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To Greek Or Not To Greek

Lyndsay Neel was anxious and uncertain. She stared at her bid card and struggled to decide in which order to rank the last three sorority houses she had visited.

“If you don’t turn your bid card in within the next 30 seconds you’re not going to be Greek,” warned Angela Guillory, the Louisiana State University director of Greek Life. Neel quickly ranked the last three sorority houses and turned in her bid card. Her anxiety intensified as she went back to her apartment to wait out the next 24 hours for the LSU sorority bid day announcements.

By the next morning, Neel, exhausted from the constant “what if” scenarios she played in her mind received her bid card telling her which sorority she now belonged to. Neel saw Delta Gamma, her first choice on her bid card, and her exhaustion turned to euphoria as a feeling of acceptance settled over her.

Neel had become part of one of the largest Greek systems in the United States. LSU has 13 sororities and 20 fraternities. The 2012-2013 LSU Greek Life annual report states there were 4,858 fraternity and sorority members that academic year.

Members of Greek organizations perceive many benefits. Neel said she believes more good than bad comes from being a member of a Greek organization.

However, Neel mentioned that larger Greek systems like LSU have more risk factors than smaller Greek systems because of their size. The larger the system, the more opportunities exist for problems.

One of the problems Elizabeth Newell, assistant director of Greek Life at LSU, believes is facing the LSU Greek community is its social climate, or its reputation for the party scene.

Although most LSU students, Greek or not, participate in the Baton Rouge social scene, Newell said the LSU Greek groups have organized social functions that draw more attention than other Greek activities such as philanthropy, community service and building positive relationships.

However, Newell believes being a part of a Greek organization has many benefits. The main benefit she enjoys is the lifelong bonds created with others.

“I think everyone needs a place where they feel accepted, motivated, accountable and successful,” Newell said. “Our Greek community offers some of the best places to accomplish this.”

Newell herself experienced both the positives and negatives of Greek Life when she was a college student and member of a Greek organization at the University of Southern Mississippi. She entered a career in Greek Life so she could make a more positive difference in Greek communities.

“I am the product of a broken Greek community with a Greek Life office that was viewed as enforcers rather than advisors and educators,” Newell said.

“I decided to make it my purpose to create an environment valued and utilized by students. My Greek experience changed my life for the better, and it is my hope to share much of what I’ve learned over the years with our community.”

Newell has been working with LSU Greek Life for almost one year and has already experienced LSU welcome a brand new sorority, Alpha Phi. One of the main reasons LSU added another sorority was to help the existing sororities keep their numbers from becoming unmanageable.

“We are growing at an incredible rate,” Newell said. “Currently 22 percent of the undergraduate population at LSU is Greek, and we attest this to the incredible positive environment the Greek community and our office have worked hard to establish.”

Greek Life at LSU is a lot larger and different from when LSU alumna Janet Vidrine, of Baton Rouge, experienced it. Vidrine pledged Delta Gamma sorority at LSU in 1981. When she went through recruitment the chapter size of each sorority varied, and four sororities did not meet quota, meaning they did not recruit the maximum number allowed.

LSU’s 2013 fall recruitment resulted in every sorority meeting quota, and thus over 900 women were welcomed into the LSU sororities. The chapter sizes of each sorority no longer vary, with the exception of Alpha Phi, the most recent sorority.

Since pledging Delta Gamma in 1981, Vidrine has remained involved with the sorority, including fall recruitment activities.

Immediately upon graduating in 1985, Vidrine has been active in the Delta Gamma alumnae group.

Vidrine believes alumni involvement could help diminish the negative behavior of some Greek members.

“Many Greek organizations have wonderful programs in place to combat bad behavior, but the local alumni need to be trained to help the collegians,” Vidrine said. “Collegiate chapters need more alumni support in the form of advisors.”

Vidrine suggested the negative behavior of Greek members is emphasized more today than when she was a member.

“The majority of Greeks do the right thing, but today, with social media and 24-hour news, the bad behavior makes the front page all over the world,” Vidrine said.

Vidrine was quick to mention the more positive aspects that come from joining a Greek organization. She said her greatest benefit from joining a sorority is the connections she has made with like-minded women of all ages.

Although most connections tend to be formed within the first year of joining a sorority, Neel made connections her sophomore year because she did not go through recruitment as a freshman.

Neel was able to experience college life with and without a Greek influence. She said she was involved in many organizations her freshman year in college, but still felt something was missing. Neel said entering the Greek community was one of the best decisions she has made.

“I am honored to be a part of something so amazing,” Neel said. “This is what has driven me to become so involved in Greek Life. I wanted to give back to a community that has given me so much.”

Neel will graduate from LSU this May. She said her biggest selling point to anyone who is considering joining a Greek organization is that being Greek helped her grow as a leader and develop as a person.

“Being Greek doesn’t make you better than the next person,” Neel said. “It just makes you better than the person you were before.”