



Struggling Links – Understanding Chapter Closings

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

- Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

The worst of times and one of the most difficult tasks that I have been involved in as an officer and most significantly as National President is the closing of our collegiate chapters. This practice I will surely say has made my name an unpopular one at times. It brings many regrets and sleepless nights. It alludes a sense of failure and loss. It is the most heart wrenching of all decisions to be made and involved in as National President. It is emotionally draining and brings on difficult feelings that will live with me forever. There are many joys in serving as National President and it is an opportunity I consider myself lucky to have experienced. Closings are the dark side of the job and something I hope can be tucked deeply away to erase the hurt. If only it were that easy.

I think I have seen all sides of this issue. You see, I was a charter member of my chapter, Beta Iota, at Clarkson University. Some 17 years later I was also the area coordinator when my collegiate chapter was failing. There was no miracle to be had for Beta Iota and it did not make it. I was also the closing officer. Many asked how I could do this. I felt that I was there at the beginning and I would be there at the end, too. Somehow it helped me to come to peace with the decision. I knew the right thing had been done.

The Emotion

There are many feelings and emotions that chapter members, collegians and alumnae, go through when a closing is experienced. There is blame, bitterness, anger, grief, helplessness, hopelessness, loss, relief, peace, and acceptance. Those listed first are usually the first felt. There are different stages and lengths of time that any one person may experience these emotions. There is blame placed on the collegians, the alumnae, the university, and the national organization. Many consider the decision of the Fraternity to be out of the sisterly realm and contradictory to our Creed. Many alumnae are bitter. For some it is short-lived and they find other ways to stay involved in Phi Mu. Some will have no contact with the Fraternity for years, but then something will come along again to spark their interest. Some remain bitter for a lifetime and never recover from their chapter's closing and forever hold disdain for the national organization. I always explain these various stages of grief to those whose chapter is closing. I tell them that these feelings are natural. In the end, it is a choice in each

member deals with the situation. We make a choice to be a lifetime member of Phi Mu. We also make a choice in how we will execute that lifetime involvement. We make a choice if we choose to cut ourselves off from it. My hope is that we have more to offer our members than just their collegiate experience. My hope is that we can provide opportunities to make their lifetime experience meaningful. My hope is that they will stay involved and that they will let others know what their collegiate chapter meant to them. My hope is that they move past the pain and become an advocate for their chapter to return to their campus. This means keeping good relations with national and staying involved as an alumna of their university. It means networking and keeping Phi Mu's name alive. It means never giving up on the Phi Mu spirit and the lifetime commitment.

Who Makes the Decision

The decision to close a collegiate chapter is made by the National Executive Committee (NEC). This Committee is composed of four members of the National Council: the National President, the Vice President Collegiate Operations, the Vice President Alumnae, and the Vice President Finance. It takes a two-thirds vote of NEC to revoke or suspend a chapter charter. Revocation of a chapter charter means to remove the charter for a permanent or indefinite period, with no indication plan for re-establishment of the chapter. Suspension of a chapter charter entails removing the charter for a stated period, pending re-establishment of the chapter at a later date.

Chapter conditions, the campus environment, and insurmountable difficulties would lead to a decision to close a chapter. Chapters may also request suspension of chapter operations by NEC after a chapter vote is taken and a written request is made through the National President.

A chapter whose charter has been revoked or suspended by a two-thirds vote of the NEC has the right to appeal the action to the National Council. A two-thirds vote of the National Council is required to sustain the action.

The Reasons for Decline/Failure

What could possibly lead to the closing of a collegiate chapter? There are many situations and not one will ever be exactly the same. Sometimes chapters face years of decline and sometimes it all happens very quickly. Probably the most common reason for Phi Mu to close a chapter would be for a decline in membership. I recall closing chapters of 45 members with recruitment problems all the way to chapters left with only 2 members. Struggling chapters cannot be competitive with the other NPC groups on campus. Lack of membership then combines with other factors lead into a downward spiral from which sometimes there is no turning back. Fewer members leaves less money for activities, empty rooms in the chapter house, and less members to do the chapter jobs including serving on committees and holding offices. Scholastic standing often fails and chapter participation in campus activities becomes non-existent. This then leads to an experience for the collegians that is not a quality one. They no longer enjoy being in the chapter when every moment turns to picking up the slack and trying to save the chapter. For them it becomes a constant search to find anybody

to put in the chapter house and on the roster. It leads to feelings of defeat when hours are put into formal recruitment only to walk out of bid matching with 0 to 4 matched. When women would rather have no invitation than list Phi Mu on their Preference card, we know there is a problem. Where then is the LOVE, HONOR, and TRUTH that we profess?

Over time, it has been called different things – show cause, warning, assigning a special supervisor, watch list, revitalization or reorganization. Ultimately it all means the same thing. A chapter in serious crisis is being dealt with. After a chapter struggles for years, sometimes going off campus for awhile is the only solution.

It is critical to let the alumnae know of trouble in advance so they can “rally the sisters” to help out their chapter. This has been done at several times. Alumnae may be notified if a chapter needs financial assistance or of they are in need of advisers or house corporation board members. We have also notified alumnae when a chapter has been placed on show cause status. Alumnae usually respond and come forth to assist. This assistance must be consistent. If it goes away we often find a chapter struggling again. Some chapters go through periods of decline and then progress. It goes on like a roller coaster ride. This can go on for years. We have proven to ourselves that it is chapters with consistent alumnae involvement and complete advisory councils that remain vibrant and successful. It is important to keep that lifetime commitment.

A chapter also may be closed also for disciplinary issues such as behavior/risk management problems, alcohol abuse, or hazing. Rarely is this done in women’s groups, however, it does happen. In the last 14 years, Phi Mu has closed two chapters due to hazing issues. There is no tolerance for chapters that blatantly and continually disregard Phi Mu policies thus putting our sisters and the entire Fraternity at risk. When we join Phi Mu we make a pledge to uphold her ideals and this must be expected of all our sisters. When policies are repeatedly violated and a chapter fails to learn through the educational means we provide, then the assumption must be made that such members do not desire to be part of our special bond of sisterhood. We say that we care about all of our sisters. In caring we must confront unacceptable behaviors and closing a chapter may be the action taken to demonstrate that care.

What Harm Does it Do to Keep a Struggling Chapter Open?

It is said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Sometimes the weakest links must be identified and dealt with. It hurts many aspects of our sisterhood when the weakest link is ignored. It is not a good experience for the collegians. A weak chapter is noticed by others in the area. The Fraternity may be judged by it. We might lose members on nearby campuses or opportunities for extension if we are seen in a negative light. First impressions sometimes make or break a deal. Continuing to support a struggling chapter is a drain on the Fraternity’s resources. Money and volunteer and staff time might be spent on a chapter that will never recover. Yes, the Fraternity is our sisterhood, but it is also a business. We must manage our business responsibly or it will not be strong for future generations. Sometimes this means making non-emotional decisions. The risk of keeping a struggling chapter must be weighed.

How to Return to Campus

It is a high priority for Phi Mu to return to campuses where we have been and had to leave. Sometimes if we know that we could potentially return to campus in a defined period of time (2-4 years), we can make an agreement with the local panhellenic for return. This would be our responsibility to renew annually. Once we leave a campus, we must be invited by the local panhellenic to return. We would have to go through the extension process as outlined by the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC). There would have to be a need for another NPC group on the campus. The campus would open for extension. Groups would present packets for review. The local panhellenic would then select groups to make presentations. They would consider the presentations and select the organization that is the best match for their campus to colonize.

Positive Results/Success Stories

Out of all of this the best of times are when pending or actual closings result in a rebirth of positive actions. We have seen this with Delta Tau (Western Kentucky University) and Alpha Nu (University of Florida) Chapters in the early 1990's. In this decade we have seen the rebirth of Beta Eta (Miami University - Ohio), Chi (University of Missouri – Columbia) Lambda Delta (USC – Aiken), Nu (Shorter College), Epsilon Lambda (Arkansas Tech University), Gamma Lambda (UNC – Chapel Hill), and Delta (Tulane University) Chapters. There is no greater joy than to be part of such a re-colonization and to be there to install the chapter and return the chapter charter to the loving hands of new members and expectant alumnae. That is truly an emotional moment and a time of great pride and joy. I have been lucky enough to directly experience this six times in my Phi Mu career. In the best of times, this is a true gift experienced in our sisterhood.

Keeping the Bond Strong

And in the best of times, we remember that sisterhood is for a lifetime. Dedicated alumnae are needed to serve as chapter advisers, advisory council members, house corporation officers, alumnae chapter members, and National and Area Officers. It is alumnae support that keeps our collegiate chapters strong and ensures a bright future for them. Usually in the worst of times, a chapter has not had the attention that they need and alumnae have long abandoned their cause. Phi Mu is more than the collegiate experience and we need to be committed to that. We should see it as an obligation to join our chapter association, local alumnae chapter or Forever Faithful, and be a regular donor to Phi Mu Foundation. Have we been committed to our alma mater in returning to campus and being involved in alumnae events? Have we shown our pride in Phi Mu? Are we creating a heritage and setting the example for our legacies and future generations of Phi Mus? Have we kept the heart of Phi Mu clasped in our hand and lived up to the Creed? Have we mentored our young women and instilled in them the confidence to succeed and believe? Have we kept our pledge to Phi Mu? Because when it comes right down to it, the responsibility to keep our chapters strong, successful, and open is all of ours. Have you kept the promise you made to Phi Mu?