

Prejudicial Preferences: The Discriminatory Selection Practices of Colby's Greek Letter Societies¹

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Title Slide/Introduction:

From their establishment in the 1840s, until their abolishment in 1984, many Colby fraternities and sororities boasted academic, philanthropic, and extracurricular excellence, as well as unity through “brother-” and “sister-hood.” Yet, despite this projected image, certain fraternities and sororities implemented both overt and subtle exclusionary practices, oftentimes selecting or denying student membership on a basis of race, religion, or ethnicity. Through prominent social influence, Colby's fraternal system consequently formulated an unspoken, yet palpable, understanding of what acceptable racial, religious, and ethnic “excellence” was to be, fracturing, rather than unifying, the student body.

Slide Two: Fraternity and Sorority Overview

Between Delta Kappa Epsilon's establishment in 1846, and the Board of Trustees' decision to abolish fraternities in 1984, Colby College had eleven fraternities and five sororities, all of which were founded at different times throughout that period.

At their nascence, each fraternity and sorority began as an informal society, such as a literary or debate society. Wanting more recognition and privilege, the organization could find and send a membership petition to a national fraternity/sorority whose interests aligned with its own. If the petition was accepted, the society became a fraternal “local chapter,” functioning underneath the “national chapter's” policies and oversight, as the slide indicates.

E.g.

- In 1892, Colby's “Beta Epsilon Society” – an informal student group – petitioned to “Alpha Tau Omega” (ATΩ), a national fraternity, for membership. Once ATΩ accepted the petition, “Beta Epsilon” became the “Gamma Alpha” local chapter of ATΩ, “Gamma Alpha” working underneath ATΩ's direction.

Slide Three: Rushing Process

In order to induct new members, fraternities and sororities would hold a “rushing season,” of which would take place the first semester of each academic year.

Rushing period would begin with informational events hosted by Colby's fraternity and sorority student oversight committees – the “Inter-fraternity Council” (IFC) for the fraternities, the “Panhellenic Council” for the sororities. The informational sessions were open to all interested “rushees,”¹ and outlined the general rules of “open rush” (first session) and “closed rush” (second session). Overall, each informational session was relatively formal, as one Panhellenic brochure required each “rushee” to wear “wool or cotton dresses.”

¹ Rushees: Students, generally underclassmen, who were interested in either fraternity or sorority membership, but had not yet pledged or been inducted into a fraternity/sorority.

Slide Four: Open Rush

“Open rush” was essentially a week of fraternity/sorority open houses. Each night, fraternities and sororities would hold low-key, non-exclusionary parties from 4-5pm, with fraternities hosting “smokers,” and sororities hosting “open teas.” As one Panhellenic handout outlines, “open rush” allowed indecisive “rushees” to learn the basic characteristics of a fraternity or sorority “socially, [civically], and culturally...[and] the personality of the [members], individuality and as a group.” “Open rush” thus provided fraternities and sororities a chance to demonstrate their society’s basic character.

Slide Five: Closed Rush

After “open rush,” “closed rush” began. Throughout “closed rush,” fraternities and sororities would host private parties, inviting approximately 45 “rushees” that the society would potentially consider for membership; if a “rushee” was not invited to a specific fraternity’s/sorority’s closed party, he/she could not bid to that specific fraternity/sorority. “Closed rush” consequently provided an opportunity for each fraternity/sorority to impress “rushees,” in hopes that the “rushees” would – in turn – “bid” or choose their fraternity/sorority. Yet, closed parties also allowed fraternity and sorority members to analyze each “rushee’s” character and personality. Thus, at that point in the process, each fraternity’s/sorority’s exclusionary policies were in full swing, demonstrating each step’s increase in selectivity.

Slide Six: Preferential Bidding

At the end of “closed rush,” bidding occurred – the processes differing between sororities and fraternities.

With regard to sororities, each “rushee” would submit a “bid” – a declaration of intent to join a specific sorority – including the “rushee’s” first and second preference. The accepted bids were passed out the following day, and were to be accepted or denied by the “rushee” almost immediately.

Rather than “bidding,” each fraternity gave a council of three, non-fraternity-associated, faculty members twelve envelopes, including invitations for fraternity membership and corresponding acceptance cards. After the invites had been passed out, the “rushees” had a period of four days to consider the invitation. Throughout the four day period, fraternity members could not approach “rushees,” allowing for unprejudiced decision making. Afterwards, the “rushees” would pass in their acceptance cards to the council, indicating their concrete interest in joining a specific fraternity. If a fraternity did not meet its membership quota after the cards had been collected, a fraternity could invite additional “rushees” to fulfill their quota.

Other notes:

- **Analyzing Selectivity Power:**
 - *Rushees:* Throughout the initial “open rush” period, “rushees” had the power to demonstrate their interest in specific fraternities/sororities. At that point, “rushees” had relative power, as fraternities and sororities needed interested potential members. Similarly, within the bidding/accepting of invitations period, “rushees” decided with which fraternity/sorority he/she would join, yielding selective power.

- *Fraternities/Sororities*: While “rushees” maintained a certain measure of power, fraternities and sororities ultimately had the most selective authority. Through “closed rush,” fraternities/sororities could preliminarily weed out the “rushees” they would ultimately deny by not sending an invitation. However, then selecting just 45 “rushees,” fraternities/sororities could better understand who, from that bunch, they would select or deny. Then, throughout the bidding/invitation process, fraternities and sororities had the power to deny/accept bids or decide to whom to send an invitation, subsequently determining who would be initiated into the society.

Slide Seven: Four Types of Discrimination

In looking through the material, there appear to be four concrete forms of discrimination: explicit policies, implicit policies, recommendation systems, and “mutually acceptable” clauses. These various forms functioned on an individual, local, and national prejudicial basis.

Other Types of Discrimination to Consider:

- *Blackballing*: within this selection practice, a fraternity/sorority member would place his/her hand into a box of white chips and black balls – white signifying “yes” and black “no.” While numbers varied from one society to the next, to give an individual more than the acceptable number of black balls rejected – or “blackballed” – a fraternal candidate. “Blackballing” thus functioned largely on a basis of individual bias and prejudice. However, individual discriminatory sentiments most likely aligned with the “local” and/or the “national” chapter’s policies, considering members often joined a society with like principles.
- *Ritual*: one may interpret ritual as a discriminatory form, as religious ritual may have dissuaded individuals of differing faiths from joining religiously-affiliated fraternities or sororities. Yet, ritual is a very gray area. Throughout the 1960s, many individuals on the local and national chapter level argued to Colby’s administration that ritual was characteristic of the chapter’s founding principles, and that individuals of varying faith were generally aware of each society’s religious creed. Therefore, ritual was a relatively gray zone, viewed either as an aspect of group unity, or, rather, a discriminatory practice.

Slide Eight: Explicit Discrimination

In explicit policies, the language *clearly* outlined membership expectations, particularly in regards to race, religion, and ethnicity. Explicit policies were most commonly found in a Greek letter society’s constitution or membership bylaws. As a national chapter usually formulated a society’s constitution, discriminatory explicit policies were usually designated on the national level, and enforced on the local level.

As an example, the pictured constitution was circulated by the fraternity’s national chapter – Kappa Delta Rho – rather than the local chapter – Xi. Thus, the national chapter dictated the local chapter’s policies.

Slide Nine: Explicit Policies in Kappa Delta Rho

Kappa Delta Rho’s 1926 constitution reads as follows:

As *Christian* gentlemen, men of honor and high ideals, members are expected to be tolerant of the rights and beliefs of others and never indulge in snobbishness.

The active members of a chapter shall be duly enrolled undergraduate *male white Gentile* students of the institution where the chapter is located (emphasis mine).

As pictured, Kappa Delta Rho's constitutional language bluntly indicates a member must be white and Christian. Further, the use of "Gentile" implies the exclusion of individuals of the Jewish faith. Consequently, Kappa Delta Rho's policies were as religiously explicit as it they were racially, excluding individuals of color, as well as individuals of varying religious faith.

Slide Ten: Implicit Policies: Gentleman's Agreements

Contrastingly, implicit policies – or "gentleman's agreements" – were unwritten, but understood, standards established within a fraternity/sorority. As the policies were not tied to any concrete document, "gentleman's agreements" allowed a fraternal society to proceed, act, and/or discriminate in whichever way they chose, with virtually no incriminatory evidence.

For example, as one "Facts on Colby's Fraternities" pamphlet indicates, "unwritten law so [limited]" Zeta Psi's actions. As to whether or not this "unwritten law" was or was not discriminatory is impossible to know from an outside standpoint, the "unwritten law" understood solely by society members. Consequently, through implicit policies, a fraternal society truly was a "secret" society.

Slide Eleven: Recommendation Requirements

Many fraternities and sororities required alumni recommendations in order for a "rushee" to be considered for membership. Fraternities and sororities would ask alumni who lived in "rushee's" hometown, or personally knew the "rushee" and the "rushee's" family, to fill out a survey or give an interview. Recommendations required information regarding hometown, parents' occupations, grades, etc. However, the forms also required information regarding religion/church preference, appearance, character, and reputation. While seeming relatively innocuous, the questions allowed considerable room for individual prejudice; if an alumna so desired, he/she could write a negatively charged recommendation due to his/her individual bias, specifically regarding the "rushee's" racial, religious, ethnic, or economic background. Recommendations were thus extremely subjective.

Slide Twelve: Recommendation Subjectivity

Evidenced within the archival materials, a majority of Colby's sororities emphasized the importance of recommendations. As mentioned beforehand, recommendations were heavily subjective, falling within the realm of individual prejudice, but also potentially coinciding with the national/local chapter's sentiments, as well.

Case Studies:

- *Chi Omega:*
 - Chi Omega maintained an alumni, index-card database, composed of each alumna's address and recommendation history.
 - Due to its racially prejudicial establishment and policies, Chi Omega would not accept recommendations for an African American. Recommendations were easily

subjective to racial discrimination through categories such as “appearance,” “character,” and “reputation.”

- Chi Omega additionally maintained a largely Christian membership. Thus, regarding the sorority’s religious principles, a “rushee” may have been excluded through the question regarding “family’s church preference” (See Chi Omega Recommendation Sheet, Slide 10 or 20 F7 C6).
- *Delta Delta Delta:*
 - By the 1960s, Delta Delta Delta had pledged a few girls from various religious backgrounds. However, despite Alpha Upsilon’s religious flexibility, an alumna expressed individual prejudice, giving a negative recommendation to a Jewish “rushee,” of which was later overruled.

Slide Thirteen: Recommendation Subjectivity (Cont.)

Case Studies (cont.)

- *Sigma Kappa:*
 - While no official documents in Special Collections (as personally seen) portray particular racial prejudice, some personal testimonies and recorded sources outline Sigma Kappa’s recommendation system as racially tainted. For instance, Katharine Burrison, in her September 16, 1983 letter to Larry Pugh, claims she was approached by a sorority member to verify as to whether or not a “rushee’s” grandfather was African American. As Burrison confirmed that he was, the “rushee” was denied sorority membership on the basis of her racial heritage. Robert Barlow’s letter to President Strider further acknowledges Sigma Kappa’s discriminatory recommendation system, proclaiming the national chapter’s racial sentiments discouraged pledging an African American through threats of disassociation.

Slide Fourteen: Mutually Acceptable Clauses

Generally nationally ordained – either as a constitutional policy or an unspoken understanding – “mutually acceptable” clauses maintained that each considered “rushee” must be of a “character” acceptable to *every* local chapter under the national umbrella. For many fraternities and sororities, “mutually acceptable” policies were difficult to understand, in that what was to be considered “mutually acceptable” *to all chapters* was not directly spelled out in any set document. This implication appears to have created an overarching fear at the local level. As observed within Robert Barlow’s and Colby’s sorority leaders’ letters to President Strider, sorority leaders were afraid to progressively pledge a member that strayed outside the sorority’s considered racial, religious, or ethnic profile, because of possible disassociation by the national chapter. Therefore, there was an underlying fear of, and reluctance to, change and diversify one’s local chapter, subsequently upholding the sorority’s hegemonic character and composition.

More specifically, “mutually acceptable” clauses were particularly problematic for fraternities and sororities that were heavily associated with the South. Chi Omega, for example, was originally established in the South and maintained a majority of local chapters in the region. Thus, Colby’s local chapter, Beta, was met with resistance when attempting to enact more progressive membership clauses, such as the right to induct an African American “rushee.”

Many chapters resisted this motion, as an African American sorority sister would not be considered “acceptable” to *all* chapters, or, chiefly, the Southern chapters.

Slide Fifteen: Alternatives to Exclusivity/Around Policies:

There were, however, alternatives to exclusive and discriminatory policies.

Usually established by individuals who were denied membership to more exclusive societies, some fraternities were simply founded on a non-discriminatory basis. For instance, Pi Lambda Phi’s and Delta Upsilon’s constitutions were democratic and non-sectarian. Thus, both organizations accepted individuals from varying racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds.

On the other hand, some fraternities and sororities would take a “social member,” if in disagreement with the national chapter’s policies. As described by ATO’s social membership bylaw, a “social member” was an individual who paid dues and partook in a majority of fraternal activities, yet was not recognized by the national chapter. A fraternity or sorority would take a “social member” if they liked him/her, yet knew he/she would be considered unacceptable by the national chapter, based upon whatever criteria. For instance, Lambda Chi Alpha disagreed with national discriminatory policies, yet did not have the power to immediately change them. To counteract national governance, Lambda Chi Alpha would grant social membership to members *they* approved of, yet the national chapter may not have, for whatever reason. Therefore, “social members,” according to one source, were able to partake in almost every fraternal activity – except for induction and voting – allowing members that would otherwise be excluded to partake in the fraternity.

Slide Sixteen: A Person of Change: Jackie Nunez

Jackie Nunez (’61) was an active student and academic wonder. An avid writer for the *Echo*, member on numerous advisory boards, and treasurer for Chi Omega, Nunez had more than enough on her plate as a student. Yet, Nunez managed to graduate at the top of her class, later going on to graduate from Harvard with a Masters of Arts in Teaching (A.M.T., Alumni Survey). Despite her tragically early death in 1966, due to Hodgkin’s disease, Nunez left behind a legacy of change, progressivism, and courage. To this day, Nunez is considered one of the College’s most brilliant and influential students, as she dedicated her life to the equal opportunity of all students.

On May 16, 1961, right at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Nunez proposed a resolution to Colby’s Student Government, later publishing her proposal in the Colby *Echo* (May 19, 1964).

Nunez’s resolution, of which will be described in greater depth, proposed that fraternities and sororities remove their discriminatory clauses and policies. In doing so, Nunez confronted fraternities’ and sororities’ influence and power at Colby, challenging fraternities’/sororities’ racial, religious, and ethnic sense of entitlement.

Slide Seventeen and Slide Eighteen: 1961 Nunez Proposal/Nunez Proposal As Adapted by the Board of Trustees

The 1961 Nunez Proposal, as published in the *Echo*, was simple, yet monumental. Nunez’s proposal required each fraternity and sorority, by 1963, to submit a letter from their national chapter to President Strider and the Board of Trustees proclaiming that the local chapter

had complete autonomy in selecting members. Further, Nunez insisted that “mutually acceptable” and other unspoken, discriminatory agreements be prohibited.

As evidenced by the subsequent *Echo* articles and editorials, there was a mixture of reactions, spanning from fraternity members protecting their reputations to reports on the status of the proposal. Overall, there was a sense of urgency, tension, and mixed approval of the bill.

Adapted by the Board of Trustees, the proposal evolved into three explicit criteria. The first criteria required each local chapter to disassociate from their national chapter if it required them to discern “rushees” on a basis of race, religion, or national origin, or had national discriminatory policies. The second condition prohibited the enforcement of religious ritual onto any individual. Lastly, the criteria mandated that members be selected without regard to race, religion, or national origin, or in regards to “mutually acceptable” clauses or required recommendations – abolishing both written and unwritten forms of membership discrimination.

For fraternities and sororities, the atmosphere became relatively chaotic, as many local chapters had to confront and attempt to change their national chapter’s prejudices by 1965. By extension, the threat of disassociation increased tension; national chapters unwilling to change “tradition” threatened to withdraw, or “drop,” chapter recognition, while Colby’s administration threatened to enforce disassociation, if no changes were being made. This threat was particularly problematic as disassociation, overall, would mean decreased alumni donations, loss of privilege/recognition, and even the possible disbanding of the local chapter. Therefore, the local chapter’s stakes were high.

Slide Nineteen: Case Studies (Subsection Title Page)

Slide Twenty: Race: Chi Omega (Case Study)

Due to administrative pressure, the Beta Chapter of Chi Omega was forced to change its membership policies. As revealed in previous slides, Chi Omega’s recommendation requirements and “mutually acceptable” clauses created a lot of room for potential discrimination—particularly in regards to race. Consequently, at the 1964 National Convention, Beta proposed a resolution to remove the “mutually acceptable” membership clauses, facing extraordinary national chapter resistance throughout as a result.

As the 1964 convention notes outline (20 F7 C6, Box 1), Beta’s largest struggle was changing the “mutually acceptable” clause. In talking with other local chapters, Beta recorded various Southern chapter members proclaiming that pledging an African American was akin to interracial marriage, due to the close ties of sisterhood. Some Southern chapters similarly felt that increased African American membership would lead to increased interracial marriage, which they considered completely unacceptable. Others chapters likewise dismissed their prejudice by claiming Southern African Americans were unable to meet Chi Omega expectations. Thus, it would have been considered a far cry from “mutually acceptable” for Beta to pledge an African American.

On a more national front, Beta Chapter had particular troubles with the National President, Mary Love Collins. Collins often likened Colby’s resolution for anti-discrimination policies and “local autonomy” to Communism. Collins proclaimed,

Why the local autonomy trend in [the] last four years...It always begins with a campus study or a self-analysis, evaluation. This is a communistic tendency. Radical campus newspapers, liberal professors who don't understand or believe in voluntary organizations. The colleges are trying to regulate fraternities because they've received big grants or government loans, which include stipulations such as the complete equality of all students...Within every noncommunist organization the Communist Party tried to infiltrate. (June 19, 1964).

Equating "equality" to communistic tendencies, Collins established the tone for the rest of the convention, implying progressive policies were communistic, rather than humane, and subsequently setting up Beta for criticism by other local chapters.

Slide Twenty-One: Race: Chi Omega (cont.) (Case Study)

Unable to make significant changes on the national level at the 1964 convention, letters between various sorority members suggest Beta was considering disassociation from the national chapter. For instance, Marty's letter to Margie implies that going "local" would demonstrate moral conviction and, hence, transgress prestige. However, on a different note, Beth's letter to Maggie reveals that Chi Omega's progressive stance may have been reflective of administrative pressure, as they could potentially be "forced to [pledge an African American]." The diction "forced" implies not necessarily a change of heart, but, perhaps, reluctant compliance with administrative policy.

Slide Twenty-Two: Religion: Tau Delta Phi

Tau Delta Phi, as described, experienced a significant amount of difficulty in receiving campus recognition. In order for a fraternity to be recognized, the fraternity had to receive a 3/4th positive vote from the Student Council – a board composed of one member from each established fraternity. After petitioning unsuccessfully several times, Tau Delta Phi finally received the needed vote in 1932.

Tau Delta Phi's experience is interesting, in that it both indicates the prejudices held by a largely Christian-affiliated fraternity system and reflects the various anti-Semitic sentiments of the early 20th Century. In a similar instance, Dean Runnals of Colby's Women's College received a letter from a Jewish sorority, asking Runnals about the potential establishment of a Jewish-affiliated sorority. Runnals declined, claiming she felt its presence would fracture relationships between Jewish and Christian students. Runnals, however, did not acknowledge the possible fracturing influence of Christian sororities on Jewish students, mirroring Colby's relatively unwelcoming environment for Jewish students.

Slide Twenty-Three: Religion, Sectarian Fraternities/Sororities: Grey Area

Many fraternities and sororities were sectarian, either within their rituals or their basic character. Due to their sectarian nature, many religious fraternities and sororities excluded members of alternative religious beliefs, or forced members of other religious faiths to complete rituals that went against their religious morals. Therefore, the Administration, throughout the Nunez Proposal, found religious affiliation often breached the borders of acceptability.

Consequently, religious association within the fraternities and sororities appears a bit of a grey area. As Jewish and Christian fraternities and sororities claimed the right of religious unity, all were still religiously exclusive. Subsequently, when does association turn into discrimination?

When does religious identity become prejudicial? When does religious ritual become less about religion and more about exclusion? As a deeply personal decision of identity, religion thus became a very touchy subject within the 1960s correspondences between President Strider and national chapters, ultimately resulting in the loss of Delta Delta Delta's national recognition of its local chapter.

Slide Twenty-Four: Fraternity Abolition

In the early 1980s, Colby's Administration began to re-evaluate the presence of Colby's fraternities and sororities, in line with many other liberal arts colleges nationwide. This came about in due part to various factors.

Firstly, the financial side to the fraternity-owned houses was creating financial troubles for the College. The fraternity houses were, by law, owned by each fraternity's alumni network. Yet, according to an unnamed source, alumni support had wavered over time, and had decreased housing funds. By extension, due to decreasing fraternity membership and declining fraternity member house occupancy, a majority of the fraternity houses had open beds, meaning the houses were not functioning at their full potential and were costing the College money.

Secondly, the houses themselves were in disarray. Due to the loss of house mothers and poor fraternity leadership in some houses, the houses appeared unkempt. Oftentimes, according to a source, the floors were covered in alcoholic substances, the doors were broken, and the yards were covered in beer bottles and trash, among other things. Overall, "Frat Row" – prime campus housing – was neglected.

Thirdly, the fraternities dominated social life. As one source explained, fraternity members would often party both day and night. The party atmosphere often resulted in destruction of campus property, confrontations between students – fraternity and non-fraternity – vomiting, public urination, and other disciplinary violations.

Fourthly, the faculty and administration believed the fraternities perpetuated an anti-intellectual atmosphere, according to one source. It was not uncommon for a tour group to avoid "Frat Row," for fear of exposing prospective students to "cat-calling," swearing, day partying, and "Frat Row's" general disorder. The overall impact appeared a relative embarrassment to the College.

Fifthly, fraternities were known for various incidents of sexism. For instance, the practice "netting" was both misogynistic and terrifying for women. Fraternity members, on a given night, would walk around campus with a net. If they saw an attractive woman, they would throw a net over her and drag her to a fraternity house party. Of course, while members may release her upon protest, the administration felt no one should have to endure that level of harassment in any given situation. Further, women were often subject to "cat-calling" and would often avoid "Frat Row," according to various alumni letters.

Lastly, the basic premise of tolerating an exclusionary system was deemed inconsistent with the principles of a liberal arts establishment and society's changing times. One source brought up the issue of housing, suggesting fraternity houses were primary housing unavailable to a majority of the student body – particularly women. Another source raised the issue of student leadership positions. In that fraternity members had a voting backing from their

individual fraternity house, as well as other fraternity members, at times, fraternity men were subsequently able to secure a majority of student leadership positions by sheer voting power. Consequently, fraternities not only dominated student social life, but also a majority of student leadership positions, excluding opportunities for other, non-fraternity men and women.

Consequently, the Board of Trustees and advisory board felt that a more open, egalitarian residential life was needed, one in which aligned with Colby's liberal arts principles. Faculty and the Board thus replaced the fraternity system with the "Commons System," or a student residential/governing system revolving around four groups of residence halls. While the "Commons System" did not last long, it was a step further to obtaining a more open, non-discriminatory environment.

ⁱ All information was obtained through the Special Collections archival materials.