Moving Beyond Assessment to Continuous Development and Improvement

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Assessment, standards, and accreditation programs are the current trend in fraternity and sorority life (Hauser, 1997; Sasso, 2012). However, it seems these programs, created with the best of intentions, sometimes get stuck in the next stage of development—the creation of continuous improvement. Any review of these programs demonstrates a variety of hints at the next stages of continuous development for chapters but with no clear explanation of how. How do fraternity and sorority professionals push the boundaries of these assessment programs and create continuous improvement within chapters?

Purpose of Assessment Programs

For 30 years, assessment models have been appearing within fraternities and sororities (Norman, 2003). These models are designed to bring the organizations back into alignment with the campus community (Sasso, 2012). However, Sasso (2012) points out there is no universal model, instead each campus and organization have their own standards which bring the fraternity and sorority culture into congruence with the university. While designed to align with the campus community, a good model should also align with the fraternity/sorority's values. A model that connects to the fraternal organization's mission, vision, and values can create a higher percentage of buy-in from the students. Furthermore, models should be designed to enhance and create continuous improvement of chapters. This should be the ultimate goal of any program. When thinking about assessment or accreditation, there should be a connection to the future which promotes continuous development of chapters. The cyclical nature of successful assessment programs suggests opportunities for continuous improvement through a variety of different models.

Model Programs and Current Research

It is important for advisors to remember that assessment programs are not "one size fits all." When developing a program to assess multiple aspects of a fraternity and sorority community, a variety of criteria must be considered. Quantitative assessments may be best for some communities, whereas others may require a more reflective, qualitative review or perhaps a mixture of both. Sasso (2012) studied the different types of models and came up with five different types of programs. These five types have advantages and disadvantages. Advisors must also consider the breadth, depth, type, and frequency of assessment. How can an assessment be integrated into the current initiatives of the community? The following universities have developed and integrated model assessment programs that serve the individual characteristics of their institution and community.

The University of Rochester's Expectations for Excellence Program has existed for seven years. The core purpose of this program is to create college-centered fraternities and sororities, and highlight self-authorship as an integral aspect of a reflective, qualitative assessment process.

The reflective nature of this program, along with its focus on connecting chapters to campus and community resources highlights the aim for continuous improvement for individual chapters and the entire community.

The State University of New York (SUNY) Geneseo's Chapter of Excellence Assessment is a values-based program focused on providing a framework for continuous improvement. This program rewards chapters who are able to successfully align their actions with their espoused values. Chapters are assessed on the criteria of values integration, intellectual development, leadership development, positive relationships, and citizenship.

These are examples of two successful assessment models, but there are many other colleges and universities who have developed and implemented models that best fit their communities. The University of Delaware, Western Carolina University, Bucknell University, the University of Oklahoma, Clemson University, Cornell University, and SUNY Oneonta are other institutions who have developed their own models. However, it is challenging when reviewing websites to determine if the model focuses on continuous improvement or are solely created to align the chapter to the campus.

Creating Continuous Improvement

Moving from assessment to emphasizing continuous improvement is not a challenge. In fact, it should be part of the assessment process. Assessment models should acknowledge growth year to year. By acknowledging growth, chapters will continue to improve and develop. How do we, as fraternity/sorority professionals, create and support such initiatives?

First and foremost, as advisors of fraternities and sororities we need to ensure models embrace the organizations' values. By embracing the organizations' values, talking points are created focusing alignment with and modeling of those values. Organizations should strive toward their values and align with the campus's mission to become strong and successful chapters. Additionally, to create models of continuous improvement there is a need for chapters to acknowledge their previous standing and where they currently stand within the campus community. With this acknowledgement, chapters should be continually improving year to year. Even top achieving chapters have the opportunity for continuous growth. Feedback from assessment should incorporate areas for development and growth while highlighting areas of strength. Chapters should then incorporate the feedback into their own progress and use it for the next assessment to demonstrate their own growth. This becomes a key tool when advising the organizations.

To focus on the continuous improvement of chapters, there is a need for each advisement conversation to focus on where the organization is and where they want to be (i.e. goal setting). Using feedback and results from the chapter's assessment will help strengthen and improve the organization and focuses on where they currently are according to their own communities (both on campus and within their own local or inter/national organization). Conversations should be focused on all aspects of their fraternal experience while challenging

the organizations to push beyond their own goals and set new standards of expectations for themselves and their communities.

What is needed to become an award winning chapter on campus and within their own fraternal organizations? Using this question is a great conversation point for improvement and goal setting. If the chapter is already award winning, how are they going to continue to set and achieve a higher standard? Always challenge the chapter to reach for the next goal and use their assessments to push forward and achieve. There is always room for improvement and ways to become a stronger organization both on campus and within their own fraternal organization.

Conclusion

Assessment with continuous improvement expectations will create stronger chapters and award winning organizations. When focused on continuous improvement, chapters become resilient and create value driven change. With continuous improvement, expectations are heightened and positive transformation occurs within the fraternal cultures. How can assessment promote positive progress within the advisement of fraternal communities on your campus?

References

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