



In going Greek, Hispanic students embrace their roots

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Clad in shirts that displayed their fraternity letters, the young men filed into an empty classroom to assemble boxes for their annual clothing drive.

As other frat brothers arrived, the men greeted them with a hearty embrace and their secret handshake.

But this wasn't just another fraternity at Montclair State University. It was la fraternidad Lambda Theta Phi, one of dozens of Hispanic Greek organizations in the country.

As the number of Hispanics in higher education has risen over the years, so has the number of students who turn to an age-old college staple -- fraternities and sororities -- but ones that embrace their ethnic roots.

"I looked at the different organizations on campus," said Johnathan Gaugler, a Paterson resident who attends Montclair State University. "I wasn't interested in joining a Greek organization that was mostly social -- a lot of parties, drinking. I liked Lambda Theta Phi because it focused on culture and academics. I felt like I could relate to them more."

The membership numbers of many Hispanic fraternities and sororities are minuscule compared with mainstream Greek organizations. The Hispanic fraternities claim as few as 30 students. Many have only a handful of members at any one time; every now and then, some have even had only one member, if that.

A few reasons are that college attendance rates among Hispanics are low, many Hispanics commute to college from home -- not leaving much opportunity for participating in campus activities -- and Hispanic Greek groups often lack the resources of mainstream organizations.

But their individual membership numbers belie the growth that Hispanic fraternal organizations have seen in just the last decade. More than 30,000 people are members of Hispanic fraternities and sororities, triple the number of the early 1990s, according to the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations.

Gus Garcia, a founding member of Lambda Theta Phi, the nation's first recognized Hispanic fraternity, recalled how daring it actually was to start the organization at Kean College in 1975.

"The guys would play dominoes, and people would look strangely at us," said Garcia, today a successful businessman in Florida. "There was a lot of tension between blacks and whites at the time at the college, and white fraternity members would ask the lighter-skinned Hispanics what side they were on, and African-Americans asked the darker-skinned Hispanics what side they were on.

"I would just answer, 'We're on our side.' "

But in essence, Garcia said, Hispanics really had few fraternity and sorority choices.

"Some joined black fraternities," he said, "White fraternities weren't really after us; they weren't making any real effort to include us, to recruit us. So Latin students just sat there, without being Greek."

The birth of Lambda Theta Phi, Garcia said, "was a rejection of a 90-year-old Greek structure that was black and white, but didn't have room for others."

'I felt out of place'

Many Hispanic Greeks credit their organizations with making a difference in their decision to attend college.

Alex Lopez, a sophomore from Passaic who is majoring in athletic training, remembers sitting in a classroom at Montclair State and -- for the first time ever -- finding he was the only minority.

"I felt weird being around all white people," Lopez said. "I felt out of place. I grew up around minorities, went to school with them, I never felt different."

That feeling of alienation is one of the factors, experts say, in the low numbers of Hispanics who attend -- and stay in -- college. A 2004 study by the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C., found that Hispanic undergraduates are half as likely as white undergraduates to attain a bachelor's degree.

"I can honestly say that I wouldn't have stayed in college if I hadn't joined a Hispanic fraternity," said Jose Acosta, a Montclair State alumnus, recalling the racism he felt at Rowan University when he first arrived at the college. "I felt culture shock. The fraternity taught me social responsibility, how to run an organization, the importance of changing my priorities, of giving back to the community that raised you. It made me stronger."

Many Hispanic Greek organizations take an almost parental role in seeing that their members do well academically and learn to navigate the college system.

In fact, unlike most other Greek organizations, some Hispanic fraternities and sororities do not admit members just beginning their freshman year out of concern that it is an overwhelming time in a college student's life -- one with enough new distractions already.

"A lot of us are the first in our families to go to college," Lopez said. "So it helps to have older brothers, like alumni, talk to us about how to succeed here and make it all the way through college and graduate."

That said, Hispanic fraternities and sororities are not for every Hispanic student.

While Johnathan Gaugler is immersed in his fraternity and its cultural feel, his twin brother, Anthony, said he is perfectly comfortable at a more rural, predominantly white campus in Connecticut.

"I am proud of my heritage," said Anthony Gaugler, who is majoring in psychology. "I speak the language, I like the music, I'm a Latino at heart."

"But I don't approve of labels, of being put in a category because you're this or that group," Gaugler said. "I like being with people who are different from me because I feel an obligation to educate those who are familiar with my culture, so they don't go on perpetuating the same beliefs."

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