

Examining Diversity

Chapters learn that when they focus on diversity, their membership numbers grow.

By John O'Brien

The Sigma Chi chapter at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania is bucking the trend: While other members of Greek-letter life at the college are seeing declining membership, Sigma Chi's numbers are on the rise. Those involved within the chapter believe the growing membership is due in part to its decision a couple of years back to add the position of diversity chairman to its leadership. "Most fraternities are getting smaller, but our numbers are growing," says Sebastien Ridore, **GETTYSBURG 2019**, who became the chapter's third-ever diversity chairman in spring 2018. "We are getting stronger and stronger because of how diverse we are."

The Gettysburg chapter is one of a growing handful of Sigma Chi chapters to have members serving as diversity chairmen. The goal of the position is not just to promote diversity in recruitment, but also to help expose existing members to different ideas, viewpoints and people.

Sam Jarvis, **KNOX 2009**, Grand Praetor for the West Illinois province of Sigma Chi, says the effort speaks to the heart of the Sigma Chi belief in attracting brothers of different temperaments, talents and convictions.

Jarvis oversees his alma mater in Galesburg, Illinois — where he was a founding father of the Fraternity chapter — along with Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, and Western Illinois University in Macomb.

The Knox chapter added a diversity chairman a couple of years ago as part of a larger effort among Greek-letter organizations at the college to do so. Jarvis says the main goal of the chapter's efforts is to be supportive of diversity initiatives in general, but said it does play a part in recruiting in a fraternity and sorority system that has inherently

been a place of privilege. Having a diversity chairman helps in the efforts to bring in brothers of all backgrounds.

"It encourages chapters to think outside the cookie-cutter image they've made for themselves," Jarvis says. "It allows them to open themselves up to other options."

Not doing so is why some fraternities and sororities are shrinking, he believes. "Students today are different. They don't want a homogenous experience," Jarvis says. "They want to go someplace they belong, someplace they feel safe, someplace they can meet a lot of people and establish relationships."

Fraternities that don't make efforts to promote diversity are hurting themselves, he adds.

"You're shooting yourselves in the foot," says Jarvis, who lives in Iowa City, Iowa, and works in public health. "If you're just picking the same person over and over again, the same kind of students, I can't imagine there will be any growth, there will be any opportunity for change."

But meaningful efforts to promote diversity, along with the public statement made by having a diversity chairman, can help attract students who might otherwise be turned off by the Greek-letter system. "They're bringing in a lot more opportunity for the [chapter]," Jarvis says.

Ridore agrees.

Many of Gettysburg's roughly 2,600 students are in the school's Greek-letter system, and students can't pledge until fall of their sophomore year, giving them a year of exposure to Greek-letter life — and not always a good one.

"For people who aren't part of Greek[-letter] life, it can be overwhelming," Ridore says.

People of color, in particular, get turned off by Greek-letter life, finding it too exclusive, Ridore



Left: Gettysburg chapter diversity chairman Sebastien Ridore, 2019, center, delivers his officer report during an executive committee meeting on Feb. 13, 2019.

says, especially at a school he says is predominantly white — he was one of only nine male students of color as a freshman. “A lot of them don’t feel like they wanted to have a place in it,” Ridore says.

The senior from Stoneham, Massachusetts, says he asked to be appointed diversity chairman because he wanted to bring new ideas and approaches to what was still a new role within his chapter. “I want to interact more with different parts of the campus,” Ridore says. “I wanted to reach out to different parts of the campus.”

He reached out to other groups about holding events with Sigma Chi, including the Black Student Union, Latin American Student Association and Diversity Peer Educators. “I’m hoping to have more social events with groups beyond sororities,” he explains.

One event last year held with the college’s Diversity Peer Educators involved an exercise in examining privilege. Attendees walked around to different booths, answering questions about their backgrounds and adding beads to a bracelet when the question applied to them. At the end of the event, everyone compared the sometimes dramatically different number of beads they had.

“It was a really good chance to see ... how it affects different brothers,” Ridore says. “It was a really good exercise to have us examine that.”

Ridore’s chapter requires all members to attend two diversity events each semester. Every month, he distributes a list of applicable events happening on campus and then tracks members’ attendance. Those who don’t satisfy the requirement face discipline.

The chapter also hosts its own diversity events, including one last year led by faculty advisor Jennifer Bloomquist. She is Gettysburg’s associate provost for faculty development, dean of social

sciences and interdisciplinary programs, and a professor of linguistics and Africana studies.

Ridore says the event examined how minorities, especially African Americans, are portrayed in media, and drew an enthusiastic response from his brothers, many of whom stayed afterward to talk with Bloomquist more about the issue.

Bloomquist credited Sigma Chi with being one of the more diverse Greek-letter organizations on her campus, with members who are black, Latino and openly gay. She said adding a diversity chairman was something natural for the chapter to do. “It was entirely the members who decided this is something they wanted to do,” she says.

“Other Greek[-letter] organizations have paid attention and they’re starting to investigate the possibility of [adding] a diversity chairman,” she says. And now the college is using diversity as one of its rubrics for evaluating Greek-letter organizations.

She said it’s the kind of impact she’s come to expect from a Sigma Chi chapter that has included leaders on a number of fronts at the university. “They think they are a better and stronger organization if they have members of all walks of life,” she says. “They know that it prepares them to be better leaders.”

Jarvis agrees, pointing out how diversity efforts have taken on greater importance within society in recent years, particularly in the corporate world. “It’s time for fraternities to get on board. It will be good for us, it will be good for chapters, it will be good for our image,” he says, adding that more importantly, it will show that the Fraternity is living up to its values.