

LIVING THE CHI OMEGA SYMPHONY

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I first heard the words of *The Symphony* as a prospective Chi Omega in 1969—six decades after they were written. The late 1960s and early 1970s were tumultuous years on my campus, Ohio University, and on campuses around the country. My undergraduate and graduate students today are amazed by my stories of sometimes violent campus protests, contentious disagreements with administrators, and outright derision of the Greek community and other traditional activities. In the midst of the fascinating but chaotic environment of those years, I recall the calming effect of our *Symphony's* timeless prose advocating hope, encouragement, and unwavering loyalty to the unifying democratic, scholarly purposes of our Fraternity. Then and now, I and thousands of others have been inspired by the powerful image of *The Symphony*. As Chi Omegas we are called to rise above our own solo performance to contribute to a harmonious blend of instruments that portrays both high standards and helpfulness. *The Symphony* is an inspirational element of our Sisterhood and the deceptively simple words of our creed provide practical guidance to resolve troubling, messy ethical dilemmas.

Current realities

Let's fast-forward nearly 40 years to our current millennium. The enduring values of *The Symphony* remain essential guides to ethical and moral decision making. Fraternal leaders, college administrators, parents, and student communities are all concerned about the confusing ethical landscape that students (and those who care about their character development) must navigate. Consider the following trends:

- Even though fraternal groups and college administrators have devoted enormous time and resources to creating more stringent alcohol enforcement policies and innovative educational programs to address dangerous drinking, binge drinking among college students continues to be a major problem. In a recent national survey, nearly 41 percent of females in US colleges and universities are estimated to drink in a high-risk, destructive manner (Wechsler and associates, 2002).

- Among college students nationwide, between 20 percent and 25 percent of women reported experiencing completed or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner, 2000).
- Recent studies consistently report that more than 70 percent of college students say that they have engaged in academic cheating at least once (Thorpe, Pittenger, & Reed, 1999).
- In a 2002 study, 10 percent of college women were at high risk for eating disorders. The highest-risk students were those living in a sorority living environment (Hoerr and associates, 2002).

Addressing ethical dilemmas

One strategy commonly used to help students address these troubling problems is developing detailed policies and procedures. Because of the increasing litigious nature of society in general, and higher education in particular, college administrators and fraternal leaders have recently been consumed with risk management, creating legalistic codes, standard rules, and procedures (Winston & Saunders, 1998). This intense attention to policy construction, however necessary, may consume the energy of fraternal and university leaders who want to encourage development of ethical character among our undergraduate and alumni members.

Using *The Symphony*

Because it is so strongly embedded in the symbolic fabric of our Sisterhood, *The Chi Omega Symphony* is a superior tool to address ethical dilemmas. Yet, how might one translate the lofty words of *The Symphony* into a tool for practical problem solving?

Let's look briefly at an example of how elements of *The Symphony* might help a fraternity leader resolve a knotty problem. Here's the situation:

Sally, vice president of a large chapter, admitted to being treated for an eating disorder in high school. When she arrives on campus to begin her senior year, the Sisters are amazed by the amount of weight she lost over the summer. She appears to be dangerously thin and lacks energy. Several chapter members, including the advisor, have talked with Sally about their concerns, but she indicates there is no problem, she just wanted to lose some weight and so joined a health club. Sally gets very defensive when confronted and threatens to resign if her Sisters don't leave her alone. The chapter president, Jan, has decided that she must address the issue.

Some phrases from *The Symphony* can guide a fraternity leader to an ethical, yet caring, response.

*We can gain immense strength and support from the words of **The Symphony**.*

Some universities, such as the University of South Carolina and the University of Connecticut, have fashioned an approach that complements the attention to policy and procedures. These institutions have created "creeds" designed to assist students in understanding their ethical responsibilities as members of an educational community. These campus community creeds have shown some promise as ethical development tools. At many universities, however, it can be difficult to make these creeds an inherent part of the tradition and life of the student community, especially when developed by administrators (Lowery, 1998).

. . . to place character above appearances. It is tempting to minimize the messiness of this situation and move to a quick solution that protects the chapter's "image" on campus. Yet, an ethical leader will recognize that the best response will require time to ask searching questions about the "character" and values to which the chapter aspires.

. . . to speak kindly. Situations like this one, while common, are emotionally uncomfortable and even painful for both the individual and the chapter. One way to deal with the discomfort is to make light of the problem, ignore the person, or gossip about the situation, even to those out-

