# I Did Not Drink the Kool-Aid, Should You?

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As a campus based fraternity/sorority advisor, there are a lot of things I love about my job. However, there are some things I do not love about my job. I do not like membership reviews. I hate them. I'm sure some will argue a well done membership review can save a chapter, continue a tradition, and build a community. If that is the case – after participating in numerous membership reviews on my campus and others – I have never seen it.

A membership review is the fraternal equivalent of the parent in the grocery store telling their screaming child "if you do that one more time…"  Well, guess what – now they know they get to do it one more time. In this odd lexicon of undeserved second (and third and fourth) chances, the child/chapter understands they have one more opportunity to act like a fool and embarrass us in public. If we are lucky, that will be the worst of it.

Membership reviews are often seen as a last ditch effort to cleanse the chapter of underperforming members, set new goals and forge ahead with a reduced number of members under the belief that finally(!) these are the ones who "get it" and will save the future of the chapter.

Uh huh. I do not buy it. I did not order, nor did I drink, the Kool-Aid.

Once you find yourself in a situation in which you are considering a membership review, you already know some basic information: this is a chapter in trouble. They likely racked up a number of risk management violations in the past few semesters or years. They likely do not perform well academically and rarely participate in quality service projects. As a whole they do not positively contribute to the fraternity and sorority, campus, or town communities. They do not have advisors who are positively involved. In the worst situations, the advisors are part of the problem. The chapter is a "plague on both our households" (Shakespeare, 1913).

So instead of calling it like we see it and engaging in discussions with our university administration and our headquarters partners to help this chapter close gracefully with a hope of eventually reopening, we cash in on that hope for all the wrong reasons. Hope is not a strategy or a policy, it is a liability (Cobb & McRee, 2007). We hope, we *believe,* against all rational input, the few members of this chapter who "get it" are equipped with the leadership skills to carry a chapter which is dramatically reduced in membership but overflowing with problems to success. We believe this because we *want* to believe it. We confuse ourselves. We believe investing more time and effort into a chapter than its actual members do is helping with their development as fraternity/sorority members. We forget failure is also a way our students learn.

If you find yourself in a situation where you are considering a membership review, ask yourself the following questions:

1.  Have I talked to...?
    - the chapter president
    - the executive board
    - the new members
    - the advisor/advisory board
    - the alumni/ae
    - the headquarters staff
    - the college/university administration

2. Of the stakeholders listed above – which are you on the same page with about the current health of the chapter and which ones are you not?

3. Does it appear you care more about the health and longevity of the chapter than some or all of those stakeholders do?

After speaking to the stakeholders listed in question one and considering the answers to question two, look at question three. If the only people who care about the chapter are not active members in it, you do not need a membership review – you need to take the charter and head for the hills. Fraternity is a privilege, not a revolving door of mediocrity.

If you insist on conducting a membership review, here are some suggestions for success.

1. **Ask in advance, "what is our end goal, and what is our timeline?"**
Move quickly; do not drag it out. It helps no one to have a chapter in limbo for weeks on end, and it can create a dangerous risk management situation if a chapter thinks it has nothing to lose. If the headquarters partners with whom you work cannot get staff members/officers to campus within your timeline, work with them to utilize conference calls, Skype, or other technology to allow them to be involved. If this still presents a problem, keep them informed but move forward anyway. If this process is not important enough to them to be involved, then you already know where they stand on the issue.

2. **Define expectations through the process and for the immediate future (six months to a year).**
Before you begin, ask yourself where the chapter can reasonably be six months to a year from now. What expectations do you have about academics, service, recruitment, and risk management?  Are those expectations reasonable, and what support will exist to help the remaining chapter members reach those goals?

3. **Who in the chapter is it necessary to speak with?  Who needs to buy in for this to be successful?  What will success look like?**
Many membership reviews contain 15-20 minute interviews with all of the chapter members to ask questions about previous incidents or their role in them. This is a waste of time. As fraternity/sorority professionals you likely already know the answer to most of these questions, why waste a day repeating information?  Additionally, by the time these interviews are scheduled the students involved have already had time to compare notes and get their stories straight. Do not waste your time on the chapter president who has allowed hazing to go on or the risk manager who believes alcohol improves recruitment. Who will be the new leaders – what do they want and what do they think?

4. **Who will take the lead on the membership review – the university or the headquarters, and what will that look like?**
If a membership review is to work, everyone that has an interest in the future of the chapter has to work together. However, having too many people in charge of the process can lead to confusion, miscommunicated expectations, and poor follow up (or none at all) from one or more of the parties involved. Decide in advance who will take the lead, what each group involved expects from the process and each other, what the follow up should include, and how it will be done.

Making the decision to host a membership review or not can be as difficult a decision as whether or not to take the steps to close a chapter. There is a lot to consider. Is this right for our campus, for this organization?  Also consider this – is this the right time for you? How much professional time and energy have you given to this group and how much more do you have to give?

I have been the professional that says, "I'm done, I'm done, I'm done – unless we're not and then I'm in 100%."  Sometimes that has worked out well, other times…not so much. As a new professional I was afraid of offending anyone, of being too bold, or being seen as someone who did not respect fraternal values. However, with experience and time I have learned to trust myself. I know my campus and my students; I know how much I have to give to any one group in order to have anything left to give to others. I did not stop caring about fraternal values, but I did stop investing time in people and organizations who do not share the same respect for them as I do. Sometimes those people are undergraduates, and sometimes they are other professionals.

I truly love and believe in fraternity/sorority. I have the benefit of hope that our organizations will continue to recruit positive members and impact the campuses and communities that we live in for many years. However, I balance that hope with a strong dose of reality. The closing of a chapter is not indicative of my failure as a professional, but instead an indication of my success.

## References
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