

Advocating for the Fraternity Experience



When students arrive to college, they have hundreds of opportunities to get engaged on campus. Almost all student organizations offer a co-edified experience, yet every year nearly 1 million students purposefully seek out the opportunity to foster deeper connections and development among peers of their own identified gender by joining men's fraternities and women's fraternities/sororities.

They are looking for something different — I'd argue something special — not readily found in co-ed student involvement opportunities. My own fraternity story reflects this reality, as do the stories of many undergraduate men I meet across the country.

My childhood was difficult. Growing up in poverty, I often wondered where my next meal was coming from. I lost my loving mother to a heart-attack at 13 years old, and I regularly suffered at the hands of my abusive father. Walking onto a college campus as a student, given my background, was a blessing for me. Still, even that blessing was shared with continued struggles. I battled depression and suicidal thoughts throughout college as I continued to cope with my past. Fortunately, I had an important source of growth and support to help me through. My fraternity was my family, and my brothers were shoulders to lean on in tough times. Without the bond, the support, and the brotherhood I had through fraternity, I am not sure I would have survived my time in college. Nor would I have had a group I identified with and trusted. As any college student does, I made juvenile decisions and mistakes along the way as well. In those moments, I had strong peer role models and adult mentors that gave me the immediate social feedback I needed as I learned to be a healthy adult man.

Now, when I visit chapters and meet brothers, I hear this echoed by undergraduate men every day. It is shocking how many men are coming to college longing for positive male influences, and a sense of brotherhood they have been missing in their lives. They share powerful stories about support received through experiences such as troubling emotional trials, feeling not only safe but emboldened by their brothers as they came out as gay, and navigating self-reflection, growth and personal development.

Fraternity is valuable, in part, specifically because it offers a space for men to learn and grow in a space with other men. We rightfully worry about concerning behavior that happens in certain chapters, and we absolutely need to correct that behavior. However, we should also recognize the unique value that can come from a brotherhood of men collectively navigating the challenges of college and beyond.

At a time when positives strides are being made to ensure a more welcoming and inclusive environment for students on campus, there is an urge to be suspicious of things that do not align with an ideal of complete inclusivity. Thus, some will question whether fraternities and sororities should continue to exist as women's and men's organizations. There is a natural conflict that exists between inclusivity and selectivity. Organizations that are, in their very nature, exclusive in some sense (such as fraternities and sororities, sports teams, merit and honorary societies, performance groups, and cultural clubs) exist within this tension.

For some, the answer to this conflict is to remove the exclusive component by co-edifying fraternities and sororities. Others suggest preserving only sororities as single-sex organizations to empower women. While I strongly support inclusivity, I do not agree with the urge to have it swallow the uniqueness of the single-sex fraternity and sorority experience. We live in a beautifully complex society that necessitates cognitive dissonance and nuance. Uniform application of any ideal without respect to this complexity is typically achieved at the cost of undermining another significant and critical value.

The single-sex experience fraternal organizations offer has distinct value. Various academic articles and opinion pieces tout positive outcomes ranging from elevated academic engagement and graduation rates to professional well-being and civic engagement. However, there is notably less literature that discusses the needs of young men in today's society, and how the fraternity experience provides a critical support system. I am aware of the risk I take as a white man speaking about how men today are struggling and how inclusivity should mold around the existing structures of men's fraternities, but I pose this is an important topic that requires a nuanced and thoughtful dialogue.

Research shows young men are, in fact, struggling — struggling with serious issues from mental health to academic success — in different ways than women. A May 2018 Cigna study reported that the current population of 18 to 22 year-olds is the "loneliest generation," lacking people who "really understand them" or who they "feel close to." A 2016 study showed the stress of first-year students in fact stems from loneliness. Further research shows that by adulthood, many men have lost the "deeply fulfilling" connections they once experienced with male friends, and this continues to taper throughout their lives. Some call this loss an "epidemic of male loneliness."

Loneliness can have serious impacts on physical health, future career success, and mental well-being. In fact, young men are startlingly four times as likely to commit suicide as young women. Addressing this issue of male-loneliness and depression cannot be overlooked or set to the side. Yet, psychologists say that improving social skills, enhancing social support, increasing opportunities for interaction and connection, and engaging in bonding activities for men are all ways to combat it. All are benefits fraternities offer today's college student.

Additionally, in a society that places a heavy value on the need for a college degree, men are not reaching the finish line nearly as often as women. Currently, 25 percent fewer men graduate from college than women. It is incredible and worth celebrating that women today are more likely than ever to obtain a college education, and there is undoubtedly plenty of room to continue improving equity for women in education and the workplace. Yet, as we celebrate and continue pushing for equity for women, we cannot ignore a disturbing trend for men. Fraternities provide significant benefits in helping men reach the finish line. Members report significantly higher levels of academic engagement, greater graduation rates, and on many campuses, GPAs above the all-men's average.

Finally, we cannot overlook the need for healthy bonding among college men coupled with strong, positive, male influences. There is extensive literature and dialogue around toxic masculinity. Whether or not you agree with the concept of masculinity itself being toxic, there is no doubt there are healthy and unhealthy, and productive and unproductive ways to interact as men in society. Young men in college — who are still developing, learning and adapting — take cues and model behavior from the world around them as they choose between those two ends of interaction. Moreover, men are coming to the college environment from a background that is not always built on a foundation with consistent and positive male influences in their family. There is obviously a need to provide young men with healthy examples of masculine identity, and there are potentially destructive consequences when young men are not able to find such.

Are fraternities the answer to solve these issues? No. Complex issues like these require nuanced and multi-faceted solutions. However, a positive, healthy fraternity experience where genuine connection and friendship is fostered is absolutely a source of positive influence that can be a part of the answer.

The fraternity experience provides a unique outlet for students to create a sense of family and bonding. Additionally, it can make the campus environment less lonely. In contrast to other co-ed clubs, activities and organizations, it also provides a space for men to develop and grow in a space with other men; something that can have a unique and meaningfully positive impact on the issues college men are struggling with today. The incredible bonding within a fraternity and the security that accompanies a space where men can interact, grow, talk, and even fail, can bring about a great opportunity for vulnerability, honest dialogue and peer enacted behavior correction. This provides a safety net for men in the chapter struggling with tough issues like loneliness, depression, and self-doubt. When the experience is supported by adult advisors, the positive environment is only amplified. This is further bolstered by the new member, member development, and mental health education provided through the connection between a chapter and its inter/national fraternities. I believe conversations about the reality women face in our society and about the support our men need are not mutually exclusive. Having a space designed to afford me, and others like me, the opportunity for male development and growth does not negate the opportunity to support inclusivity. Perhaps not every man in college needs a venue to connect with, and learn from other men, but I did. My fraternity experience was pivotal in helping me to discover who I am, where I fit within society, and how I can contribute to society in a positive way. The answers here are not easy. We should celebrate the realities of our complex world and have honest conversations about the complicated issues in front of us.

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