

## **Building a Culture of Collaboration**

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In the summer of 2009, Lehigh's Delta Upsilon president, upon experiencing an epiphany after attending a national convention, rapidly fired off a series of texts to me. Over the course of those texts, he shared with me his aspirations of where he would like to see his chapter and how they could stamp out apathy, repositioning themselves to lead our community in meeting the leadership and civic engagement needs of our students. He then sent two sentences that I have never seen or heard an undergraduate utter before:

"Our chapter needs to conduct a member review. What do we need to do to make this happen?"

The actions, experiences, and learning moments for Lehigh's Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs (OFSA) since receiving those texts have allowed us to completely redefine the use of membership reviews as a tool on our campus for assisting in continuous culture change. A membership review had not been conducted on our campus in nearly a decade. Since those texts, OFSA has assisted in seven membership reviews over the past four years. Each has brought a host of positives, challenges, and learning opportunities.

From the perspective of the campus-based professional, there are always questions worth asking before a chapter reaches a membership review, during the process, and after the outcomes have been decided upon. Every time we have been involved with a membership review, our list of do's and don'ts grows. Just like there is no uniform intervention, policy, or program that will correct chapter culture, there is no "one size fits all" way to conduct a membership review.

### **Are there any institutional roadblocks to a membership review?**

For example, the Delta Upsilon membership review helped illustrate the need for Lehigh to review policies regarding chapter facility occupancy by members. Organizations that were interested in pursuing membership reviews had a fear that removing a large number of students would result in Lehigh removing the organization from housing due to low facility occupancy. We reworked our policies to allow for extensions in our occupancy policies based on proactive membership review plans to assist in changing chapter culture.

### **Do all of our stakeholders understand the purpose of a membership review?**

Our less educated students and alumni looked at membership reviews as "the scary weekend 'nationals' comes in and kicks people out." Campus-based professionals, headquarters staff, invested alumni and undergraduates know a membership review is sometimes a necessary and productive opportunity to change culture, hold members accountable, live up to our standards, *and* have important learning opportunities.

However, what is done on the front end to help chapters understand how this process works? Knowing that a sense of urgency is the best time to begin soliciting buy in for a change process, OFSA wanted to use the Delta Upsilon process to dispel the "scary" perception associated with membership reviews (Kotter, 1996). After the review, OFSA began partnering with our Greek Alumni Council (GAC) on a series of educational sessions to discuss the membership review process with our undergraduate and alumni leadership. Whether it is achieved via council meetings, webinars, or alumni advisor email updates, it is important that the community is periodically retaught what a membership review is and that the process is important for positive culture change.

## **Do the chapter members themselves understand the purpose of a membership review?**

Once a membership review has been scheduled, OFSA coordinates a time to meet with the chapter before the national headquarters and alumni/ae representatives arrive. Knowing that tension and negative emotions are often the harbinger of a membership review, the chapter members need an opportunity to express frustrations (real or imagined) and vent negativity in order to approach the review productively and to treat the professionals and volunteers conducting the review with respect.

This also allows the chapter time to ask questions regarding topics such as:

- The schedule for the weekend
- General themes of questions that may be asked
- How the national office will communicate their decisions
- How a membership review will affect housing and financial obligations
- What the appeal process is

By processing the emotion of the weekend in advance, as well as discussing all of the logistical needs that come with the review, students are allowed to focus on the real challenges that led to this decision. OFSA also takes time to discuss with the organization factors that led to the decision. This has had a major impact on helping students rethink the “they are just out to get us” mentality.

Membership reviews often result in unanticipated transition for our students, much like those described in Schlossberg’s transition theory (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In thinking about the greater good of the chapter, the individual stressors placed on students as a result of the membership review cannot be forgotten. For many students involved in membership reviews, their identity as a chapter member and their perceived role in the campus community will be drastically changing. The role change will have dramatic social and emotional effects on the student (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Advance processing with the organization is coupled with OFSA alerting colleagues in our academic support and counseling areas to ensure that any chapter members that are “students of concern” have an anticipated support plan put in place by the professionals working with them.

## **How does the timing of a membership review affect the lives of our students?**

Taking into consideration the key times of year that affect the stress levels of students is also of utmost importance. Does it make sense to conduct the membership review during midterms or finals? Do you have available housing for displaced students if the review is held prior to the end of the year? Is it homecoming or alumni weekend, and is campus culture volatile enough that a membership review would lead to an unhealthy release of student tension? Each campus has its own particular housing, timing, and cultural challenges. The campus-based professional needs to be sharing these with all involved stakeholders before the review’s timing is set in stone.

## **What are the financial ramifications?**

This is definitely a question that varies not only on the institution and residential situation, but also on time of year, who the billing agent is, how the local and inter/national

obligations are structured and what (if any) finances are paid to the institution. Make sure the students know:

- What are sunk costs and what are not
- What the deadline and method for any reimbursement is
- Who will be providing the reimbursement

Students will likely be looking for a place to live and food to eat. If there are dues coming back from a headquarters' billing agent, meal plan money coming back from the local alumni corporation, and/or room fees coming back from the university, advance notification and organization is needed.

### **Do you have a coordinated communication plan?**

Having a communication plan in place prior to a membership review is not just about sparing you from the frustrations of other offices getting telephone calls from angry students, parents, and alumni/ae. In spreading the good word about proactive measures being taken to assist chapter growth, the campus-based professional is accurately informing others in a timely way, which is a key part of the process.

Sharing talking points and communication protocols with the President's Office, Alumni and Development professionals, and senior leadership in all areas of student affairs is also important. Having offices involved in understanding the process and rationale for a membership review helps calm those affected as well as provides clarity. Parents need to be informed, as well. The majority of parents do not understand what a membership review is, let alone understand who makes the decision regarding the status of their son or daughter and on what grounds the decision is made. As a result, anger from parents is often misdirected at the campus-based professional for "not doing more to protect students!"

Proactivity goes a long way. Oftentimes it is not the campus-based professional who has a teachable moment with a student, alumna/us, or parent affected by the review. Rather, it is a residence hall staff member, university gift officer, or office administrative coordinator. Corresponding to Schlossberg's transition theory, the loss of the chapter means that immediate social support from displaced students often comes from parents, family members, friends outside of the organization, and residence hall and student organization affinity opportunities (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In short, make sure staff who work with these populations have the necessary information.

OFSA also coordinates correspondence to chapter parents and alumni prior to and after the membership review. Having both groups better understand the reasoning for the review, as well as the potential outcomes (both positive and negative) has opened up lines of communication. Advanced notification, coupled with easily assessable resources, (such as an online link to a chapter's conduct history and institutional assessment program) results in clarification and understanding of the cultural challenges of a chapter.

Lastly, the use of the LU Greeks Blog and Facebook page has allowed OFSA to inform the Lehigh community as to decisions regarding membership reviews. Coupled with intentional conversations at council meetings and in chapter president one-on-one meetings, the community has a much better chance at understanding the antecedents that led to a membership review, as well as the process, outcome, and ways to assist other organizations.

## **What is the follow-up plan?**

Knowing the real work begins after the membership review, making sure that a plan of action for moving forward is clear, simple, and easily understood by all is essential. Ensuring the chapter redevelopment plan, notification protocol for current or ex-members not living up to standards, and agreed upon progress markers for students, alumni/ae and the institution will help make sure the review is the start of something, not the end.

Not every membership review leads to a success story. Some of Lehigh's membership review scenarios have resulted in progress while others have resulted in the eventual end of the chapter. All have led to continued tweaking of a process that is as rewarding as it is arduous. Whenever membership reviews have been successful, the common link has always been that all those involved worked in a collaborative fashion with the best interests of the student development experience in mind. When I look back at that series of texts, and I fast forward to the consecutive "Fraternity of the Year" awards that Delta Upsilon has received subsequent to that first membership review, I can tell you that every learning moment has been worth it.

### **References**

- Evans, N., Forney, D., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press. Boston