

Sorority

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Pledge Prep



Cary Norton for The New York Times

Pat Grant, left, and Marlea Foster coach a client on the dos and don'ts of sorority rush, which at many campuses begins in August.

By ABIGAIL SULLIVAN MOORE

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MARGARET KING of Birmingham, Ala., was at a loss about how to help her older daughter prepare to rush at the University of Virginia. In the South, where sororities have

long been a momentous rite of passage, the road to sisterhood is long and not so clearly marked.

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Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Alpha Delta Pi members talk up the Greek life at freshman orientation at George Washington University.

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A swatch from Lilly Pulitzer's "Sorority Line" of clothing.

So Mrs. King, who graduated from Yale in 1984, before it had any sororities, enlisted the aid of Marlea Foster and Pat Grant, local consultants who had coached their own daughters through rush at Furman, the University of Georgia and Auburn University. Naming themselves the [Rushbiddies](#), they opened shop in 2009 after hearing about the rush misfortunes of their daughters' friends. About 50 mothers and their "chicks," as the Biddies affectionately call them, attended one of their two-day workshops in April (\$100 a couple), complete with mock rush party, wardrobe hints and paperwork prep.

And there is a mound of it. The smart rushee, the Biddies advise, will have a résumé stressing community service, leadership, academics and teamwork, letters of recommendation from alumnae of each chapter, preferably on the campus in question, and reference letters.

With the help of Ms. Foster and Ms. Grant, who wears a pink feather boa during workshops, Mrs. King asked alumnae of about 10 chapters, several from U.Va., to write her daughter's recommendations. To guide their plaudits, she sent them packets with a professional photograph, transcript and résumé. To thank them, she dropped off a bottle of rosé in their mailboxes.

The rush proved successful, but, she says, "I'm just glad I didn't have four daughters."

For a generation that grew up on tutors, admission counselors and relentless competition, prepping for rush seems only natural. A mini-industry of blogs, Web sites, books and consultants now helps them prepare for sorority recruitment and all its fallout, professionalizing what was once left to older siblings.

Samantha von Sperling is an image consultant in New York, but lately her bread-and-butter Wall Street clients have asked her to help their daughters get ready for rush at schools like Harvard; the University of Wisconsin, Madison; and New York University, which has added three chapters since 2006 and more than doubled the number of sisters, to 570.

"It's the same kind of coaching I do on Wall Street," Ms. von Sperling says.

Sororities are emerging in surprising force at campuses not usually associated with the Greek tradition. Students raised on Facebook and fears about post-college careers view sororities as the ultimate social network and an extension of the community service begun in high school. Nationwide, membership is up, growing a bit more than 15 percent from 2008 to 2011, to 285,543 undergraduates, according to the [National Panhellenic Conference](#), which represents 26 old-line sororities.

Twenty-eight percent of female undergraduates at George Washington University last semester were Greek, about double that in 2006; at Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, Pa., the number reached a high of 50 percent; at the University of Rochester, 22 percent; at the University of Pennsylvania, 29 percent.

Though new chapters are being added and membership expanded, competition is palpable for hot sororities. "The most sought-after organizations aren't able to keep up with the demand," says Matt Supple, director of Greek life at the University of Maryland, which recently added a new chapter.

Which sororities get the most first-choice rankings is a closely guarded secret.

"Sorority recruitment is like no other experience that you will ever have for the rest of your life," says Sunday Tollefson, author of ["Rush Right: Reveal Your Best You During](#)

[Sorority Recruitment.](#)” “It’s like speed dating meets interviewing meets beauty pageant meets upscale academic summer camp, complete with a counselor.”

Rush often begins in August or early fall — for January rush, substitute Uggs for fashionable flats. At the University of Mississippi, which has nine sororities, all candidates attend a first-round “philanthropy” event at each chapter that includes learning about its charitable work. Candidates can visit up to six chapters on the second round, depending on how many invite them to return, and three on the final.

In the early rounds, they have only minutes to make a positive impression. The trick, says Ms. Tollefson, whose Web site, [SureSister.com](#), aims to demystify rush, is to be memorable for 10 minutes after each event. That’s when sororities typically decide who will be cut.

Appealing facial expressions, confident body language and good conversational skills are critical. “Practice, practice, practice in the mirror, saying your name, and see what you look like when you listen,” advises [Denise Pietzsch](#), an etiquette consultant in Ohio who works discreetly with clients heading to Miami University. “If you’re a great active listener, they will remember you because you let them talk.” Her typical fee: \$125 an hour.

Ms. von Sperling offers a Friday-to-Sunday intensive, for \$8,000. One day is devoted to carrying yourself properly and the art of conversation. Treat rush, she says, as you would a job interview. Avoid politics and religion. “I teach them how to make interesting small talk: what you saw at the cinema, a trip to Europe. I don’t know too many 20-year-olds who are having a debate about economics.” Another day is for getting physically ready — hair, makeup and wardrobe. Ms. von Sperling organizes “outfits down to accessories, completely strategized.” Just in case a client forgets, outfits are photographed and placed in a style file.

When Rachel Lewis was president of Alpha Chi Omega at the University of Kansas, parents asked: “Should I buy all J. Crew clothing? Do they need designer purses?” Ms. Lewis, a 2010 graduate, recently wrote [“Recruitment 101: an Insider’s Guide to Sorority Recruitment”](#) and started up [Sorority Corner](#), a membership-based Web site. Her advice: “Dress like you are meeting your boyfriend’s parents. If it’s too short or too tight or too out there, it won’t impress.”

Sundresses by Lilly Pulitzer, the designer of happily hued clothing, are particularly popular for August rush. Two years ago, the company introduced the “Sorority Line” — totes, scarves, makeup bags and the like — using chapters’ colors and symbols. Sales are

strongest in the South: “OBSESSED! E-mailing this to the entire Gamma Psi chapter at Wofford College!” gushed one fan on the company Facebook page.

The Rushbiddies host a fashion workshop at Saks Fifth Avenue in Birmingham; they also give individual consultations. In late May, they visited a client’s home in an affluent Birmingham cul-de-sac for a final session. They reviewed paperwork, dispensed advice and vetted dresses for August rush at Auburn. “This I love,” exclaimed Ms. Grant of a one-shoulder black cocktail dress destined for the last rush event. “It’s not too over the top.” And shoes? “Black strappy sandals,” said Ms. Foster.

During the session, the rushee, Mallie, who did not want her full name published because it might affect her chances, was mostly quiet, worn out by her recent finals. Her mother took notes and asked questions. Later, Mallie talked about rush: “It’s going to be stressful — not only making a decision for the next four years but for friends you will have for the rest of your life.” Because the experience can be so emotional, consultants provide “on-call services.”

Many aspiring sisters spend their summer working out and dieting. “Rushing shakes your confidence level,” says Maggie, who also spoke on condition she not be fully identified. She will soon be heading to Washington & Lee, and is trying to lose weight. “You are being judged on how you look,” she says. Case in point: A study of Northwestern undergraduates in a normal weight range, published in 2010, showed the thinner women more likely to join a sorority.

As rush grinds on, students often text their moms with frequent, sometimes tearful updates. “Drama Trauma Drama,” wrote one weary mother on a Greek chat forum. For some mothers, empathizing with the pain of peer rejection is excruciating.

“I lost six pounds that week,” recalls Julie Baselice, whose daughter Christina is now a Chi Omega at the University of Texas. “It was the most stressful experience of my life.” As for Christina, she is grateful for the counsel of [Marjorie Burciaga](#), an Austin, Tex., consultant, on how to handle herself during recruitment events. “It’s so easy to go in there and start talking, talking, talking,” she says. “You need to learn how to have a filter.”

Many students who don’t get asked back by their dream sorority during the early rounds walk away from recruitment altogether. Last year at the University of Virginia, 27 percent left during January rush. Students often have their hearts set on a particular house, says Michael J. Citro, the assistant dean of students.

Or a rushee might limit herself to the house her mother belonged to (legacy status is a plus but no guarantee of a bid). Ms. Burciaga encourages her clients to keep an open mind

about chapters they visit. “I talk to them about what seems like a good fit for them,” she says.

One obvious reason for rejection is inadequate grades. At the national level, sororities set a grade-point average, and individual sororities often raise the bar. Beyond that, candidates can rarely discern why a sorority rejects them.

Madeline D’Arcambal Braun, a Manhattan native entering her junior year at Indiana University Bloomington, says she had “absolutely no idea” why she wasn’t asked back. She dropped out of rush freshman year after the houses she wanted didn’t invite her back. “It’s exactly like a breakup. That’s how this feels.”

Indiana is reputed to have one of the toughest rushes. Parents have complained on the Sorority Parents blog, operated by the National Panhellenic Conference, that space is too limited. Last year, a little more than half of the 1,718 women at Indiana who registered for recruitment joined a sorority; about 800 either didn’t continue or did not receive a bid. Possible reasons, say university officials: inadequate grades, student dissatisfaction with the chapters that chose them and vice versa, or not enough spaces.

This past year, the nonresidential sorority Theta Phi Alpha was added to expand slots, becoming the 20th chapter at Indiana. Ms. Braun decided to give this one a whirl, and joined sophomore year. “It’s awesome,” she says. “I’m always raving about it.” Another nonresidential chapter, Alpha Sigma Alpha, is coming this fall.

Rush at George Washington University is a different ballgame. No résumés are needed. Nor are alumnae letters of recommendation or references. Requiring them “is ludicrous,” says Sara Fischer, who as president of the G.W. Panhellenic Association last year helped bring an 11th sorority to campus. “G.W. is not this kind of place.”

There aren’t a lot of legacies at G.W.; students are not drawn there for its Greek life. “Most come to school with a bad idea of sororities, like hazing,” said Marta Cofone, current Panhellenic president, struggling to be heard over the throb of Katy Perry at a meet-the-Greeks event during new-student orientation last month. Last year, a G.W. sorority lost its housing after an alcohol-fueled hazing incident.

“I wasn’t even going to join,” Ms. Cofone said, but the group leader she met at orientation was a “smart, intelligent and interesting person,” and Greek.

Several sorority members from New York and New Jersey, clustered at the Sigma Delta Tau table that night, recalled their mothers’ collective shock at their decision to go Greek. But, says Ms. Fischer, “being in a sorority is the best way to network.” She credits her Greek contacts with helping her secure an apartment, jobs and internships. She and others

also attribute the recent growth of their sorority to recruiting a broad swath of women. “You’ll see that same set of Greek letters on someone with a nose piercing,” Ms. Cofone said, referring to the chapters’ names emblazoned on members’ T-shirts and caps. “That’s why it’s so successful.”

Valerie Berg, vice president of recruitment at G.W., notes that if students are open to any sorority who wants them, nearly all will get a bid. No prepping required.

Still, the elements of competition persist. Anticipating questions about October’s rush, Ms. Berg recently updated the sororities’ Facebook page. The topic: what to expect and what to wear on each day.

Abigail Sullivan Moore is co-author of “The iConnected Parent: Staying Close to Your Kids in College (and Beyond) While Letting Them Grow Up.”