

LEADING WHERE IT COUNTS: Influencing Social Media Values-Congruence

Chris Blackburn

Associate Director of Greek Life and Leadership, Ohio University, Theta Xi Fraternity

Kevin Smith

Assistant Director of Leadership, Ohio University, Delta Upsilon Fraternity

The emergence of social media has provided the fraternity/sorority community with more opportunity than ever to live both in accordance and in conflict with their organizational values. Whereas one day we might see a Facebook post touting a sorority's latest service endeavor, the next day we might see a Tweet highlighting some unsavory actions or distaste towards institutional policies or administration. Yet, despite all of the challenges social media presents, it can also be a tremendous opportunity for positive educational intervention for fraternity and sorority professionals.

Now more than ever, students living "off-value" are exposing their actions to administrators. They want to be engaged with us in ways that they are comfortable with and in methods that make them feel connected to our influence. This is our chance to become the educators we wanted to become, rather than the risk-managers we have become.

But should we intervene? Let's face it: a majority of what we see occurring within the boundaries of social media is predominantly lewd, insensitive, and/or just plain hurtful. Hardly ever is any of it illegal. Does our intervention turn us into "Creepers," "Stalkers," or the "Ethics Police?" Well, yes by students' standards but certainly not in the sense that many of us are regular participants in the "Twitterverse." The expectation of privacy is ridiculous, both in a student-to-professional capacity and a professional-to-student capacity.

As educators, we must first step back and consider what our students are doing and compare that to what we are here to teach them. We often see our fraternity and sorority members as leaders on campus. Each student leader takes part in values-based leadership laboratories where if their organizational values and secret oaths were truly lived, would make the world a much better place. Yet, because we know this is not the case, we are continuously frustrated by what is, from our perception, a great lack of leadership.

But is it?

What we are looking for in our leaders is for them to influence others, hopefully in a positive way. As administrators, we are above the social fray, often having more life experience and the war wounds to prove it. In a sense, we know because we know better. Further, as educators, we want to see our student leaders live better than we did. Yet, this also complicates things.

Typically, those fraternity/sorority leaders whom we see elected are voted in for their personality and willingness to adhere to the traditions of the past. Often they maintain the organization as the students know it and further, as the alumni have known it too. In a sense, they are elected to maintain the organization in its current state and perpetuate all that is "right" or perhaps in our eyes, all that is "wrong". Yet, this also complicates things because of our subjectivity of what leadership has become to us, rather than what it looks like for our students.

In one recent example, a male student attended a Greek singing competition, an event intended to build a positive community experience. During this event, he Tweeted: "That dance could have been better if they didn't let the big girls wear spandex #airbands #ouchmyeyes #tokensororitygirls."

The additional challenge with social media is that when someone makes a derogatory statement against a person or a group, one has to question how much malice was intended. In cases where a comment is made in an intimate setting of one or two other people, the damage is contained. Yet, one simple Tweet can reach thousands. A choice of how much damage to create is made.

As an educator, this is disappointing on many levels: 1.) It defeats the purpose of building community, 2.) It clearly shows that those good values we defend as the reason for Greek Life are not being lived, 3.) With social media, it has broad reaching potential. 4.) Where was this student's leadership?

We get frustrated because we see this time and time again and we see it from our "leaders." In such cases, we can ask any student, "where is your leadership?" Quite frankly, they really don't know.

Perhaps, we should look at "what leadership is."

In Haslam, Reicher, and Platow's "The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence, and Power" (2010), the authors argue that today's successful leaders matriculate through a four stage process:

1. Leaders must be seen as one of us (a member of our organization or our community).
2. Leaders must be seen as someone who can do it for us; capable of advancing the interest of the group
3. Leaders must craft a sense of "us." Here they shape a shared understanding of who "we" are and who "we" aspire to be.
4. Leaders must make us matter. In this, they avoid groupthink and move the vision into reality.

How often, if ever, do our students make it to stage three or four? Yet, how often do we address them as if they should automatically be there, particularly in the context of social media? We ask questions such as, "How is this photograph of you with two 40's taped to your hands living your values?," or "What would your founder's say about you tweeting about a founder's day party at a local bar?," expecting students to completely change their actions based off of one conversation relating to something they may or may not recognize as inappropriate or wrong. Leaders must craft a sense of who we are by holding on to who we were, but cannot do so without being challenged in their methodology and without being expected to learn and grow from their choices.

As fraternity and sorority advisors, we have a duty to push students further in their growth and development and to assist them in the formulation of personal morals and values as well as reinforce the values they took an oath to maintain. Instead of dictating to students how their social media footprint should be developed (instinctively off of our personal set of values), we should assist students in shaping that for themselves, allowing them to recognize how a tweet, pin, post, photograph, etc. can dictate to the world who they are as a person and as a member of their organization.