Access Your Letters:

The Greek System and Its Place within Disabilities Awareness at the University of Illinois

With 94 chapters, the University of Illinois boasts the largest Greek system in the nation (Field Notes, Delta Sigma Omicron). Students often comment on how their experiences as a member of a Greek organization enriched the time they spent on this campus. According to Kevin Fritz, a senior with a physical disability, however, the Greek system has not presented itself as accessible to students with disabilities (Fritz interview). Ironically, Tim Nugent noted in an interview from the 1960s that students with disabilities can realize their full potential “only if they are given the opportunities for normal social growth experiences, normal recreation, [and] the opportunity to try things” (Nugent interview). This difference is one of the biggest disconnects between campus life and the university’s acceptance of disability by both students with disabilities and administrators who interact with them (Housing administrator interview, Kevin Fritz interview).

Methods

To analyze this disconnect, I have included a wide variety of print and live sources, primarily from the last eighteen years (since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act). I conducted a number of one-on-one interviews and held dialogue with students and staff members involved in both disabilities awareness as well as the Greek system: Kevin Fritz, a student with a disability, a housing administrator who deals with students with disabilities, and Ashley Dye, the Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs. I chose these people based not only on their availability, but also on their experience with my issue. Kevin Fritz gave
me permission to record our interview, and it is transcribed in addition to this paper. My research is more heavily based on my findings from their insights since my issue is of relatively recent interest. Attending a Delta Sigma Omicron meeting (a fraternity for students with disabilities) was another key way to gain information; both minutes from this meeting and field notes from my observations allowed me even more insight into present-day issues in the disabilities community, as well as more ideas regarding further research opportunities.

I also chose to include archival sources from the Student Life and Culture Archives regarding the historical perspectives surrounding renovations and the disabilities community. Knowing about the Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing was key in pinpointing counterarguments to the legislation which sparked my interest in this issue altogether. Tim Nugent’s interview from the 1960s helped put the university’s reputation for disabilities awareness in perspective. Finally, Joseph A. Shapiro’s *No Pity* helped me tie my research together with what we studied in class. I was able to access almost all of my sources with success; my only hindrance was the issue of confidentiality, which I of course took into account when conducting interviews.

**Findings**

When asked about accessibility in the Greek system, one of the first issues students and staff identified were the physical barriers to entry. According to Kevin Fritz, many Greek houses have meetings in basements and living quarters on upper floors, all of which are only accessible via stairways (Kevin Fritz interview). A housing administrator who deals with students with disabilities noted her experience with two female students who went through Panhellenic sorority formal recruitment. One decided it was not for her for personal reasons, but the other accepted a bid from a sorority. However, during pledgeship, she decided that her level of participation would
not be sufficient for active membership to be worthwhile, so she decided not to activate (Housing administrator interview). Although other issues certainly exist (and are discussed later in this paper), at this point it seems like the physical barriers to entry are the largest reason for the disconnect between the Greek system and people with disabilities; students could not rush fraternities or sororities simply because they could not get in the door. The housing administrator referred to a theory that depicts accessibility as a pyramid of three components: At the base is *accessibility*, followed by *usability* in the middle, and finally *desirability* at the top. The basic premise behind the pyramid is that people with disabilities cannot even begin to consider whether a facility is usable or desirable before it is accessible (Housing administrator interview).

However, recent legislation will most likely bring new light to the bottom tier of this pyramid: the issue of accessibility. Ordinances on the local level are mandating that Greek houses undergo certain minor renovations in order to stay up to code, while statutory amendments on a national and state scale require certain accommodations for new constructions and large renovations. In complying with local building codes, many chapters are choosing to undergo additional renovations, in many cases subjecting themselves to the jurisdiction of the state and national accessibility statutes. According to Ashley Dye, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs at the University of Illinois, most fraternity and sorority houses were built in the 1920s (Field Notes, Delta Sigma Omicron meeting). As such, many of these houses are highly inaccessible. This also means that many of these houses are in need of major renovations simply because of their age. A recent city ordinance in Champaign mandates that all fraternity and sorority houses have sprinkler systems by 2009 (Champaign Ordinance No. 2004 – 286); a similar ordinance in Urbana is expected in 2011 (Field Notes, Delta Sigma Omicron meeting). But what do sprinklers have to do with the disabled student community on campus?
In order to better understand this complex relationship, a basic knowledge of the legal standing of persons with disabilities is helpful. Since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, people with disabilities are considered “a discrete and insular minority who have been faced with restrictions and limitations, subjected to a history of purposeful unequal treatment, and relegated to a position of political powerlessness in our society, based on characteristics that are beyond the control of such individuals and resulting from stereotypic assumptions not truly indicative of the individual ability of such individuals to participate in, and contribute to, society” (42 United States Code §12101(a)(7)).

The other titles of the ADA relay in succession that employers and owners of public buildings are required to make “reasonable accommodations” for persons with disabilities, as well as not to discriminate against them in any way as a result of their known disabilities.

This act is very important because, despite the inherent vagueness of what “reasonable” means, it was the catalyst for many statutory amendments at the state level, including additions to our own Illinois Administrative Code, which contains all building regulations in the state. One particularly relevant addition to the compiled statutes, more commonly referred to as the Illinois Accessibility Code, became effective in April 1997 (71 Illinois Administrative Code §400). Under the Illinois Accessibility Codes, all new constructions (i.e. demolitions and reconstructions of Greek houses) are required to be 100% accessible. Furthermore, when there are renovations comprising of a significant portion of the reproduction cost of the facility, “the element or space being altered” must also be accessible (71 Illinois Administrative Code §400.500). In many cases, the addition of a sprinkler system to a Greek house constitutes a renovation of this magnitude.
The point of all this legalese is quite simple: the disconnect between the Greek system and disabilities awareness on this campus is due to apathy. Greek houses never thought about accessibility until they were forced to by legislation governing the recent round of renovations. Since Greek houses are most often owned by alumni corporations, they are considered public housing, and therefore subject to the public ordinances of the cities of Champaign and Urbana. Also, in addition to the sprinkler system requirement, many Greek chapters are choosing to undergo other renovations, thereby invoking the IAC and requiring accessibility. This means that for the first time, houses of Greek organizations on campus will be forced to deal with the physical barriers that have been present for almost a century.

An important point to address is whether or not this legislation will, in fact, result in actual increased accessibility in the Greek system. The state and federal laws are in effect directly for the benefit of persons with disabilities, which is a laudable merit on its own. However, local reasons for renovations are based on fire safety—an issue unrelated to accessibility (Ordinance No. 2004 – 286, Field Notes, Delta Sigma Omicron meeting). In all of the direct forces governing the physical accessibility of Greek housing at Illinois, very few of them are directly related to disability. Even an opposing force, the Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing, maintains this apathy. The Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing is an organization that works with chapters to register their houses in the National Register of Historic Places and provide grant funding for renovation (Society 1995). Even this organization, however, does not mention disability and accessibility as reasons for a grant approval or disapproval (Society 2002). This is most likely due to the fact that major accessibility renovations are still a relatively new development, and many houses have not undergone construction since the passing of the Illinois Accessibility Code in 1997. Nonetheless, it still speaks to the fact that apathy, not positive or negative feelings, is a
major reason for the Greek system’s removal from our university’s reputation for disabilities awareness.

Another example of this apathy is previous research on the Greek system and its demographics. An anonymous student research paper entitled “Diversity and Discrimination Within the Greek System” contains valuable information regarding ethnic diversity within sororities on campus (“Diversity” 2007). The research includes the word minority fairly frequently, but does not mention students with disabilities, who are also defined as “a discrete and insular minority” under the ADA (71 United States Code §12101(a)(7)). This is in no way a negative view of the research or its findings, but rather an assertion that most people do not think of disability when they hear the words diversity or minority.

One interesting counterpoint I have found to all of this research lies in the philanthropies of various organizations on campus. Of all of the houses in the Panhellenic and Interfraternity Councils, approximately 36% of them have national philanthropies involving an organization that benefits people with disabilities. However, over 55% of these houses have independent chapter philanthropy events that benefit disability (“IFC,” “PHC” 2008). One sorority chapter even noted in its profile that “[w]e have sponsored the National Alopecia Areata Foundation and Juvenile Diabetes Research in honor of two of our collegiate members afflicted with these disorders” (“PHC” 2008). Normally this would seem like an anomaly, but I find it hard to believe that such a substantial difference in these numbers is a coincidence on this campus.

However, as Kevin Fritz mentioned, students with disabilities are treated differently in a philanthropic setting than in a normal everyday one (Kevin Fritz interview). In his interview, he referenced a fraternity that wanted to interact with him and his friends with disabilities for its philanthropy, but never for a party or a rush event. Joseph A. Shapiro also mentions this idea in his
book No Pity, claiming that this difference in attitude “oppresses” people with a disability, placing them at a level lower than those who are able-bodied (14). It seems as though able-bodied members of the Greek system are able to put aside their apathy in settings that clearly distinguish them from their classmates with disabilities, but there are still mental barriers that prevent active members from interacting with them during normal social and fraternal events.

Recommendations

Looking forward, there are a number of ways in which the Greek system can become more accessible. In a Delta Sigma Omicron meeting, dialogue between members and Ashley Dye indicated that a formal written communication between students with disabilities and the housing corporations (groups of alumni who govern the various chapter houses on campus) would be a very practical start (Field Notes & Minutes, Delta Sigma Omicron meeting). I affirm this recommendation, as it serves as a direct remedy for the apathy present in the hierarchy of Greek organizations, and also extends to alumni members not on campus. By bringing it to their attention in a positive and constructive manner, it will provide a basis for dialogue and mutual understanding to accompany the new building codes and regulations.

On a more immediate note, many recruitment activities can occur in public areas that are accessible by everyone. Barbecues, outdoor parties, and movies on the quad are all examples of ways to remove the physical barriers that currently exist within the housing units themselves (Housing administrator interview). Furthermore, the United States Access Board has introduced a topic which it calls “visitability,” a term referring not to the residences of people with disabilities, but rather to the residences of their friends and people they would like to see (“Regulatory” 2004). In the Greek system, fraternities and sororities frequently call on each other for dinner.
announcements, providing a very practical application for increasing the visitability of these houses. Knowing that a student with a disability could not only enter his or her own house, but any other Greek house on campus (even if just on the ground floor), would serve as a positive motivation for those students to pursue membership in the Greek system.

Perhaps the hardest barrier to overcome with regards to accessibility is the mental stigma of tradition that exists within the Greek community. Being based on ritual, most Greek organizations pride themselves on their adherence to fraternal bonds and values, and in many cases also restrict themselves to the mindsets of those who came before them. Dealing with this issue seems rather difficult, and it was Kevin Fritz who came up with a very unique answer to this problem. Part of the tradition in the Greek system includes devaluing the individual in favor of membership to a group. While I originally thought that more of a focus on the individual would lead to more accessibility, he suggested that these organizations place even less value on the individual. This logic implies that de-emphasizing the individual to an extreme would also de-emphasize whether or not the student was disabled. According to Kevin,

“[fraternities and sororities] need to de-emphasize the individual so much that there’s no such thing as someone who can walk or can’t walk, someone who’s heavy or thin, someone who’s gay or straight, black, white, anything. They need to de-emphasize all those stereotypes and just be empowered by their mission.” (Kevin Fritz interview)

Although this would have to come after eliminating physical barriers, it seems like the right mindset to pursue in order to promote a higher level of accessibility.

While I began to address some of the current issues regarding accessibility in Greek housing, a more thorough analysis of students with disabilities who have participated in formal recruitment would definitely provide much more insight. More interviews with recruitment chairs
of various chapters, as well as surveys of the Greek system at large, would definitely help assess the Greek community’s views towards students with disabilities (and whether or not apathy really is a major factor). My research focused primarily on the two Greek councils with houses, the Interfraternity Council and the Panhellenic Council. Analyzing differences between attitudes in all four of the four Greek councils (Interfraternity, Panhellenic, United, and Black) regarding students with disabilities would also be interesting to compare to my findings. As more houses undergo renovations, a more detailed look at actual construction projects would be useful in determining the success of the state and federal statutes in mandating accessibility in public buildings. This would prove useful in determining if organizations like the Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing are working actively against major structural modifications in favor of preserving tradition, a current hindrance to accessibility renovations in Greek housing.

I believe understanding issues regarding accessibility, specifically with regards to mainstream activities, is crucial to understanding a large part of the social dynamics of this university, its reputation, and its impact on the world. The back of the Fraternity & Sorority Affairs t-shirts this year reads, “Choose Your Letters. Change Your Life.” Today there is a distinct difference between choosing letters and accessing them; it is my sincere hope that for Illinois’s happy children of the future, these two actions will be virtually indistinguishable.
Works Cited and Consulted

Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 United States Code 12101.


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