



## Fraternities and Sororities

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Glbtq students are involved in both traditional Greek-letter societies and in gay-oriented fraternities and sororities.

Although many gay and lesbian groups have gained acceptance on college campuses, one area in which openly glbtq students continue to experience discrimination is in the generally conservative Greek system of fraternities and sororities. A large proportion of gay and lesbian students who are members of traditional fraternities and sororities are closeted.

Studies have shown that most gay fraternity members stay in the closet for fear of reprisals from their fellow brothers in the fraternity; however, while some exceptions exist, when lesbian and bisexual women have come out to their sorority sisters, reactions are generally more positive and supportive.

### **Traditional Fraternities and Sororities**

Fraternities are male college student societies formed primarily for social purposes, into which members are initiated by invitation and occasionally by a period of trial known as hazing. However, the practice of hazing has become restricted or prohibited entirely on most college campuses today.

Fraternities are usually named by two or three Greek letters; they are therefore also known as Greek-letter societies. Women's Greek-letter societies are commonly known as sororities.

The typical Greek-letter society generally owns or rents a house on or near a college campus that is used as a residence hall for members and as a center for social activities. Some fraternities and sororities have only one local organization or chapter; others are nationally organized with chapters at several institutions.

Research has demonstrated that fraternity and sorority life has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, students in Greek-letter organizations tend to exhibit higher levels of involvement in other campus activities. Individuals who were members of sororities or fraternities also report being more satisfied than non-Greeks with their social development in college. Additionally, Greek involvement seems to lead to positive outcomes after college; Greek alumni are more likely to engage in civic and volunteer activities and are also more likely to donate money to charitable causes.

On the negative side, Greek-letter organizations have been criticized as sexist and exclusionary, and of not living up to the values of the institutions of higher education of which they are a part. Greek-letter organizations have also been criticized for failing to contribute in a positive way to either the personal or academic development of their members. Areas of particular concern for sociologists studying the Greek-letter system include alcohol abuse, eating disorders, gender roles, sexual coercion, and insensitivity to diversity.

### **Gay and Lesbian Involvement in the Traditional Greek-Letter System**

Many gays and lesbians, similar to straight men and women, join traditional Greek-letter societies because they are looking for close friendships and want to belong to a group of people with whom they can share their experiences. They may have a strong need for connection and wish to belong to a nonsexual, same-sex bonding environment.

Experts, however, suggest that some homosexuals join fraternities and sororities because they seek validation that they are not really gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Joining a fraternity or sorority, organizations noted for reinforcing traditional gender roles and behaviors, can be one strategy to prove that they are heterosexual.

Although many national chapters of fraternities and sororities provide educational programs on highly publicized topics, such as hazing and alcohol abuse, few provide materials on homosexuality. Most do not even mention sexual orientation in their ethical codes. Currently, there are no national policies on homophobia in the Greek-letter system. Only a handful of more progressive fraternities, such as Sigma Phi Epsilon or Zeta Beta Tau, have added sexual orientation to nondiscrimination clauses in their bylaws.

Studies have shown that members of the Greek community are more likely to have an anti-gay bias than members of the non-Greek community. In a 1996 national survey sponsored by the Association of Fraternity Advisers, more than 70 percent of gay and lesbian members of Greek-letter societies surveyed reported homophobic attitudes within their chapters, often in the form of derogatory jokes or comments. Some gay and lesbian members said they even joined in the anti-gay attitudes and rhetoric to mask their own sexuality.

Many gay and lesbian members of traditional Greek organizations report that their chapters would not invite a student to join the society, or allow a pledge to continue, if that person was discovered or believed to be gay.

The fear of losing friendships or being kicked out of their fraternity if they come out looms large for gays in the Greek system. And gay-bashing gives homosexual members even more reason to stay closeted.

When straight fraternity or sorority members learn that another member is homosexual, their reactions may depend on how they find out. If gay members come out on their own they are likely to get a better response than if they are "outed" by others.

However, while members may be supportive on an individual level, out gay men and lesbians are generally careful to downplay their homosexuality and not to refer to it in the company of others outside the organization. Many believe that being publicly associated with a gay or lesbian member could hurt recruitment and damage the organization's image.

### **Gay-Oriented Fraternities and Sororities**

Gay-oriented fraternities, which began forming in the late 1980s, serve a need for students who are gay and want to be part of the Greek-letter society system but do not feel comfortable in traditional Greek organizations.

The isolation and lack of acceptance many gays and lesbians feel while growing up make belonging to a gay fraternity or sorority--a surrogate family and a support group in which their sexuality is accepted--attractive.

Moreover, on college campuses located in rural or isolated areas where students may have fewer social options, gay-oriented fraternities and sororities provide young men and women with perhaps their only contact with the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community.

Delta Lambda Phi, the sole national gay fraternity, is currently active in 20 college campuses across the United States and has over 1,200 active and alumni members. The core purpose of Delta Lambda Phi is to provide meaningful friendships and social interactions in an atmosphere of social, service, and recreational activities.

Delta Lambda Phi was founded through a trust established by three donors to create a social fraternity that would not discriminate based on sexual orientation. The original donors had regretted that such an alternative organization did not exist during their own college years. In 1987, the Delta Lambda Phi National Social Fraternity was inaugurated, and 24 men were initiated into the fraternity's Alpha Chapter in Washington, D. C.

Since then, Delta Lambda Phi, a fraternity for gay, bisexual, and progressive men, has become one of the country's fastest growing fraternities. The fraternity's motto is "Lambda men are making their presence known!"

The female counterpart to Delta Lambda Phi is the Lambda Delta Lambda sorority, founded in 1988. However, this lesbian-oriented sorority has not been as successful in attracting members; there are currently only two chapters in existence.

Another gay-oriented college organization is the Lambda 10 Project, a national clearinghouse for gay, lesbian, and bisexual fraternity and sorority issues. The Lambda 10 Project was developed in 1995 and works to heighten the visibility of gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of the Greek-letter system by serving as a resource center for information and educational materials related to sexual orientation and the fraternity/sorority experience. The Lambda 10 Project is headquartered at Indiana University in Bloomington.

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