

Creating Pathways into Greek Life for Students with Intellectual Disability

By Lindsay Bowles Krech, Jonathan Lidgus, Madeline Siener, and Erica Walters

Introduction

Greek Life is a historic part of the social landscape within higher education, with the first fraternity starting in 1776 and the first sorority starting in 1851. Joining a Greek organization can be a hallmark collegiate experience for many students, offering lifelong friendships and a multitude of professional connections. Potential benefits of joining a Greek organization are well known and can include personal and professional growth, increased college retention, and enhanced feelings of belonging to the campus and community (Burkhard & Timpf, 2021; Asel et al., 2015).

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on improving access to fraternities and sororities for students with disability (Sasso et al., 2024). Many college campuses across the US are initiating postsecondary education programs for young adults with intellectual disability, and not surprisingly, many of these students are interested in joining Greek organizations. Students with intellectual disability should have access to Greek Life, using the same processes students without disability use to access these programs. This requires students and their supporters to embrace the dignity of risk. When students with intellectual disability are afforded the same potential opportunities, they may experience the same consequences as their peers without disability (Bumble et al., 2022).

Thoughts from the Authors

Vanderbilt's Greek Life staff played a crucial role in the process. They provided valuable guidance on how to gain access at both the university and inter/national headquarters levels. We also consulted with colleagues from postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability and Greek Life staff at other institutions that had already developed clearer pathways into Greek Life. This helped us understand the steps they took and the barriers they encountered before engaging with other collaborators.

Leveraging their relationships with chapter headquarters and their knowledge of the Greek Life system, our Greek Life staff led conversations with each chapter headquarters. Our team of program staff provided resources to support these discussions, and we found it beneficial to prepare academic records, including students' semester grades and progress reports, to demonstrate their academic standing.

Additionally, our peer mentors offered valuable insights into the customs of sorority life. They also helped us connect with sorority chapters, identify potential support needs for recruitment, and collaborate with officers from each chapter to provide education and outreach across the Panhellenic Council.

—Lindsay Bowles Krech, Vanderbilt University



Sadie and Grace went Zeta at Vanderbilt University!

Thoughts from the Authors

The path to including students with intellectual disability in Greek Life at the University of Missouri – St. Louis (UMSL) began with the determination of a single student. (See Lucy’s story on the next page.) During her interview process with the Succeed Program, she shared her goal of joining a sorority, emphasizing that this was an important part of her college journey. This conversation sparked a meaningful collaboration between the Office of Inclusive Post-Secondary Education (OIPE) and the university’s Office of Student Involvement as they worked to support her dream.

The OIPE team partnered closely with the Coordinator of Student Organizations and Fraternity & Sorority Life to break down the recruitment process, identifying potential challenges and exploring strategies to support students and their goals.

When the student received a bid to join her sorority, the collaboration between offices grew even stronger. The OIPE provided guidance to the Coordinator of Student Organizations and Fraternity & Sorority Life, focusing on empowering peers on the sorority or fraternity executive board to take the lead in offering direction and support to their fellow members, fostering a sense of community. In the event of any challenges, OIPE worked closely with the executive board to address concerns and provide tailored solutions. This sustained partnership not only enabled the student to thrive within her sorority but also set a precedent for supporting students with disabilities, creating a more adaptive Greek Life experience for all.

This journey of collaboration displays UMSL’s commitment to supporting their students’ ambitions and to cultivating a sense of belonging for all students in Greek Life. It serves as a powerful example of how one student’s determination can spark meaningful change and create pathways for others to succeed in a more positive environment.

—Madeline Siener,
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Greek Life organizations are complex, with unique structures, requirements, and cultural norms. Efforts to include students with intellectual disability in Greek Life may require a significant amount of time. Staff from postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability should be prepared to learn about Greek Life so they can educate other university and Greek Life staff about postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability.

Getting Started

It is important that staff from postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability understand the structure and culture of Greek Life at their institution. Greek Life, also commonly referred to as Fraternity and Sorority Life, typically resides within the Student Affairs or Campus Life department. This office manages the day-to-day operations of all Greek organizations, including recruitment, events, and adherence to campus policies.

Our community was able to bring this program to reality fairly quickly by leaning on our counterparts at other institutions that had already enacted a similar partnership... Open communication, transparency, and uniting around the shared goal of bringing more women [with and without disability] into the Panhellenic community helped us achieve success.

—Destiny Savage, Assistant Director of
Greek Life, Vanderbilt University

Greek Life staff can support staff from college programs for students with intellectual disability by helping them understand the unique structure of the Greek system at their institution and by identifying key collaborators for engagement. Education and collaboration are likely required at the individual chapter level, institutional level, and inter/national headquarters level.

Greek Life Organizational Structure

The organizational structure of Greek Life typically includes the following levels:

Level One: Chapter

Each fraternity or sorority chapter functions as a student organization with similar leadership roles, such as president, vice president, and chairs. Some chapters may have local leadership from alumni members, an advisor(s) from the university or alumni community, or residential staff who oversee daily operations of the Greek Life living facility.

Staff from programs for students with intellectual disability should ensure that chapter leaders are equipped to promote opportunities for students with intellectual disability. Peer mentors from these programs may assist with networking and facilitating peer-to-peer communication.

Level Two: College or University

In addition to the Office of Greek Life, college and university campuses have Greek Life councils that manage operations, uphold standards, and promote shared values of the university.

Staff from college programs for students with intellectual disability should facilitate access at the university level by agreeing upon authentic eligibility, recruitment, and membership processes. Specifically, staff should consider topics like eligibility requirements and how students can demonstrate meeting those requirements, facilitating an aligned and authentic process for students, establishing a natural peer and staff support structure, and addressing any challenges related to student matriculation status.

Level Three: Headquarters

Chapters also follow policies set by their national headquarters. These central organizations establish rules, guidelines, and standards for all chapters at each college or university. Headquarters oversee initiatives such as membership policies, philanthropy, alumni engagement, and traditions.

Lucy Salamon, Member of Delta Zeta at University of Missouri–St. Louis

Lucy's journey through sorority recruitment is marked by perseverance and personal growth. Although she participated in Continuous Open Bidding (COB) during her freshman year and faced disappointment when she did not receive a bid, she remained engaged on campus. She formed meaningful friendships that motivated her to try again. When Lucy went through recruitment during her sophomore year, she felt better prepared and ultimately received a bid from Delta Zeta. Being part of this sorority provided her with a strong sense of sisterhood and support. Lucy advises others navigating recruitment to, "be yourself, meet new people, and have fun." She acknowledges that the process can initially feel overwhelming, emphasizing the importance of contacting a trusted person from the Office of Student Involvement or the program for guidance.



Lucy and her Delta Zeta sisters showing their pride.

Types of Greek Life Organizations:

Greek Life organizations include a variety of groups that promote community and leadership among students.

National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) coordinates nine historically African American Greek letter organizations, fostering unity.

Interfraternity Council (IFC) oversees fraternities, facilitating collaboration and support among their members.

National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) advocates for sororities, providing resources and guidance to enhance their influence and positive impact on campus.

Multicultural and Intercultural Greek Councils (MGC/IGC) support identity-based and culturally-centered organizations, honoring diversity and inclusion within Greek Life.

Staff from college programs for students with intellectual disability may need to communicate directly with each chapter's headquarters or support their university's Greek Life office with communication. Staff from these programs should be prepared to discuss higher education for people with intellectual disability and its reciprocal benefits as well as engage in more detailed discussions about headquarters-level eligibility requirements and membership access.

It will be essential to facilitate awareness within each level of Greek Life during the development phase. Based on the level of existing awareness, staff from college programs for students with intellectual disability may need to introduce the topics of intellectual disability and postsecondary education. Examples of materials to prepare can include a program brochure about postsecondary education for students with disability, a Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) report, a PowerPoint about benefits and outcomes of postsecondary education for students with disability, videos introducing the program, an annual report, facts about postsecondary education students with disability, and examples of other types of campus membership and roles, such as club sports or student government.

Recruitment and Membership

When collaborating with individual chapters, the university Greek Life office, its councils, and chapter headquarters, certain topics may require additional negotiation. Many programs for students with intellectual disability with Greek Life offerings reported the need for strategic conversations related to eligibility requirements and affiliation types. Staff from these programs may want to connect with colleagues from similar programs through the Think College network to learn more.

Recruitment Access

To participate in Greek Life, students must meet specific eligibility requirements, which typically include:

- Full-time student status
- Minimum GPA (typically 2.5 or higher)
- Student conduct check
- Ability to complete recruitment process

Staff from programs for students with intellectual disability may need to demonstrate student status and GPA requirements in alternate ways.

Student Status: Approaches to demonstrate full-time student status may include presenting the program of study, explaining the significance of Certified Transition Programs, comparing student clock hours required by the program to those required of full-time traditionally matriculated students, working with the

registrar to code students as full-time, or collaborating with Student Affairs to establish a memorandum of understanding (MOU) granting students full access to all student organizations.

GPA: Approaches to demonstrate academic performance can include using student evaluation scores, progress reports, grades from program classes, or other evaluation measures to demonstrate satisfactory academic standing. University and headquarters staff may be most receptive to processes that align with those used for bachelor's degree-seeking students, such as student transcripts, a 4.0 evaluation scale, or documentation from the university registrar or enrollment management system.

Another consideration with Greek Life access is affiliation type. Some students in these programs join Greek organizations through varying levels of affiliation. Having a familiarity with affiliations can aid students and organizations in navigating Greek Life and enhancing their campus experience. Understanding the distinct types of membership, such as **Local Membership**, **Inter/National Membership**, and **Alum/na Status**, assists programs and students with recognizing resources and opportunities available based on affiliation.

Local Membership: A new or initiated member has local membership when their fraternity or sorority is not affiliated with an inter/national fraternity or sorority. For example, “I am a member of Theta Pi Sorority at my university.”

Inter/National Membership: A new or initiated member has inter/national membership when their fraternity or sorority is affiliated with an inter/national fraternity or sorority. Inter/national fraternities and sororities at colleges and universities are often referred to as “chapters.” For example, “I am a member of the Epsilon Tau Chapter of Kappa Delta Sorority at our college.” Most students in programs for students with intellectual disability affiliate at this membership level.

Alumnus/na Status: An initiated member of a fraternity or sorority who is no longer a matriculate of the university and as a result,

no longer involved as a collegiate member. In other words, once a collegiate member graduates, they will no longer be involved as a collegiate member and will transition to “alumnus/na status.” Membership is lifelong—once a member becomes an alumnus/na of their organization, there will be different types of opportunities to engage and connect, which varies by organization.

Recruitment Training & Supports

Training

Greek Life initiatives should have existing education for members, potential new members, and Greek Life peer supports like recruitment counselors. When possible, programs should leverage these existing resources to integrate knowledge about disability etiquette and about peer relationships with students with intellectual disabilities, rather than creating separate training sessions. This approach is more efficient. Programs that include students with disability may consider offering training to groups like Student Affairs staff, Greek Life staff, Greek Life Councils, recruitment counselors, and current Greek Life members.

Training may include education about promoting respect and dignity of people with intellectual disability, example supports or accommodations specific to Greek Life, information about postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability, and evidence about the reciprocal benefits of this type of program on college campuses. Additionally, accessibility principles like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can help chapters improve recruitment and membership processes for all students.

Supports

Greek Life has existing staff and peer support for prospective and current chapter members. Students with intellectual disability should use these supports during recruitment, new member, and membership processes. Through additional training from the program, these existing supports can effectively facilitate recruitment and membership processes and address student concerns that may arise.

Typical supports include:

- **Greek Life staff:** oversee all chapters, deliver education and training, provide accommodations, and develop accessibility protocols.
- **Recruitment Counselors:** guide students through the recruitment process and offer support to all prospective members.
- **Peer Chapter Support:** facilitate new member education programming, provide mentorship of members (i.e., “big sister,” or “chapter family”), and lead chapter initiatives through executive board.

Recruitment Access

Involvement in Greek Life requires time and financial commitments unique from other student organizations. It is important students understand these obligations before entering the recruitment process, and consider balancing academic, career, and other existing social commitments.

Greek Life dues can cost several thousand dollars per semester, with most organizations charging members each semester. Need-based financial support is typically available. Students who live in Greek-sponsored university housing will likely pay additional fees. Chapters may also have optional purchases, such as apparel, events, and member experiences. To ensure transparency, many chapters publish their dues each semester.

Additionally, membership in Greek organizations often requires a larger time commitment than other student organizations. New member experiences typically involve additional evening and weekend educational training and activities. Ongoing membership may require attendance at weekly chapter meetings, special chapter events, philanthropic activities, and optional social gatherings.

In addition to the information and training provided by Greek Life staff to all students interested in involvement, staff from programs that include students with intellectual disability may want to provide supplemental training to ensure their students make an informed choice. This could include conversations with advisors,

one-page summaries of financial costs and expected time commitments, interviews with peer mentors currently involved in Greek Life, or follow-up meetings with Greek Life staff to address questions in a smaller setting.

Recruitment Processes

Recruitment processes will vary by chapter and school. Recruitment can span several days, with each day requiring many hours of engagement. Students may expect to have suggested dress codes, meet several members of each chapter in one-on-one or small group conversations, and hear presentations or performances from a chapter.

“Every student going through recruitment will have different needs. As a recruitment counselor, attention can be given to how all students will move from house to house, where they will spend their break times, where they will input house selections, and how they will keep track/take notes of their experience in each house. Some students may not be familiar with the recruitment process and the language surrounding it, so it is important to communicate every aspect of recruitment in an accessible way with all students in your group so they can accurately advocate.”

—Vanessa Torano, Panhellenic Recruitment Counselor, Vanderbilt University

Additionally, some recruitment structures require prospective members to narrow down their choices after each round or day. Students going through recruitment must make decisions about which chapters they feel most connected to. Similarly, chapters will also narrow down their selections and decide which students to invite back for the next round. Part of this process involves the possibility that a chapter a student prefers may not choose them.

In addition to the training and natural support offered by Greek Life staff and peers, students with intellectual disability may need additional supports or accommodations. Staff from programs for students with intellectual disability should prepare students to self-

advocate through methods such as listing support needs on application forms, advocating for accommodations with recruitment counselors and Greek Life staff, or role-playing scenarios for impromptu advocacy.

Additionally, staff from these programs may support students in advocating for accommodations or modifications from Greek Life staff. Some examples include helping students request sensory-friendly spaces within houses, asking for the ability to sit when needed, seeking quieter spaces for one-on-one or group conversations, or modifying the recruitment schedule. Staff may also develop individualized supports with students, such as visual examples of attire, individualized schedules, printed maps of houses, or plain language adaptations of materials.

Membership Supports

While there are inherent risks associated with joining any college social group, Greek organizations on campus have well-documented risk factors, such as hazing, alcohol abuse, and sexual violence (Scott-Sheldon et al., 2008). Incidents due to these risks are well-documented in articles and media in which action is taken against students, and Greek organizations have been suspended or removed from campus altogether. Institutions of higher education have implemented many policies governing student organizations, including Greek organizations, which help to mitigate the risks of binge drinking, hazing, and other related behaviors (Rosenberg et al., 2016).

Most Greek Life offices require trainings to mitigate these risks. Staff from programs for students with intellectual disability can offer additional support by creating plain language materials to supplement the trainings, supporting the student as they complete the trainings, offering space for students to ask questions or check for understanding, or setting up additional learning opportunities with campus offices, such as Centers for

Wellbeing and Safety, Counseling Centers, and the Title IX Office. It is important students understand the risks, know how to avoid them, and are aware how to file reports if necessary.

“If you’re interested in students joining your chapter from your campus program, the partnership with your inter/national organization is a key step. This provides an opportunity for chapter leaders, advisors, and campus partners to collaborate and together, provide the best experience possible for all members. We’ve seen students flourish and become some of the most active and involved members of their chapters, embrace every aspect of the membership experience, and even take on leadership positions! When partnering together, you can evaluate your leadership structure and chapter programming, and discuss processes and strategy for engagement and support. We all have the same goal—to foster a sense of belonging to every single member.”

*—Jennifer Bailey, Greek Life Staff,
National Headquarters Kappa Delta*

Once a student joins a Greek organization, many of the activities and materials will be exclusive to chapter members to protect the customs and rituals. Students will primarily rely on natural supports within the chapter, many of which include mentorship models like “big sister” or “chapter family.” Training Greek Life peers on accessibility, along with helping students develop self-advocacy skills, can help ensure students receive the support they need. Students and their peers should also know how to ask questions or seek additional training opportunities from Greek Life and staff from their program if needed. Peer mentors or graduate assistants from programs for students with intellectual disability can also be valuable resources for peer-to-peer campus involvement support.

Conclusion

Students with intellectual disability who are enrolled in postsecondary education programs should have access to the experiences and outcomes Greek organizations offer. Likewise, Greek Life chapters can experience reciprocal growth and more enriching communities by including students with intellectual disability. Through thoughtful planning, training, and collaboration, more college campuses with programs for students with intellectual disability can experience the benefits of Greek Life.

Thoughts from the Authors

The development of this kind of pathway at Clemson University began in spring 2016 with the enrollment of one ClemsonLIFE young woman. Since then, more than 60 ClemsonLIFE students have joined the Greek community, encompassing both fraternities and sororities. The initiative, which has been completely student-driven, was made possible by a strong collaboration between the fraternity-sorority life administration, Greek student population, and the ClemsonLIFE program. The administration played a critical role in ensuring that ClemsonLIFE students followed the same recruitment and rush process as all other students with minor modifications.

One key challenge was navigating the national Greek organizations eligibility criteria of ClemsonLIFE students, given there was concern over the definition of “fully matriculated” status. As more students with disability join the Greek community, the process of navigating barriers like the “fully matriculated” status or GPA requirements has become increasingly more lenient. With each new student joining, the Greek community becomes more familiar with better practices, seeking ways to foster a stronger relationship between students with intellectual disability and national Greek organizations. The continued success of these initial experiences has not only helped in addressing previous challenges but has created a more supportive environment for future students, ensuring their seamless integration and full participation in all aspects of Greek Life.

Today, ClemsonLIFE students have become integral members of over a dozen sororities and fraternities, claiming leadership roles; representing the chapters in collegiate events; and participating in recruitment, philanthropy events, and chapter meetings. They also participate in all the training sessions provided to the Greek community, including those focused on alcohol, hazing, and sexual violence prevention, ensuring they received the same comprehensive preparation as their peers. Through these efforts, the Greek community at Clemson has fostered a positive environment, full of opportunity. A common expression from the traditional students has been “I thought I was going to change his life...and he in fact changed mine”...

[Watch the video, Clemson Fraternity Embraces Student in Intellectual Disability Program.](#)

—Erica Walters, Clemson University



Lauren, Alyssa, Brice, and Jessica, members of Kappa Delta at Clemson University.

Additional Resources:

The [Sorority Life](#) is maintained by the [National Panhellenic Conference \(NPC\)](#) and is the world's largest trade association specifically charged with advancing the sorority experience.

[The North American Interfraternity Conference \(NIC\)](#) is a trade association that represents national and international men's fraternities on campuses in the United States and Canada.

[The National Pan-Hellenic Council \(NPHC\)](#), also known as the "Divine Nine," fosters cooperative actions of its members in dealing with matters of mutual concern.

[The Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors \(AFA\)](#) elevates the standard for effective professional practice in working with sororities and fraternities in higher education.

See also [Inclusion in Greek Life](#), a recorded Think College affinity group meeting featuring a conversation between Chelsea Stinnett, current Think College Technical Assistance Coordinator and formerly at the University of South Carolina; Rebecca Holloway, Director at Union EDGE; Vanderbilt University's Director of Greek Life, Destiny Savage; and Next Steps at Vanderbilt peer mentor Greek Life Liaison, Emily Gothelf.

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