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## New Member after College: A Scholarly Personal Narrative on Non-Traditional Membership in College Fraternities

Benjamin Z. Huelskamp

*While the majority of fraternity and sorority members join during their undergraduate years, some join after receiving their first degree. Non-traditional membership has not been examined or discussed in scholarly literature even though non-traditional members often have a significant impact on undergraduate members as Greek life advisors, chapter advisors, student affairs professionals, and faculty members. This article examines one man's experience with fraternity and sorority life and the influence of non-traditional members on fraternity and sorority members.*

Dear Men of Nu Gamma,

It is with great respect and immense gratitude that I write this letter to you as a brother, advisor, and friend. This is letter about us, but it is particularly about using my voice to spark discussion within our fraternity, and fraternity and sorority life internationally. You and the vast majority of other members of the fraternal movement followed the traditional path to membership: you joined a fraternity on the campus of your undergraduate institution. You are therefore traditional members. I am not a traditional member, however. As I will recount in detail in this letter I did not join a fraternity as an undergraduate for a variety of reasons. It was only after coming to the University of Vermont (UVM) and becoming an advisor for your chapter that you decided to invite me to join Phi Mu Delta (PMD). Because I was initiated into the fraternity after I had already received my first undergraduate degree, I am a non-traditional member. As you know I talk about PMD a lot, but one of my close friends often confuses the idea of non-traditional membership in a fraternity or sorority with non-traditional students who are undergraduates who are older or have more life experience than a typical student who begins undergraduate study within a few months of graduating from high school. Inasmuch as the study of student affairs is traditional, I have progressed through undergraduate and graduate work as a traditional student.

There are many ways this letter and essay could have been written. I chose Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (ESPN) in order to use my voice to address

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an issue that I feel is rarely, if ever, discussed in scholarly literature. I follow Nash and Bradley (2011) in placing great importance on the truths that we each possess as people. As you well know, my educational philosophy is rooted in creating space for my students to speak their truths and tell their stories. Non-traditional membership in fraternities and sororities is something that exists in the fraternal movement and may, occasionally, be mentioned in an organization's newsletter, but is rarely even discussed and each organization has different rules regarding non-traditional members. But I believe that non-traditional membership is vitally important to fraternities and sororities as it allows people who are passionate about the values and educational mission of the organization to be fully recognized. Furthermore, they can use their skills and experience to benefit the members of both local chapters and international organizations. Non-traditional membership also allows organizations without established programs for initiating graduate students to do so if needed. Overall, non-traditional membership has a compelling interest and stake in building strong, effective chapters on college and university campuses. Additionally, inducting administrative and student affairs staff can greatly increase buy-in from administrators outside of the fraternal movement (Rios, 2012). But before I go further with the discussion of non-traditional membership, let me tell you about how I became involved with PMD and the fraternal movement.

Before I arrived at UVM in the summer of 2011, I not only had never heard of Phi Mu Delta, but never believed that I would be a member of any fraternity. Unlike you, I came to Vermont not as an undergraduate, but rather a graduate student in the Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA) program. Soon, I responded to a call for fraternity and sorority advisors. While I said that I was open to working with any organization, I secretly wanted to work with either Kappa Sigma or FIJI, if only, because I was familiar with them. The Greek life advisor<sup>1</sup> suggested I look up Phi Mu Delta. My initial thought: why would I want to work with such a small national fraternity? I equated "large fraternity" with "better fraternity." I assumed that a larger fraternity, with the associated larger budget and resources, would make such a fraternity a better fraternity. Beyond the fact that "better" is an inherently subjective concept, each fraternal organization is different with unique histories, traditions, and rituals. After some internal wrestling and several subtle hints about the possibility of joining PMD, I decided to accept the invitation to at least explore being your advisor.

Like many men from similar background and identities,<sup>2</sup> I first learned about fraternities from Animal House in which beer, parties, and "thank you, sir, may I have another?" were perpetuated as the norm—perhaps even the ideal (Rietman

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<sup>1</sup> "Greek life advisor" is one of a number of accepted terms used by the Fraternity and Sorority Life community nationally to denote the student affairs professional responsible for the Greek community at a particular institution.

<sup>2</sup> I identify as White, from a middle-class background, and a second-generation college student.

& Simmons, 1978). I never considered fraternity membership until I arrived at The University of the South<sup>3</sup> in November of 2004 for a visit day. Even my ever-skeptical mother had to admit that Sewanee's Greek culture felt different than other schools. Maybe I could "go Greek" here. Less than two years later, I was enrolled at Sewanee and (based solely on websites) had decided that I would join the Kappa Alpha Order (KA), even though my mom thought Delta Tau Delta looked better and my aunt was pushing for Lambda Chi Alpha (LXA)—the fraternity of which my grandfather was a member until his death. Sewanee did not allow first-time, first year students to join Greek organizations until their second semester so I sat back and observed the different organizations. I quickly realized that if fraternity membership was about staying out late and partying then maybe Greek life was not for me. But when formal "rush" arrived in January of 2007, I was intent on pledging LXA,<sup>4</sup> because it seemed expected and the right thing for a Sewanee man to do—the student body was 80% Greek-affiliated at the time. At the same time that I was going through rush, I was also beginning my second semester in the University Choir. The head chorister at the time was also the rush chair of LXA. He encouraged me to hold off, wait until the following semester, and meet more of the men. Though I was deeply conflicted, his advice was one of the reasons I chose to forgo rush for the time being. The next semester, more confident in my chances to get a bid, I went through upperclass rush. This time I was out to get a bid to Beta Theta Pi with LXA as a "safe" alternative. Needless to say, on Bid Day, I was without a bid at all. Shortly after that experience, I came out and my mind turned elsewhere. It was also brought to my attention that as an openly gay man it might be more difficult for me to join any fraternity with the exception of LXA, which had several openly queer members. A part of me still wanted to be a member of one of the fraternities, but the loss was not great overall. I graduated from college with friends in every fraternity and with the respect of the people around me. That was enough for me.

My first experience with PMD came one day in early October 2011. I went to lunch with three of you and I was nervous, to say the least. Here, I was a man who had never been a member of a fraternity presuming that I could properly advise you on being a fraternity. Not to mention that I already had the idea in my head that I might be able to join you as a brother. I did not have any concrete ideas to give, and it took me almost half an hour to finally give intelligent answers. As you now know, I am not known for my great skills at initiating conversations, and we stared each other down for quite a while during that lunch. That meeting could have gone better, but you decided to give me chance nevertheless. My first meeting with the chapter was a visit with the Executive Director, Tom Murphy,

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3 The University of the South is often referred to simply as "Sewanee" after the name of the town in which it is located: Sewanee, TN.

4 It is important to note that LXA nationally and at Sewanee uses the terms "new member" and "new member education" rather than "pledge" and "pledging." I, however, would only discover that later as I learned more about LXA and its members.

an event that would have demanded coats and ties at Sewanee. Even though this is UVM and not Sewanee, I broke out a coat and tie. You all were in jeans and letters. More awkwardness on my part, but the silver lining was that I met Derrick, one of our brothers and soon to-be chapter president, for the first time. He would quickly become a friend of mine and the first PMD that I would consider a brother. After that meeting I felt that I could work with you and do more than try to advise you as a fraternity.

Though I can only speak from my experience, I think that many non-traditional fraternity and sorority initiates face unique challenges. By the time we returned from winter break, the chapter had installed new officers and then the invitation to join was extended to me. I, of course, accepted, but first weighed the possible challenges of joining a chapter on the campus where I worked. Would this create a conflict of interest as I worked with other students? My supervisor, a member of Zeta Tau Alpha, walked me through that question, but in the end, encouraged me to continue pursuing membership. The next question was how would I complete new member education? To get an answer to questions such as this, a new undergraduate member of PMD would ask the new member educator or another active brother; I called the executive director of the national fraternity, Tom Murphy. After answering that first question, Tom Murphy became my go-to. The other chapter advisor pulled me aside and told me that if I needed questions answered I should go through him or Derrick because an undergraduate would not go straight to the executive director.

This was one of the first areas of what has become a delicate balancing act between new member and advisor, brother and student affairs professional. The concern and request made sense in general practice, however, by this point, Tom had become the closest person to what I would call a “big brother.” In many fraternal<sup>5</sup> organizations, new members are assigned a big brother/big sister<sup>6</sup> who is supposed to support and guide the younger/newer member. Derrick, among many of you, felt that it would be strange to assign me a “big brother” given that I am older than all of you. I never have been sure if this was really the reason or, as I would like to think, many of you had come to see me as some type of “big brother” already. In absence of someone to ask questions to, I turned to a PMD that was both older and more experienced than me. Though I talked to Tom far less than I perhaps should have, without knowing it, he nonetheless guided me through the new member phase. An equally interesting question we had to answer was when and how many of the official new member education sessions I should attend. A traditional new member would be expected to attend all sessions and

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5 Within the fraternal movement the word “fraternal” is used for all organizations regardless of the gender identity of its members.

6 Some organizations use terms other than “big brother/big sister.” For example Alpha Delta Pi sorority refers to this position as “diamond sister.”

make up any that were missed. However, we collectively realized that I knew a fair bit about fraternal life, particularly the history of both the fraternal movement, PMD, as well as the national structure of the movement. We, therefore, determined that my attendance could be limited. My experience with new member education was on one side of the spectrum with other non-traditional members falling at other spots. At PMD's Mu Alpha chapter in Pennsylvania, a long-time advisor followed the non-traditional track and completed the entire sequence of new member education. That said, the process for non-traditional membership is at the discretion of the individual chapter.

When I was in high school, there was a show where cameras followed the “real” life of one fraternity and one sorority. I cannot remember which organizations these were or at which school they were located, but I do remember that each organization had a beautiful chapter house and a completely separate and equally beautiful house for their pledges. Beyond the blatant and indiscriminate displays of hazing, what I also remember about the show is the episode when the men and women were finally initiated. Cameras were not allowed, but when people emerged and were asked about what had transpired inside they all said that it brought them closer together as brothers/sisters. I was struck by how each member seemed to have the same answer. Not disclosing ritual and offering robotic answers are very different ideas. I had that memory in the back of my mind as I arrived at my own initiation.

For the most part, you know why I was enthralled by the process and act of joining Phi Mu Delta, but perhaps other readers will ask why knowing the stereotypes and already being beyond college age, was fraternity membership appealing to me? Fraternity and sorority membership is a life-long commitment and a life project of orienting yourself to the larger shared values of an organization. Ferrucci (2006) says that, “without a future, without a project, we are not really human” (p. 96). Our fraternity and brotherhood is one of these projects. That's why, when just before initiation, more senior members said, “when you have to touch something, don't touch your face” and images of occultish rituals and “thank you sir, may I have another?” danced in my imagination, I still knew that this fraternity and these men were a commitment I was glad to make. But as members of Phi Mu Delta our secret rituals do not connect us or bind us together, rather it grounds us in an unbroken tradition dating back to our founding in 1918. The bond of brotherhood may be completed at initiation, but it is forged and strengthened as we interact daily with each other. That is what I learned the night I was initiated. Beyond the great joy of being initiated, I was delighted to see one of the alumni members there to welcome me into the alumni association.

Rios (2012) noted that when he was inducted into Tau Delta Phi as a non-traditional member, an “invisible wall was taken down and [he] was given full access to the

inner workings of the undergraduate fraternity/sorority community...” (n.p.). Like Rios, I sensed an inherent shift in my interactions with the university fraternity and sorority life community once I was an initiated member. There is a certain interconnectedness of individuals in the fraternal movement, which requires fraternity/sorority membership, or service as a campus Greek life advisor, to fully enter. Rios (2012) also notes that he was quickly enlisted by his fraternity’s national board to serve on committees and leverage his substantive student affairs experience.

While I lack his breadth of experience, I have been asked recently to lead a working group within a larger committee on which I serve. That said, as a non-traditional member, I have never, and will never, be an active undergraduate member. I was inducted as a new member and initiated as an alumni brother. Though this fact makes me no less a brother to you, it does mean that I will never be able to hold many of your roles—officers, big brothers, and more—but the position, and indeed calling, of an alumnus member is an important one nevertheless. As an alumnus and an advisor, I am expected to be a type of “big brother” to all active members of the fraternity regardless of their chapter, but particularly the men of Nu Gamma. I am also expected to model the values we espouse in how I lead, advise, and behave. My position is one of great accountability in that I am accountable to you before I can hold any of you accountable. I have not always been that model, but it is a standard to which I strive to hold myself.

Six years ago when I entered college at Sewanee, I wanted more than anything to be a good Sewanee man and join a “frat,” not knowing how offensive that term was then. Now I am honored daily to be a fraternity man in Phi Mu Delta. To anyone who would discuss their membership in a fraternity in the past tense or only hold to their ideals during their collegiate years, let me say that I have found strength and courage in becoming and being a fraternity man after college. Each day, I recite the PMD Founder’s Creed, written by another Nu Gamma man. “I believe in brotherhood...brotherhood that reaches beyond the limits of Phi Mu Delta and welcomes every man as my brother” (Phi Mu Delta, 1918, n.p.). This is my favorite line, though I would join many other PMDs in understanding “every man as my brother” to encompass every person without regard to gender identity. My deepest commitment as an educator is to welcome each student, and indeed each person, as an individual of the highest value due the greatest respect. Phi Mu Delta has given me a framework to do just that each and every day.

This letter has a dual intent. Though addressed to my brothers, it is also a work aimed at shedding the first rays of scholarly light on the experiences and path of non-traditional membership in the fraternal movement. Non-traditional members in fraternities and sororities, particularly those who serve as chapter advisors and/or campus Greek life advisor, have a unique position to address concerns of both potential new members and their respective family members, as well as current

members. Fouts (2010) named numerous areas which influence the decision of an undergraduate to join or even consider joining a fraternity or sorority. Non-traditional members can have a positive influence on the following: empathizing community, leadership development, and social activity, highlighting the benefits of membership, partnering to address misconceptions; and asking chapters the right questions (Fouts, 2010, pp. 29-30). Fouts (2010) named peer perceptions and peer-to-peer interactions as one of the main influences affecting membership in Greek social organizations. The same is true for the ways in which non-traditional members can influence their peers, namely colleagues, faculty, and parents. Rios (2012) also notes that non-traditional members and others within the fraternal movement should create ways in which non-members, particularly faculty, staff, and students, can engage in fraternity and sorority life on their respective campuses.

The second intent of this letter is a work of appreciation for my PMD brothers, particularly the men of Nu Gamma, as well as the men and women of the fraternal movement internationally. Hopefully that showed forth for them as I hope it does every day. They have thanked me many times for being their advisor and friend, but I have never formally thanked them for the gift of brotherhood and fellowship. It is my hope that they will take this letter as a small token of my thanks, to my brothers and friends; men for whom I hold the utmost respect.

Faternally,

Benjamin Z. Huelskamp, Nu Gamma H'12



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