

10 Rules for Engaging the “Enemy” (a.k.a. Conducting a Membership Review)

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Often there are people in our profession who view the bad chapters or the problem students as the “enemy.” This view is not the intent for the following article, as I believe the “enemy” is often the membership review process itself. It creates a false sense of change and hope for many involved, including headquarters staff members, university officials, alumni, and even students themselves. Membership reviews are often a misused and misunderstood tool. It is a tactic deployed by fraternity and sorority staff members or requested by university officials, often as a last measure to save a chapter. As many professionals in fraternity and sorority life already know, this tactic is often not very successful. After 12 years of experience in risk management and working for two different men’s fraternities, I have observed the membership review process from a variety of perspectives: new staff member vs. veteran staff member; young professional vs. experienced professional; volunteer vs. staff member; for my own fraternity vs. as a non-member; on the ground involvement vs. support and supervision remotely. Each experience has led me to identify and operate under the following ten rules of conducting a membership review. While my experience is working with men’s fraternities, I believe the rules below are applicable across most, if not all, of the organizational types (NIC, NPC, NPHC, NALFO, etc.) and membership statuses you may work with on a routine basis.

1. User Interface

Do not let yourself be the obstacle that prevents change. Often the use of a membership review can be flawed by the person conducting it. Just like technology, if you don't know what you are doing you will not get the desired results. How you address the process and interact with the students will dramatically influence the outcome of the membership review and determine its success, even in spite of the student reaction.

2. Respect the Student

Those students who participate in the interviews are usually the members who care. If they did not care, they would not be in the interview. In addition, each student should be shown respect and dignity, even if they are asked to leave the chapter. There is no need to make the process even harder by creating ill will or fostering a place for personal attacks. As professionals we should avoid engaging with students in this unprofessional manner to begin with and the difficult process of asking someone to leave their chapter should not change this.

3. Respect the Process

The membership review process should not be used as a fix all, nor should the “law of the instrument” take precedence. “It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Abraham Maslow, 1966). Membership reviews should be used judiciously and with caution. This means both the campus professional and headquarters staff need to identify specific desired outcomes from a membership review and then determine if the membership review will actually succeed in meeting those outcomes.

4. Be Organized

This applies to all parts of the process: logistics (room reservations, appointment times, who is to participate, etc.), travel needs, questions, process, what will be shared, and when it will be shared. As the professional you should know the process

and specifics down to the last detail because there will be questions, and if you do not have an accurate answer your credibility and the credibility of the process could be jeopardized.

5. Partner with the Campus Professional

As fraternity staff members, we are partners with our host institutions, and we should work closely with the campus professional to ensure the membership review process is planned and executed accordingly. This includes logistical needs and working to share the outcomes and the redevelopment plan moving forward.

6. Use Alumni (cautiously)

Alumni should be communicated with and involved in the membership review process at all times. This can take a variety of forms depending on the issues causing the membership review, the nature of the alumni involved, and the overall openness of the alumni. Just as with the student members, there may be problem alumni, and as is the case with the students, those individuals may need to be removed from the chapter. Most importantly, alumni should be involved in the follow-up plan to the membership review.

7. Provide Quick Decisions

Students deserve to have membership decisions as quickly as possible, within 10 days is ideal. Separating a student from their membership experience is a difficult thing to do. Having students dwell on and focus on the outcome can negatively impact the rest of their college experience.

8. Establish a Redevelopment Plan

This may be the most important step in the membership review process. All else is irrelevant if the students are left by themselves to fill the void from what or who has been removed. Provide a roadmap and direction on how to move forward and the steps involved in doing so. This can be done onsite with the remaining students and alumni in the chapter and with the campus professional. Shared input is important as there will be many people invested in the success of the process.

9. Allow Time to Heal

Separating friends, roommates, and potentially family members, is difficult and takes time to heal. A chapter will not be excited to hear from and work with fraternity staff or university officials for the immediate period of time following the interviews. This is okay; with a strong redevelopment plan, these feelings will pass and the students will develop stronger relationships with their support systems and begin making the necessary changes for success.

10. Follow Up

Chapters that recently underwent a membership review need consistent follow-up in addressing the redevelopment plan and building a trusting relationship with outside support systems. At first, this will be weekly and every other week. As the redevelopment plan progresses follow-up may become once a month, but it is still important to foster and develop relationships between the staff and the chapter and to hold a chapter accountable for change. Follow-up communication needs to occur with chapter officers, alumni, advisors, and the campus professional. All need to be involved for the membership review to work long-term.

There are of course some specific details that may not always be present during a membership review process. I believe the three most common are:

Timing

When to conduct a membership review will be dependent on each individual situation. There may be times when it is appropriate to wait (days, weeks, or even a month) until a membership review is conducted. There are also times in which a membership review will be necessary within hours of learning about an incident. The timing of the membership review should depend on input from the university, the fraternity, and the alumni advisors. In either case, I believe the recommendations above remain relevant and can be applied.

Housing

When a membership review occurs with a chapter that has housing, it is important to fully know the implications of a change in membership status to their housing contract. The house corporation should be involved in the process if eviction could occur. University housing should be consulted to adequately provide alternative housing arrangements if someone is removed from the house as a result of being removed from the chapter. Local ordinances and state laws should be reviewed to ensure full compliance with notices and removal from the property. The housing implications can be so great that all invested groups should be involved. However, the complicated nature of a housing situation should not influence the decision as to whether or not to remove a member. A student's membership status should always be based on the merits of the person's interview and measured against the predetermined metrics used to evaluate membership (academics, behavior, attendance, judicial files, finances, etc.). There will be other matters to consider as well, especially if a membership review leads to the closure of a chapter. The security of the chapter facility and property is important. House corporation officers should consider plans to hire private security to be on the premises, campus police should be notified so they can provide additional patrols, and the house director should be observant and proactive because damage and vandalism will likely occur.

Appeals

Each fraternity and sorority will have to develop its own language and coaching around the specific appeals process, if there is one. If an organization has a defined appeals process, then it should be a part of each communication to the chapter and individual members to ensure full awareness of the procedures afforded to them.

Membership reviews can feel like "chainsaw surgery," meaning you sometimes will cut the "good flesh" to ensure you have removed all of the "cancer." Some good members will walk, some will be removed. A membership review is an inexact science, and there is no one way to succeed doing them.

A last word of caution: I think it is important to put things in perspective and realize not all students will have a full and comprehensive knowledge of the fraternity or sorority and its values, and this is okay. When you think about the typical chapter experience that usually leads up to a membership review it should not be unexpected that this would be the case. The student has had a less than ideal fraternity experience. Therefore, it is important to identify a student's willingness to learn and change. Someone willing to engage in the learning and change process will be a great ally and supporter as the process continues.

Don't allow your membership review process to turn into a tragic "war story" shared with other staff members over the summer or during the Annual Meeting. More often than not, I believe those horror stories are a direct result of poor interaction with the students and flawed execution of the membership review process.

Membership reviews can be an appropriate tool used to address chapter and student behavior, but it is not a universal technique that should be used to solve all problems, nor will its use guarantee success. There are many things needed for a successful chapter experience: good alumni, successful recruitment, continuous member education, etc. A membership review does not change these basic needs.