

Transforming fraternity and sorority cultures for values congruence: What is it going to take?

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Greek-letter social fraternities thrive on over 600 American campuses. Incongruence between espoused values and the reality of members' behavior presents constant challenges for institutional administrators, faculty members and concerned alumni. Positive examples of fraternities exemplifying their founding principles of brotherhood, scholarship and service are easily available. However, negative images centered on alcohol, hazing and hegemonic masculine behavior garner far more public attention: conduct that all too often is related to organizational discipline, liability and litigation. Negotiating the political impact of these organizations on the college campus, particularly in terms of amplified institutional loyalty and noticeably superior institutional donor rates among fraternity and sorority alumni/ae as well as alumni involvement in governing boards and trustee bodies, results in one of the greatest conundrums in the student affairs profession. When groups of senior student affairs officers converse together, it is likely that a majority if not a unanimous opinion among them that many collegiate fraternities, and often sororities, require radical cultural change, at least among individual chapters if not across the entire fraternal system.

A review of pertinent research provides a wide array of both constructive as well as destructive effects of fraternity participation. Positive relationships have been found between fraternity membership and academic performance (Tripp, 1997), moral development (Mathiasen, 2000), values development (Rayburn, 1993), self-esteem (Brand & Dodd, 1998; Tripp, 1997), student engagement (Hayek, Carini, O'Day, & Kuh, 2002; Pike, 2003) and retention and persistence (Reisberg, 2000; Tripp, 1997). According to Hunt & Rentz (1994), positive effects have also been attributed to fraternity membership with relation to two of Chickering's (1972) developmental vectors: establishing and clarifying individual purpose and

developing mature interpersonal relationships, “establishing intimate relationships based upon trust, reciprocal caring and honesty.” (Hunt & Rentz, 1994, p 293)

Conversely, negative effects of membership have been cited related to moral and ethical development (Earley, 1998; Maisel, 1990), cognitive development (Pascarella, Flowers & Whitt, 2001; Terenzini, Pascarella & Bliming, 1996), and issues of academic integrity and cheating (Eberhardt, Rice & Smith, 2003). Furthermore, the hedonistic pursuits that have come to be inextricably linked to fraternities such as the use and abuse of alcohol (Brand & Dodd, 1998; Danielson, Taylor & Hartford, 2001; Eberhardt et al., 2003; Reisberg, 2000), and the practice of hazing (Reisberg, 2000), produce additional detrimental impact on members. The latter comes as no surprise given that alcohol and hazing have become the perennial, long-term issues that have plagued campuses and fraternity systems for generations.

Allen (2006) and the National Study on Hazing found that while hazing exists in a plethora of student organizations in both high school and college level, it certainly still exists in collegiate social fraternities and sororities. In fact, her pilot study found that within social fraternities and sororities, over 40% of students, either voluntarily or under coercion, participated in drinking games, and approximately 20% reported getting sick, and/or sleep deprivation, while well over 15% reported being forced to perform acts of personal servitude, being line ups and being yelled at, wearing humiliating clothing, harassment of others and being dropped of some distance away and having to find their way back on their own. Despite reporting these activities, an average of only 5% actually felt like that had been hazed.

If it seems like the fight against hazing on the college campus is a losing battle, there is good reason. While Allan’s (2006) national study found that hazing, including use of alcohol, drinking games, etc. are occurring within a wide range of student organizations on the high school and college levels, Hoover & Pollard (2000) confirm that a significant population of students comes to the college level with familiarity with hazing, either experiencing it as a victim and/or inflicting the abuse.

In addition to mixed educational and developmental effects on students, issues of liability and litigation also provide further rationalization for the need to alter fraternity culture. As institutions function in an increasingly litigious society, Elkins, Helms and Pierson's 2003 research examined the volume of litigation and case outcomes related to fraternity issues, analyzing the affects of this litigation on institutions of higher education, national organizations, local chapters and individuals. They identified a clear increase in such litigation. While in some cases, the litigation did not result in huge monetary settlement costs to stakeholders, related costs in terms of defense counsel, court costs, institutional reputation, etc. had a sizeable institutional impact. Despite educational efforts, fraternity/sorority student leaders and members are still engage in risky behavior, and Elkins, et al. (2003) concluded that institutions should actively draw students into "developmental conversation" (p.77) in a concentrated and collaborative effort toward operational planning, dramatically increased personal and organizational accountability, and overall organizational culture change. (Reikofski, 2008)

In the face of these challenges, front line advisement and management of these groups on most campuses is frequently left to entry level student affairs professionals straight out of master's level graduate preparation programs, or at best, only a half-dozen years out. Day-to-day administration, leadership development, organizational advisement and constant reaction to individual and organizational misbehavior consumes the majority of the 50-60 hours per week these front line professionals dedicate to their position responsibilities. One of the questions that seems to be on the minds of many senior student affairs officers is whether or not these fraternity/sorority advising professionals have the breadth and depth of knowledge and skill that would truly provide them with the tools necessary to drive a comprehensive cultural change in fraternal organizations?

II. Conceptual Framework

Organizational Culture

Campus stakeholders must examine these situations involving fraternities, sororities and their members from multiple perspectives. These are indeed individual students, but educators know that the group culture and dynamics and the social environment must also be taken into consideration in terms of their impact on individual development, as well as the “group-think” that drives collective behavior within these organizations, which often does not resemble that of individuals within the group. The “whole” is actually significantly worse than the “sum of the parts.” Not only is an understanding of student development theory and the growth challenges that individuals are facing required, but also necessary is greater understanding of these organizations, their underlying cultures and the context within which they exist. Without such knowledge, a calculated culture change is a fruitless effort.

Definitions may vary slightly throughout the literature, but much of the research tends to agree that organizational cultures are based upon a common set of beliefs and values, and in support and perpetuation of these shared beliefs are various forms of myths, rituals, stories or legends, structures, and sets of rewards or punishments to reinforce these philosophies. (Ashkanasy, Wilderom and Peterson, 2000) Specifically, Kuh and Whitt (1988) defined culture(s) in higher education as, “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus.” (p. 12)

Schein (1992) provided a slightly different definition for culture that may offer further insight into fraternities: “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.” Schein’s definition rationalizes the indoctrination and education provided to fraternity/sorority new members as they join. Further, he provides an understanding of a series of tasks that organizations

address, often simultaneously, as members work to survive and adapt to external environments, including mission/strategy, goals, means for achieving those goals, measurement or assessment of progress toward those goals, and corrections. Internal integration includes issues of common language and conceptual categories, group boundaries and conditions for inclusion and exclusion, distribution of power and status within the group, development of norms, defining and dispensing of rewards and punishments, and meaning making within the ideology or philosophy of the group culture. These tasks of internal integration describe fairly accurately the cultural development found within individual fraternity and sorority chapters.

Dill's (1982) work examining the management of academic cultures identified elements of social integration, symbolic events, internal socialization, and even recruitment. Dill also discussed Satow's (1975) term "value-rational organizations." (in Dill, p. 307) All of these assertions resonate to provide a greater understanding of these student sub-cultures and the values incongruence many observe within them. When the norms of the chapter culture are divergent with institutional policy or rules, and in this case the espoused values and rituals of the organization, the culture tends to remain true to the accepted behavior and norms rather than stay in compliance with institutional normative expectations. Further, offering membership and transmitting core values to new members, referred to as "management of social integration" (p. 304), equates to fraternity new member education, or what has been formerly known as pledging. Symbolic events and rites of passage which stress organizational core values is equivalent to fraternity initiation rituals or ceremonies. These may refer to both the formal initiation ceremonies as well as informal rights including drinking games, traditional parties, etc.

Dill examined the manner in which organizational cultures competed for membership, social prestige and to occupy or dominate a special niche within the market to assure their survival. In the effort to project those attributes that they believe would attract members and afford social capital, the naturally competitive nature of fraternity men often causes them to abandon founding principles and core values in

preference for building notoriety by hosting the biggest/best social functions, attracting the attention of coeds, and providing a high level of social desire in an effort to attract members. Remember Schein's (1992) attention to the tasks an organization faces for survival in external environments, mission/strategy, goals, means for achieving those goals, measurement or assessment of progress toward those goals, and corrections. If fraternities are focused more on the achievement of social status, competition for members, enhancement of reputation as a fun, desirable destination rather than functioning as a values-based organization, it is understandable that these foci may be contributing factors to a declining commitment to their *raison d'être*.

These organizations can and should be viewed to multiple degrees as subcultures. Kuh and Whitt (1988) defined subcultures as "a group of people who have persistent interaction, a distinct group identity, and collective distinct understandings that form a basis for action" (p. 83). While the fraternity system can be considered a subculture of the university, the student culture, or even the national fraternity organization, individual chapters could also be considered a subculture of the campus fraternity culture, meeting all of the requirements put forth in Kuh and Whitt's definition. Within fraternity systems, some chapters and some stakeholder are more easily swayed to be supportive of a change plan than others, complicating the circumstances surrounding the overall task of organizational change

Organizational Change

While much of the organizational change work began within business industries, the work of a number of organizational change theorists are readily applicable in other areas including education and even fraternities and sororities and other student cultures. Frost and Gillespie (1998) suggested that "...organizational culture provides a framework that members of the organization use first to understand the organization, and then either to adopt, reject or attempt to change the culture" (p. 5). Successful

organizational change includes a number of important components: the necessity of a clear understanding of the culture, an understanding that institutional transformation *is* cultural change, and that all attempts at organizational change must be based within that cultural foundation (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Frost & Gillespie, 1998; Hearn, 1996; Sckerl, 2002). At the foundation of any organizational/cultural change planning should be an assessment of the organizational culture, the intersectionalities of subcultures, and an understanding of the communication patterns as well as any assessment to be done during and following the change process (Green, Eckel and Hill, 1998; Martin, Manning & Ramaley, 2001; Reigle, 2003; Tierney, 1988;).

Hearn's (1996) review of existing theories and research on organizational change in higher education concurs, adding that change efforts are most likely to be successful if they have strong support of top leadership and are in congruence with fiscal priorities. However, Hearn, as well as Schein (1999), cautioned that any attempts to develop new values, priorities or goals are doomed to failure if these efforts violate existing values, resources and norms, official or unofficial, unless these differences are directly addressed in the planning and communication about the intended changes.

One of the most widely used change theorists, John Kotter (1996), contends that major cultural/organizational changes are possible, but that organizations and leaders are not prepared to approach the challenge properly. Kotter presented an eight-step, linear model for creating major change that has common elements to some of the other models described above: establishing a sense of urgency; creating the guiding coalition; developing a vision and strategy; communicating the change vision; empowering broad-based action; generating short-term wins; consolidating gains and producing more change; anchoring new approaches in the culture. His theory presents emphatically the need for a solid, well-defined and well-communicated vision about where the change will take the organization. Kotter's position is that such a delineated vision provides a commonly understood finish direction and goal for everyone's efforts. Gioia

and Thomas (1996) agreed that the creation of a vision or “future image” was a powerful component in defining the direction and purpose of change and provided the basis of “sensemaking” among all stakeholders.

Collins and Porras (1996) expounded upon this notion of a well conceived vision, proposing that the vision must address two major components: “core ideology and envisioned future.” (p.66) Recall that one of the common elements among all definitions of culture was a shared set of values and norms. An effective vision must be rooted within the values upon which an organization or culture exists. A clearly envisioned future references a tangible, real, vibrant image of the desired goals. Obviously if any leader is to engage the support and assistance of others within the institution, they must all be able to make sense of the ultimate goal(s), understand the sequential steps of accomplishing the goal(s), and be motivated by this shared vision. A part of this vision development may be the refinement of purpose and programs, as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of these programs (Hearn, 1996).

Secondly, Kotter (1996) argued that a primary contributor toward failure for most organizations is the stark difference between “management” and “leadership.” He described management as being organizers who simply monitor the status quo: that is their function and *raison d’etre*. He described leadership as being those in the organization, regardless of formal position, with the visionary skills and innovation to not simply manage but to lead the change efforts and the natural evolution of an organization.

People support that which they help to create. The development of such a vision, and ultimately a change plan, must be a collaborative effort involving the entire institution. (Hanna, 2003; Lick 1999; Eckel & Kezar, 2003) This level of involvement can lead to what Coleman (1997) might refer to as an undaunted and righteous commitment to the effort. Coleman also encouraged the development of a set of what could be considered revolutionary or groundbreaking values in the development of this vision. Kotter (1996) and Coleman (1997) both encourage inclusion and revolutionary, visionary participation in the change process.

If participation is limited or overly controlled rather than coordinated, how is the leadership that Kotter discussed or the revolutionary participation that Coleman posed supposed to occur?

c. Action Necessary for Substantial Progress

Equally important as understanding individual student development theory, front-line professionals need to comprehend research and theory on organizational culture and organizational change. Significant research exists defining and exploring organizational culture and organizational change. What is clear from all of the research, though, is that if change is to be successful and lasting, facilitating the process of change requires strong leadership, an in-depth understanding of the culture, a well-developed vision and plan, and a consistent and continuing drive toward the intended outcome. Using Kotter's model, any institutional representative who is to guide such organizational/cultural change must be actively involved in creating, or at least communicating, the sense of urgency, must be instrumental in creating the guiding coalition; help to lead the development of the guiding vision and strategy and be instrumental in helping to communicate the change vision. S/he must be instrumental in engaging participation and empowering broad-based action, be active in generating and recognizing short-term wins, be vigorous in consolidating progress and gains toward the goal(s) and use those gains in producing more change, and then finally anchoring the organizational change and new approaches in the culture. This last objective could be accomplished through amended leadership and new member training, amended constitution/bylaws, institutional recognition policies or relationship statements, institutional provision of positive reinforcements and enticements, and finally, bringing national headquarters staff members, local alumni and faculty advisors on board to help perpetuate the changes.

The professional who is able to design, drive and accomplish change as described above is likely to have significant fraternity/sorority advising experience, and possess or have access through collaboration to

additional organizational/cultural change work, knowledge well beyond what is generally included in a master's level preparatory program. Additionally, this professional should be prepared to make a long-term commitment to stay in the position to provide the unswerving advisement and drive for change, as well as enjoy noteworthy institutional support both in terms of supervision, collaboration and resources. This puts a significant level of responsibility on the institution to provide the resources as well as salary/incentives to keep a good professional around to accomplish these goals. Yet for many campuses, the fraternity/sorority advising office may not even be staffed by a full-time professional let alone a seasoned professional.

III. Today's Campus Greek Advisor

According to an email interview with Kelly Jo Karnes, 2010 President of the Association of Fraternity Sorority Advisors, a 2009 membership survey of the Association of Fraternity Sorority Advisors provides insight into the contemporary campus sorority/fraternity advisor and supporting documentation. Of 430 respondents who were direct, campus-based fraternity and/or sorority advisors, 410 (95.4%) held bachelors or masters degrees. Of 447 responding to this question, the average level of professional experience was only 6.9 years, with a range of 0-34 years. Members reported that most have a wide range of responsibilities in addition to fraternity/sorority administration. The average salary nationwide for respondents was \$40,926. Either no one person had primary responsibility for advising fraternities or sororities on their campus, or the responsibility rested on a single individual (79.2%). Nearly half (47.8%) reported that the person with primary responsibility for fraternity sorority advisement was either a current graduate student or an entry level professional, and another 47.1% reported that fraternity / sorority advising was a director level position. Finally, 79.8% reported that their operating budget in terms of administering the entire fraternity/sorority system was \$14,999 or less.

IV. Conclusions

Campus administrators and senior student affairs officers, in particular, often seem united in agreement that fraternity/sorority cultures on their campuses require positive cultural change. Yet accomplishing such change requires constant, targeted professional supervision and direction over a significant period of time. Generating lasting culture change is a long, complicated process that takes a great deal of planning, skill and time to accomplish. On many campuses, the fraternity/sorority life administrators change faster than a generation of students matriculate and graduate. In these cases, how are successive generations of fraternity/sorority students and leaders to be motivated toward a common vision of institutional change and improvement of their organizations and the accompanying educational experience, if one of the few constants in terms of working directly with the fraternity/sorority system is constantly in flux? If effective, deep-rooted culture change is truly a priority for the campus rather than monitoring current behavior, institutional leaders must revisit those elements that would attract *and retain* talented advisors who possess the depth and breadth of knowledge and the capability to drive such a culture change, not to mention providing the tools, resources, encouragement and support necessary to accomplish this challenging task.

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