



The Greek Alternative: Co-ed Fraternities

By Leah Gliniewicz

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Students who are looking for more than social mixers and keggers in their college experience are turning to co-educational fraternities as another potential alternative. One such group is Alpha Phi Omega (APO), a co-ed service fraternity with chapters at 360 colleges nationwide and 17,000 members during a given school year.

Bob London, APO's executive director, explained that members originally had to be former Boy Scouts in order to join until that policy was changed in the 1960s. Then in the 1970s, the group changed its requirements again to allow co-ed membership.

"We're an inclusive organization," London said. "We take anybody on campus."

The College of William and Mary, Miami University of Ohio and the University of California at Davis are among the schools with the biggest APO chapters nationally.

The organization tends to grow its leaders organically. Members typically go on to become alumni mentors, and each student chapter has four advisors. London said that APO has roughly 45 alumni associations and about 450 alumni volunteers. The group still has strong ties to the Boy Scouts and will mark its 80th anniversary in the fall.

Volunteer Learning

So why are so many college students taking the volunteer route?

"Service learning is such a big deal at colleges," explains London.

He claims that 20 years ago, you didn't see colleges offering volunteer opportunities. However, providing community services and volunteering is now an accepted way of learning outside the classroom.

"So colleges are trying to incorporate that into their curriculum," London said.

He added that APO is also a natural continuation for those students who were active in the Boy Scouts when they were younger.

"They know about us so it's familiar, especially if they're away from home," he said.

That's how former Boy Scouts Chris Meschuk and Nick Bautista got involved in APO.

Meschuk was elected by the APO's board of directors as the president of the organization's 2004 national convention. He recently finished his graduate studies in urban planning at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Meschuk joined as an undergraduate because he was looking for an extra curricular opportunity during college.

"I was involved in Boy Scouts in high school and was still interested in pursuing [community] services once I got to college," he said.

Some of the activities Meschuk's Gamma Theta chapter was involved in included working with Habitat for Humanity and tutoring school children. He believes that APO contributed a great deal to his overall college experience.

"I recently became an alumnus," he said. "Now it's my opportunity to give back to the students that now have the great opportunity that I had."

Nick Bautista is president of the Gamma Alpha chapter of APO at the University of Washington in Seattle. The 26-year-old senior with a triple major in geography, political science and philosophy joined the group four years ago.

Bautista had been looking to join a community service organization. He was already familiar with APO because he had served as an Eagle Scout in high school.

Bautista said the organization is not like a traditional fraternity or sorority.

"Alpha Phi Omega is not in the Greek system," he said. "It's more like a club."

Bautista's chapter joined with his school's sororities and fraternities one year to organize a food and clothing drive that reaped a truckload of clothing and 5,000 pounds of food. The chapter also went trick-or-treating door to door to collect canned food.

After graduation, Bautista plans to step into an alumni advising role.

"It's important to have these types of organizations on campus," he said. "With the type of experience I've gained it would be a waste not to pass it on to other people."

Business Frats

Not all co-ed fraternities are community service-oriented. Some, such as the Alpha Kappa Psi (AKP) business fraternity, focus on a specific career path instead. The goals of AKP are to further the understanding of accounting and finance and promote self-improvement in the field of business.

The national organization marked its 100th year anniversary in 2004. The group has 185 active chapters, several colonies, 14 active alumni chapters, and has chartered close to 100 alumni groups, according to AKP's website.

Michael Lewis is president of the AKP chapter at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. The Beta Phi chapter has approximately 50 members. Lewis became president in January and has been in the chapter for three years.

The fraternity only accepts students with a business major or minor and at least a 2.5 grade-point average is required. Lewis thinks that people join because they want to build a network with others who also like to succeed in business. The AKP chapter takes tours of local companies, brings in guest speakers for the fraternity, holds etiquette dinners and hosts résumé workshops for Drake students.

Lewis said the group is similar to a social fraternity in that it features a pledge process for new members. However, member initiation remains far simpler in co-ed fraternities than in traditional fraternities.

"It's more like a club," he said. "It's not as restrictive as a social fraternity."

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