

Greekology

Sororities: You haven't come a long way, baby

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PHOTOS BY MICHAEL PALMIERI, PENN STATE U.

WE'VE ALL HEARD THE STORIES. Ritual beatings. Binge drinking. Hazing. Rape. The list goes on and on, often blurring the line between myth and truth, but always hanging over the same head: the Greek system's.



Many women, fed up with a Greek system teeming with customs better suited for the Dark Ages, are looking for a little modern enlightenment.

In recent years, the matriarch and patriarch of the century-old system — the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) and the National Interfraternity Council (IFC) — have been waging a war against these stereotypes, hoping to change the Greek image and bolster waning rush numbers.

Their efforts so far are giving finger pointers a run for their money. Since 1978, 36 states have passed laws prohibiting hazing. Nearly all sororities and fraternities have shortened the mandatory pledge term. Many have traded subservient hazing practices for unified membership, some eliminating "Hell Week" altogether. And in a pioneering move last March, national fraternities Phi Delta Theta and Sigma Nu committed to a plan banning alcohol from all chapter houses by the year 2000.

This fastidious leaf-turning has brought about a new era for the Greek system. Or has it? In the clamor to right wrongs and redress ills, it seems one Greek tradition has managed to survive the shuffle: sanctioned sexism.

Modern history

Today, sorority women are entering a system where dressing up and playing tea party are required recruitment tactics; where penguins, turtles and teddy bears are house mascots; and where responsibility of the organization's maintenance is often delegated to house "moms" and campus "brothers." It begs query: Are today's sororities preparing women for a competitive modern society or molding them into the manicured debutantes of yesteryear?

Lisa Tomle, a senior at Michigan State U., thinks it's the latter.

As a member of Alpha Phi, Tomle says she values the all-women environment her sorority offers, but is consistently disappointed with a reality that falls short of its ideology.

"In a social fraternity, the aspects of being a strong, independent, career-minded and driven woman are things that are stated — but not actively sought after or prioritized," she says.

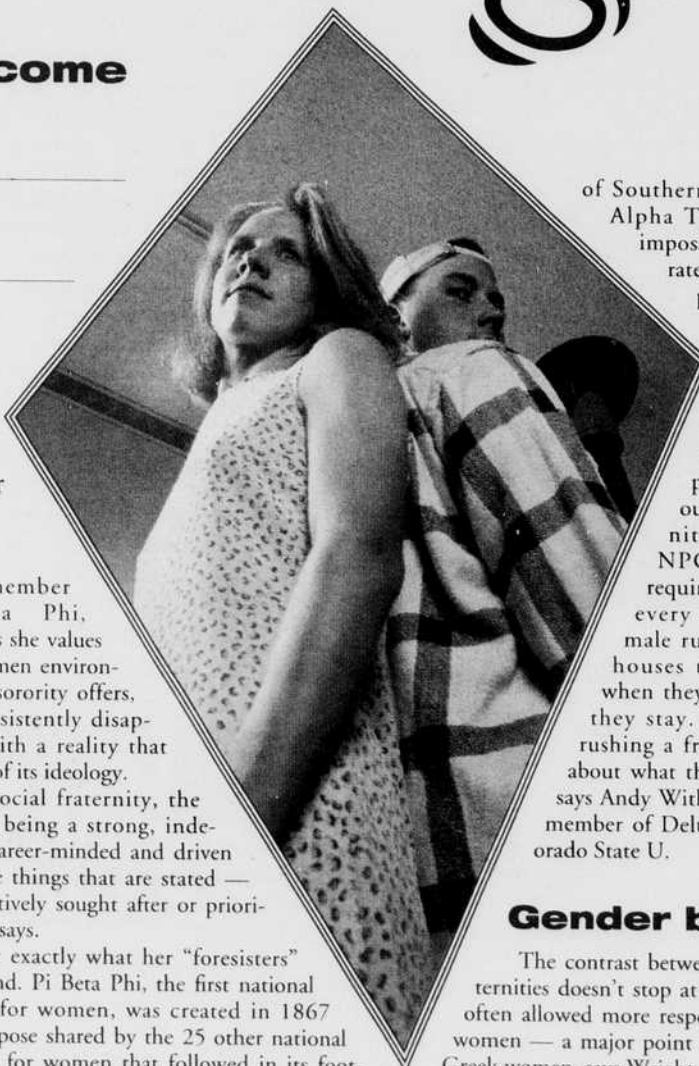
It's not exactly what her "foresisters" had in mind. Pi Beta Phi, the first national fraternity for women, was created in 1867 with a purpose shared by the 25 other national fraternities for women that followed in its footsteps: to create an environment encouraging academic, social and personal growth among women.

The rush crush

Where are the sororities going wrong? Many say the problems begin at rush, the process where prospective members visit each sorority house on their campus and engage in a series of timed interviews with current members. Their hope? To perform well enough to be selected as a new member, one worthy of filling the limited number of open membership slots. The house's hope? To perform well enough to attract women they consider worthy of filling those coveted slots.

The result is rushee vs. rushee, house vs. house, and all sides working against an unforgiving control mechanism: time. No single interview lasts more than one hour, with the bulk of them clocking in at 15 minutes. Complicating matters more, the interviews are rarely, if ever, one-on-one.

"In such a short time, [rushees] can only be based on the way they're dressed, their looks and smiling," says Esther Wright, author of *Torn Togas: The Dark Side of Campus Greek Life* and a U.



of Southern California Kappa Alpha Theta alumna. "It's impossible to get an accurate idea of their talents, personalities — what it *should* be focused on."

Many women say the process is just plain unfair — especially when compared to the notoriously easy-going fraternity rush. Unlike the NPC, the IFC doesn't require its rushees to visit every house on campus; male rushees choose which houses they want to visit, when they visit and how long they stay. The result? "Guys rushing a fraternity know more about what they're jumping into," says Andy Witherow, a senior and a member of Delta Sigma Phi at Colorado State U.

Gender bender

The contrast between sororities and fraternities doesn't stop at rush. Greek men are often allowed more responsibility than Greek women — a major point of contention among Greek women, says Wright.

"Many of the women I interviewed felt that in comparison with the men ... they had very little influence in the way their [chapter] houses were run," she says, adding that chapter house meetings for sororities nearly always have an advisor present whereas fraternity chapter house meetings rarely do.

In in-house living, the presence of power-wielding adults is a matter of gender as well. Though the NPC does not mandate it, most campuses across the nation require sororities to have a housemother; typically a matronly — or at least adult — figure to take care of the house bills, house maintenance and the hiring and firing of cooks and housekeepers.

Most fraternities, on the other hand, have not been required to have any type of adult overseer since the early '70s. Of the few that do, the men still say they are given a major portion of responsibilities.

Brian Olsen, a '96 grad of the U. of Nebraska, Lincoln's Sigma Nu chapter says simply, "We do everything there. For major stuff we might call somebody in to help, but minor stuff like cleaning, bills and repairs we do ourselves."

For sorority women, the story is hardly the same. Says Jessica Bode, a junior at the U. of Nebraska,