

## *DEI Message September 2020 Video Transcript*

Over the past two years, the national council has taken intentional action to explore and better understand where we, as an organization, are in our journey of providing a diverse, equitable and inclusive membership experience. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia, classism, ableism or any other prejudice has no place in Alpha Sigma Alpha. I wanted to take some time to share with you some of the progress we have made already, as well as some of the plans that we are working on.

In January of 2019, the national council approved the hiring of consultants to assist us with our diversity, equity and inclusion work. In the October of last year, Alpha Sigma Alpha partnered with Fleurette, also known as Flo, King, Taryn Petryk and Aida Martinez-Freeman, from Thriving Inclusion, to perform an equity audit of our organization. This audit provides a snapshot of Alpha Sigma Alpha's engagement with diversity, equity and inclusion to achieve goals related to strategic planning while assessing our climate for diversity. This process involved a thorough review of the organization's current practices to ensure the Sorority is fostering an environment that is reflective and inclusive of the global community – different people, different cultures, different perspectives. Members had the opportunity to provide feedback, which was included in the development of a comprehensive report of the Sorority's strengths and growth opportunities.

We surveyed members regarding our organizational culture, which included beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how Alpha Sigma Alpha functions. The consultants at Thriving Inclusion also conducted focus groups with members to gather more information. 1,830 members participated in the survey and 8 focus groups were held with roughly 90 participants in total.

While many members shared they are proud of the organization for taking steps and gaining valuable insight, members also shared that they felt we were not doing enough, especially with regards to anti-blackness and racial injustice. We hear you and we are working to do better.

One of the key recommendations from our audit was to define what diversity means for Alpha Sigma Alpha and put forward a statement. Diversity is more than physical attributes of race, ethnicity and gender, it also includes gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic status, ability, religious or ethical values systems, nationality or immigration status and political beliefs. The national council has approved the following diversity, equity and inclusion statement:

*Alpha Sigma Alpha views diversity as the full range of identities, perspectives and experiences our members bring to the organization. The interplay between these differences and similarities creates the richness of our membership. We are committed to cultivating an inclusive environment where all members feel a sense of belonging. This is only achieved if members feel comfortable expressing every dimension of their authentic selves and trust they will be respected.*

We spent the past month working on this statement and will use this as our guide as we continue our work. But in order for this statement to become woven into the fabric of our

organization, it will take each one of us to embrace this definition and work together to make it a reality.

Our mission, vision and values encourage growth and compassion, but are not explicit with regards to our position on inclusion. The national council had already been working on reviewing these statements prior to receiving the audit and will use the feedback received to further guide our work. We are in the process of exploring the relationship members have with our mission, vision, aims and values.

We say that we want our members to be comfortable bringing their whole selves to Alpha Sigma Alpha, but the reality is that some aren't. Some members who identify as Black/African American, Latina or Native American shared they didn't fully feel welcomed to bring their true selves to the organization. Some members who identify as transgender have shared instances where they did not feel like they belonged to the organization and have not found their "groups of friends" within the organization. Some members expressed concerns related to how to support sisters with disabilities and concerns about financial, social and economic diversity not being supported. Body image was also mentioned. Members in every focus group shared their concerns with the lack of inclusion and representation of diversity in social media and other media outlets. We know that we can improve in this area and I am asking all of you to send your pictures to Alpha Sigma Alpha headquarters. I am asking that you all take a look at your social media posts too. Are you sharing pictures that truly represent the diversity of our membership?

Implicit bias exists in our organization, both at the collegiate chapter level and within our alumnae. It occurs in recruitment, selection and leadership development across the organization. While we have begun work in this area by providing national council and headquarters staff hidden bias training last year, additional education and training is needed for all Alpha Sigma Alpha members. We are also reviewing all of our national policies and procedures to assess where implicit bias may play a role. Recently we removed our national policies on legacies and issued a position statement on legacies. This decision was made based on the request of our collegiate members. Several individual members and collegiate chapters wrote to the national organization requesting we remove this policy as they believe it to be a barrier to membership. While our legacy policy was not as specific as other organizations, we recognize that the decision to extend an invitation to membership rests with a collegiate chapter. We acknowledge we could have done a better job in communicating this decision to the membership and commit to sharing more details with regards to decision making when we can. We continue to value the relationships that legacies bring to Alpha Sigma Alpha and encourage members to share recommendations of potential new members with our collegiate chapters.

During convention, we invited Flo, one of our consultants with Thriving Inclusion, to share tools and strategies for members to address prejudice, discrimination and justice within our sisterhood. The feedback we received was incredibly positive. We are continuing to identify additional workshops and educational sessions that we can provide for our members. We have also created a space for members to come together and learn about the many aspects surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion. Through our "Agape Love: Conversations About Inclusion & Belonging" Facebook group, members are encouraged to ask questions and share resources as we increase our awareness and education on topics related to diversity.

The national council is reading the book, "White Fragility, Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism" by Robin DeAngelo, as part of our continued board development and have invited Flo to join our fall meeting to facilitate our discussion. We also shared on social media the videos that are part of our preparation for our meeting.

Last year at The Academy, we provided members the ability to indicate their pronouns on their name badges. We recognize that not all members may identify with "she/her/hers" and we want to address members using the pronouns they identify with. However, we are a women's-only organization and for legal reasons, as an organization, we will continue to use the pronouns associated with females in our organizational documents.

In the near future we will take a closer look at other components of our organizational structure. This includes our financial models as well as our standards requirements and our leadership development pathways. The funnel through which we recruit, develop, place, and retain volunteers can be improved. We need to create succession plans to promote diversity within our volunteer leadership. This biennium we are charging our Board and Leadership Advancement Committee to develop plans to continue to diversify our volunteer pipeline to support these efforts. Additionally, we are updating our national headquarters staff job descriptions to integrate diversity initiatives into each role. In the next month we will be rolling out a new chapter officer position focused on diversity and inclusion, at the request of several of our collegiate chapters. I want to give a special thanks to our Theta Omega Chapter for putting together a first draft of the position description! I'd also like to give a shout out to our Gamma Phi Chapter as they have added a DEI section to their chapter minutes where they share resources for members to educate themselves first. These learning resources include books, films, articles, podcasts, YouTube videos and even Instagrammers. They have also added an action item section to the end of their minutes to help members find a way to move forward after their learning. One example they shared was encouraging each member to sign a petition for a cause that the member was passionate about and sharing it in the chapter's GroupMe. I know many of our chapters are also doing wonderful things in the area of DEI and I encourage you to share them with your region facilitator so we can continue to share these ideas with each other.

Christian privilege also came up in the audit report. Members who do not identify as Christian felt dissonance during rituals. In the fall of 2018, the national council appointed a study team to review the 2007 publication of *The Ritual of Alpha Sigma Alpha* and evaluate all aspects of our ritual for inclusivity. This study team gathered member feedback regarding attire, logistics and language and manner of the ritual. As a result, several changes were made to promote inclusivity while at the same time preserving the sacredness and sentiment of our Ritual. Members of national council were among the first to put some of these changes into action during the virtual initiations held in May and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Chapters will begin implementing these changes this fall. We are now turning our attention to our supplemental ceremonies with the same lens of Christian privilege and will be sharing updates with you soon.

Inclusiveness around gender identity and sexual orientation are areas we also need to focus on. I was recently asked what Alpha Sigma Alpha's position was on gender identity. Anyone who identifies as a woman is eligible for membership into our sorority. I know this is a sensitive topic for many individuals and there are different personal beliefs around gender identity and sexual orientation. In 2006, we included sexual orientation as part of the protected classes in which membership cannot be barred. And still today, some members are

judged by their sexual orientation. Whatever your personal beliefs, the expectation of an Alpha Sigma Alpha is that we treat each other with dignity and respect. In the Phoenix Degree, we pledged to "live in harmony and fellowship with all its members" and in the Sanctuary Degree, we affixed our signatures to this oath "We do solemnly affirm that we will defend Alpha Sigma Alpha and its principles as long as we live, and that we will aid one another in every possible way." Let us remember the Agape love that our sisterhood subscribes to. Agape love is unselfish and unconditional. It is not an action, but a feeling. The feeling inside you, encouraging you to make society a better place, one kind gesture at a time.

The national council is working on developing a long-term, comprehensive plan that will span the next 5 years. We have a lot of work to do and it will take us time to get it right. We want to be thoughtful and intentional. We know we will struggle. We won't always get it right the first time, maybe not even the second or third, but we will learn and grow and continue to do better. Our member's voices are diverse, fierce, focused and strong, and we need to hear and listen to each other, now more than ever. We know that change will not happen overnight, and we want to be thoughtful and intentional in our approach. We will be reaching out to the membership soon to share ways that you can be involved in the conversation and helping us frame out our plan. It will take all of us, working together, to build a better, stronger Alpha Sigma Alpha.

Alpha Sigma Alpha is committed to cultivating an environment where members feel a true sense of belonging and ensuring our organization is reflective of the world in which we live. Every member should feel comfortable expressing her authentic self and be welcomed and valued for all that she brings to our sorority.

Alpha Sigma Alpha, we have work to do. These next few years will test our resolve and we must stand poised and ready to adapt and grow, ensuring our beloved sorority remains relevant and continues to positively affect society. I am excited about all that we will accomplish together!

Until we can see each other in person, be safe, stay well and don't forget to wear your mask!