

## Nine Things I've Learned about Membership Reviews

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1. No matter how many times you advise against it, the undergraduates in a chapter that is about to undergo a membership review will attempt to orchestrate their answers so "everyone" says the same things and won't reveal other things during the interviews. Your response: Hold a meeting before the interviews begin and away from the chapter house or normal meeting area and invite only those who have signed up for interviews. Explain that the interview team members expect complete candor and honesty and choreographed answers tell us not only are you lying—you are lying in an organized manner. That is not a positive, and it will affect the individual outcomes.
2. If you enter into a review with an agenda— if you have a minimum number of members and new members to keep or a maximum to suspend or any number for any purpose— you may as well fold up the table and put the fake money, the little doggie, and the race car back in their boxes. The game is over. Your only goal with a review: to find those women or men who are committed to change and who will, given the removal of other members, help us change and improve the culture of the chapter. There can be no ceiling or basement, no magic number, no bright line, no agenda.

We often encounter the agenda within a review when alumnus or alumna members from the chapter are involved in the process...and that is human nature and expected. They will almost always think first of preserving the house, meeting the budget or the break-even point for housing. Your pushback is simple: we can't allow numbers to drive the review.

Do not allow the *house* to drive the review. Make your decisions about members and new members first and *then* we can talk about filling the house or leasing it out or fundraising. Reverse the priorities and the review will fail.

3. You will always find out more than you knew about issues, challenges, and concerns in the chapter during a review. No matter how thorough the investigation, no matter how many pre-review visits, no matter how many off the record conversations...once the interviews begin the team members will learn more—sometimes much more— about life in the chapter. Drug sales, eating disorders, traditions, secret sub-groups, family rituals...get ready. And your obligation as an interviewer? Never criticize, denigrate, express dismay, frustration, or anger. Listen. Just listen. No "What were you thinking?!" or "How can you believe that?" Just. Listen.
4. Using standardized questions and grading responses with a standardized scale will not get us to a better chapter. Engage our undergraduates in conversations...listen to their comments and concerns, ask open-ended questions. Standardized questions also make it exceptionally easy for undergraduates to share the questions with those yet to be interviewed so that they can respond consistently...and they will.

5. There are always some members who will be absolutely honest with you, who want to tell someone in authority what is really happening, and who want to see changes made. Some may be potential new members (PNMs) who see clearly what the chapter could become, some may be last semester seniors who feel guilty about the state of the chapter and want to leave thinking they helped in some way to repair the damage, and some may be those whose voices have been drowned out by the negative members. Regardless, listen for those voices.
6. There are four urban legends that will surface once the decision to conduct a review has been made. Those are:
  - a. *There is a minimum number of members who must be suspended because: 1) agreement between nationals (sic) and Fraternity/Sorority Advisor; 2) agreement between nationals and alumni/ae; or, 3) agreement between president of the university/VP for Student Affairs/Dean of Students and nationals.*
  - b. *They (nationals) will not suspend more than \_\_\_% because: 1) of prominent or generous alumnae/alumni; 2) pressure from parents; and/or, 3) we're a single letter chapter, so we're too "Kool."*
  - c. *Someone (undergraduate/alumnus/unknown person) has ratted us out to nationals and nationals already has their hit list/"A" list/list of those to be retained/suspended even before we begin.*
  - d. *(If a house is involved) The university required the review so that they can eventually torpedo the chapter and take the house.*

Respond to these at your pre-review meeting.

7. Find the code word(s), term(s) or phrase(s) that have become part of the chapter culture, and you now have the username *and* the password. That is why our teams always meet after the initial two or three rounds of interviews. By then the words, terms and phrases have surfaced. Then, you simply plug those into your interviews: "*What was your response to the Century Soda Club?*" "*Your thoughts on Vestal Virgin night?*" Members and PNMs will then often say, "If you know about that then you've probably heard about \_\_\_" and you are off and running.
8. Hazing chapters often have freshmen or PNMs sign up for the early rounds of interviews. No one knows why this happens. Speculation ranges from the cannon fodder theory—put those who theoretically have the least to tell and are the least blameless into the review machine first so they can feign innocence while reporting back with details—to the fact that the truly negative members typically wait until the final few rounds of interviews. Either way, the PNMs and/or younger members are frequently the best sources of information because they have not yet been supplied with the chapter culture filters, stealth codes, and organizational arrogance that discourage or prevent them from telling the truth.

9. Your real work begins after the interviews. Remember, you have removed a number of members from a chapter and perhaps some PNMs (since they joined for reasons that are no longer part of the chapter). A chapter, like a person who has undergone major surgery, needs time and a disciplined regime of rehabilitation.

The people who did the interviews and made the choices cannot be involved in helping the chapter move forward post-review. The stigma that attaches to these people is too strong; the temptation to ask, "Why did you keep \_\_\_ and suspend \_\_\_?!" is too powerful. Regardless, have your plan in hand and get the chapter moving up and forward.