

Wife Swap: Fraternity/Sorority Professionals Edition

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Many of us (maybe more than would like to admit it) are familiar with the television show “Wife Swap” or its latest incarnation, “Celebrity Wife Swap.” For those non-reality-show-watching readers, the basic premise is the wives of two families swap places for two weeks to see what it is like to live with another family. The families are typically miles apart, both geographically and ideologically, which inevitably leads to challenges, debates, and, in most circumstances by the end, a better understanding of another person’s viewpoint or values.

While a proposal for the ABC network has not been authored, perhaps there is something that we, as fraternity/sorority professionals, could gain from “Wife Swap.” Consider for a moment the vast dichotomy that often exists between campus-based professionals and inter/national organization staff members. While our overarching purpose and goals for working with fraternities and sororities are often the same on paper, our approach and rhetoric can be vastly different. It is not different in a “one is bad/one is good” way, but it is different in terms of the campuses or organizations we work for, the expectations of our supervisors, the items we focus on, and/or the background and knowledge we bring to the role.

But what if we could offer professionals the opportunity to “swap” jobs for a span of two weeks? What impact would a swap like this have in our field? For addressing our major issues? For understanding another person’s perspective? If you have never worked on a campus before, here is your chance to advise governing councils, meet one-on-one with chapter presidents, sort through a new social policy with the conduct office, and serve on one-too-many campus-wide committees. If you have never worked for a(n) inter/national organization before, here is your chance to interact with a(n) inter/national council or board of directors, manage a plethora of volunteers, create online officer training modules, and deal with liability insurance for undergraduate chapters.

In a two week “swap,” consider the opportunities for growth, learning, and healthy discourse that could occur. Similar to the rules on “Wife Swap,” the person swapping would have to stick to the normal expectations and job responsibilities during their first week on the swap. They would be given instructions and a debriefing on what to do, how to do it, who to meet with, and where to go. They would be tasked with observing systems and processes, meeting with students, administrators, board members, or volunteers, and recording notes of what they have learned and where they might make recommendations or ask questions. In the second week of the swap, the new person makes the transition from sitting back and absorbing information to sharing their thoughts and opinions, suggesting changes or edits, and providing a new “outsider” perspective to their colleagues.

How might a professional’s opinion on when or why inter/national organizations close chapters change once they have been privy to those challenging conversations? How might a professional’s opinion on expansion timing and structure change once they have personally witnessed the process or results? The key to this swap is remembering that there is not inherently a right or wrong answer in the vast majority

of these cases. In a world that is becoming less and less adept at listening and seeking to understand another person's viewpoint, how might an opportunity like this allow us to grow as professionals and as humans? What could we learn that would move us all forward as a profession?

Suffice it to say, in the real "Wife Swap," the second week can get tough, especially as the new wife changes how the family operates to demonstrate a different way of doing things. How might a longtime campus-based professional react to someone coming in, perhaps without a Master's degree in student affairs, who begins to challenge their deeply-held beliefs on student development and advising? How might an executive director who is skilled at non-profit management and strategic planning handle questions about their board structure and purpose from someone who has never managed a volunteer system? While a two week time period is hardly enough to understand the true inner workings, politics, and challenges of an organization or campus, it does have the potential to show how "the other side" operates. Perhaps the greatest challenge would be if the campus or organization hosting the swap is open to the suggestions and perspective of the new voice or if they simply write him or her off as a non-employee who "just doesn't get it."

We are in a time period now where the employee crossover from campus to inter/national organization and vice versa is increasing, and it has the opportunity to add a rich dynamic to our field. While we have long supported consultants transitioning into higher education programs after completing their time on the road, we are now seeing campus-based professionals transition to inter/national organization roles and back again in much greater numbers. But if we cannot all participate in a two-week "wife swap," perhaps we can learn something from our colleagues that have made more permanent swaps of their own. These four colleagues have worked professionally both on-campus in fraternity/sorority life and for a(n) inter/national organization, and they share with us their personal experiences, lessons learned, and hopes for improved collaboration between campuses and inter/national organizations in the future.

Kate Planow, Director of Growth, Kappa Delta Rho Fraternity:

I think one of the things that I realized soon after I started on the HQ side was that not all campus professionals thought the same way I did in terms of relationships. While my first thought as a campus professional was always 'how can I partner with the HQ in this situation or conversation (good and bad)?' Not all people do that. I also realized that, after having some incidents where an organization may have been burned because of campus policies on how they handle situations, the first call may not be to the campus professional because the organization wants to protect their interest on a campus (potentially). I still think that both sides need to continue to have conversations that are open and honest; including talking about the difficult things and how [we can] best support our students and chapters and give them the best fraternity/sorority experience possible. Both sides need to build relationships with each other!" (personal communication, July 2, 2014)

Shawn Hoke, Director of the Center for Leadership and Involvement, Clarion University of Pennsylvania:

One of my biggest frustrations, as someone who has worked on both sides of the fence, is the tendency of each side to think of members as 'their' students, as opposed to 'our' students. I know each side has its own history, traditions, and rules, but, ultimately, we are all trying to provide a quality, transformative

experience to OUR students. Having said that, however, I have always felt that organizations should give greater deference to the rules and culture of the host institutions, as we are guests on their campuses. Similarly, I have always been frustrated by the lack of investment many institutions make in their fraternity/sorority communities. Fraternity/sorority communities represent a tremendous opportunity to impact institutional retention and graduation rates, as well as alumni loyalty. (personal communication, June 30, 2014)

Cat Sohor, Director of Fraternity Advancement, Theta Xi Fraternity:

It wasn't until I started to work at a headquarters that I saw the lack of trust that exists between both sets of professionals. We all want what is best for our students and alumni, but we can take different paths to get there. No professional is perfect, and sometimes the political pressure to make a certain decision can be personally devastating, but if we are going to be true partners in helping our students and alumni, we have to identify better ways to communicate with others and trust in each other." (personal communication, July 2, 2014)

Danny Catalano, Assistant Director of Fraternity/Sorority Life and Leadership, Miami University:

Relationships between HQs and campuses are vital in the effort to promote the positive fraternal experience. More so, it's important for both stakeholders to be speaking the same language. For example, the philosophical approach towards an issue such as hazing might differ greatly. When both HQ and campuses are on the same page, they can partner in their effort to support one another in solving the problem. To better support each other, it's important to understand the politics of each side and how that impacts the decision making process. I can't begin to say how many times I've heard, from both sides, 'Well, no one died, we have bigger fish to fry.' That cannot be way we treat situations and support each other in advancing this experience." (personal communication, July 7, 2014)

At the end of each episode of "Wife Swap," we revisit the two families about a month after their swap to hear what they learned as a result of the experience and what changes they kept or implemented after it ended. How many campuses or organizations would be open to something that their swapped professional suggested? How might it impact our long term success if we sought out the opinions of "the other side" when faced with a difficult situation? How can we build and gain more trust with each other? How could an idea like a swap make us a stronger field, and perhaps more interestingly, a more united Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors? While it is doubtful the ABC network will begin producing a fraternity/sorority professional's edition of "Wife Swap" anytime soon, are there organizations or campuses out there that might be willing to take on a swap of their own? And if timing or costs will not permit it, what can we learn from the messages above from professionals who have made a permanent swap? Ultimately it falls on the individual shoulders of our members to hold each other accountable, to build the bridges, and to tackle our challenges together, head on.