

EDUCATION



D. Perez-Sornia, front row, third from right, is one of the first trans nonbinary members of the sorority Delta Phi Epsilon. They appear with other members during the sorority's initiation at Cal Poly Humboldt in Arcata, California. PROVIDED BY D. PEREZ-SORNIA

Greek Life

LGBTQ+ students find community in fraternities and sororities

By Matt Alderton

When Dylan Mason was an incoming freshman at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, his mom dropped him off at his dormitory with three earnest admonitions. “She told me: Don’t get a tattoo, don’t get your ears pierced and don’t join a fraternity,” chuckles Mason, 20, who recently finished his second year of college and his first year as a member of the fraternity Phi Kappa Tau. Mason, who identifies as gay, had never planned to join a fraternity. He changed his mind when he overheard members of another fraternity laughing at him. **CONTINUED >>**

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Members of Delta Lambda Phi at Sacramento State University gather in support of health initiatives that include HIV testing. PROVIDED BY DELTA LAMBDA PHI

“During winter recruitment, I was walking through the student center and heard a comment about me rushing. They thought it was funny. At the time, that really affected me,” Mason says. “I wanted to prove them wrong. So, I made it my goal to join Greek life.”

From that initial spite came genuine fellowship. “My fraternity brothers are people who probably wouldn’t have hung out with me in high school, but now they’re some of my best friends,” says Mason, who is vice president of his fraternity.

“That’s the beauty of diversity ... even though I’m so different, I’m part of this community now — this brotherhood — and that’s something I think a lot of gay people are lacking.”

GREEK INCLUSION GROWING

Although fraternities and sororities have a history of homophobia, Greek life today is much more diverse and inclusive than ever, observes Douglas N. Case, former coordinator of fraternity and sorority life at San Diego State University and an initiate of Kappa Sigma Fraternity. In two studies of Greek life

that he published in 1996 and 2007, Case observed quite a “remarkable” shift in LGBTQ+ representation: In 1996, just 25% and 19% of LGBTQ+ men and women, respectively, said they were out to their Greek brothers and sisters. Then by 2007, 79% of LGBTQ+ participants in Greek life said they were out.

“Now it’s 2025, and things have continued to evolve,” Case says.

Although she’s careful to note her small sample size, Chana Etengoff found similar evidence of inclusion in a 2022 study of 50 LGBTQ+ students: 66% of LGBTQ+ participants in Greek life said their Greek experience was positive and 88% said Greek life contributed positively to their overall college experience, she reported.

“It was different than I would have expected,” says Etengoff, who is an associate professor of psychology at New York’s Adelphi University. “To me, the takeaway is that LGBTQ+ individuals are more complex than just their sexual or gender identities ... just because you’re LGBTQ+ doesn’t mean you can’t also be motivated to participate in Greek life.”

‘A BUILT-IN COMMUNITY OF LIFELONG FRIENDSHIPS’

A fraternity that perfectly embodies the benefits of Greek life for LGBTQ+ students is Delta Lambda Phi (DLP), which describes itself as a “Greek organization started by gay men for all men.” Inclusive by design, founder Vernon L. Strickland III established it in 1987 to create an alternative social space for queer men whose relationships were often predicated on sex.

“In the gay world, bars and hookup culture are very pervasive. And that’s not a bad thing, but sometimes people want a little bit more,” says Brosnan Rhodes, who joined DLP in 2017 and currently serves as its trustee. “Delta Lambda Phi offers a built-in community of lifelong friendships and bonds that you can plug into at any time in your life, anywhere you go.”

And because DLP is queer, the relationships created — friendship, mentoring or networking — are

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Delta Lambda Phi founder Vernon L. Strickland, left, speaks at a fraternity event. PROVIDED BY DELTA LAMBDA PHI

inherently benign.

“In our community, it can be hard to get close to people because we don’t always know who is safe,” Rhodes says. “I love the fact that within our brotherhood, we can form bonds and connections without worrying whether a space is safe. Because we have a shared experience, I know that my brothers in every situation are going to treat me with the same kindness and respect that I’m going to give them.”

Nearly 40 years after DLP’s founding, other fraternities and sororities are carrying its torch of inclusion. At Indiana’s DePauw University, for example, the Interfraternity Council and Panhellenic Association recently drafted a joint statement of inclusion to which all fraternities and sororities have committed themselves, says Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students John Mark Day. The statement reads: “The best version of Greek life is a community where everyone feels not just tolerated but welcomed to exist as their authentic self.”

“This is deeply personal for me,” Day says. “As someone who is both gay and a member of a fraternity, I know that these spaces can be welcoming of students who are both figuring out and fully living their LGBTQ+ identities ... I also know there’s a business case for this. As students become more diverse and inclusive, the organizations that will thrive will be the ones that truly live their values of

brotherhood and sisterhood.”

DePauw’s inclusion statement is a sign of progress across the Greek system. “It used to be the case that maybe you had a gay-friendly chapter of a fraternity or sorority that folks would gravitate to. Now, inclusion is becoming more of a priority throughout the Greek community,” Day says.

For pioneers like DLP, that progress is a “double-edged sword,” according to Rhodes, who says DLP has only eight active chapters in 2025 along with three groups currently seeking chapter status as prospective brothers find acceptance in other, larger fraternities where they previously weren’t welcome.

“When Delta Lambda Phi was formed, it was because gay men could not join traditional fraternities,” says Case, an honorary DLP member. “That’s not true anymore.”

WHAT ABOUT TRANS AND NONBINARY STUDENTS?

Clearly, organizations like DLP are no longer necessary for some LGBTQ+ students. For others, however, they’re more relevant than ever.

“More organizations are accepting, but they may not be wholly accepting,” notes Rhodes, who says DLP membership among individuals who are nonbinary, gender-nonconforming and trans has “dramatically increased” in recent years. “There are many parts of our community that are still underrepre-

sented in Greek life because they aren’t the ‘typical’ gay person. But at DLP, we’re still a safe space for those people.”

Given the high rates of suicide among transgender and nonbinary youth, safe spaces in the Greek system can be “lifesaving,” according to Case. “Homophobia, heterosexism and transphobia still exist, and they’re even more prevalent in single-sex organizations. So, there’s still work to be done,” he says. “But we’ve come a long way, and I find that to be reassuring.”

Progress is quite evident in individuals such as D. Perez-Sornia, who was one of the first trans nonbinary members of the sorority Delta Phi Epsilon when they joined it in 2019 as a junior at Cal Poly Humboldt in Arcata, California.

“Our core values as a sorority were justice, sisterhood and love. So being in a sorority exposed me to a group of women who were into the same things I was into and had the same values I had, and that gave me an opportunity for self-growth and identity formation that I really needed at that time,” explains Perez-Sornia, who says Greek life can be rewarding for people of all gender and sexual identities when they’re fortunate enough to have inclusive brothers and sisters. “You have to be smart and do your research to find out where you’ll be accepted. But if I could join a sorority as a girl with a mustache, I think anybody can.”