

Step Up and Lean In

“Since its founding in 1902, Delta Zeta has had the courage to stand up, be brave and to live a life that is full of taking risks.”

Dr. Mari Ann Callais

“ Our women must learn that they have the right to ‘sit at the table.’ When I say ‘sit at the table,’ I mean literally – to physically be a part of the decision-making, brainstorming, policy development, etc. – to sit at the table with a sense of belonging. ”

In 2014, how are women approaching leadership? Are they unafraid? Are they taking risks? Are they bringing other women with them?

The success of Sheryl Sandberg’s (chief operating officer of Facebook) book, “Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead,” is a testament to the fact that women want to stand up, step up and speak up to become leaders in every aspect of their lives, advancing their careers and their place in the world. But is there a lesson in “Lean In” for sorority women? Aren’t we already leading and mentoring?

Dr. Mari Ann Callais, speaker, facilitator, consultant and writer in the areas of leadership, fraternity/sorority life and higher education, believes that sorority women, collegiate and alumnae, can become bolder, braver and stronger by leaning in and taking a seat at tables where decisions are made that determine our future.

“What I hear from sorority leaders,” says Dr. Callais, “is they are afraid of not being liked or their chapter not being popular. Sandberg states, ‘Fear is the root of so many of the barriers that women face. Fear of not being liked. Fear of making the wrong choice. Fear of drawing negative attention. Fear of overreaching. Fear of being judged and fear of failure’ (‘Lean In,’ Knopf, 2013, p. 24).”

“As women, we are afraid of being judged by others, especially during the developmental years of college when women want to be accepted. So often I see chapters elect officers and those officers try to do the right thing. Then, when their peers think they are trying to take their fun away, they turn on the very women they elected to be their leaders. Women must have more confidence in their abilities to lead and make decisions.”

The sorority experience gives women an opportunity that few others will find in the college setting. “If we can’t help our women to feel confident, where else will they learn?” Dr. Callais asks. “We are positioned to build strong leaders, and not only the officers. Chapters have a small number of officers, but the majority are members who join because we tell them we are interested in helping them to grow and develop. They join because they want to feel accepted by a family of sisters who truly care about them. This is what our chapters and our members need to be not only talking about, but also offering our women.”

With support from within – “when your sisters have your back,” as Dr. Callais says, a sorority woman can do anything to fulfill her dreams and to enrich the world. “The challenge comes when our women act contradictory to our values,” she says. “When chapter members speak down to one another, when they don’t support one another – not just in a campus election or event, but also on a day-to-day basis during the times that really matter, confidence and fearlessness are destroyed.”

It is in a sorority that women find the strength to take advantage of life-changing opportunities – for themselves and others. “No one else is afforded the kind of support

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that sorority women offer one another when we do it right,” Dr. Callais says. “We have to start believing that we have the ability to make changes – to have courage to stand up when others are afraid.”

The sorority experience is a subject Dr. Callais is passionate about. “We are learning how to do sorority really well, but we are not experiencing sorority,” she emphasizes. “If we were experiencing sorority, we would be unstoppable on college campuses.”

Experiencing sorority is living the ritual and taking the values of Delta Zeta into every aspect of one’s life – especially on the college campus.

“Leaning in and sitting at the table is the only way things are going to change,” says Dr. Callais. “And when you sit at the table, be clear about where Delta Zeta stands.”

But even good leaders can be cautious about being ambitious, a trait that Dr. Callais says women should cultivate. “We are afraid because how does ambition make us seem?” Dr. Callais continues. “How many women do we know in high-power positions who start acting like a man? They don’t realize that they are hired or chosen because we want who they are as women. That is what is important.”

“Our women raise tons of money; do hours upon hours of community service, and typically have higher GPAs than the all-women’s average on campus. With this said, what fraternities think of them on most campuses is still one of the most influential factors that determine how they are viewed and how they view themselves. Even though 57 percent of women are earning undergraduate degrees and 60 percent earn master’s degrees, many women still see ambition as a dirty word.”

“BRING OTHER WOMEN ALONG”

“The sorority experience was established for women to mentor other women,” Dr. Callais says. “In my experience, some of our chapter leaders are put in leadership positions too early in their time in the chapter. In the last couple of decades, we have seen a shift from juniors and seniors holding major officer positions to most of the leadership responsibility being placed on the sophomores. It is important to remember that, developmentally, sophomores can do the job asked of them, but what if we gave them the skills and support to develop and take on that role a year or so later? By the time they are juniors and seniors, they are burned out. Then, our seniors feel like they don’t matter to the sorority anymore. We need to help our older members be role models for younger members and stay involved to support their younger sisters.”

Dr. Callais continues, “It is our role to mentor one another, and to help one another be the best version of ourselves that we can be. Our male counterparts are much better at bringing other men along whether in the work place, social scenes or other environments. As women, it is our responsibility to encourage, mentor and nurture one another. There is nothing like the feeling of another woman genuinely offering to help you in a way that builds up your confidence.”

“But as younger women, especially, and as older women who are supposed to be mentoring them, if we don’t give them the courage to sit at the table, we will never make the strides that we are capable of making.”

The advantages provided by sorority membership, especially when women lean in, step up and support their sisters, shape them into women who take their fearlessness into the world. And that fearlessness changes the world for the better. “Our sisters challenge us to be better,” Dr. Callais says. “Delta Zeta changes the world for people who need speech and hearing services because someone in Delta Zeta stepped up and said, ‘That is our responsibility.’”

“If you understand the power of being a Delta Zeta and being in a sorority, you can change our communities in a way that no other organization can,” Dr. Callais emphasizes. “But you have to have courage, you have to step up and you have to be willing to take those hits because you know your sisters have your back.”

When we became members of Delta Zeta, we pledged to uphold the Sorority’s values as established by our Founders more than 100 years ago. These were women who barely leaned in to create a national sorority and foster a sisterhood that endures. They changed the world for women at Miami University and, later, for Delta Zetas and others around the world.

And leaning in means having the courage to face controversial or difficult issues. “So often as sororities, we don’t want to be involved in issues that might seem controversial (such as violence against women), but it is time for our women and our organizations to stand up for women and gain the respect of others,” Dr. Callais says.

“You can have a seat at the table,” Dr. Callais reiterates. “And until you believe you can, the world is not going to change.”



Dr. Mari Ann Callais serves as the Sr. Director of Special Initiatives for Delta Delta Delta Fraternity. She is a member of the CAMPUSPEAK Speakers Team and has been a keynote and featured speaker at many regional and national conferences and conventions. She most recently served as an Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator of the Student Affairs Graduate Program at Mississippi State University. She is the Past National President of her sorority, Theta Phi Alpha, NPC Delegate, and she was a member of the Delta Delta Delta Center Board.

Mary Ann was the recipient of the Fraternity Communications Association’s Varner Award in 2015. She has been honored at the Sigma Sigma Sigma Greek Advisor of the Year, with the Theta Chi Fraternity Outstanding Greek Affairs Professional Award, Theta Phi Alpha National Achievement Award and the Guard of Honor, which is the highest award Theta Phi Alpha bestows on a member. She was awarded the AFA 2005 Distinguished Service Award and the National Diversity Council’s 2011 Most Influential and Powerful Women in Louisiana.

She served as the Theme Housing Specialist and Vice President for Leasing/Marketing Cottages Division for Capstone Development. Dr. Callais is also a consultant on several fraternity/sorority housing projects.

Delta Zeta’s Founders were women who were unafraid to take risks. In 1902, they came to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio as some of the first full-time women students on campus. They met opposition, especially when they wanted to form a national sorority. One such story from Founder Julia Bishop’s diary tells of the would-be theft of the Sorority’s draft of the Constitution by the “Senators,” a group of young men from the various fraternities, who snatched it from the hands of one of the Founders as she crossed campus. Dr. Guy Potter Benton, advisor and friend who would later become the Sorority’s Grand Patron, retrieved the document.

“Delta Zeta’s Founders were great role models for all of us,” says Dr. Callais. “They supported one another and believed in the gifts and talents of each sister. Today, many of our chapters are very large and different than those early years, but the example those women set for us is still applicable today.”

“We have to start stepping up because those young women from 1902 are depending on us to do that. They are depending on us to be brave, to be vulnerable, to take risks, to be uncertain and to sometimes not be popular. That is when you know you are a good leader.”