




STUDENT AFFAIRS AND
ACADEMIC SUPPORT

MEMORANDUM

To: Greek Presidents Council

From: A. Dwight Benedict, Dean 
Student Affairs and Academic Support

Date: July 10, 2015

Subject: Greek Life at Gallaudet University

Today, I announce several administrative decisions with respect to Greek organizations at Gallaudet University. Specifically:

1. Attire

The use of robes and other similar regalia during marches and public events on- and off-campus is permanently banned. This ban extends to all Greek organization publications, promotions, and advertisement, including, but not limited to, member pictures, composites, websites, event banners, flyers, e-mail messages, and alumni functions.

2. Artifacts

The use of artifacts during marches is suspended for the time being. Greek organization members are not to carry artifacts, including, but not limited to, swords, chests, torches, books, rope, and robes.

3. Officer Titles

Greek organization officers will be referred to by their English titles: Typically, president, vice president, recording secretary, corresponding secretary, treasurer, and the like. Organization-specific officer names, such as Archon, Grand Master, Grand Rajah, Grand Scribe, Proedros, etc., may not be used in dialogue, written, or email communication between any Greek organization and the University or the community for the time being.

A discussion about the use of artifacts and officer names will take place in Fall 2015 between Student Affairs and Academic Support and the GPC. In the meantime, if there are any special

occasions where your organization would like to carry an artifact during a march or event, please contact Dr. Mary Keane, Director of Campus Activities and Commuter Programs, at least two weeks in advance of the march/event to obtain approval.

Background

In the fall of 2014, the Student Body Government (SBG) sent a letter to University administrators with a list of concerns, including Greek attire, specifically the use of robes and symbols that were similar to those used by hate groups; the use of artifacts that could serve as negative triggers or that have similarities and/or associations with hate groups; and Greek organization officer titles.

I immediately asked the presidents of the Greek organizations to work together, through the Greek Presidents Council (GPC), and to work with the SBG to develop draft guidelines to address these concerns. Quite frankly, the response was underwhelming: perhaps some organizations believed that they would not be affected and did not actively participate in the development of the draft. Ultimately, only one GPC member actively worked with SBG to develop draft guidelines. I received the draft guidelines after the spring semester was well underway.

Unfortunately, the draft guidelines fell short of addressing the main issues raised by the SBG in its letter to University administrators. I am disappointed that the GPC as a whole did not recognize the importance and seriousness of the issues raised by the SBG, including but not limited to the association with known current and past hate groups; that they did not fully address the concerns of students of color who asked the SBG Director of Diversity to act on their concerns; and that they did not display sensitivity to how current practices could reflect negatively on Greek organizations and ultimately on Gallaudet University.

In my view, the GPC failed to recognize the importance and urgency of the issues brought forth by the SBG, and the connection these issues have to the larger picture of Greek organizations and their current status in the United States. Simply stated, the GPC did not work together to closely study the issues and develop a satisfactory response. In an era where the larger community is questioning the value Greek life brings to institutions of higher education, the increased scrutiny of Greek life in the news and social media, and the societal issues that the United States is facing, it is more critical than ever that members of the GPC work closely together to develop a strong rapport and support each other on issues and to develop proactive solutions to reduce negative exposure to Greeks in general. What may seem to impact one or two organizations in fact impacts all organizations. GPC plays an important role in self-regulation and ensuring that Greek organizations continue to evolve in a rapidly changing world.

I am disappointed with SBG; while SBG is to be commended for bringing important issues to the University's attention, their efforts in addressing the concerns brought to them by students of color fell short in actually addressing the underlying issues and concerns. As a result of the SBG's concerns, one Greek organization voluntarily discontinued the use of their royal blue and gold robes, but no overall guidance for all Greek organizations came out of this.

Rationale

Respecting our local neighbors is also an important goal, and increasingly so. Gallaudet University's community engagement is moving in the direction of an open campus concept, where the long-term goal is to literally remove all fences on the campus and become one with the community. Gallaudet has been working hard to build positive relations with our neighbors in the District of Columbia and to cultivate the Gallaudet brand to compete for the best and brightest deaf and hard of hearing students. A photo of Greek organization members marching in robes sent out through social media could be very damaging to Gallaudet's brand and efforts as perception is a powerful thing and easily trumps tradition and actual intent.

None of this is to deny the significant role of Greek organizations at Gallaudet, or in the higher education community. Since their beginnings in the early 19th Century, Greek organizations have played a major role in colleges and universities throughout the United States. On many campuses, they are an integral part of the fabric of the school. Fraternities and sororities provide their members with opportunities for personal and professional growth, leadership training, networking, and the sense of having a family away from home, among other positive aspects. Greek organizations on campus have often provided such opportunities for our students.

However, there was, and still is, a "dark side" to Greek life, including hazing, excessive partying, binge drinking, drug use and abuse, sexual misconduct, and risk-taking behaviors. As institutions of higher education have evolved over time, such as Gallaudet University, the expectations and standards of conduct for Greek life have changed as well.

Conduct that was tolerated decades ago is no longer acceptable. Most recently, some other schools have drawn an especially hard line, and have suspended or disbanded Greek organizations for minor or major infractions. Other colleges and universities have abolished Greek systems on their campuses entirely. In the past two months alone, more than 25 Greek organizations across the United States have been investigated, suspended by their headquarters and/or their school, or disbanded. These organizations are local and national fraternities and sororities, at schools large and small, public and private. The schools include Ivy League institutions such as Dartmouth College and large, multi-campus institutions like the University of Wisconsin.

This is the current trend regarding Greek life on college and university campuses. Gallaudet University is not exempt from this trend.

However, Gallaudet cannot tolerate rituals and activities that create a hostile environment to students on campus. Members of the University community comes from all walks of life and diversity is who we are, everyone in this community must feel welcome regardless of race, hearing status, disability, religion, color, national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, and the like. In exchange for recognition of the student organization by the institution, the student leaders need to be respectful of our identity, institutional mission, and the broader deaf community when planning activities and events. Any student organization that falls short of this risks having the institutional recognition withdrawn.

Conclusion

I am aware that the new directives that I announce today may impact some organizations more than others. However, I believe this is in the best interest of all Greek organizations and the University. Participation in Greek life at Gallaudet University serves as a part of the whole student experience and is valuable in the opportunities that are provided to their members. Principles, beliefs, a strong philosophy of leadership development, and the camaraderie of brotherhood and sisterhood are intangible, but they define Greek life far more than apparel, artifacts, officer titles, and adherence to outdated traditions, practices, and customs. All of our Greek organizations need to adopt a 21st Century mindset and adjust to new expectations and standards.

An excellent example of a change in the nation's mindset which I believe is very similar to the decision to ban the use of robes occurred yesterday when the South Carolina legislature voted to remove a racially-charged symbol from the grounds of their state capitol – the Confederate Battle Flag. I watched the news coverage of the lowering and permanent removal of the Confederate Battle Flag from the grounds of the South Carolina state capitol building this morning and I couldn't help but reflect on this decision to permanently ban the practice of wearing robes by Greek organizations at Gallaudet University. I know that the robes decision is a polarizing decision, very much like the decision to no longer fly the Confederate Battle Flag. I understand that this decision may anger some; I believe that, in retrospect, it will be recognized as the correct decision as we adapt to changing times and perspectives.

I readily acknowledge that change is difficult. I understand that some of your alumni organizations may take umbrage at what may appear to be unilateral decisions. At the same time, we must unite to achieve the common goals of fostering respect for all, and we must rededicate ourselves to the core mission and goals of Greek organizations. I look forward to working with you to transform the GPC into an active, forward-thinking organization, and to strengthening Greek life at Gallaudet University. In particular, I will convene open, frank discussions with the GPC this fall about apparel, artifacts, and officer titles, and any other common issues.

cc: Dr. T. Alan Hurwitz, President
Dr. Carol Ertling, Provost
Mr. Paul Kelly, Vice-President, Administration and Finance
Mr. Paul Julin, Vice-President, Institutional Advancement
Mr. Carl Pramuk, Associate Dean, Student Center Programs and Services
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Mr. Saeed Abdi, Advisor, Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity
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