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Title

Reflections on Leadership in the Berkeley Panhellenic Community

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0nd3775j>

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Publication Date

2023-10-30

Reflections on Leadership in the Berkeley Panhellenic Community
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Introduction

In 1880 the very first sorority, Kappa Kappa Gamma, was founded at the University of California,¹ Berkeley campus, just 10 years following the establishment of the first fraternity. At the time, women composed a mere quarter² of the undergraduate student population. The space for sororities on campus was anchored by 1916 with the birth of the Panhellenic Council, which installed a governing body for all affiliated sorority organizations. Over a century later, sororities at Berkeley have expanded their robust and highly organized social structures, providing women on campus a space dedicated to growth in leadership, scholarship, friendship, and service.³ The current makeup of the Panhellenic community is composed of 14 affiliate chapters, 12 of which are associates of National-level affiliations; there are about 2,000 women in the community, making it the largest organization for women operating on campus.

Purpose of Sororities

Beyond serving as a source of housing, sororities were fundamentally established as organizations for women to prosper on campus. Kappa Kappa Gamma's national foundation in 1870 emphasized academia and leadership as central to the sorority. Their founders stated they believed in a "woman's potential to inspire others and impact the world".⁴ Other sorority chapters established at Cal reflected similar beliefs -- that women hold the tremendous capacity to succeed. Over time, the purposes have not changed within each sorority, and the Panhellenic community still collectively embraces the four pillars of leadership, scholarship, friendship, and service⁵ to which each chapter demonstrates its own commitment. Leadership opportunities are widely available with 12 elected roles in the Panhellenic executive council and a multitude of officer positions within each chapter. Women in this community have also demonstrated a unique dedication to service through their philanthropic causes. Each chapter has its own philanthropic cause, for which they host events and fundraise throughout every semester. Scholarship in Panhellenic life is embraced through shared study materials, chapter and community-wide study groups, and professional development workshops. Panhellenic women are further expected to hold a serious commitment to academic life and are accountable to uphold GPA minimum requirements that vary by chapter. Jessie Harris Stewart, class of 1914, shared the academic standards of her chapter, Delta Delta Delta, through her oral history.

Riess: Did the sorority place any emphasis on academics? Was there any competition among the sororities, for instance, to have a group of really academically top girls?

¹ "About CalGreeks." LEAD Center, lead.berkeley.edu/about-calgreeks/.

² Berkeley, UC. OPA – University of California Berkeley, pages.github.berkeley.edu/OPA/our-berkeley/enroll-history.html.

³ "Cal PHC About." Calpanhellenic, www.calphc.com/about.

⁴ "Our History: Kappa Kappa Gamma." Our History | Kappa Kappa Gamma, www.kappakappagamma.org/Kappa/About_Us/In_the_Beginning/.

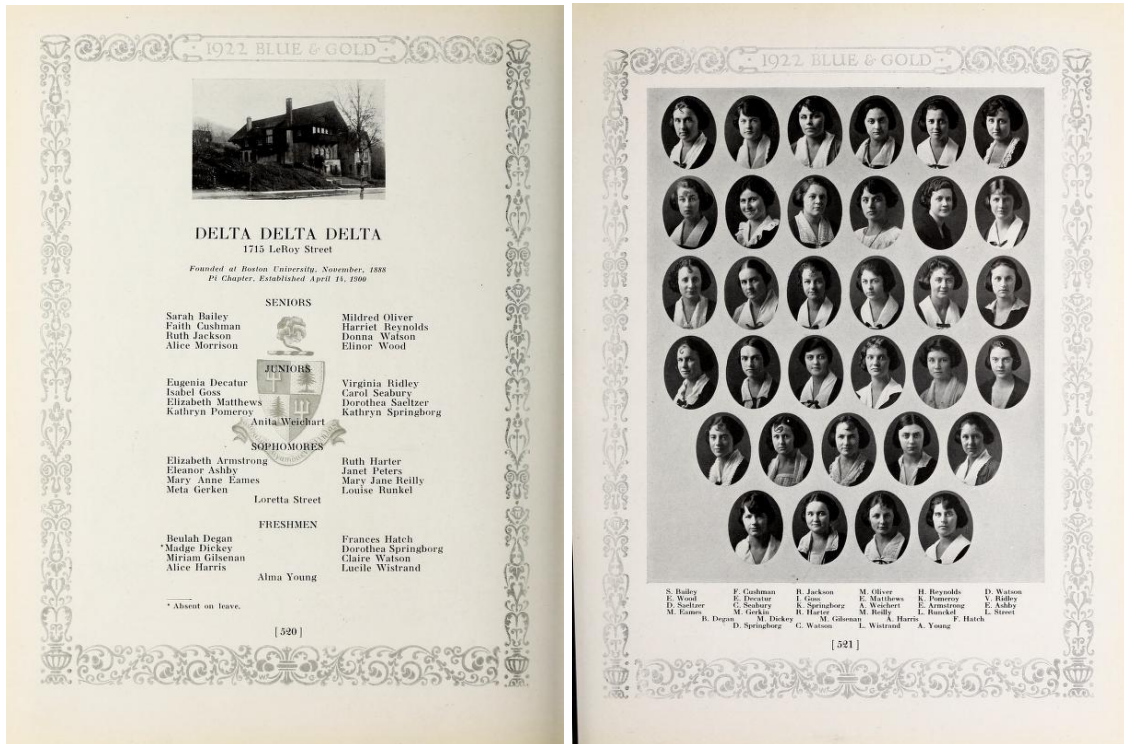
⁵ "Cal PHC About." Calpanhellenic, www.calphc.com/about.

Stewart: Well, we had to keep our grades up. There was that about it. There was a house senior going after you when you didn't keep your grades up. But I don't think there was any competition between the sororities at all.

...

Riess: How would the house senior know what everybody's grades were?

Stewart: Well, the senior in our house would see your grades and say, "You've got to pick them up now. You've got to do better than you're doing," or something like that.⁶



Delta Delta Delta Sorority featured in the Blue and Gold Yearbook, 1922.⁷

Women Students' Need for Housing

By 1915, seventeen sororities⁸ had secured charters in Berkeley and several had chapter houses for residence by the late 1920s.⁹ A century ago, student lodging for women was not easily obtainable, so the establishment of sorority houses as living quarters for women came as a meaningful opportunity for housing. In 1900, the Pi Chapter of Delta Delta Delta was founded at UC Berkeley. Then in 1925, it became the first chapter to have a house designed and built specifically for the purpose of being a sorority home.¹⁰ It wasn't until 1942, 52 years after

⁶ Jessie Harris Stevart, MEMORIES OF GIRLHOOD AND THE UNIVERSITY. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library. University of California Berkeley.

<https://ia800908.us.archive.org/32/items/girlhooduniversi00stewrich/girlhooduniversi00stewrich.pdf>

⁷ The Blue and Gold Yearbook. Internetarchive. <https://archive.org/details/bluegold48univ/page/n535/mode/1up>

⁸ "About CalGreeks." LEAD Center, lead.berkeley.edu/about-calgreeks/.

⁹ BAHA: Ghosts of Old Greeks Populate the Northside, berkeleyheritage.com/eastbay_then-now/greeks.html.

¹⁰ University of California, Berkeley chapter of Tri Delta. "Tri Delta: University of California, Berkeley." *Delta Delta Delta*, berkeley.tridelta.org/our-house.

women were first admitted to the university, that the first women's dormitory, Stern Hall, was built and even so it was funded through private donations.¹¹ After university housing spaces opened up for women, availability and accessibility still remained difficult. A student activist in the 1960s, Jackie Goldberg, class of 1965, recounted that after being rejected from both a co-op and dormitory, she joined Delta Phi Epsilon in a desperate search for housing. At the time, Delta Phi Epsilon was one of two Jewish sororities on campus; the other was Alpha Epsilon Phi.

Lack of Inclusion During the First Six Decades



Kappa Kappa Gamma Sorority women standing outside their house in the 1950s¹²

To discuss the Panhellenic community without acknowledging its long history of exclusion would be incomplete. Early sorority life at Cal was characterized by a lack of inclusivity and diversity. From their founding in the 19th century all the way to the 1960s, sororities were very exclusive spaces. Today, the Greek community has certainly come a long way from its elitist and predominantly white population and its historic exclusion of women of color and working-class backgrounds.¹³ Over the years, many of Berkeley's Panhellenic chapters have fought to expand inclusion, even going so far as to directly oppose their national or local affiliation's policies. Even so, today the Greek community still remains often at the center of controversy for exclusivity and elitism.

Because of the racist attitudes in the Panhellenic community, Black women were not welcome into the existing sororities until the 1960s and even then, the community remained primarily geared towards white women. However, to create community in 1921, the first Black sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority¹⁴ was founded at UC Berkeley. That same year, Ida Louise Jackson founded the Rho chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, thus establishing a second Black

¹¹ Free Speech Movement Oral History Project. "Sleeping With The Light On - Let There Be Light." <https://soundcloud.com/berkeleyohc/episode-1-sleeping-with-the-light-on?in=berkeleyohc/sets/let-there-be-light-150-years>

¹² Chapter History. Kappa Kappa Gamma Berkeley. <http://berkeley.kappa.org/chapter-history>.

¹³ "Room Two." *Room Two: A Room of One's Own*, bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/womenatcal/room_02_insi "Room Two."

¹⁴ "About CalGreeks." LEAD Center, lead.berkeley.edu/about-calgreeks/.

sorority on campus.¹⁵ Decades later, in 1985, the National Pan-Hellenic Council was established, to represent the 9 historically African-American fraternities and sororities. In 1946, the first Asian sorority, Sigma Omicron Pi, was founded at Cal to provide a space committed to the Asian American community.¹⁶ In 1997, Sigma Phi Omega was established as the second Asian sorority on campus.¹⁷ The two Asian sororities still remain on campus today, as part of the Multi-Cultural Greek Council, and are dedicated to community service and leadership growth. Up until the 1960s, exclusion of Jewish women from sororities was common. Rhoda Goldman, an alumna of the class of 1945, explained that sororities often displayed anti-Jewish discrimination because they were private organizations that did not need to adhere to non-discriminatory practices.¹⁸ Evidently, the history of the Panhellenic community is marked by prejudice expanding across racial, religious, and class identities.

In 2007, the Mult-Cultural Greek Council was formed to recognize all other single-gendered fraternities and sororities beyond those within the Panhellenic, National Pan-Hellenic, and Interfraternity Councils. In 2016, the Panhellenic Council instituted a new role in community leadership, Vice President of Community Development,¹⁹ which aims to address inclusivity and diversity within the community. Today, each chapter in the Panhellenic community has surely made strides toward greater diversity since their founding, and the role of inclusion has been elevated by the Panhellenic Council as well through a specific “diversity and inclusion resources” section on the Cal Panhellenic website along with a statement addressing the rise of racial tensions in 2020.²⁰ Nevertheless the Berkeley Panhellenic and Interfraternity communities still have much progress to reach and will continue to be shaped by the members who hold their community to higher standards of accountability.

Opportunities for Service

Membership in the various sororities at UC Berkeley has provided women a variety of opportunities and experiences over time. Agnes Partin, a student at Cal in 1917, joined Alpha Gamma Delta Sorority and recounted her experiences through detailed letters she sent home.²¹ Partin shared her encounters of hazing, which she playfully described as wearing clown costumes and having to sing and dance for the older members. She wrote about the Annual Formal Tea that her chapter hosted in honor of the initiates and the lavish events she was attending. During Agnes’s time at Cal, World War I and the Spanish Influenza outbreak greatly influenced her experience. Partin proudly wrote about what her sorority sisters were doing during this time:

¹⁵ Qu, Deborah. “One of UC Berkeley’s first African American graduates and Oakland’s first black teacher.” Berkeley Library Update. <https://update.lib.berkeley.edu/2020/08/04/the-fighting-spirit-of-ida-louise-jackson/>

¹⁶ “Our Story.” UC Berkeley Sigma Omicron Pi. <https://sopi.berkeley.edu/about.html>.

¹⁷ “Sigma Phi Omega.” <https://callink.berkeley.edu/organization/sigmaphiomega>.

¹⁸ Rhoda H. Goldman, a retrospective memoir : oral history transcript / 2000.

¹⁹ Kim, Alicia. “Diversity Presentation Leads to Dispute within Panhellenic Sororities at UC Berkeley.” *The Daily Californian*, 6 Dec. 2017, www.dailycal.org/2017/12/04/diversity-presentation-sparks-controversy-within-panhellenic-sororities/.

²⁰ “Cal PHC About.” Calpanhellenic, www.calphc.com/about.

²¹ Partin, Agnes Edwards, and Grace E. Moremen. *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley, during and after World War I: the Letters of Agnes Edwards Partin, 1917-1921*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

“We’re so proud of our girls -- almost every one of them is working at something really worthwhile... & doing lots of Red Cross and other war work... One of our graduates (1913) has been made assistant to the Recorder... one is director of the Junior Red Cross in Monterey County, one has gone to France as [a] dietician, one is doing Juvenile Court in L.A. and ever so many are working in offices or stores or on ranches...”²²

She also wrote about her more serious duties as a sorority sister when it was her turn to stay up and care for another sister who had fallen sick during the outbreak. During the reappearance of the flu in 1919, she was designated to send out telegrams to her sorority sisters to alert them against coming back to campus until further notice. These letters describing Agnes’s sorority life during extraordinary times illustrate the significant sense of the sisterhood and leadership she gained. In her final year at Cal, Partin was selected to be pledge trainer in her chapter. She expressed her enthusiasm and readiness to dedicate time and energy to her new responsibilities as a leader, showing her commitment to the sorority and detailing the enriching opportunity she had. The academic standard for sorority membership has historically been set high, ever since the first sororities established themselves as institutions committed to supporting women in the often sexist academic settings they found themselves in.²³ This high academic standard was celebrated by Agnes Partin as well when she wrote about her sorority sister and friend, Mary, who had made Phi Beta Kappa as a junior.* Agnes noted that “usually it’s only seniors who are elected, and there were only 5 juniors chosen [in 1919].”²⁴

Leadership and the Panhellenic Community

Leadership stands as one of the three pillars of the UC Berkeley Panhellenic community’s mission statement. Currently, the Panhellenic community is composed of 14 chapters, governed by an Executive Council of 12 Panhellenic women. The Executive Council is composed of a President, Executive Vice President, Vice Presidents of Risk Management, Membership, Communications, Programming, Philanthropy, Scholarship, Sustainability, Community Development, Health and Wellness, and a Head Recruitment Counselor. Throughout normal years, the Panhellenic community has constantly made strides of progress through the development of new practices and legislation. To illustrate this point, in 2018, following the passing of a bylaw, the Panhellenic Council offered a statement that condemned inappropriate behavior from the fraternity Sigma Chi.²⁵ This statement also issued a Panhellenic-wide prohibition of all events affiliated with the Sigma Chi fraternity in demonstration of solidarity. As per the bylaw, the Panhellenic community sends out monthly statements delivering a position on the current fraternities under discussion and means to hold them accountable.

The *leadership* and commitment shown by Panhellenic leaders throughout the years have convincingly demonstrated the strong character built from within the Panhellenic community.

²² Partin, Agnes Edwards, and Grace E. Moremen. *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley, during and after World War I: the Letters of Agnes Edwards Partin, 1917-1921*, page 136. Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

²³ Simpson, Amanda. “The Sorority and Its Role In Women's Rights.” *Medium*, Medium, 2 Dec. 2015, medium.com/@amandasimpson1851/the-sorority-and-its-role-in-women-s-rights-f1bdf2ecabd9.

²⁴ Partin, Agnes Edwards, and Grace E. Moremen. *Student Life at the University of California, Berkeley, during and after World War I: the Letters of Agnes Edwards Partin, 1917-1921*, page 194. Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

²⁵ “Cal PHC About.” *Calpanhellenic*, www.calphc.com/about.

*Note: *Phi Beta Kappa is the oldest academic honor society in the United States.*

After joining Delta Phi Epsilon in search of housing during the 1960s, Jackie Goldberg went on to hold the title of Panhellenic Representative for her chapter. In her leadership role, she developed a plan alongside the Dean of Women, Katherine Towle, to make the Panhellenic recruitment process more inclusive by having all affiliate chapters sign a non-discrimination pledge.²⁶ Faced with pushback from each chapter's unwillingness to act against their *national* direction by signing the pledge, Goldberg took the initiative to host a forum on campus where she invited national leaders from sororities, hoping that the prejudiced membership practices would open their eyes and incite change. As a result, every Berkeley sorority signed on to the non-discrimination pledge.²⁷ Goldberg's influence in the 1960s serves as one of many exemplary acts of fearless leadership emerging from the Berkeley Panhellenic community. Further, many Berkeley Greek alumnae have proceeded on with their leadership, including Goldberg who was elected to the Los Angeles City Council in 1993 and then served in the California State Assembly from 2001 to 2007. Ida Louise Jackson, class of 1922 and founder of Alpha Kappa Alpha, demonstrated courage and leadership when she became the first Black teacher in Oakland public schools.²⁸ Joan Didion, class of 1956 and member of Delta Delta Delta, went on to become a globally recognized novelist and journalist.²⁹ Anna McCune Harper, class of 1924 and member of Sigma Kappa, became one of the highest ranked tennis players in the country from 1928 to 1932, served as Sigma Kappa's national president from 1939 to 1942, and in 1981 was inducted into the Cal Athletic Hall of Fame.³⁰ Marguerite Higgins, class of 1938 and member of Gamma Phi Beta, became the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting from the Korean war in 1951.³¹ During World War II, Higgins was named by General Douglas McArthur in a telegram stating "[the] ban on women correspondents in Korea has been lifted... Marguerite Higgins is held in highest professional esteem by everyone."³² These are just a few examples of extraordinary leadership emerging from the Berkeley Panhellenic community and there is no doubt that the community will continue to support and uplift women in leadership.

Personal Reflections on Delta Delta Delta

Over a century after its founding at Cal, I joined Delta Delta Delta as a first-year student. Hesitantly entering the Panhellenic community, I joined cautiously, with awareness of the problematic history and the daunting, often sexist, reputations of Greek life. However, though mine is not reflective of all, I have experienced a steadfast community, friendship, and personal development of leadership. This chapter and community have given me, amongst many other young women, a space to thrive on campus, a place to surround myself with women I admire, and as many before me would acknowledge, a place to live.

²⁶ Art and Jackie Goldberg Free Speech Movement Oral History Project, 1999.

https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/fsm/goldberg_art_and_jackie.html

²⁷ Free Speech Movement Oral History Project. "Sleeping With The Light On - Let There Be Light."

<https://soundcloud.com/berkeleyohc/episode-1-sleeping-with-the-light-on?in=berkeleyohc/sets/let-there-be-light-150-years>

²⁸ Qu, Deborah. "One of UC Berkeley's first African American graduates and Oakland's first black teacher." Berkeley Library Update. <https://update.lib.berkeley.edu/2020/08/04/the-fighting-spirit-of-ida-louise-jackson/>

²⁹ "Berkeley's Remarkable Women." 150W Berkeley. <https://150w.berkeley.edu/photo-gallery>.

³⁰ "Notable Sigma Kappas." Sigma Kappa. <https://sigmakappa.org/about-us/notable-sigma-kappas/>.

³¹ "1945: Marguerite Higgins." Gamma Phi Beta.

<https://www.gammaphibeta.org/gpb/881f8a74-a56f-48e7-aa60-a013f94d4425/1945-Marguerite-Higgins>

³² "1945: Marguerite Higgins." Gamma Phi Beta.

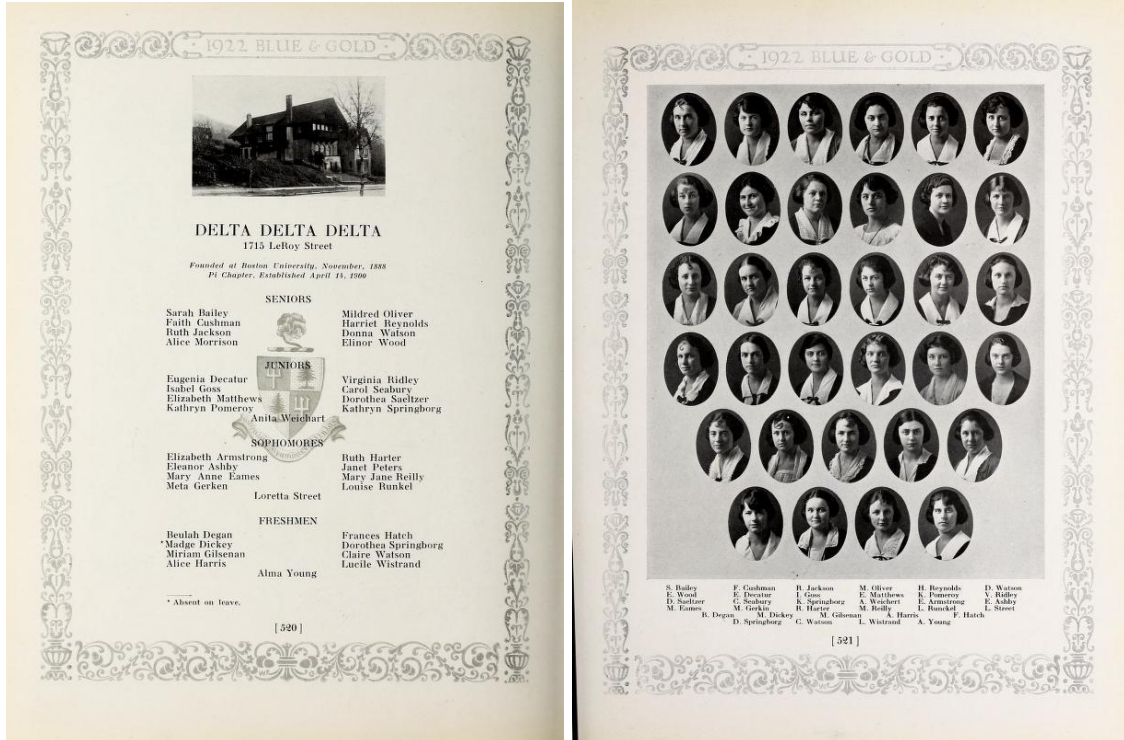
<https://www.gammaphibeta.org/gpb/881f8a74-a56f-48e7-aa60-a013f94d4425/1945-Marguerite-Higgins>

Throughout the years, Tri Delta Pi Chapter has most notably established itself in the Panhellenic community through philanthropic efforts to raise money for St. Jude Children's Hospital. St. Jude is a children's cancer research and medical center that has prided itself on the complete lack of all financial costs from every patient's family. The daily cost to run and operate St. Jude Hospital is two million dollars. Because of organizations like Tri Delta, St. Jude has been able to provide their patients' families with care and research without any financial costs. In 2014, Tri Delta nationally committed to raising \$60 million in 10 years for St. Jude, the largest pledge from a single organization to date.³³ In 2017 during my first year in Tri Delta, the Pi Chapter raised over \$55,000 for St. Jude, reflecting the vigorous effort put into a multitude of fundraising events throughout the year. The Pi Chapter holds its relationship with St. Jude dear, and its fundraising numbers alone demonstrate how much of a force of nature a group of young and determined women can be.

Offering over 40 leadership positions, the Pi Chapter of Delta Delta Delta has also provided many opportunities for young women to gain leadership experiences in a community designed for and shaped by themselves. Personally, I have gained skills in areas like community outreach, *accountability practice*, emergency response, sexual violence prevention and education, and protection of privacy. Above all, I have grown to embrace what it means to be a strong leader.

I have often reflected on what it has meant to be a member of the Panhellenic community. While I struggle to affiliate myself with a system originally built upon elitist prejudice, this community has provided a cohort of diligent, compassionate, and bold women whom I have seen grow into compassionate leaders, brilliant academics, and admirable women. Today, the Berkeley Panhellenic community continues to uplift the spirit of women and encourage leadership, service, friendship, and scholarship. My experience at Cal has been defined by these women, and their impact will guide my future. I will reflect upon my time in the Panhellenic community as one of the most fortunate periods of my life, in which I was surrounded by, shaped by, and led by a community of extraordinary women.

³³ "Tri Delta and St. Jude." St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, www.stjude.org/get-involved/school-fundraising-ideas/college/greek-organizations/tri-delta.html#fc5959b808e5e41d04cbf00334995ef9b9eefe86f5423448e4bee5985e9e30c0=4.



Delta Delta Delta Sorority featured in the Blue and Gold Yearbook, 1922.³⁴

Conclusion

The Panhellenic community at UC Berkeley has constantly evolved since its first sorority was founded in 1880. The community has changed over time to reflect the life of women on campus. A community that once served primarily as a support system for women seeking housing has developed into a space to cultivate the leadership, scholarship, friendship, and service of women. The Panhellenic community holds a rich history with often discomfoting components such as sexist hierarchies, discriminatory practices, and challenges regarding diversity and inclusion. But as we have seen strides toward progress led by Panhellenic women leaders throughout time, there is no question that the Panhellenic community has equipped many women at Cal with immense support and friendship, leadership development, and a fundamental space for women students to thrive.

³⁴ The Blue and Gold Yearbook. Internetarchive. <https://archive.org/details/bluegold48univ/page/n535/mode/1up>