

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

HOW ALPHA CHI OMEGA IS LEARNING AND LEADING

BY LAUREN FILIPPINI (ALPHA CHI, BUTLER UNIVERSITY), EDITOR

The Symphony of Alpha Chi Omega asks our sisters to “see and appreciate all that is noble in another.” There are no limitations to this charge, no asterisks or exceptions. We are asked to recognize others and honor what makes them unique.

Another way to look at this: We know that diversity is valuable, and that varied perspectives are what make us a stronger Alpha Chi Omega. By appreciating each other for what makes us different, we create an inclusive space where each sister is safe to be herself.

But we also acknowledge that diversity, equity and inclusion (referred to as DE&I in this article) are challenges – for us, for the entire sorority/fraternity industry and for our world as a whole. Our organizations were founded in a time in which sameness was a standard, and by the nature of our recruitment process, selection (albeit a mutual one) is inherent in how we continue. Today, we see further challenges through individual members’ choices, whether that is wearing a costume that appropriates another culture, using racial slurs or other disparaging language, expressing disagreement with national policies, or more broadly refusing to create inclusive spaces and resisting efforts to change.

These challenges, however, do not mean we do not try. In fact, it is in the trying and the striving to do better that we learn more about what is at the core of Alpha Chi Omega – our values of wisdom, devotion and achievement – and we define and redefine what it means to be a real, strong woman.

We are leaders in change, and we are prioritizing DE&I for our organization and each individual member. Each step may be small, but the small steps lead us in the right direction and compound to create a real impact.

WHY HAVE WE MADE THIS A FOCUS?

Diversity, equity and inclusion have become hugely popular and prevalent topics in our society – from higher education to workplace environments and everything in between. According to the Census Bureau, minorities (those classified as of any race other than non-Hispanic, single-race whites) will make up a majority of the U.S. population by 2042.

As the campuses that host our collegiate chapters admit a more diverse student body, they are also calling on campus organizations to create inclusive environments. They know that our organizations can be home to women of all backgrounds and experiences, and they are challenging us to respond.

But we respond not just because we are asked to. We know the value that an inclusive membership experience brings to Alpha Chi Omega. For a sisterhood founded on trailblazing ideals and a willingness to push the envelope, we know we can only improve when we bring in diverse voices and create an environment where those voices are welcomed and honored.

Our current collegians are part of Generation Z, the most racially diverse generation in history. Research shows that these women care about diversity to a

greater degree than previous generations, choosing to engage with diverse groups of friends and supporting efforts to specifically include those who differ from them. They believe that the problems of this world can only be solved when diverse voices come together to the table. And they are looking for an Alpha Chi Omega that reflects this.

And a quick note: While race is a key part of how we look at diversity, Alpha Chi Omega's DE&I work also includes a variety of other areas – ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, opinion, and mental or physical ability, to name just a few.

National President Angela Costley Harris points out, “Diversity of thought and idea is one of the most powerful tools we have to advance Alpha Chi Omega forward in a way that is relevant for all current and future members.”

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

In the early 2010s, in response to increased campus concerns about diversity and seeing the need for our own action, Alpha Chi Omega took a stand. The 2015-20 Strategic Plan set forth a specific objective: “Increase membership diversity.”

The National Council also determined there was a need to bring in experts – experts who cared about the future of Alpha Chi Omega – and engage in an open dialogue about what it means to provide an inclusive membership experience. A call for members for the Diversity and Inclusion Study Group (DISG) was made in late 2016 and saw more than 100 applications submitted for consideration. “To say there was a passion for this cause is an understatement,” says Chief Executive Officer Katie Lampinen Gaffin.

Ultimately, 13 members of diverse backgrounds and lived experiences were chosen and tasked with exploring issues facing Alpha Chi Omega in the areas of diversity and inclusion, reviewing current data and programming, and making recommendations.

The DISG met throughout 2017 and 2018, focusing their efforts on such areas as programming, policy, communications and language. As a result of their dedication, the group delivered a comprehensive report with findings and recommendations across five areas of focus (in the red box on this page) to the National Council in 2018. Staff and volunteers have begun reviewing these recommendations and implementing them in the work they have already been doing and are now planning for the years to come.

“Our intention in this work is to facilitate the hard conversations that members and leaders want to have,” Angela says. “For example, when I wanted to discuss how to increase diversity in volunteer roles without crossing into tokenism, we had a mechanism in place to have that conversation with experts on that topic.”

DISG AREAS OF FOCUS

- DATA COLLECTION AND ASSESSMENT
- ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY, LANGUAGE AND PRACTICES
- COLLEGIATE PROGRAMMING
- ALUMNAE PROGRAMMING
- MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

WHAT ARE WE DOING NOW?

Alpha Chi Omega contracted with Jessica Pettitt, speaker on inclusivity and author of *Good Enough Now*, to engage in DE&I work. Jessica has worked with fraternities and sororities across all types of Greek councils and most recently spoke to Alpha Chi Omegas at the 2017 Volunteer Summit and the 2018 National Convention.

“Sisterhood is at the root of our membership, but how we do sisterhood and what it means to each of our members is completely individualized,” Jessica explains. “So how do you address that? One person at a time.”

Knowing this, Jessica facilitated focus groups with our collegiate members in 2019 to learn about the membership experience for the following identities: LGBTQA; financial challenges, difficulty and instability; non-Christian; Catholics, Protestants and Christians; non-white; white, middle/upper class and heterosexual; and those with disabilities.

Staff and volunteer leaders also participated in a webinar series led by Jessica. These included training on social justice, cultural misappropriation, unconscious bias and working across difference, among other topics.

“You have a lot of volunteers and staff who are hungry for this,” Jessica says of her work with Alpha Chi Omega.

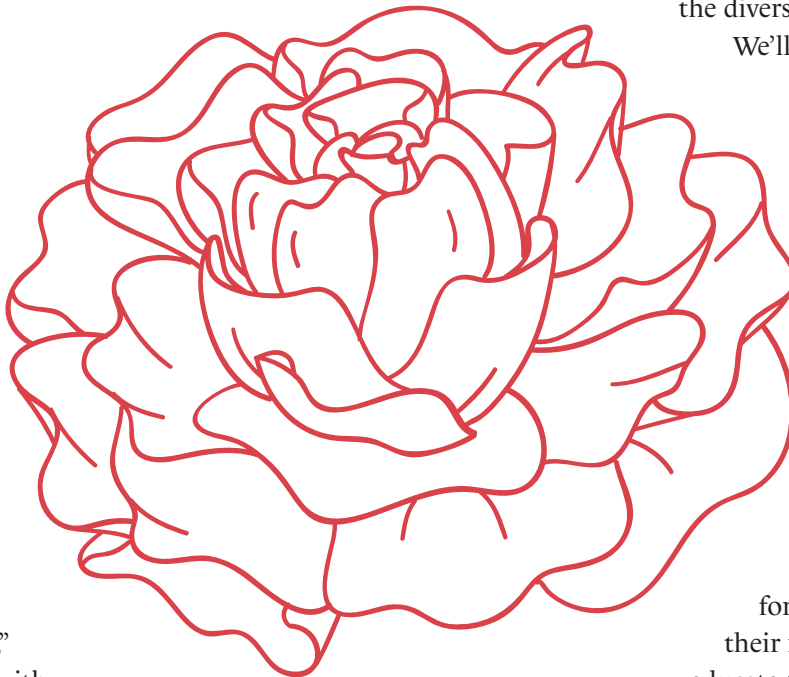
Tangible changes have already been implemented. Our national training programs – Leadership Academy, Collegiate Growth Academy, Volunteer Summit and convention – have included a diverse set of speakers as well as programming regarding the real-world application of a diverse and inclusive membership. Facilitators for these events also receive resources regarding these topics before they lead discussions, thus fostering an open environment.

The MyJourney program, our premier collegiate member experience, has been updated to include

a learning path on diversity and inclusion. With sessions like “Being My Sister’s Ally” and “Embracing Diversity in Alpha Chi Omega,” the program provides our collegians with a safe environment and guided questions to have honest conversations about these topics and how they relate to their Alpha Chi Omega experience and beyond.

In addition, you may have noticed posts on our Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts that have come from our new social media strategy focused on honoring and learning about the diversity of our membership.

We’ll be highlighting a wide range of holidays (as we did for Bodhi Day on January 20) and heritage recognition events (like Hispanic Heritage Month September 15 – October 15) with member stories and education. We’re dedicated to creating a space for members to express their identities as well as to educate their sisters.



Also on social media, for the last several years we’ve shared messaging regarding cultural appropriation through the “My Culture is Not Your Costume” campaign. Around Halloween, we ask members to think before choosing their costumes, providing them some questions to ask themselves in order to be respectful of other cultures.

And finally, our chapter awards program now includes a Diversity and Inclusion Award. Our collegians are prioritizing DE&I work in their chapter experiences, and headquarters wants to recognize those efforts. Jessica applauds the national Fraternity for its

willingness to listen to, learn from and share the best practices of the collegiate membership, who face these issues head-on.

She also points out a challenge (and a benefit) that Alpha Chi is continuing to learn more about: “The hardest part of doing DE&I work in a national association is that each local chapter has a completely different culture and a completely different experience, and rolling one thing out doesn’t fit everybody,” she says. “But the skills from diversity, equity and inclusion impact everybody.”

WHAT ARE WE PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE?

Jessica continues, “You can have a consistent experience where people can be individually seen. That’s the real work that Alpha Chi is trying to do.”

As we continue to get to know our members, individually and as a collective organization, we know that our work on DE&I is never done. Staff and volunteers throughout the Enterprise are working diligently to identify areas for improvement and new initiatives, with input from the collegiate focus groups and feedback from our members in mind.

Our national boards are actively working on succession strategies involving DE&I to better reflect our membership. In addition, we are intentionally attracting and including women who represent our diverse membership in volunteer roles and leadership appointments.

As an Indiana-based company, Alpha Chi Omega joined Indiana Forward, a coalition of businesses, advocacy groups and other organizations, in a bipartisan effort to pass a bias crimes law in the state. While the measure did not pass in the legislature, Alpha Chi Omega stands ready to join together and advocate for policy changes.

Jessica points out that although DE&I is an incredibly difficult conversation, Alpha Chi is not shying away from it. We are asking questions to learn what our

DE&I DEFINITIONS

Adapted from the University of Houston Office of Student Life

Diversity: psychological, physical and social differences that occur among any and all individuals

Equity: the guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity and advancement for all, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups; different than “equality,” which is evenly distributed access to resources and opportunity that may or may not result in equitable outcomes

Inclusion: the act of creating involvement, environments and empowerment in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to fully participate



members need individually, as unique chapters and as a national organization, and we are taking action.

We continue to learn and explore new avenues to increase diversity and create inclusive and equitable environments where all members can feel safe and confident to develop into real, strong women. The focus group responses, DISG recommendations and continued open dialogue with all members continues to teach us about the challenges and needs of this time – as well as to inspire us to continue building the Real. Strong. Women. Experience.