

**GO GREEK TO NO GREEK: A LOOK AT THE CHANGING  
ATTITUDE TOWARD THE GREEK COMMUNITY AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON, 1964-1972**

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Go Greek to No Greek: A Look at the Changing Attitude Toward the Greek Community at the University of Oregon, 1964-1972

In United States history, the mid 1960s through the early 1970s is an era commonly equated with the social upheaval created by the Vietnam War. Many watched as friends and family members were sent overseas, perhaps never to return. Soldiers were not the only casualties of this tumultuous time, however. On college and university campuses across the nation, traditional social institutions came under fire as well. University Greek Systems were no exception. At the University of Oregon alone, over half of the fraternities closed between 1964 and 1972, along with four sorority chapters.<sup>1</sup> In an October 1972 memorandum to the Dean of Student Personnel Services, Thomas Mills, the Advisor to Fraternities wrote: "After several years of declining membership, the number of fraternities and sororities has stabilized, and membership has improved. I note an increased optimism about the fraternity system as a viable living option at the University of Oregon."<sup>2</sup> This implies, however, the general pessimistic attitude that prevailed concerning the fraternity system during the preceding years. It was an attitude brought on by charges of discrimination, as well as a generational struggle against an

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, as well as the fact that it has come into common usage, the term sorority will be applied to all female chapter houses. However, the term sorority was coined for Gamma Phi Beta, and they are therefore the only chapter with the exclusive right to be known as such. Formally, all other female chapters are supposed to be known as female fraternities.

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum to Robert L. Bowlin from Thomas J. Mills, Status Report of Fraternities and Sororities, October 25, 1972; Fraternities and Sororities, Alphabetical Subject Files, Box 5, coll. UA REF 1, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

enemy known only as the Establishment.<sup>3</sup> A general rejection of structure and tradition marginalized the Greek system, justifying Mills' conclusion that, "I do not expect sororities and fraternities to play the dominant campus role they played ten years ago."<sup>4</sup>

The story of the Greek System at the University of Oregon prior to this period of time is no different from that of any other University. During the 1950s the Greek system played a major role on the University of Oregon campus. Dan Williams, a current vice president at the University, was himself a student from fall of 1958 to spring of 1962. During this time, he, like many of his peers, joined a Greek chapter. He estimates that approximately seventy-five percent of the campus joined the Greek system while at college, if not for the social aspect, then certainly for the simple housing solution it provided for students who no longer wished to live in the dorms.<sup>5</sup> The popularity of joining a chapter as a viable housing option is supported further by the numerous houses being constructed in the early sixties.<sup>6</sup> High numbers of participating students meant more money to fund housing. Being a member of a chapter is not as straightforward as living together, however. Williams soon found that it could be very demanding, and found that he divided his time frequently between school and the house. According to Williams, it was within his chapter that he was taught the societal "norms" of the time, which would prepare him and his peers for life in their postgraduate years. Life was

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<sup>3</sup> Rice, Wandalyn. "A Living Alternative: The Greek System". *The Daily Emerald*. Jan. 21, 1970. Vol. LXXI, No. 86, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum to Robert L. Bowlin from Thomas J. Mills.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Williams. February 7, 2005. University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

<sup>6</sup> For information on houses being constructed, see newspaper clippings in: Fraternities and Sororities; Alphabetical Subject Files, Box 5, coll. UA REF 1; Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

structured, and everything was decidedly traditional, although in retrospect, he acknowledges that life at the University was on the cusp of change.<sup>7</sup>

This sentiment is echoed by Dave Frohnmayer, current President of the University of Oregon. Between the years 1962 and 1964, President Frohnmayer claims that the entire personality and dynamic of the United States as a whole changed.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it was during this time period that the Baby Boomer generation began coming of age. This era witnessed generation disequilibrium, with a profoundly high proportion of eighteen to twenty-four year olds present in the population.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when they put their minds to something, it was more than likely to be felt keenly throughout the entirety of society.

One sentiment that is easily ascertained from a study of the Vietnam era is a sense of domestic injustice. Particularly, the issue of racial discrimination weighed heavily on the minds of many. It was this issue in particular that also brought the University of Oregon's Greek System into the spotlight.

As early as January 1961, The State Board of Higher Education passed a minute stating: "Therefore, the Board now directs that after January 1, 1963, the University and Oregon State College shall withdraw recognition of any fraternity or sorority whose national chapter then requires local chapters to restrict their membership on the basis of race or religion."<sup>10</sup> It was a response to membership requirements such as that of Sigma

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Dave Frohnmayer. January 10, 2005. University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Board of Higher Education, November 11, 1965; Discrimination, Fraternities, Office of the President: Flemming 1965-1966, coll. 10477, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

Chi fraternity, which restricted membership to “white, male student(s)”.<sup>11</sup> Sigma Chi, like many other fraternities and sororities, found other means of carrying out exclusionary practices, however. Though their Constitution and Statutes were later revised and the explicit language of discrimination was removed, a section was added that can be read to implicitly state the same sentiment:

The bonds of our fellowship are reciprocal bonds which require that every member of Sigma Chi be welcomed personally as a brother in all chapters and regions of the Fraternity. Ever chapter owes a duty to every other chapter, to the whole fraternity and to any man considered for membership, for as long as it continues to hold a charter in Sigma Chi, to refrain from proposing for membership to our fellowship any person who for any reason is likely to be considered personally unacceptable as a brother by any chapter or any member anywhere.<sup>12</sup>

This sentiment was echoed within other houses. In November of 1965, the Kappa Sigma Chapter at Swarthmore College was suspended for discrimination. “The president of the chapter said that a “gentlemen’s agreement to bar non-whites” had been reached at the national conclave to the fraternity in 1961.”<sup>13</sup> Such practices were highly detrimental to the Greek System, however. It became increasingly important for Universities to ensure that there were no discriminatory practices taking place as a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This Act denied funding to any state or federal institution that supported

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Discrimination Charges Not Unfamiliar” by Bob Carl, November 2, 1965, Office of the President: Flemming 1965-1966, coll. 10477, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

campus organizations that followed discriminatory practices.<sup>14</sup> Though it may not have been intentional on the part of Congress, this declaration affected the Greek system almost immediately, and would set the tone for the vast majority of the struggles that it would face for the better part of the next decade. An effort on the part of a member of the House of Representatives best captures the chain reaction begun by the passing of the Civil Rights Act:

Mr. Chairman, the freedom of all fraternal and social organizations is under attack because the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is being used as a weapon against the independence of social fraternities in a manner contrary to the expressed intent of Congress . . . Congress did not intend the Civil Rights Act to be applied in such a manner as to interfere with the membership practices or internal operations of fraternal or social organizations, or to withhold or deny Federal funds or assistance of any kind because of such membership practices or internal operations, and so forth.<sup>15</sup>

This formal ruling by Congress to no longer condone discrimination only reiterated public sentiment. It also gave the University of Oregon even more incentive to probe further into the charges of discrimination against the chapters present on campus.

In late 1965, University President Arthur S. Flemming began an investigation into alleged discriminatory practices by the local chapter of Sigma Chi Fraternity.<sup>16</sup> It had

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<sup>14</sup> Congressional Record – House August 26, 1965, Fraternities, Office of the President: Flemming, 1966-1967, coll. 10487, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

become standard practice for the national office to review pictures of all pledges prior to initiation.<sup>17</sup> This lack of local autonomy was nothing new for many of the houses. In fact, it was still standard procedure for many fraternities and sororities not to pledge any individuals unless they received a recommendation on the individual's behalf from alums.<sup>18</sup> The battle between University of Oregon's Beta Iota chapter of Sigma Chi continued well into 1967, when the fraternity was finally given thirty days in which to comply with university selection and membership policies.<sup>19</sup> Though it was certainly not the only chapter that was practicing discriminatory policies in membership selection, nationally Sigma Chi was the most known for such practices, and therefore became the example for all of the other houses. Knowledge of their selection practices prompted the following joint statement from University of Oregon, Oregon State University, and The State Board of Higher Education:

Members including both pledges and initiates shall be selected by the active student membership of the local chapter from students who have satisfactorily met fraternity and sorority affiliation standards of the universities, and shall not be subject to approval or veto by any outside individuals or agency, including specifically, local alumni, national

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<sup>16</sup> Carl, Bob. "UO Probes Sigma Chi", November 2, 1967, Discrimination, Sigma Chi, Office of the President: Flemming, 1965-1966, coll. 10477, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

<sup>17</sup> Stanford University "Since your campus has a Sigma Chi chapter . . ." April 29, 1965, Discrimination, Fraternities, Office of the President: Flemming, 1965-1966, coll. 10477, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

<sup>18</sup> Carl.

<sup>19</sup> News Bureau, University of Oregon, September 15, 1967, Discrimination, Sigma Chi, Office of the President: Flemming, 1966-1967, coll. 10487, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

officers, or members and alumni of other chapters. This principle does not deny the local chapter the right to counsel with and seek advice on membership matters from national officers or others, but the ultimate election must rest with the chapter's student membership.<sup>20</sup>

Thus it was true that in a time when a generation at large was rejecting established forms of leadership, the Greek System was still very much subject to an advanced degree of control. It is therefore poignant to note that it was the University that was working for increased self-government in the Greek houses.

Ival McMains, a student at the University of Oregon from 1966 to 1971, bore first hand witness to the struggle for local autonomy in the Greek System. As a freshman he joined the local chapter of Delta Tau Delta. According to McMains, there was still a sense of structure within the Greek System at this time; a noticeable hierarchy. By 1970, however, the Greek System was on hard times. This was the time when the tradition of having house moms at all of the fraternities – in addition to having them at the sororities – was abolished. As a result, fraternity life became a dynamic, coalescing, revolving, three-ring circus.<sup>21</sup> Members had increased autonomy, but what they chose to do with it was not exactly what the University had envisioned.

At the same time that the Greeks gained their freedom – as it were, the student population was moving on to bigger issues than simply the discrimination practiced locally by their Greek System. The damage had been done, however, and several houses were already facing closure as a result of bad press in the past. In essence, life for the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ival McMains. January 19, 2005. University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.



rest of the student population was moving too fast for the Greeks. An exposé in the January 21, 1970 issue of *The Daily Emerald* makes note of this occurrence, remarking that the last big news involving the Greek System was in April 1967. The article then goes on to ask, “What has happened in the following three years? Why aren’t the Greeks big news any longer?”<sup>22</sup> Gerald Bogen, Vice President of Student Affairs at the time, attributes diminishing acknowledgement of the Greek System to an irrelevance of culture. Greeks were known to be elitist, and to behave as such, as well as to have money, was not cool at the time.<sup>23</sup> Colleen Connolly, a student who was a member of the Kappa Kappa Gamma Sorority at the time, confirms this statement with her impressions on what Greek life was like at the time. According to Connolly, anytime she was to meet a student who was not affiliated with a house, she would inform them only of her address rather than voice her membership in a sorority. Once again, going Greek was not the popular thing to do at the University of Oregon. Connolly, a transfer from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, saw this as a stark contrast to her prior experience. At Whitman, approximately eighty percent of the campus was Greek, and it was still a very popular and very viable alternative for many students.<sup>24</sup> At Oregon, the Greek System was facing a competitor as yet unknown at Whitman. It was this competitor that caused the closing of several of the fraternities, among them the Beta Kappa chapter of Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity. Mike Merrell, the last president of the house, claimed that what happened to them was not a unique experience.

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<sup>22</sup> Cover of the Jan. 21, 1970 edition of *The Daily Emerald*. Vol. LXXI, No. 86.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Bogen. February 22, 2005. University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

<sup>24</sup> Colleen Connolly. March 12, 2005. Phone interview.

The chapter, Merrell added, succumbed to a combination of the attraction of apartment living and a new desire for personal freedom on the part of University students. ‘There is a natural contempt for the Establishment today,’ he said, ‘and a growing tendency to tell people to go to hell if they interfere with you. Everyone is concerned with personal freedom and doesn’t want restriction, but people are confusing freedom with the abuse of freedom.’<sup>25</sup>

And abusing freedom is just what the fraternities did. They were wild, contained plenty of drugs, and alcohol flowed through the houses as much as it ever did.<sup>26</sup> With the breakdown of discipline and the prevalence of party life, “It reached the point where the guys couldn’t sleep in the house, they couldn’t study in the house, and so they started to ask why they were living in the house,” concluded Merrell.<sup>27</sup> Left to their own devices, many houses folded as a result of their own poor management. Phi Delta Theta, which closed during the 1970-1971 school year, was forced to shut down as a result of embezzlement on the part of their student leaders.<sup>28</sup>

Even those houses that experienced better management faced hard times due to changing social attitudes. The President of Theta Chi, a house that was still thriving at a time when other houses were facing closure, viewed apartment living as competition for

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<sup>25</sup> Rice.

<sup>26</sup> Connolly.

<sup>27</sup> Rice.

<sup>28</sup> Connolly.

the Greek System.<sup>29</sup> Once again, personal freedom was the order of the day, a right that many students did not associate with chapter houses. The lack of popularity of dorm living can be seen as a reflection of this as well.<sup>30</sup> This was yet another form of structured living that was being rejected by the student body in general.

As numbers continued to drop, students within the Greek System began to realize the need for change. Steve Neal, the Interfraternity Council President during the 1970 to 1971 school year, told *The Emerald*, “I think that the survival of the Greek system on an activist campus of the seventies will be made a more definite fact as the Greeks rise from their traditional apathy and become more and more involved in the moral and ethical issues of the day.”<sup>31</sup> But was this change even possible, and if so, was it too late? The impression given by Colleen Connolly is that this need for change – though recognizable – was not to be obtained. She characterized her fellow Greeks as a not very activist group. When questioned as to why she thought this to be true, she responded by saying that that was not the type of people that were drawn to the Greek Community.<sup>32</sup>

And so it was that while the rest of the student body became active in current affairs, the Greek Community attempted to eke out an existence in spite of heavy criticism, and later utter disinterest. It was an assertion of the old ways of structure and tradition, a type of existence that had no place within the Baby Boomer generation.

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<sup>29</sup> Eals, Clay. “Theta Chi: Success Story”. *The Daily Emerald*. Jan. 21, 1970. Vol. LXXI, No. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Connolly. When Colleen Connolly transferred to the University of Oregon in 1970 as a junior, she lived in the dorms. It was not until her senior year that she moved into the Kappa Kappa Gamma house on 15<sup>th</sup> and Alder.

<sup>31</sup> Lanier, John. “Greeks must change or die”. *The Daily Emerald*. Jan 21, 1970. Vol. LXXI, No. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Connolly.

Houses could not fight the stereotypes because, in fact, their alums continued to fulfill them by continuing inherently discriminatory recruitment practices. A disinterest in activism, perhaps egged on in the Greek Community by a sense of futility in active members, led to declining participation. When at last the opportunity for leadership was thrust upon members of the houses, many failed at the hands of inexperience.

Today, the marginalization that resulted during the Vietnam War Era can still be felt throughout the Greek System at the University of Oregon. Whereas fraternities used to run the University, participation in the Greek System is down to a mere ten percent.<sup>33</sup> Tradition, structure and partying still reign as the dominant characteristics of the community, and a benign neglect by University Administration is more the order of the day rather than the threat of censure. It would appear that little has actually changed, once again verifying Mills' conclusion in 1972 that fraternities and sororities would never again be dominant on campus. Perhaps if active members had been assigned greater authority within their own houses, a change might have taken place that might have preserved the esteem with which the Greek System was once regarded. Perhaps, however, the Greek System was doomed, along with every other standard of tradition pre-dating the 1960s, to be relegated to the background of individualized freedom.

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<sup>33</sup> Michelle Lothers. March 12, 2005. University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. Ms. Lothers is the current Panhellenic Vice President of Scholarship.