



BETA THETA PI



A TALE OF CONFLICTING CATEGORIZATION

Beta Theta Pi is a North American fraternity. Over its 175 year history, it has faced a number of tensions between categorization contexts during their creation and subsequent use. As people at universities continue to question the relevance of Greek letter organizations on college campuses, a closer look at these categorizations and the history that informs them can ease the confusion between them and establish some harmony among the various contexts.

CATEGORIZATION CONTEXTS INCLUDE:



Cultural categories are formed through everyday experiences, without explicit instruction. Cultural categorization of fraternities and sororities tends to be informed by news media, movies, and other instances of pop culture.

CULTURAL



Individual categories get generated based on individual experiences and preferences. Individual categorization in greek life is informed by membership in a greek organization - here, membership in beta theta pi.

INDIVIDUAL



Institutional categories tend to form consciously and explicitly, typically for the purpose of regulation or establishing more coherent semantic meaning. Greek life's institutional category exists on both the national and university level.

INSTITUTIONAL

BEFORE BETA

1717



FREEMASONS

1776



PHI BETA KAPPA

1809



UNION LITERARY SOCIETY

1839



BETA THETA PI

Formally founded in London in the year 1717, the Freemasons trace their roots back to the Renaissance and the guilds of the stonemasons. While older secret societies exist, Americans' fascination with European secret societies often led them to the masons; subsequently, many elements of freemasonry are seen in Greek letter organizations, including lodges (typically called chapters) and many traditions in the organization's ritual - the ceremony in which new initiates learn about the organizations values, heraldry, and history.

Founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary, Phi Beta Kappa is recognized as the first Greek letter organization. Its letters represent the motto *"philosophia biou kybernetēs"*, translating to "philosophy is the guide of life." Although PBK kickstarted the creation of both literary societies and Greek letter organizations on American campuses, its own early expansion to Yale and Harvard caused it to evolve from a social organization to a pure honor society, instead. Despite - or perhaps because - of this shift, students studying the liberal arts and sciences still seek out membership to Phi Beta Kappa.

The Union Literary Society was founded at Washington College. Literary societies acted as the primary extracurricular activity for students at most universities, offering large libraries, debate, and opportunities for public speaking. Most students were involved in a literary society, leading to intense rivalries. Many aspects of literary societies persist in Greek letter organizations, perhaps most notably in their very namesakes - enrollment at a university involved fluency in classical Greek, meaning all students would be familiar with the letters of the organization.

Half of the founding fathers of Beta Theta Pi were members of the Erodelphean Literary Society, while the other half belonged to the Union Literary Society. John Reilly Knox, president of the Union Literary Society at the time, expressed interest in forming a secret society, and recruited the other 7 members to join him. "At nine o'clock on the evening on the eighth day of the eighth month of the year 1839," the eight founders held the first meeting and signed the first minutes of Beta Theta Pi.

A NEW CATEGORY

Early in their history, Greek letter organizations emulate secret societies and literary societies. Their place in college campuses distances them from most of society, meaning that the cultural category looks homogenous - and of course, only members of the organization know anything about their inner workings and business.

CULTURAL


'the history of many of these secret associations had always possessed a charm for me... Revolutions have been accomplished and despots dethroned by the united action of small but daring associations'
- John Reilly Knox
on the origins of Beta Theta Pi.

Individual


Much like literary societies, Greek letter organizations are an extracurricular activity like any other. They are loosely organized by students, and operate 'under the radar' of the university, withholding documentation and information about membership.

INSTITUTIONAL


EARLY HISTORY




alpha delta pi, 1851
first fraternity for women



sigma chi, 1855
final organization in the "Miami Triad"




gamma phi beta, 1882
first organization to identify as sorority



zeta beta tau, 1898
first fraternity for Jewish men

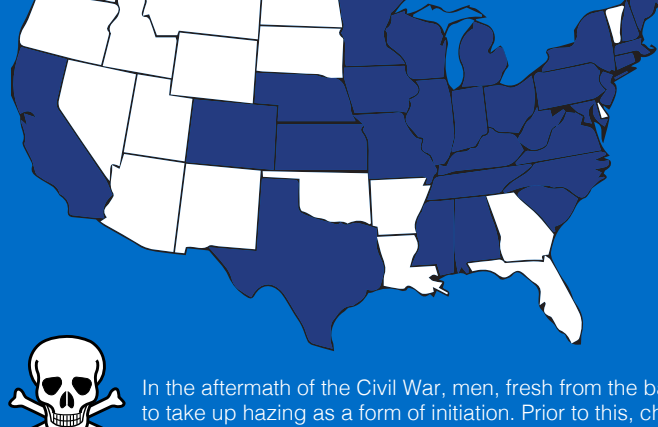
MEANWHILE, IN BETA...



The Civil War hits fraternities particularly hard; half of all of Beta's chapters close, and brothers end up fighting on both sides of the conflict. Despite their rivalry, Union Betas are known to have held special burials for Confederate members of the organization, leading to the legend of the "Beta brothers in blue."

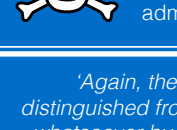
1st

fraternity to publish its constitution and stand by a public mission statement (1877). Many expected the organization to fall apart; instead, many of the fraternity's rivals followed suit, and open constitutions became the norm across fraternities and sororities.



By 1900, Beta has chapters in almost 30 states, often as a result of mergers with other organizations. This includes the Hebrew-based Mystic Seven Society (Davidson, North Carolina, Virginia) and Alpha Sigma Chi (Cornell, Maine, Rutgers, Stevens, St. Lawrence).

College administrators begin to take notice as more alumni have favorable reviews of the university based on their Greek experience.



In the aftermath of the Civil War, men, fresh from the battlefield and military training, begin to take up hazing as a form of initiation. Prior to this, chapter consensus was sufficient for admission into the fraternity.

Greek life slowly becomes more accepting over the course of the 19th century; the Aredelphian society makes way Alpha Delta Pi, and Sigma Chi's expansion alongside the rest of the Miami Triad marks Greek life as truly national. Gamma Phi Beta establishes a new type of organization for women (sororities), and Zeta Beta Tau undermines the Christian norm by forming a Jewish fraternity.

CULTURAL

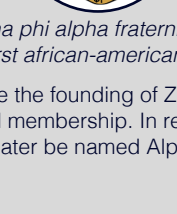
'Again, the Beta is distinguishable and distinguished from all other kinds of fraternity men whatsoever by just a little warmer and stronger, just a little tenderer and more enduring fraternity feeling than any of them can attain to... The first mark of a Beta will be his Beta Spirit.'
- Willis O. Robb
on the characteristics of Betas and fraternity.

INDIVIDUAL

Greek letter organizations have a degree of notoriety with college administration; many Greeks face expulsion as punishment for maintaining their membership. As organizations become more transparent with formal constitutions and administrators notice increased donations from affiliated alumni, administrators begin to ease their restrictions.

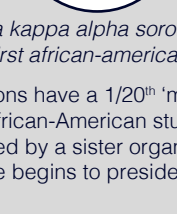
INSTITUTIONAL

THE WAR YEARS

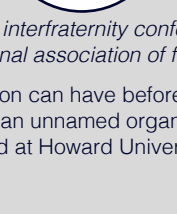


alpha phi alpha fraternity, inc
1906, first african-american fraternity


Despite the founding of ZBT in 1898, many Greek organizations have a 1/20th 'maximum' on the Jewish blood a person can have before being denied membership. In response to similar discrimination, African-American students at Cornell University establish an unnamed organization that will later be named Alpha Phi Alpha. They are soon followed by a sister organization, Alpha Kappa Alpha, founded at Howard University. The National Interfraternity Conference begins to preside over fraternities on a national level.



alpha kappa alpha sorority, inc
1908, first african-american sorority

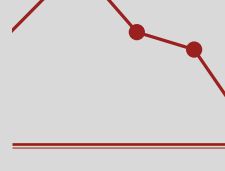


national interfraternity conference
1909, national association of fraternities




THE BETA CAMPANILE - 1941

100 years after its founding, the president of Beta Theta Pi commissioned four bells inscribed with "Beta", "Theta", "Pi" and "1839-1939" and placed them in Old Main, the location of the founding. By 1940, sufficient funds had been raised to build the Beta Campanile, and the building was dedicated in 1941.




Around WWI, references to the word "fraternity" begin to decline in books and literature. While many of these references are generated from chapter histories and records, the decline reaches another low after WWII, and continues decrease until the 1980s.



12%

The first mission statement notes that members are committed to "the building up of a fraternity that recognizes... devotion to the cultivation of the intellect." By 1935, 1,370 Betas were recognized as members of Phi Beta Kappa; this was over 12% of Betas graduating from universities with Phi Beta Kappa chapters. Prior to 1949, Betas were also the only surveyed NIC fraternity to claim a GPA higher than the all-male average on their respective campuses.



In 1949, the fraternity established its first administrative office and hired its first Administrative Secretary. The national convention minutes heavily emphasized that the administrative office was meant to formalize the recordkeeping efforts of the fraternity.

Fraternities are now a major part of the collegiate experience, with men "rushing" to the trains to recruit new members. Although individual organizations aren't fully integrated, Greek life as a holistic entity refers to a more diverse collection of individuals.

CULTURAL

'we can plan for the second century of Beta Theta Pi with the certain knowledge that your fraternity and mine is worth of a place among the institutions that are contributing effectively to the upbuilding of our country and to the advancement and peace of the world.'
- Harold J. Bailey
on the future endeavors of Beta Theta Pi.

INDIVIDUAL

Greek life is finding more national organization; with the establishment of the National Interfraternity Conference, the first true institutional categories begin to form. Similarly, the establishment of the Administrative Office creates the opportunity to further formalize the institutional category of the fraternity.

INSTITUTIONAL

POST-WAR



Sixty years ago, Bill Lowry (Kenyon University '56) becomes the first black man initiated into Beta Theta Pi. Following this controversial move, various other chapters begin to ratify their constitutions. Lowry mentions, "My acceptance by the group was not expected, wasn't necessary, and frankly, was detested by many. However, despite the rather daunting times, the men of the Beta Alpha chapter of Beta Theta Pi were able to exercise an objectivity and open-mindedness that I had never experienced."



University students become increasingly independent, with the 1960s referred to as "the time of the individual." Nationwide, fraternities see a decline in membership, but continue to persevere. The combination of historic elitism, hazing practices, and general post-war hedonism create unsavory organizations for members and campuses alike.



Undergraduates take steps to create more effective risk management, becoming the first fraternity to condemn drug use. Open parties became outlawed, and the fraternity developed holistic risk management policies and an overarching insurance policy to address litigation fraternities faced with increasing frequency.



Animal House (1978) shows the startling post-1950s dichotomy of Greek letter organizations: incubators for privilege and hedonism, depending on the house. Far from inaccurate, Animal House tried to observe a fraternity house party... And ended up in a brawl with the organization.



phi iota alpha
1931, first fraternity for latino men



mu sigma upsilon
1981, first multicultural sorority



delta lambda phi
1986, first fraternity for gay men



kappa phi lambda
1995, sorority for asian women

Greek life becomes more accepting than ever, but the increasingly individualistic culture makes the conformity of Greek letter organizations polarizing to the majority of potential new members. As the politicization of fraternities falls away, however, movies like *Animal House* portray a new, negative picture of Greek life that persists to this day.

CULTURAL

'Fraternity men, in the late 1960s, were assumed to be rich, well-dressed, thick necked, thin skinned, racist morons who took easy classes and didn't care about anything beyond Friday's keg party. Most of the frat men didn't fit the stereotype, although the men in the Beta Theta Pi house, directly across the street from Cloyne, did.'

- Cloyne, *A Personal History*

INDIVIDUAL

Undergraduates take some steps in terms of legislation, but overall institutional categorization lacks the vigor of the war years. Campuses across the country close chapters swiftly, with little tolerance for the increasingly entitled and immature behaviors associated with Greek life.

INSTITUTIONAL

MEN OF PRINCIPLE



PLEDGING ABOLISHED - ZETA BETA TAU 1989

Zeta Beta Tau announces a plan to abolish the pledging process, which has roots in the post-Civil War, in an effort to reduce hazing. New members are initiated immediately, and receive all rights and responsibilities of a member.

BALANCED MAN - SIGMA PHI EPSILON 1991

Abolishes the pledging process, encourages year-round recruitment, and promotes the ideals of "a sound body and sound mind." First implemented at the Alpha chapter at Dartmouth college; currently adopted by 85% of chapters around the nation.

MEN OF PRINCIPLE - BETA THETA PI 1999

Introduced after three years of planning. Removes alcohol from the recruitment process, requires better chapter advising, and creates guidelines for a hazing-free pledging process. Creates a national divide between pre- and post-Men of Principle chapters, with many of the former facing indefinite suspension. The founding Alpha chapter is closed in 2013, alongside the Omega chapter at Berkeley.

THE TRUE GENTLEMAN - SIGMA ALPHA EPSILON 2014

In the aftermath of a hazing-related death, SAE becomes the most recent fraternity to abolish pledging in accordance with its Creed, *The True Gentleman*. Releases supplementary material with a number of guidelines and best practices for removing the pledging process from existing chapters. The effectiveness of this measure remains to be seen.

“BETA THETA PI is dedicated to building men of principle for a principled life. Our brotherhood aids the individual, builds the Fraternity, and strengthens the host academic institution through lifelong devotion to intellectual excellence, high standards of moral conduct and responsible citizenship.”

-THE MISSION OF MEN OF PRINCIPLE

IN THE NEWS

A woman from the Delta Gamma Fraternity for Women sends her chapter a lambasting email about getting involved on campus; the email is later leaked, bringing up the question of what effective leadership looks like. An listserv email talking about date rape, "scoping out" women, and comparing women to different kinds of pie is leaked. Emails from the Snapchat CEO's fraternity days leak, displaying misogynistic attitudes and irresponsible drug and alcohol policies. A pledge of Pi Delta Psi dies in hazing related incident, and five chapters at the University of Connecticut are closed due to hazing allegations. Incidents continue ad infinitum.

Hazing and alcohol deaths continue to occur, and an unsettling number of Greeks find themselves making headlines for behavior that typically falls under the umbrella of misogynistic, irresponsible, rude, vulgar, or any combination of the above. Greek life tends to be invoked for easy characterization by way of the 'frat star' or 'sorority girl' tropes.

CULTURAL

I believe in the power of the mind, cultivating my own intellect and the minds of others... I recognize and respect the worth of each person, refusing to take part in activities that undermine the dignity of others or myself... I speak honestly, and listen actively. I seek the company of other men of principle, extending to them the bonds of brotherhood. I build bridges, not walls. I am a Beta.

INDIVIDUAL

Most administrations recognize that Greek life as a category has changed dramatically. In some ways, this is a good thing, with more diverse groups identifying as Greek, and many Greeks still standing out as high-achieving students. Multiple efforts, like UIFI, FuturesQuest, LeaderShape, and Beta's Wooden Institute advocate for values-based Greek leadership.

INSTITUTIONAL

A TALE OF CONFLICTING CATEGORIES

What does it mean to be in a fraternity or sorority? During their creation, it meant being a holdout, college-educated white male. Over time, the definition expanded to include any number of identities - and on a personal level, the Greek label holds unique and wildly variant meanings from person to person. Oftentimes, the institutional category (created by the organizations) is in conflict with the cultural expectation to have wild parties, rowdy and dangerous hazing, and advocate hypergendered behaviors. In recent years, however, the institutional idea of Greek life has come to a head, offering an opportunity to better represent what it means to be a member of Greek life - and of course, in my case, what it means to be a brother of Beta Theta Pi!

REFERENCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST!