Turning an Enemy into a Partner: Collaboration in Theory and Practice
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While we probably all think we know what the word collaboration means, it is useful to explore its actual meaning before trying to take the word into action.

Merriam-Webster offers the following definition of collaborate:

1. To work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor
2. To cooperate with or willingly assist an enemy of one’s country and especially an occupying force
3. To cooperate with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected

While we hopefully do not consider our colleagues across the aisle as “enemies,” how many times have we heard campus-based professionals refer to a fraternity as “an occupying force” on a campus? How about national organization staff describing war-like negotiations between their organization and a campus? We all know the campus-headquarters battle is not an uncommon conversation topic at conferences and in the office. Yet we say we value and thrive on collaboration. We even list “collaborator” as a core competency for our profession, so why is it so hard?

Making collaboration work between campus-based professionals and inter/national organization staff (or any two groups for that matter) comes down to two key pieces – why and who – before you can get to the how and what.

As Simon Sinek (2009) asserts, we have to Start with Why. Why do we do this work in the first place? For many of us, it is because we believe in the power of the fraternal experience, and we want to continue to move it forward and ensure its longevity. With that in mind, why do we need to collaborate? We believe that the product we offer our students is an experience in working with peers and advisors to jointly achieve a mission. Knowing there are multiple stakeholders invested in the outcome of our efforts, not only is collaboration required, it is essential for maximum effectiveness.

Once we understand the why, we have to look to the “who.” Who are the professionals that share that all-important why with us? Sinek notes how important it is to know the motivation of the parties involved. “Are they there to get something from you? Are they there to share what they know so you can advance together? Are they there to help whoever you’re working with or for their benefit? Do they have the sense that they know everything or do they have the sense that they have lots to learn” (Capture Your Flag, 2014)?

These are important questions to ask before starting a collaborative relationship. It is going to be very hard to collaborate if you do not agree on those shared values and are coming to the table expecting very different outcomes. This is where the breakdown in most partnerships occurs. If you are not in agreement on the why, you have already created an adversarial relationship that will be hard to overcome.

This is all well and good in theory, but how can it actually be implemented in our field? How do we know they want to help us and are not just collaborating so they can push forward their own agenda? Trust.
Trust the person shares your why and that we are in this together. If we spend our time focusing on the internal battles, we will never have the energy and resources to focus on fighting the external threats to the fraternal experience. We need to create a “Circle of Safety.” We need to develop empathy for all those working together to move our field forward (Sinek, 2014).

From Theory to Practice

Theory is always a great basis for the work that we do, but without action, change will never happen. Think back to those elementary school science classes and Sir Isaac Newton’s first law of motion (inertia): An object at rest will stay at rest and an object in motion will continue in that speed and direction unless acted upon by an outside force.

Our organizations (Drexel University and Pi Lambda Phi Fraternity) have greatly benefitted from the collaboration created from what began as an idea to look at hazing from a different perspective back in 2010 and has developed into ongoing support between the campus and national organization, despite not having an active chapter of Pi Lambda Phi at Drexel since 2002. Below are some of the specific ways we have collaborated over the past four years to benefit both the campus and national organization due to our shared passion for moving the fraternal experience forward.

On-campus Presentations and Workshops

Utilizing national organization staff, including traveling educational consultants, to present workshops and other educational sessions on campus is where our partnership began. Staff members of Pi Lambda Phi and Delta Phi Epsilon, based nearby, served as part of a panel discussion on the effects of hazing during Drexel’s Hazing Prevention Awareness Week. Additionally, a fraternity staff member co-presented an educational session on values-based recruitment in subsequent years.

How to apply it. Campus-based professionals can reach out to organization staff members to find out what inter/national staff or volunteer leadership live in the area and to determine what travel schedules in the area may look like that coming year. Seeking this information from organizations you do not have on your campus, but that may have staff traveling through or living in the surrounding area (as was the case for Drexel and Pi Lambda Phi), can be very valuable as those staff members ought to have a mostly uninfluenced perspective of the campus community. Reach out at the beginning of the year to schedule workshops or presentations during their travels. Organization staff members can also begin this process by determining schools located in and around the area they are visiting (not just the specific school or chapter they have scheduled). Reach out to those surrounding institutions to offer any help you might be able to provide.

Program Feedback and Review

This opportunity has benefited both our organizations. Campus-based professionals (not just from Drexel) were invited by Pi Lambda Phi to preview their newly-developed new member education and membership development programs and offered feedback on the program and its online educational system. Likewise, inter/national organization staff from a number of organizations were asked to review and offer feedback on new engagement, leadership development and hazing prevention plans for Drexel.

How to apply it. Simply ask for help and feedback. Most are flattered when asked for their feedback. Take the first step by requesting their feedback. Always offer to return the favor. Often, this initial step of simply asking for help creates the relationship to be asked to do the same in the future.
Convention/Conference Presentations and Facilitation
Many inter/national organizations already take advantage of campus-based professionals to serve as facilitators and presenters at their inter/national conventions and regional conferences. Find out which campus-based professionals may be near the location of your convention and their areas of specialty. It is valuable for students to hear that which is often the same general message but through a different voice. It helps build credibility when the same information is confirmed by multiple experts. Similarly, Pi Lambda Phi staff (as well as other organization staff members) volunteer to facilitate campus-based leadership programs at Drexel. Sometimes just hearing the same message from a “new” voice can make the difference in helping students in a campus community connect the dots on a key topic or begin to understand a concept through the use of a new catch phrase or slogan that may be common to that inter/national organization but “new” to that campus community.

How to apply it. Again, just ask. Reach out with the details of the program and how you would like them to be involved. Be as specific as possible, noting if the professional will be provided curriculum or if they will need to prepare. Offering to cover their travel and/or lodging will also ensure you will not cause them a financial burden.

Staff and Board Education
One of the unique things that Pi Lambda Phi has done over the past few years at each of their conventions is to invite local campus-based professionals to their convention to meet with their staff and volunteer board, including their national president. The campus professionals are asked to share what the successful chapters on their campuses are doing, best practices, how the fraternity can improve, and general hot topics in higher education of which volunteers outside higher education may not be aware. Campuses can do the same, especially for graduate students who might be interested in pursuing non-profit or fraternity advising fields. Having an executive director share about his/her day-to-day experiences and work will help educate both current and future advisors.

How to apply it. Again, all you have to do is schedule it and ask. Most professionals will be flattered to be seen as an expert.

Advisory Board Participation
Many organizations have opened up to the idea of filling advisory board positions with non-members. Using campus-based professionals from universities near your chapter will bring a different insight to those groups and can offer specialized knowledge in areas like campus relations, risk management, and fundraising. Campuses can also ask organization staff members to serve on campus advisory boards in addition to local alumni. An example of this can be seen in the sporting world. When team ownership wants to advance the impact of a coaching staff, there is value in hiring some coaches from outside of the organization because they bring a set of fundamentally similar, yet unique, experiences that can help the team take their game to the next level.

How to apply it. For campus-based professionals, ask which chapters in the area may need advising help. Consider the advantages for the campus-based professional when they get to experience another campus’s culture without having to be responsible for it day to day. For inter/national organization staff, ask campus-based professionals if they would be open to serving on a board of a neighboring chapter. Be clear in setting time commitment expectations for these roles up front.
Award and Recognition Review
Inter/national organization staff can be asked to help review campus accreditation programs or award applications and vice versa. Campus-based professionals were asked to review submissions for the Pi Lambda Phi Elimination of Prejudice video contest. This idea can be expanded to include any evaluation or rubric-based program.

How to apply it. Just ask! Be sure you are setting a clear expectation on the amount of time the reviews will take so your partners will complete it for you.

Member Career Development and Networking
Over the past few years, Drexel has had some of its first fraternity and sorority alumni pursue employment with their inter/national organizations following graduation. This is in part due to the numerous opportunities for members to meet organization staff members, even outside their own organization, during expansion presentations and the educational programs mentioned above. Pi Lambda Phi staff as well as others were willing to talk with members of different organizations about the experience of working for their inter/national organization. Drexel staff members also discuss career goals with consultants visiting campus.

How to apply it. Campus-based professionals can easily weave career conversations into consultant meetings. Set aside time to talk about their career goals and answer questions, especially if they are considering graduate school or pursuing higher education. Consider inviting inter/national organization staff in your area (past and present) or staff who are alumni from your campus to talk about the experience of working for a fraternity or sorority. This would be a great career panel topic.

Expansion and Extension Packet Feedback
Many campus professionals who have been through expansion and extension processes have a great deal of feedback to offer on improving proposals and the information shared with campuses. Drexel offered feedback to all of the organizations that submitted requests during their two most recent IFC expansion and Panhellenic extension processes. Inter/national organizations can offer this feedback to campuses as well. An expansion director might have seen numerous processes on different campuses and can share the good and the bad from their experiences (without putting down any other colleagues, of course).

How to apply it. Ask for and offer feedback to all campuses and organizations following an expansion/extension process. Be honest but kind in offering this feedback. Ensure you include both positive feedback and suggested improvements.

Research
Collaborating on research on a specific topic that could benefit the campus and the inter/national organization is a great way to develop a relationship. Sharing your assessment or research results with your campus and inter/national organization partners will help each other improve and benefit the students. When a Drexel staff member shared that she was doing research on academic success with a Pi Lambda Phi staff member, the fraternity arranged a meeting to talk about results and how they could be applied to the fraternity.
How to apply it. Talk about the research you are doing with partners. It may spark an interest and opportunity to work together. Reach out to strong partners (or known researchers) to suggest a topic you could explore together. Maybe even write an article together or present at a(n) inter/national conference.

A few final quick-hitting ideas:

- **Staff Receptions.** A reception for campus-based professionals or inter/national organization staff is an easy way to express your thanks for what your partners do. Be it nationally or regionally, on campus or at some type of conference, there are numerous ways to say thank you via sponsored receptions.

- **Newsletter.** Send out periodic newsletters highlighting inter/national office or campus community updates. Dates for regional conferences, scholarships available, awards/accreditation deadlines, and/or a highlight of inter/national, community or chapter successes are easy articles for such a newsletter. There is no need to make something new, just add your partners to your distribution list. Each year Drexel updates the major contacts for each of its inter/national organizations (and organizations they developed relationships with) and includes them when sending out the quarterly newsletter.

- **Awards.** For inter/national offices, create recognition or awards for our campus-based professional friends. Who does not appreciate being recognized? In 2012 Pi Lambda Phi created an annual award to a campus-based professional that has done significant work to help advance their respective fraternity/sorority community. There is nothing keeping a campus from doing the same thing.

- **Recommendations.** Offer to write letters of recommendation. When a campus-based professional endorses the work of a(n) inter/national organization, it feels good and reaffirms that organization is doing things right. It is also great to include in expansion/extension packets in the future. Likewise, a(n) inter/national office staff member can offer to write a letter of recommendation for a campus-based professional whether for grant money, national awards, performance reviews or simply to let that professional’s boss know that the staff member has done a great job.

All of these ideas are great starting points for collaboration, and we are certain there are plenty more that could be explored. However, at its core, the reason our collaboration has worked is because both the campus-based and national organization staff genuinely care about each other’s success and see the success of the other as a gain for the entire fraternal community, even though the organizations have no formal connection. Sinek said it best: “When you concern yourself with the success of others, [people will] want to work with you” (Capture Your Flag, 2014).
References


