the interim. Consider the way meetings are facilitated, what perspective is left out, the jokes/rhetoric used by members or when marketing, the flow of conversations, and/or the experiences of people in the room. Consider why you may (or may not) feel comfortable in all facets of your identity. Ask yourself, why is that the case? Let your answer guide you to why the normative behaviors and operations of the organization may be comforting to you and not others or vice versa.

Start with the low-hanging fruit… things within your control. Policies, rules, obvious problematic practices or habits. Move assertively and with strength in your work to make these immediate changes. Then in order to change culture, focus on keeping the vision of the culture you desire and your strategic goal top of mind -- bring it up in every meeting, champion the cause, rally others to help you, engage others with different levels of influence and power, gather people together around the purpose of making your organization better (you're good at that… that's just called leadership!)

Modern or Archaic?

Today's fraternity and sorority leaders know that the world around them is demanding a more modern joining process and more modern membership experiences that meet the expectations of modern students. The question will be whether our old organizations adapt to these perceived new times. Today's students are demanding a new sorority and fraternity experience, and they also might be just the members who will create it. And Phired Up is ready to help.

We help fraternities
& sororities grow

We've been helping fraternities and sororities recruit and retain more of the right members for their organizations since 2002.

Growth Training & Support

We provide on-site (and virtual) trainings, keynote speakers, and consulting to teach organizations how to recruit better, market their brand, and retain the members they worked so hard to recruit. We also provide long-term coaching and strategic consulting to chapters, campuses, councils, and headquarters.

- **Recruitment & Retention Training**
- **PNM Training**
- **Marketing Training & Strategy Planning**
- **Long-Term Coaching & Support**

Growth & Recruitment Technology

Through our sister company, TechniPhi, we provide a suite of technologies to help organizations easily manage their year-round and formal recruitment processes, vote on and score PNMS, and help guide PNMs through recruitment. They're the tools you need to make your organization's recruitment easy, organized, and sophisticated.

- **ChapterBuilder™**
- **Campus Director™**
- **MyVote™**
- **PNM Companion™ App**

See why over 300 campuses and more than 75 headquarters trust us to help grow their organizations! Visit phiredup.com and set up a meeting today!

www.phiredup.com

Phired Up | **TechniPhi**