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Long push for sorority housing ends

By [Ryan Brown](#)

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Nine chapters. More than 1,000 members. And no home.

Every year, the leaders of Duke's Panhellenic Association sororities faced the same stark math: Nearly a century after its first chapter arrived at the University, the organization's members still lacked the centerpiece of sorority life at many other schools—their own space.

"We [Duke sororities] don't have the ability to give girls a full experience because we can't live together," said senior Alyssa Dack, president of Alpha Delta Pi sorority. "Having space would make our programming more effective and our organizations better."

After nearly four years of watching her sorority shuffle through different rented meeting rooms each week, competing against the legion of other student groups for precious campus space, Dack said she was fed up. Last Fall she and fellow senior Casey Miller, a member of Pi Beta Phi sorority, made a decision: They would find the Panhellenic sororities a physical space at Duke.

It was a task that spanned the entire Fall semester, taking the women from meetings with administrators and Residence Life and Housing Services to presentations and proposals before Campus Council. Campus Council agreed Jan. 21 to grant the nine Panhel sororities two apartment buildings on Central Campus for the 2010-2011 school year, a total of 28 beds to be split among the different chapters. The buildings will also house two common rooms, which Dack and Miller said will provide crucial meeting space for Panhel.

"[Before this year] I had always just assumed—like I think most other women on Duke campus—that the reason Panhel didn't have a space of its own was that the University wouldn't allow it," Miller said.

But as she quickly discovered, the reality was far more nuanced.

Despite a popular perception on campus that Duke sororities lack housing because of a historical law preventing groups of women from living together—a so-called "brothel law"—no such ordinance ever existed in the city of Durham, said Joe Gonzalez, associate dean for residential life.

"It's an old wives' tale," he added.

And while the city of Durham does have an ordinance prohibiting more than three unrelated people from sharing a single-family dwelling, what hampered Duke Panhel from securing space was actually a tangle of administrative red tape and sorority inaction, Dean of Students Sue Wasiolek said.

The history of sororities at Duke began in 1911, when ADPi chartered the first sorority chapter on campus, but it was not until the 1930s that their popularity took off at Duke's Women's College and they later laid claim to a large meeting space on East Campus, the Crowell Building.

But after the Board of Trustees closed the Crowell space in 1959, Panhel began to roam, holding meetings in classrooms and whatever spaces they could borrow from the University. This began the nomadic existence that would haunt sororities at Duke for the next four decades, as they waged a range of battles for permanent meeting space and housing on campus.

"[Sorority] women have always gotten excited over the opportunity for housing," said Clarybel Peguero, assistant dean of students and director of fraternity and sorority life. "But they could never figure out how exactly to do it."

Instead sororities faced internal divisions, Wasiolek said, refusing to make serious attempts at securing housing until all of their member organizations were behind the plan.

That day never came. But Pannhel also fought for—and on at least one occasion in the 1980s briefly received—their own meeting space, in the building that now houses the Duke Police Department on Oregon Street. It dissolved after less than two years of existence due to a lack of interest among sorority members, Wasiolek said.

Peguero said Miller and Dack's initiative succeeded this year because, unlike the leaders involved in many previous attempts at securing Panhel space, they submitted a concrete and reasonable proposal.

Many sorority leaders are excited by the new Panhel housing and meeting space on Central, and they said it is a step in the right direction for the organization.

"If Delta Gamma had our own place on campus we would feel more like a sisterhood," said DG president Becki Feinglos, a junior. "There's something really important about having a space that's all your own."

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