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## Searching for Synthesis: Stopping Stereotypes

Dianne “Chase” Catalano<sup>1</sup>

*While an undergraduate, I had the unique opportunity to be an out lesbian and a member of an international sorority, Delta Delta Delta. I was presented with a similar "conundrum" in graduate school as the InterFraternity Council advisor and then Panhellenic Advisor while still being open about my sexuality and gender expression. Many of my colleagues in student affairs seem to believe that my sexuality and sorority membership or two years of working with the University of Massachusetts Amherst sorority and fraternity communities are contradictory parts of my identity. While there are times I am inclined to feel frustrated by the lack of synthesis between my experiences, I still believe in the potential to initiate social justice education within a sorority and fraternity system. This essay is a personal reflection of my experiences as a lesbian, masculine female, fraternity advisor, sorority advisor, and member of a sorority. I have also included some of the tools that I used to begin the conversation of social justice during my work with sorority women and fraternity men.*

I was a first-generation college student, and the only of my three older siblings to go away to a four-year college. It seemed fitting that I was the one to go, since I felt as though I had the most to hide. I held a firm belief that my family was not going to be supportive of my lesbian identity. It was not that I had ever directly broached the subject, but I was not about to jeopardize the financial support that my parents would provide. In high school, I was a loner, unable to connect with very many other students, isolated by my undisclosed identity, and unwilling to spend another day in the suburban Long Island surrounding that never felt like home. I desperately wanted to leave my peers from high school who branded me as a “dyke” my freshman year, a label which I never was quite able to shake, regardless of how many boys I dated. The rumors proved to be true my senior year when I began dating another girl, but I was too deeply rooted in the proverbial closet and too eager to leave to care. I spent the summer before my senior year of high school with my nose in what my family affectionately referred to as my bible: a lexicon-sized book that ranked and reviewed all four-year colleges and universities.

After receiving my acceptance letters, I strategically picked a small, private college that was not affiliated with a religious sect, and one that had support for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual students (The T for transgender had not been tacked on to most schools in 1995). What may seem contradictory to my desire for GLB support was that I also wanted a school that had fraternities and sororities. Seventeen years of socialization had inspired a notion within me that fraternities and sororities were the epitome of normalcy. I had seen enough movies and after-school specials, and read enough college and university publications to believe in the traditions and sacred understanding amongst men and women in fraternities and sororities. It seemed clear to me that membership had many privileges. I did not want to deprive myself of the ability to see or possibly be a part of what I had learned was “normal” college life. I had spent so much of my life feeling excluded that I needed to know there was something regular about me. I needed to know that if I wanted to fit in, that I had an opportunity to ignore my previous ostracized status and enter the realm of “cool kids.” I wanted the option to join; I wanted the opportunity to be present; and I wanted the campus to have a high enough percentage of Greeks that if I joined, I would receive status. Thus, I arrived at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania with a new bounce in my step. After my parents helped me get settled into my room, I quickly ushered them to the door, hoping to start my life as an adult, seek out an identity, and understand myself.

My ability to find friends among other residents within my hall was limited to going to fraternity parties, consuming a lot of alcohol, and “dating” boys. The fraternity parties, during my first weeks of college are a blur to me now. It was a crash course back into heterosexuality, and I learned quickly at the expense of my grades and self-comfort. About a month and a half into college I decided to take a survey of all that I was doing, and I decided to make some changes. “I started preseason training for tennis, decided to drop out of ROTC, and told both Resident Assistants (RA) in my building [that I was a lesbian]” (Catalano, 2000, p. 128). I “came out” to both of them for a variety of reasons but mainly because I was sick of hiding. I knew that keeping my hidden truth was not healthy for me. I told the male RA first because I trusted him. The female RA on my floor became jealous that I was spending time with the other RA, and after

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a childish fit on her part, I told her. It was unfortunate for me that each RA felt as though I was a source of fantastic gossip in the building, and they told their entire staff. What was the most upsetting was that each RA at the staff meeting then told each person they knew about me. With a student population around 1,800 students, it was not long before it felt as if the entire student body was aware of the freshman lesbian.

In an attempt to avoid the potential rejection from my friends in my residence hall, I rarely spent time in my room. "I started dating a woman, and we soon became known as the campus lesbians" (Catalano, 2000, p. 128). I isolated myself from campus and befriended those groups I thought were "gay friendly," and that did not include fraternity men or sorority women. I became an RA, a tour guide, an orientation leader, a social chair for Allies (a group for GLB folks and their allies), and played varsity tennis. The close circle of gay friends that I had were members of each of those organizations or teams, and that was enough of a reason for me to believe that I would be safe as a part of those groups. My focus shifted back to my academics, and my myriad of activities took up enough time that I had more excuses than reasons to return to Long Island. I finally felt as though I was home.

At the end of my sophomore year, my identity began another shift. I started to find myself surrounded by more and more sorority-affiliated women who were on committees with me or in the same classes. I was overwhelmed by their sense of openness and integrity, and I was unable to continue believing in the homophobic stereotypes that I had bestowed upon all sorority women. I had been the "token lesbian" for two years at Dickinson, and it was beginning to be a torch that I no longer wanted to bear. When I saw the Greek letters on a sweatshirt or the pledge classes sitting together in the cafeteria, I wanted a sweatshirt of my own and a seat at the table. I wanted to feel connected to a world that was not always insulated from homophobia. I wanted to be a part of the status quo (Catalano, 2000).

My experience as a Delta Delta Delta at Dickinson College had moments of pure joy and moments of profound frustration. At times I was able to feel as though I was part of my chapter, and at others I felt as though I went from being the token lesbian on campus to the token lesbian sorority member. I felt filled with contradictions and confusion. I believed in the power of sisterhood, while being a part of an organization that upheld patriarchy and conventional femininity. I believed that we all shared a connection with each other, a bond based on experiences within the chapter. I looked at the women in my chapter and realized that many of them were not the southern debutantes that I believe our International Headquarters wanted us to be. We were not all wealthy, white, slim, morally upstanding, or of the skirt-wearing variety. We were women who shared a love of our chapter, laughed at ourselves, created drama, had many good times, supported each other, and constructed leadership development. However, I struggled with the reality that we were predominately, and what felt like overwhelmingly, heterosexual. I had to justify myself to GLB and feminist friends who felt that I had literally bought into an elitist, classist, heterosexist, sexist, and institutionally racist organization. How do you explain that for once you wanted to challenge an institution from the inside, instead of being marginalized? How could I explain that I had been alone for so many years that I just wanted to feel like I belonged, without care of the cost? The price that I paid was constant inner-turmoil and the eventual ending of a 2-year relationship with a woman who could not understand my need to fulfill my vow as a Delta Delta Delta member for life.

I had debated leaving the chapter, but I had so many wonderful female friends that cared about me. I was invested in being a member and I wanted to show my support for each woman who was in my chapter. I felt accomplished and satisfied when I wore my letters. I thought that maybe, just maybe, I was making a difference. I dreamed that I was making it safe for other lesbians to become a part of a sorority. Sisterhood meant a close connection with men and women within Greek organizations and thankfully I had success. It felt good to know I was the person that those people felt comfortable talking with about issues of sexuality. I could count for paragraphs the pros and the cons of being in a sorority, but I did not want to let the cons win. I was not going to be pushed away from the place I had carved for myself, just to feel as though I were a martyr. I was a member, and some days were fantastic, and others were punishing, but I was a member.

I entered graduate school upon completion of my Bachelor's Degree. I was surprised that my assistantship search led me into Greek Affairs, advising 16 fraternities. At first I was excited by the challenge of being an openly lesbian fraternity advisor. It all sounded very controversial in my head, the thought of being a revolutionary, and changing the image of the University of Massachusetts Amherst's historically white Greek community. I envisioned working with them on social justice education and as a Greek area we would combat the stereotype of us as people who were homophobic, sexist, and racist. I thought if I could get the Greek area to celebrate each person's diversity, then they would combat the stereotypes that had been built and perpetuated by fraternities and sororities in the past. I was thinking that social justice education would create a new sense of connection to the larger university community, and that it would slowly pull away

the need for fraternities and sororities to be the party outlet for underage men and women. The fear set in sometime around the second week; not the fear that these men would harm me or treat me unfairly because of my sex, gender, or sexuality, but the fear that I would never bring them to a place that would celebrate all forms of diversity.

The InterFraternity Council (IFC) executive board was a group of men who needed leadership, time, support, and patience. These men did not trust me because they had no reason to trust me. The initial question many of these men seemed to have was if I was going to close down chapters, and eventually, the entire fraternity system. I tried to explain that if I closed down all of the chapters, then I would be out of a job. Instead of telling them that I was not going to have each charter revoked, I asked them why they continued to have an inter/national affiliation. My questions were focused on understanding why these students were in fraternities. I had no knowledge of what it was like to be in a fraternity or sorority at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and that was the first perspective I needed to understand before I could create any ideas of how to change their image or advance their education. I earned their trust slowly, and often times by explaining to them my experience as a sorority woman. The progress for my first few months was agonizing at times but worth the foundation of understanding that it harbored.

The responses I received from colleagues, public administrators in other student affairs areas, and friends were indicative of the view of the Greek system. When I was asked what I did for my assistantship I was met with chuckles, apologetic nods, and sometimes, outright apologies. At first, I appreciated the sympathy. I did not have an easy job, nor was I working with a student population known for their inclusiveness or positive contributions to the university community. At some point during my second semester, I became less tolerant of those who felt badly for me concerning my assistantship. I was working with students, students of the university community, who needed support in the same way all of the other students on campus needed support. I was often struck by the contradiction of supporting organizations that were, and will always be, elitist and classist. These are organizations that do not let anyone who wants to be a member into the group, but those that are selective about their membership and charge a high fee for that membership. It is an interesting contradiction to educate a community on social justice issues that has many of its foundations in exclusionary principles and practices. I cannot deny that there is a part of me that struggles with the many facets of Greek life that perpetuate the same societal norms that I struggle with regarding race, sexual orientation, and gender performance. I have to believe that change will come, however slowly, and that the standards of equal opportunity that colleges and universities hold in high esteem will someday be echoed in Greek letter organizations.

In December of 1999, I was asked to write a chapter on being a lesbian in a college sorority for the follow up to *Out on Fraternity Row: Accounts of Being Gay in a College Fraternity* (Windmeyer & Freeman, 1998). In the spring of 2000, my chapter was selected for the book. Being published provided me with an opportunity to do more work with homophobia in college fraternities and sororities. By 2001, I presented at one national conference, one regional conference, and once at a small, private college in the mid-west. Each speaking opportunity gave me a chance to tell my story and reflect on my experience as an out lesbian in a college sorority. I began to understand that my experience of two years of inner conflict could bring a voice to those who could not afford to speak.

In sharing my story, I was met by three very different reactions that should be noted. Silence from my International Headquarters, Delta Delta Delta. Cheers from my colleagues. Access to more students who were struggling with homophobia in their chapters or on their campuses. I was struck by an executive director for a national headquarters who came up to hug me, still crying, after she heard our presentation on the new book *Secret Sisters: Stories of Being Lesbian and Bisexual in a College Sorority* (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2000). The audience would often dictate the amount of clarification of terms and language that I used in the presentation, but one consistent theme was sharing my story. I know that through our stories as presenters, we reached this executive director. She will think about the need for support surrounding lesbian and bisexual women in her chapters, and she will remember the pain, frustration, and fear of rejection that my fellow presenters and I faced as lesbian or bisexual women in a college sorority. In another presentation that I did, I had male students ask me how to direct an openly gay male away from rushing a chapter that would not be welcoming to him. I realized that the students were also asking similar questions to those that I was asking surrounding the ways to make fraternities and sororities more inclusive.

Each time I spoke I was able to stress the need for education and I was able to reach many different groups: students, inter/national headquarters, fraternity and sorority advisors, and upper-level student affairs administrators. I struggle to understand why we do not reach out to fraternity men and sorority women who have so much potential to create a more inclusive experience for men, women, and the rest of the college or university. These are the students who are reflective of the dominant culture that social justice educators try to reach to create change. There is hope and a need for change,

but there needs to be a dedication on the parts of colleges and universities to seek out those students asking for change and provide them with the tools to educate others. There is a need for college and university administrators to inspire students to program for diversity and social justice, whether imposed by the institution or a chapter's inter/national headquarters or alumni/ae board.

During my second year of graduate school I worked with sorority women as the Panhellenic Advisor. My gender is masculine and I wore men's clothing, including ties, to the office. I think many people were surprised that I worked with sorority women because of my lack of femininity and sometimes I was surprised that I was able to connect with them on so many levels. The bottom line was this: they accepted me for the advisor I was, without concern and with many questions. I believe that it did not matter what I wore to the office; it mattered that I was invested in them as students. I was invested in their future at the university, as students, as a conglomeration of organizations, and I cared about them as individuals.

Although I have been an out lesbian for a number of years, I still sometimes struggle with coming out to new people whom I meet. What surprises me still is that I have a much harder time coming out as a member of a sorority in student affairs circles than I do coming out as a lesbian. My target identities such as lesbian and masculine are celebrated among most of my student affairs colleagues. My sorority membership is a point of confusion. I try to explain that I joined a sorority for all of the perks that being a part of the status quo brings to an out lesbian in a small, private college. Sisterhood as a feminist concept was the crux of my interest in joining a sorority and although it was sometimes muddled in its delivery or manifestations, there was a sense of sisterhood that was omnipresent. I was a member of an organization that provided me with an experience I would not change if I had my college years to do over. Being in a sorority provided me an opportunity to be part of a culture that was drastically different, in a lot of ways than the feminist and GLB population that I had been a part of prior to my pledging. What I found within my chapter, and still find within fraternity and sorority chapters, were feminists, allies, and activists.

Maybe the expectations that we have of fraternity parties and sorority recruitment functions need to change so that our students change. Maybe we need to hold our Greek organizations to the same standards to which we hold our RA's in the residence halls and see what happens. I think that we might be surprised that a small amount of leadership training could create an avenue for diversity and social justice education.

The truth is that there are not any simple ways to accomplish incorporating diversity or social justice education into a fraternity or sorority system. Just as with any diversity education initiative, there are no answers, and there are not any formulas that give you the same answers or effect every time. The only pieces of advice that I can offer are those that worked well for me, both in the residence halls, and with my Greek affiliated students.

There must be an understanding of the campus culture surrounding the Greek system. Is there a party image of Greeks? Do students wear their letters on campus? What do the faculty think of fraternities or sororities? Find concrete examples of programs that were positive and ones that could use some changes.

What are the events that the fraternities and sororities do that receive press in the university, local, or national news?

Ask members why they joined a Greek letter organization. What made their chapter stand out amongst all the others?

Establish a connection with the Residential Life staff, if it is not a predominantly commuter institution, and find out what they see and hear in the residence halls.

Find out from non-affiliates what they think of fraternities and sororities, and why they are not going to join.

Take time to find out the experiences of those in leadership positions within the Greek community. Why did they want to be president of the chapter or a member of an executive board?

What are the histories of the chapters? What chapters are new to the institution and why did they form?

Ask inter/national headquarters or local alumni boards about the experiences that they have had working with the chapters. Find out information such as: grade point averages to the number of members who have worked for the headquarters, to the recruitment statistics.

Find out what resources are available to you as a professional staff member or graduate student to enhance and shape leadership development. Find out what programs are going on throughout the campus.

Remember to stay positive and have faith in the potential for growth. The individual student has a story, as does the chapter, and neither should be neglected. The story is the place to establish trust, and it is an integral part to the movement of any community. Once I was invested in the individual student, then I had a connection to the larger community. I have had the ability to share my story, and I hope to continue to share my story with fraternity and sorority members, student affairs professionals, and anyone who is willing to listen, and create change.

## References

Windmeyer & Freeman (Eds.) (2000). Secret sisters: Stories of being lesbian and bisexual in a college sorority. pp 126-134.