

The Family Line System of Theta Xi

I became a member of the second oldest fraternity at MIT, Theta Xi, at the beginning of my freshman year in 2017. In the months following my decision to join, I underwent an education process designed to integrate me and the other students who had joined into the community. This curriculum culminated in a ceremony where I became a full member of the fraternity (an “active” member”), and was inducted into a “family line” where I had a “big brother”. Two years later, I am in charge of educating the newest members of the fraternity, and I have two “littles” of my own as of last year’s ceremony. Given that they share many of the descriptors of relationships with those of biological families, I thought this system would be perfect to diagram as a form of kinship. However, it ended up being much more complicated than I had initially envisioned.

Besides the family line relationships, the most significant connections in Theta Xi are the pledge classes: brothers who join at the same time complete membership education together and usually end up sharing rooms in our house. Therefore, we are often more tight-knit than with those we joined with than other members. I chose to include these in the diagram because they are a clear way to divide the members into groups that enter and leave the active chapter together. Even after graduation, pledge classes are significant because their members reunite for anniversaries of their joining the fraternity.

In theory, the family line system operates as follows: each calendar year sees three phases of the system. In September, we recruit new members who become a pledge class when they decide to join. These members then participate in a membership education process which lasts until mid-November. During this time, they are known as “Associate Members”. They must interview every active brother in order to become better integrated and prepare to join a family line. At the last meeting of the education program, Associate Members rank their top three choices for a big brother among the Actives. Likewise, active members rank their top three choices for a little brother from among the pledge class. The brother in charge of educating new members cannot rank anyone, but he aggregates the data from the two sets of brothers to assign the next

generation of each family line. New family line members are usually chosen based on which brothers have the closest friendships formed over the past three months.

For the next 5 months, every member of the fraternity is a member of an existing family line, and there are four classes of Actives. During this time, the oldest member of each family line must take his entire family line out to dinner and is also primarily responsible for ensuring the well-being of his newest family members to the extent that a fraternity brother can provide. When classes end in May, another ceremony transforms the oldest pledge class into alumni members, and there are only three active classes until new brothers are recruited.

This idealized cycle, which I laid out in my first diagram, has most likely never been realized in practice. In reality, multiple factors outside the fraternity's control modify the system, although the cycle remains the same. First of all, each pledge class is not the same size due to fluctuating recruitment. This means that each new brother cannot be assigned a big brother in the class above him, and certain brothers have more than one little. For example, due to massive expansion of membership after last year's recruitment, I have two little brothers, and my big brother has an additional little in the class below me. Another problem preventing the family line system from existing in its simplest form is the fact that students do not have to join the fraternity as freshmen. Both my class and the class above me had members join who graduated last year. These members have less of a chance to continue their family line due to the shorter time between their joining and graduation.

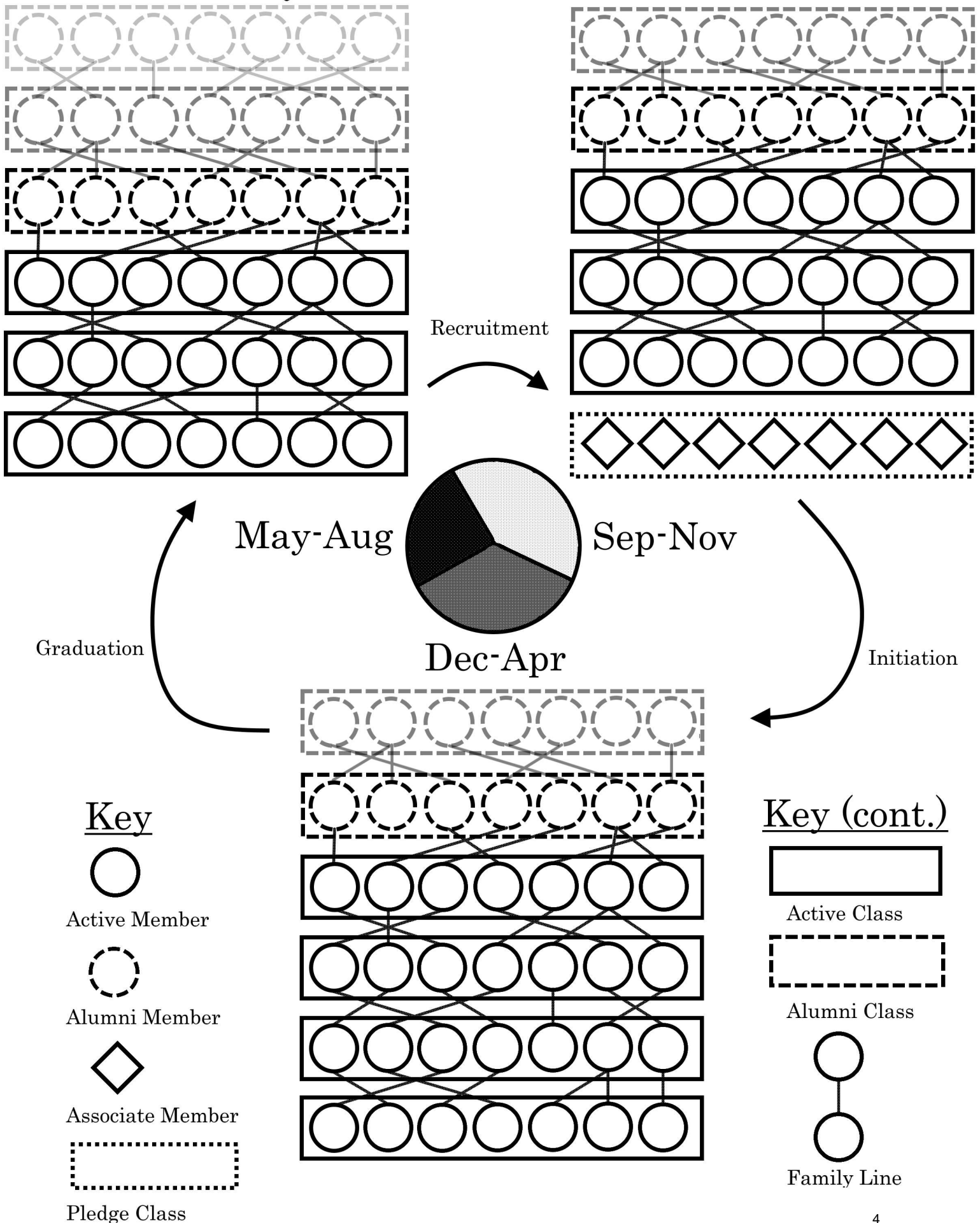
Finally, members occasionally de-affiliate from the fraternity entirely. This effectively terminates their branch of the family line. In general, we endeavor to prevent branches of family lines from ending, but these factors sometimes make that impossible. Fortunately, the fact that all lines must necessarily trace back to one of the eight founding members of our chapter makes it unlikely that any one of the original family lines has ever been extinguished. The data needed for this diagram was gathered through my observation of two years' worth of big/little ceremonies as well as my conversations with other brothers about their family lines.

After comparing the family line system to the texts we have studied, it appears to share the most similarities with the Kula as described by Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Both systems serve to

formalize a set of relationships which might have spontaneously existed and add additional ceremonies and significance to them. Just as men in the Trobriands would likely still trade with other islands and form lasting relationships with certain traders, brothers of Theta Xi would probably still have one or two closest friends in the classes above and below them without the big / little system. However, it is possible that without the system certain brothers would become isolated, as would certain islands. Both the Kula and the family line system exist in part to ensure that beneficial relationships are maintained across generations. A spirit of selfless giving drives big/little relationships through dinners just as Kula offerings maintain its influence. These relationships are also lifelong, with many big/little pairs remaining close long after graduation just as the Kula continues ever on (Malinowski 62).

The most striking similarity between the two systems, however, is the lack of any top-down design. Just as the Kula is not organized by an overarching authority, and its individual connections are not recorded or understood in whole by its participants, there is no written record of the family lines of Theta Xi tracing back to the beginning of the chapter (Malinowski 63). Therefore, each individual member never knows who is in their family line beyond one or two classes above and below him. This is in stark contrast to other fraternities and even other chapters of Theta Xi, which keep meticulous records of their similar systems over the years. Taking a step back, I believe that both the family line and fraternities in general exist for the same fundamental reason as the Kula. Imbuing beneficial social relations with mystique through tradition and ceremony ensures that they are maintained across generations and gives members of wide communities shared experiences that they can use to relate to one another. This fellowship is a valuable resource which cultures across time and space work hard to cultivate.

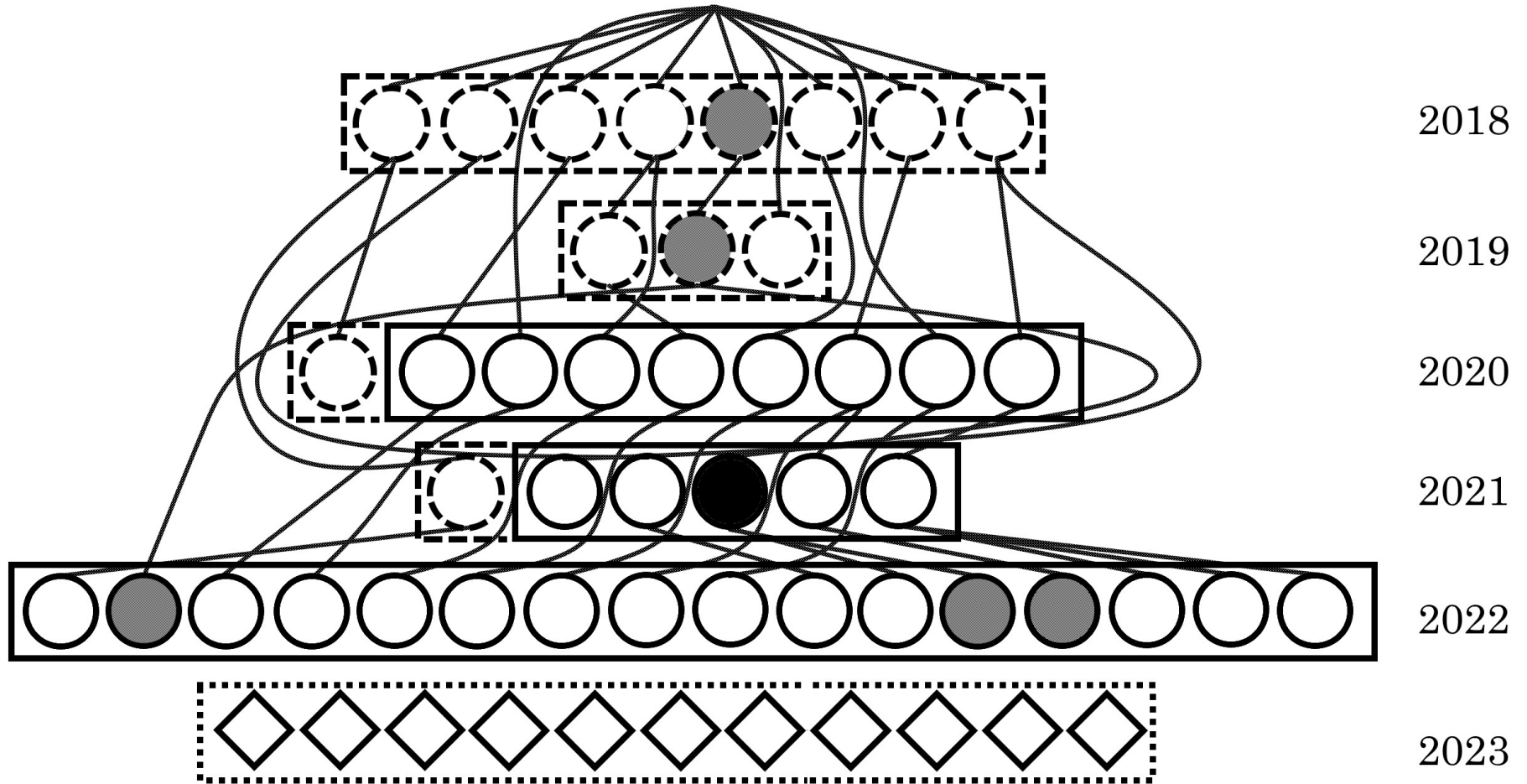
Family Line Cycle of the Delta Chapter of Theta Xi



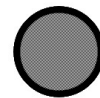
Family Line System of the Delta Chapter of Theta Xi, Oct. 2019

2017 and Earlier

Graduation Year



Myself



Family Line Members

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21A.01 How Culture Works
Fall 2019

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