

BIG TIME RUSH

In Part One of a two-part series, we explore the perceptions and realities of Greek life

Story by Lee Monistere

From her arrival at the University of Virginia, first-year student Virginia Carolyn Crawford was told: Don't ride the moose. According to Virginia Carolyn Crawford ('24), an active member of the Chi Omega sorority, "If you do, some houses could potentially black-list you. You have to be conscious of not making crazy choices when you're going out, especially during rush."

The moose in question is located in a UVA fraternity house, which girls tend to climb on at parties. Such a lack of decorum can be frowned upon by sororities. Sororities also have strict rules prohibiting prospective new members from frequenting bars or fraternity parties during rush week. "If you do, it will get reported," Crawford said. "In the first semester, you are allowed to go out and socialize, but you just have to be more conscious of not offending somebody or not looking totally stupid and reckless."

Sororities and fraternities are student social organizations that are more commonly referred to as Greek life. While a majority of chapters, both national and local, are centered around the college social scene, some Greek organizations are based on common areas of interest like medicine or business. Greek life is dominant in the schools of the Southeastern Conference, with the number of chapters ranging from 30 at Texas A&M to more than 60 at the University of Georgia.

The number of students involved in Greek life varies by school. At Vanderbilt, just over a quarter of students are involved in sororities while almost three-quarters join at Washington and Lee. At the University of Texas, only 16% join a sorority while almost half pledge at the University of Alabama. At Tulane, more than half the women participate in Greek life compared to just 15% at Washington University in St. Louis.

In the Ivy League, a mere 6% of all students at Brown are involved in Greek life while roughly 60% are members of Greek organizations at Dartmouth.

Despite the level of participation, Crawford notes that when people think of Greek life, the majority associate it with the "Bama Rush TikTok stereotype."

"People paint it as this superficial, paying-for-friends process," she said. "While there is a financial barrier to rush, it's worth it if you can sustain it. People underestimate how intense the bonds are and underplay that the whole goal is to find people who feel like you're home."

Before rush week, sororities create TikTok



GET YOUR GREEK ON
Caroline Hankamer celebrates Bid Day with her Kappa Delta sisters.

Photo courtesy of Caroline Hankamer

videos to entice girls to join their chapters. The typical video has around 20 girls doing synchronized dances and cartwheels while hundreds of others are bunched behind them cheering. The girls wear outfits that fit a certain theme, also plastered across a banner hanging from the balcony of their sorority mansion.

Bama Rush has a foothold on the internet every fall. Each day, girls make videos showcasing their outfits and explaining where every piece of clothing is from.

Crawford notes that this extreme stereotype does not accurately reflect sorority culture.

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VIRGINIA CAROLYN CRAWFORD

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Math teacher Kimm Shafer was a member of Alpha Delta Pi at the University of Texas. Being a part of her sorority motivated her and her sisters to work harder; at UT, ADPi freshmen had study hall hours to ensure their sorority continued to have the highest GPA on campus.

"When it came to studying, people were very serious," Shafer said.

Senior Mary Garvey plans to rush her freshman year at Tulane University, which begins in January.

"Rush is a good way to get closer with the girls in your class, and it's a great opportunity to have more of a schedule in college," Garvey said. "One of the big things that draws me to sororities is forming study groups with like-minded people and creating a close-knit group of friends with the people you meet."

When Shafer was in college, sororities would not send students an invitation or rush them unless the potential new members submitted letters of recommendation from someone in that sorority. Today, letters of recommendation are not used as frequently, depending on the sorority and the college. Shafer's daughter Katy ('18), a member of Pi Beta Phi at New York University, did not submit any letters of recommendation.

Crawford says that the recruitment process at UVA is less intense compared to some schools, especially regarding the amount of preparation required. "We had to submit the interest form by late

October, but I had friends who submitted it right when it opened in August and others submitted it the day before."

Crawford's friends at the University of Texas have discussed how "emotionally draining" the preparation process was for them. The size of Crawford's chapter is also significantly smaller – her pledge class consisted of 63 girls while most SEC sororities rush hundreds of girls per year.

"With the smaller size, you get to know people a little more easily, and the process feels a little more personal," Crawford said.

The dress code also varies: at most southern schools, the outfits the girls wear during each round of rush week are more formal compared to northern schools.

Crawford remembers calling a friend at UT the day before rush and showing her the Reformation jeans that she planned to wear.

Her friend looked concerned: "You're wearing jeans?!"

"I had to convince her that it was normal."

Caroline Hankamer ('23) started the recruitment process during her senior year at St. John's. After she announced her commitment to the University of Mississippi on Instagram, sorority girls at Ole Miss immediately began reaching out, introducing themselves and offering to help her acclimate to college life. She also began taking trips to Oxford, Mississippi, where she would stay with sorority girls and attend events at the houses.

Garvey plans to prepare for recruitment by reaching out to her friends at Tulane.

"I want to ask lots of questions about the process and try to be my best self throughout college," Garvey said.

It is common practice for sororities to monitor girls' social media before recruitment to get a sense of their interests and hobbies, but they are also looking for signs that a girl might not be the right fit for their chapter.

Crawford said some girls tried to clean up their online presence to avoid controversy. "For the most part, as long as you aren't painting yourself as this wild, crazy person, you don't really need to adjust your social media."

Since Ole Miss has girls from all over the country wanting to join their sororities, Hankamer never felt at a disadvantage by being from out of state.

"It's such a big school that there were girls in our chapter from all over – and the chapters are really interested in finding everyone – so I always felt very seen."

No matter how informed one is about sorority life, nothing can prepare them for rush week.

In our next issue, we will dive deeper into the recruitment process and the realities of Greek life.

SISTERS BY CHOICE

Virginia Carolyn Crawford, second from left, with fellow members of Chi Omega at UVA.

Photo courtesy of Virginia Carolyn Crawford

