Additional Considerations in Fraternity/Sorority Assessment
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Postsecondary education is increasingly and exclusively concerned with student learning, given the long arm extension of No Child Left Behind upon the regional accreditation agencies. The pressure is to demonstrate that higher education can add demonstrable value (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh, 2001, 2003; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Strange & Banning, 2001). This is readily and easily translated into the conceptual interpretation that higher education must document and provide sufficient evidence that learning occurs across its various domains of responsibility. These include research, teaching, scholarship, and repository of knowledge. The co-curricular experience traditionally coincides with the teaching mission of the institution. However, providing evidence of this is challenging given that learning outside the classroom can be resultantly difficult to demonstrate given the complexity of campus environment and the diversity of political and administration systems within higher education (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2007; Keeling, 2004; Kuh, 200l; Strange & Banning, 2001). Fraternity/sorority advising professionals must be aware that they are also a part of this call to accountability.

Fraternity/sorority advising professionals must be cognizant of the impact that the fraternal experience can have on the individual narratives and lived experiences of chapter members. Moreover, we know through research that learning in collegiate fraternities and sororities does occur across several domains (Bureau, Ryan, Ahren, Shoup, & Torres, 2011). However, when attempting to engage in assessment of student learning, it is important to consider several factors. These factors will now be addressed.

Focus on Learning

Fraternity/sorority professionals serve as champions and advocates for both the fraternal movement and the undergraduate experience involving fraternities and sororities. Therefore, it is necessary to conceptualize that it is a part of the professional responsibility to advance this learning that has been documented through research and to further its impact (Keeling, 2004; Sandeen & Barr, 2006). The method by which this advocacy of the advancement of learning can be accomplished is through intentionally creating conditions that support and facilitate learning (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Upcraft, 2003). This means that as educators it is necessary to facilitate programs that engage these students across the duration of their experience, are grounded in student development theory, and include learning outcomes connected to assessments (Perlow, 2007, Strayhorn & Colvin, 2006; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998). Therefore, it is necessary to develop student learning outcomes and assessment measures, analyze results, and then share results to encourage continuous improvement and enhance future learning (Green, Jones, & Aloi, 2008). These assessments should be a piece of the larger evaluation of the fraternity/sorority advising program.

Assess the Parts, Evaluate the Whole

As fraternity/sorority professionals, it is important to understand the differences between assessment and evaluation. According to Upcraft and Schuh (1996), assessment is an ongoing, systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and using information about divisional, departmental, and programmatic effectiveness, in order to improve student learning. According to Upcraft and Schuh (1996), evaluation is, "any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness." One can easily conceptualize the differences through a simple mnemonic device. The heuristic of "assess the parts, evaluate the whole" simply maintains the notion that assessment is merely part of a larger evaluation. A professional should establish a matrix of assessments that measure the learning, which should all be part of a larger, intentional evaluation plan.

Utilize Theory

It is additionally necessary to have learning outcomes rooted in student development theory. These theories exist to support the notion that the undergraduate experience facilitates cognitive, identity, and behavioral change through growth. They provide a framework by which to author learning outcomes and serve as a philosophical basis for a theory of change for an overall evaluation plan. For example, one could easily utilize Magolda's (2004) Self-Authorship Theory. Learning outcomes could be framed around the developmental areas of epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. These outcomes would address the questions of: (1) how do I know; (2) who am I; and (3) how do I want to construct relationships with others (Magolda, 2004). A learning outcome might be written as, "Students will self-author their own narrative through participation in the summer fraternity/sorority retreat as measured by results of XXX survey."

Focus on Engagement

It is important that fraternity/sorority professionals consider the greater impact the fraternal movement has on the campus community through engagement. Many times this is misinterpreted as involvement. Remember that engagement is much broader than involvement, and it is easy to confuse the two concepts. Engagement builds on involvement theory (Astin, 1993). Involvement is simply a binary measure of whether or not a student is involved in a club, organization, or university activity (Astin, 1993). Engagement is a larger, broader concept that: (1) measures the amount of time and effort students expend for their academic pursuits and activities that facilitate student success; and (2) how the institution or in this case, fraternity/sorority life office, organizes learning opportunities to facilitate student involvement in these activities that will create student success (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Therefore, measures of determining how many members are in other clubs are only nominally addressing the educational impact that the fraternity/sorority experience has across the institution and on its members. This only measures involvement. Fraternity/sorority professionals should consider measuring engagement through determining participation rates in clubs, learning communities, signature programs within the division of Student Affairs, undergraduate research, etc., if the students' fraternal membership helps contribute to their involvement in these activities, and how the fraternity/sorority life office contributed to this engagement of fraternity/sorority students in broader activities across the institution.

Focus on Retention

Remember that retention, persistence, and graduation and are not the same. Retention is the capacity of the institution to facilitate support services and programs that ensure students remain enrolled. Persistence is the capacity of the student to interface and move through their undergraduate degree and experience. Graduation is when a student completes the duration of their undergraduate experience and degree. Therefore, fraternity/sorority advisors should simply consider partnering with the institutional research office on their campus to track the persistence of students to determine if their fraternal membership experience potentially has an impact on being retained and eventually graduating.

Additionally, it would be advisable to consider the potential confounding variable of membership retention. It is easy to track the retention of membership through verifying their authenticity and examining their consistency to determine the retention of membership across the duration of the student experience. Reconsider the current definition of academic standards. Currently, the best practice is to simply calculate the mean grade point average (GPA) for the chapter and the differences between new members and active members. However, one can determine the greater impact of membership on academics by examining the individual change over time for each student as well as the impact on the cumulative GPA. Given the variability over time of GPA by semester, it also necessary to measure individual and chapter GPA over an academic year rather than by one semester.

Conclusion

The preceding have been suggestions for additional consideration for fraternity/sorority professionals as they begin to develop assessment measures that are a part of a larger comprehensive evaluation plan. It is the opinion of the author that advancing the fraternal movement will move from being purely anecdotal to evidenced-based. The term "best practices" exists because they may work on a specific campus, but assessment can determine if they can work on another. This is what makes a practice or program evidenced-based. Therefore, as a profession it is essential to determine whether our 4 P's (programs, policies, procedures, and protocols) support our students through learning and student success and are "evidenced-based," or are just a "best practice."

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