

Wheelchair Ride to Panhellenic Pride: Ramps, Recruitment, and Reaching Full Accessibility to Sororities

MARGARET O'CONNOR

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
oconno36@illinois.edu

Abstract

With 18 sororities that participate in formal recruitment at the University of Illinois, Panhellenic Council seeks to promote full inclusion and "mutual understanding" among all women who decide that they want to become a part of the Greek system. For women in wheelchairs or motor chairs, Panhellenic Council facilitates the accommodations necessary to allow the potential new member to visit every house. Research methods were focused heavily on personal interviews but also include a survey of sorority chapter presidents, archival research, Panhellenic Council's governing documents at the University of Illinois, and research on student publications. Interviews reveal the perspective of the women serving on Panhellenic Council, a woman with a physical disability who is an active member of a Panhellenic Council sorority and a woman with a physical disability who chose not to participate in formal Panhellenic recruitment. The final paper explores the limitations of the temporary accessibility that is only required for formal recruitment and how this may deter or promote participation in sorority life for women in wheelchairs. It also explains the connection between physical and social accessibility and how this relationship impacts active membership after formal recruitment. Ultimately, it highlights the ways in which the Panhellenic community is working toward but still has yet to reach mutual understanding of what "accessibility" means between able-bodied sorority members and women with disabilities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Panhellenic Pride. These two words, aside from their alliterative harmony, signify unity within the Greek System and respect toward the core values that Panhellenic sororities have in common. Panhellenic Council, or the "inter-sorority programming and governing body" at the University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign, "...is constantly at work to make sure every woman is treated with the absolute respect and mutual understanding of her peers" ("Greek Terms" n.d.). When it comes to formal recruitment, there is an understanding between able-bodied women of the necessity of encouraging every woman to participate, even if that means constructing a temporary ramp to accommodate students using wheelchairs. During past recruitments when women in wheelchairs have participated, Panhellenic Council has ensured that every house is accessible, at least in its entryway – and that is something to be celebrated. However, the "mutual" aspect of this understanding has yet to be achieved. There exists a disconnect between

the well-intentioned efforts to put up temporary ramps and the harsher reality of sorority accessibility for women in wheelchairs both during and after recruitment. While sororities have willingly complied and cooperated with Panhellenic Council when asked, there are no members who are a part of the recruitment planning process who are in wheelchairs; thus many of the social accommodations that women in wheelchairs would like to see have yet to be made. As University of Illinois student Rebecca (all names used are pseudonyms) indicated, you cannot just "slap a ramp on something and call it accessible." Thus the Panhellenic community has much room to develop and grow before it can truly pride itself on mutual understanding.

II. METHODOLOGY

In order to address this question, my research needed to be current and rather abstract. Social accessibility does not typically warrant substantial quantitative data, but rather relies heavily on evaluating perceptions of the Greek System and individual experiences. Thus the

majority of my information came from interviews and my own personal knowledge of the formal recruitment process. My firsthand experience involves my participation in Panhellenic formal recruitment both as a potential new member and as an active recruiting member of a Panhellenic sorority. Because my question focused specifically on recruitment, I began with the Vice President of Recruitment, Norah Cetin, who oversaw Panhellenic Recruitment in the Fall of 2013 and the Vice President of Recruitment for Panhellenic Recruitment who directed recruitment in the Fall of 2011, Jessica Ponticelli. While Cetin was able to provide insightful information as to how the process of coordinating accommodations for women with wheelchairs runs in the beginning stages, Ponticelli supplemented that information with her own reflections on the overall experience and how it played in the Fall of 2012. I contacted both of these individuals via email and explained my research project and my intention not to place blame on the Panhellenic community but to raise awareness on an issue that would align strongly with the Panhellenic values of respect and understanding between all people regardless of race, religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. Cetin is someone who lived in my sorority house, so that interview took place there out of convenience, while my interview with Ponticelli took place in the Illini Union.

After speaking to both of them, it seemed as though participating in formal recruitment was something that was relatively straightforward, wheelchair or not—yet I knew that the level of participation from women in wheelchairs was still quite low, so there had to be a reason behind this disconnect. That is why I spoke to two women with disabilities, one who went through formal recruitment and one who chose not to participate. I met with Rebecca, the student who elected not to join a Panhellenic sorority, at a local sandwich shop and Carly, the woman who is currently a member of a Panhellenic sorority, in a private room in her sorority house. Both of these interviews yielded distinct but equally valuable perspectives in

evaluating the state of social accessibility for women in wheelchairs. Like the interviews with Cetin and Ponticelli, these conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed post-interview.

The interviews with Carly and Rebecca were especially revealing, as I was able to understand the apprehensions they both experienced when considering joining a Panhellenic sorority. Carly's experience was one that exceeded her expectations in many ways, but I was left to wonder whether or not her positive experience was unique to the chapter she chose to join or if other houses would be equally as welcoming. So I created an anonymous survey for the Panhellenic sorority presidents and presented my research project at one of their president's council meetings in order to convince them that voluntary participation in this survey would be worth their efforts—not only because of women who might go through Panhellenic recruitment in a wheelchair, but also because alumnae, family members of women in their chapter, and members who are physically injured unexpectedly would all benefit from having an accessible house. The survey was sent out via email, and I was able to recruit 14 out of the 24 Panhellenic chapters to participate.

Further, I obtained a copy of the 2011 Recruitment Constitution and Bylaws through Cetin, and did research from the Panhellenic website, where women register for recruitment and get all of their preliminary recruitment information. Simi Linton's *My Body Politic* and Tony Greif's research paper "Access Your Letters" were additional resources that I found through class assignments and discussions, and their content pushed me a little bit further to question what I was learning through my interviews and survey.

III. FINDINGS

Of the twenty-four Panhellenic chapters, only one has an active member in a wheelchair (Gawlik 2012). Yet according to the interviews with Cetin and Ponticelli, the steps to accommodate women with specific considerations ranging from a peanut allergy to

a wheelchair had run smoothly. In fact, Carly told Ponticelli that it had been easier to participate in formal recruitment than it was to find an accessible hotel room in Illinois. Certainly, this level of accessibility is to be commended. On the surface, it appears that Panhellenic formal recruitment is fully open to women in wheelchairs – but on one of the most wheelchair-accessible campuses in the world with one of the largest Greek Systems, 100% of the fourteen surveyed sororities had no members in wheelchairs, and there are typically only one or two out of the several hundred women who participate in recruitment that are in wheelchairs (Survey 2012).

It is also interesting to note that in none of sororities' survey responses, nor in the Panhellenic Recruitment Bylaws, are there any provisions mentioning the inclusion of women with disabilities. During past recruitments when a woman in a wheelchair indicated on her registration form that she needed special accommodations for recruitment, Panhellenic officers and their advisors would take it on a case-by-case basis rather than follow any specific guidelines. This allows the officers to evaluate each situation specifically rather than follow a blanket procedure, and it also puts a significant amount of responsibility in the hands of the potential new member (PNM) to self-advocate. Carly was more than grateful for the ramps put up, and while she insisted that any additional accommodations were easily made, they required her to recognize that she needed a recruitment group leader, or Gamma Chi¹, to go with her to each house and ensure that the ramps were usable and that she could get to each house in a timely manner. For Rebecca, this was one of her greatest apprehensions. She said that she had able-bodied friends who encouraged her to rush in the past, but she believes that they “don't

¹ Gamma Chis are selected from undergraduate female students who are initiated members of Panhellenic chapters and have completed the Gamma Chi section of a Gender & Women Studies course. The selection process includes an application and interview.

understand the implications of that offer” (Rebecca interview 2012). She worries that though they mean well, the able-bodied sorority member might not consider how many other details are required to make recruitment accessible because all disabilities are different. Whatever accommodations that may have made recruitment accessible for another member in the past might prove insufficient for another woman in a wheelchair. In other words, there exists an awkward gap between what an able-bodied person and a person with a disability considers accessible.

For both Rebecca and Carly, it was not just the concern about having proper ramps in place that was daunting, but also the format of the formal recruitment process. There are eighteen chapters that participate in Panhellenic formal recruitment. During Open House round, PNMs are expected to make it to all eighteen houses within two days. Afterward, a PNM will rank her top choices of chapters and the chapter members will give her a score based on the conversations they had. The consecutive invites narrow down the amount of chapters based on mutual selection from a maximum of thirteen, then to seven, and for the final invite, three chapters (“Recruitment Events” n.d.). Especially on the days when the amount of invites are between seven and eighteen, many PNMs – disabled or not – struggle to go back and forth between sororities in Champaign and Urbana in the allotted ten minutes between the scheduled invitations. Carly and Rebecca both noted that a few extra minutes would be necessary for PNMs in wheelchairs in order for them to ensure that ramps were usable and thus this automatically separated them from the group.

Sometimes the usability of the ramps was a factor that added an additional challenge to the already stressful process. Carly noted that there were some houses that would lay down a stack of books and place a piece of plywood over it and call that a ramp; others would use a board over their steps that would be incredibly steep. Especially because Carly travels in a 300-pound motor chair, the ramps needed to be sturdy

enough to support the weight as well as have a gentle incline. In her novel *My Body Politic*, author Simi Linton describes a similar experience with a so-called accessible building when she went to the most expensive hotel in Manhattan. She found that despite how new the hotel was, its attempts to accommodate her and her motor chair were inadequate at best. According to Linton (2006), the plywood ramp “was unadorned, and, seemingly attached to the steps as an afterthought” (185). In the same way that the ramp in Linton’s situation was designed for compliance reasons rather than an active effort to include her, Carly witnessed the disconnect between her actual needs and what sororities perceived as a sufficient accommodation.

Further, the efforts to remedy these less-than-perfect situations can result in a counterproductive attempt to make a PNM feel included. Indeed, Linton noted that though she was able to advocate for herself and find a doorman to help her get up the ramp, when she got to the top, “there was a flutter of activity toward me just to make sure that I got into the elevator safely. They were well-intentioned, but were blocking my path” (Linton 2006, 185). Linton became frustrated with the excess attention given to her because it hindered her ability to access the building rather than achieving its intended helpful effect. During recruitment, Carly found that her Gamma Chis would also become “angry and defensive” with the chapter if their ramp was not constructed properly. After all, the sororities knew that they needed to rent or construct a ramp months in advance of formal recruitment, according to Ponticelli. Carly, though she was not frustrated with the situation like Linton, also considered the fuss unnecessary but was grateful to see the Gamma Chis “bending over backwards” to make sure that she could access the houses. In many ways, it was more the idea that sororities were taking action that made Carly feel welcome than the actual ramp itself. It is possible, however, for PNMs to become frustrated like Simi Linton and find the extra effort they need to even enter the chapter house to be alienating and/or an even greater obstacle

to being fully integrated into sorority life.

Nonetheless, when a PNM in a wheelchair finally enters the house during recruitment, the Panhellenic community takes steps to equalize the chapters and the PNMs and ensure that preferences are formed on the basis of conversation rather than on superficial factors like appearance. For example, said Ponticelli, during the Open House round, all sororities are wearing the same t-shirt and all PNMs wear matching PNM t-shirts and carry matching canvas bags. Further, if a PNM in a wheelchair needs to use a side or a back entrance or cannot reach the second floor for conversations, the PNMs must all use that same entrance and at least a few PNM conversations need to take place on the first floor of the house. These measures are intended to prevent the PNM from feeling singled out and keep PNMs from forming a first impression based on something like clothing that reveals little about their personality (Ponticelli interview 2012).

However, in this inclusion process that aims to equalize everything during recruitment, one part that ironically distinguishes one house from another is the wheelchair-accessible accommodations. Carly admitted that at least during Open House, she found herself making decisions on which sorority to join at least partly based on their level of accessibility rather than which group of women she actually liked the best (Carly interview 2012). The uniformity achieved through the required matching t-shirts and canvas bags, therefore, might also be applied to accessibility standards. Truly equalizing the chapter houses’ accommodations would allow PNMs to focus solely on finding the chapter that is best for them rather than on how well the physical structure of the house can accommodate their wheelchairs. It would put more emphasis on the PNM’s personality and take the focus off of her disability. After all, Carly said that she joined because while she loved her friends with disabilities in the Nugent dormitory, a lot of focus was placed on the disability – something she never experienced growing up. When you are surrounded by people in wheelchairs, she said, the wheelchair

becomes the focus. Similarly, when a PNM becomes surrounded by struggles to access even just the first floor of a house, she can easily begin to focus only on how easy or difficult it will be to participate in chapter events rather than on how much she bonds with the women in the chapter.

The accessibility of the social aspects of a sorority proves to be a significant factor for women with disabilities who consider participating in formal recruitment. Though Carly decided to disregard the accessibility of the chapter after Open House and focus instead on her connection with the members of the chapter, the consideration of the limits of full inclusion is one that stopped Rebecca from participating in formal recruitment. She noted that most of the bonding that goes on between members does not happen at scheduled times, but in the smaller moments the women experience when living together in the chapter house. Not only are women in wheelchairs unable to live in the sorority houses, but members of chapters that only have temporary ramps must call ahead of time or post it on their social media page, ask for the ramps to be set up, and wait to enter, according to Carly. She conceded that there have been many instances in which people forget or she forgets to let them know ahead of time and she calls and then waits outside for the ramps to be set up. She insisted that the women of her chapter have been more than willing to work with her and have welcomed her participation in their events, but she looks forward to having a permanent ramp installed at her chapter house in order to further improve the level of accessibility in her house. Without Carly as a member of their chapter, however, it is unclear whether they would be going to such great lengths to ensure accessibility. What is clear is that Carly's presence in the chapter has brought the need for accommodations to the forefront of their agendas because chapter members have spent enough time with her to know what she wants and needs to feel even more a part of the chapter. At the time of her interview, Carly noted that her chapter had plans to install a permanent ramp.

Steps to increase accessibility in sorority life are not limited to structural elements like ramps and doorways. Carly's chapter invited the "Breaking the Odds" bloggers to present at one of their chapter meetings as part of an effort to dissolve social barriers between the Greek System and the disability community. These University of Illinois students with disabilities address misconceptions about people with disabilities and how they adapt to the challenges of college life as people with disabilities—more importantly as students who want social acceptance and to participate in everything the University has to offer (O'Donnell), including social events at campus bars and forming relationships with students of all kinds. The bloggers are University of Illinois students with disabilities or Physical Assistants to students with disabilities who are aware of the daily experiences of students with disabilities and are dedicated to correcting these misconceptions. Their work aligns with the goal of Panhellenic Council to reach a "mutual understanding" among members of the Greek system. Overall, their mission is to solve the question that Carly and Rebecca have also raised: "What is the point of giving people with disabilities access to the world if that world doesn't particularly like, understand or care to understand them?"

In many ways, the Panhellenic community has already put forth substantial effort to accommodate women with disabilities during formal recruitment, but it is important for those who plan and execute formal recruitment to consistently reflect and reevaluate their procedures to avoid the mindset that ramps equal accessibility. According to Cetin, the new VP Recruitment each year works with advisors from Fraternity and Sorority Affairs and the previous VP Recruitment to transition into her role. However, as an added measure, it would be particularly helpful to receive constructive criticism from anyone who was given special accommodations during formal recruitment. This feedback could contribute to establishing some sort of procedure in the Recruitment Bylaws, such as meeting with the PNM in a wheelchair prior to recruitment to discuss her specific needs. Especially within recruitment

that is supposed to create an environment in which women get to know each other based on conversation alone, PNMs should not have to worry about whether or not they can enter the house and be able to spend more time getting to know the members of the chapter.

If Carly's experience is any indication, the current system of providing accommodations, though well-intentioned and functional, is like one of those handmade sweaters you get for Christmas from a relative who you do not have the heart to tell, "I'm never going to wear this." You are genuinely grateful that someone would spend so much time and effort to make you happy, but if dear old Aunt Suzie had just taken the time to ask you what you wanted, she could have spent her time on something that better suited you. In other words, if Panhellenic Council hopes to further their mission of reaching a mutual understanding between all members of what accommodations suit a PNM, the process needs to be two-sided – that is, Panhellenic Council must move forward and open a dialogue between the women who want to rush and the women who direct the recruitment processes. This could be anything from letting a PNM who needs a ramp do a walk-through of the houses before she has to go through the recruitment event to simply offering a one-on-one meeting with them to address any concerns they may have. Bolstering these efforts of inclusion will allow her to forget her concerns as a woman in a wheelchair during formal recruitment and focus on finding the chapter she wants to be a part of for the duration of her college years.

Ideally, every house should have a permanent ramp to enable "visitability," a concept that the United States Access Board has introduced (Greif 2012, 8), that applies to Carly's experience of needing to call ahead and schedule a visit every time she wants to stop by her chapter house. If visitability were to be increased, then women with disabilities would be able to access their house on a regular basis and stop by whenever their schedule permitted instead of needing to coordinate their visits ahead of time. This would provide sorority members in

wheelchairs the opportunity to socialize with their sisters in the same way able-bodied sisters can, which would in turn serve to strengthen the relationships that Rebecca considers inaccessible as a result of how inaccessible and "non-visitible" sorority houses currently are. She considers one of the most important parts of making sorority life socially accessible is "changing people's hearts and minds and just making disability more apparent, and less intimidating and scary." This helps to ease any "awkward" social anxieties surrounding interaction with people with disabilities, which occur when people in a social situation will talk around you but not to you, according to Rebecca. Addressing these social anxieties is a step toward encouraging people who share Rebecca's apprehensions about formal recruitment to change their minds and decide to participate. The increase in visitability of sorority houses has the potential to make more PNMs in wheelchairs interested in joining a sorority and ultimately could help create a truly diverse, inclusive Greek community.

Further, to combat the apathy from the Society for Preservation of Greek Houses, an organization that provides grant funding for renovation of houses and helps chapters to register in the National Register of Historic Places (Greif 2012, 6), sororities need to realize how strongly their chapters' values and needs call for accessibility – at the very least, accessibility to their front doors. After all, ramps are not just an accommodation for people with disabilities. Of the 14 sororities surveyed, all reported that they had weekly, if not monthly, activities and visits from their alumnae. Any of these elderly women or women with young children could need to bring a wheelchair or a stroller into the house. Moreover, a family member of one of the chapter members or even a chapter member that unexpectedly became injured and must be on crutches or in a wheelchair would benefit from ramps and the increased participation from women in wheelchairs that would result.

Achieving even the one small step in the process of reaching full accessibility compliance with the

Americans with Disabilities Act by building a ramp would significantly push Panhellenic sororities toward the realization of the mutual understanding and pride for which they strive. As Carly noted, "Everybody loves a ramp." The Panhellenic community should be no exception.

REFERENCES

- "Constitution of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Panhellenic Association." *University of Illinois Panhellenic Council*. Accessed May 12, 2012. http://illinoisphc.com/#_p.Resources%2FResources%20for%20Presidents%20%26%20Delegates%2FBylaws%20%26%20Constitution.
- "Frequently Asked Questions." *University of Illinois Panhellenic Council*. Accessed April 5, 2012. http://illinoisphc.com/#_p.About%20Us%2FFAQ%27s.
- Gawlik, Morgan. "To Access or Not to Access: Accessibility of the Greek System at the University of Illinois." Presentation at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Rhetoric Research Symposium, Urbana, IL, April 2012.
- "Greek Terms." *University of Illinois Panhellenic Council*. Accessed March 31, 2014. http://illinoisphc.com/#_p.Recruitment%2FGreek%20Terms.
- Greif, Tony. "Access Your Letters: The Greek System and Its Place within Disabilities Awareness at the University of Illinois." *Ethnography of the University Initiative*. Accessed February 21, 2012. <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/13173>.
- Linton, Simi. 2006. *My Body Politic*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- "Mission." *Breaking the Odds*. Accessed March 15, 2012. <http://www.breaking-the-odds.com/p/our-mission.html>.
- O'Donnell, Brian. "Breaking the Odds." Presentation, Chapter Meeting, Champaign, IL, April 2012.
- "Recruitment Events." *University of Illinois Panhellenic Council*. Accessed April 5, 2012. http://illinoisphc.com/#_p.Recruitment%2FFormal%20Recruitment%2FRecruitment%20Events.