

Challenge Your Assumptions, Enhance Your Practice
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“Begin challenging your own assumptions. Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in while, or the light won't come in.”

Actor Alan Alda

Do you remember when you and your team members last reflected on the *assumptions* you hold that influence your practice? An “assumption” is “the taking of anything for granted as the basis of argument or action” (“Assumption,” 2016). As a field of Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) professionals, an assumption persists that fraternities and sororities provide students with transformational learning experiences. However, when these beneficial experiences do not occur, there is a tendency to tweak what we do (i.e., our strategies and programming). After all, we all know the saying, “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.” Perhaps what we are “doing” is not the fundamental problem, but rather the assumptions guiding our practice. Examining our assumptions allows for improved decision-making and more effective actions, which ultimately leads to beneficial outcomes for students. In this brief article, I explore four assumptions guiding the practices of FSL professionals and how a proven, yet unknown, tool can radically shift those practices.

Assumption 1: Our Intel is “Good Intel”

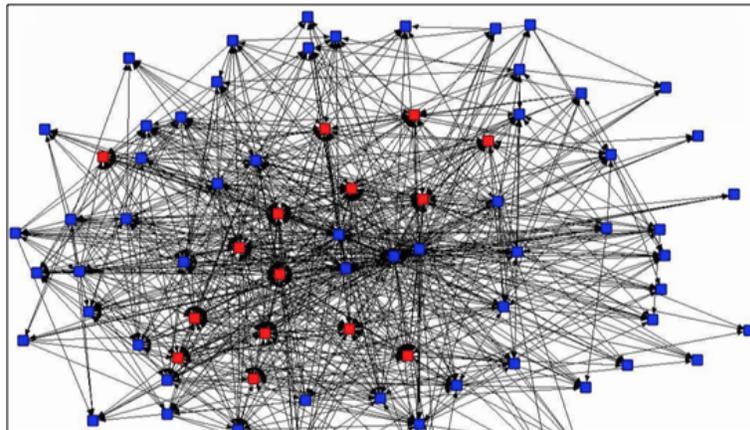
How accurate and reliable is our perception of chapters and communities? Our perception may be formed through formal meetings (e.g., chapter president one-on-ones), informal conversations (e.g., spontaneous chats at events), or structured feedback (e.g., surveys). I’m sure many of us are skeptical of the accuracy of our intel, but regardless, at some point, it leads to our own assumptions about individual students, chapters, and the broader fraternity/sorority community. In order to assess the accuracy of such assumptions, consider an innovative strategy.

Social Network Analysis (SNA) has the ability to transform our intel about our chapters and the community, but it has yet to be adopted widely by FSL professionals. Fundamentally, SNA identifies and quantifies any type of existing relationship (e.g., influence, like/dislike) between two entities (e.g., member-to-member, chapter-to-chapter). SNA involves three simple steps:

1. Curiosity: Ask yourself, which types of relationships are meaningful for you to understand?
 - a. *Chapter: Which chapter members have the most influence within their chapter?*
 - b. *Community: Which chapters are most harmful to your FSL community?*

2. Survey: Send a short survey to students about their relationships in their organization (e.g., friendships, power differentials, interactions) or relationships with other chapters.
 - a. *Chapter: From the list of chapter members, identify which individuals are your closest friends.*
 - b. *Community: From the list of chapters, identify the fraternities or sororities which you believe have negative relations with your chapter.*
3. Analyze: Survey responses are analyzed, resulting in a network map to visualize the data.
 - a. *Chapter: The most “popular” individual among a group of chapter members is identified as highly influential within a specific group.*
 - b. *Community: Chapters identified most frequently as “well-liked” are likely community influencers.*

Allow me to provide examples of the transformational power of SNA to alter assumptions and improve potential programming for fraternities and sororities. FSL professionals can quantify the chapters who are the most influential, most/least liked, community isolates, community/bridge builders, and even the specific harmful or positive relationships they have with other chapters. Whether students feel they belong to their chapter can be assessed by analyzing the directionality of relationships (i.e., outgoing caring behaviors versus caring behaviors received). Influence within a chapter can be visualized by using students’ reported perceptions of influence (see *social network map below*). Could SNA improve your intel?



Social network map completed by the Cor Foundation (www.corfoundation.us/hit) to identify influential organizational members in a Fraternal Organization. Fifteen organizational members (red squares) were identified as having influence over 100% of the organizational members.

Assumption 2: Positional leaders are the most influential

FSL professionals rely heavily on positional (formal) leaders within a chapter to lead organizational change. This ubiquitous strategy is based on the assumption that formal leaders inherit a degree of power and influence with their formal position in the organization. By associating positional power with influence, we spend significant less time with the “invisible” leaders within an organization. Do all influential chapter members hold formal leadership positions? Probably not. We need to shift our assumption that positional power holds more organizational influence than an individual's network of relationships (Simpson, Farrell, Oriña, & Rothman, 2015).

What happens when an influential member becomes an “invisible” leader? Their potential to create positive organizational outcomes may never be realized. FSL professionals can prevent this by utilizing SNA to identify the most influential positional and “invisible” leaders. SNA likely surpasses all of your current strategies for understanding the complexity of relationships and interactions occurring within your chapters and community. For example, would the outcomes of your programming or conversations with students improve if your audience included the *most influential* organizational members?

Assumption 3: Leaders are Positive Influencers

We hold the assumption that influential students have a positive impact on their chapter. When we neglect to recognize and respect the power of negative influencers, we will always lose the war against harmful fraternity and sorority culture. The most dangerous chapter member is the negative informal influencer. Not only are they “invisible” to you, but their power can reverse all of your positive contributions to develop leaders who want to benefit their chapter or community.

All influencers—both positive and negative, formal and informal—must be included in organizational decision making in order to facilitate a positive culture change. The most effective way to identify your formal and informal—positive and negative—influencers is through SNA. Identifying and intervening on negative influencers is essential if you want to change harmful fraternity and sorority culture. Negative influencers can be empowered to leverage their influence for positive organizational change. Can we afford to ignore negative informal influencers if they are causing our chapters to remain stagnant or shift in a negative direction?

Assumption 4: Improving Programming Improves Outcomes

At some point, we cannot produce any more positive results from our programming with students. It will reach maximal effectiveness. We need to make a shift to SNA as a best practice to improve training, programming, and practices of FSL professionals. Your time and resources can only benefit from introducing SNA into your practice. Is sifting through participant applications the most effective selection process for choosing the *right* students for a program? Are mandatory, all-member presentations with

motivational speakers an effective and efficient culture-change approach? Is increasing the number of students you reach in a presentation more important than getting the *right* students for creating change? Fraternities and sororities function as a result of relationships, but yet we do not leverage new scientific models and strategies to understand those relationships.

If your team or university does not have someone with the knowledge and skills to use SNA effectively to solve your problems, let me know how I can help your community leverage SNA to positively impact the students you serve.

References

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