

## Institutional Information Can Help Grow New Relationships

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When I first joined the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) staff, I remember being so excited for the anticipation of working with Interfraternity Councils (IFCs) and collaborating with campus-based professionals. Responsible for connecting with advisors across 23 states, I was ecstatic to build new relationships with countless institutions. Tasked with making at least 300 calls, I picked up the phone and began calling fraternity and sorority offices naively expecting advisors to welcome me as I proposed ways for their IFC to succeed.

What I was greeted with was unexpectedly different from call to call. Oftentimes, responses were cordial and polite. Some campus-based professionals seemed annoyed by my contact. Across my 300 calls, whether the reception was positive, frosty, or nothing, I was somewhat surprised by the lack of desire to spend time talking to me. Regardless of the reaction received, I quickly realized that to most campus-based professionals, I was just another new consultant who would likely only be in the industry for a year or two at best. After three years in the industry, having attended many events and seeing all sides of the field, I realized the source of this assumption.

The unwillingness from committed campus-based professionals to educate me about their campus was not because they were being rude or unprofessional. For many, this lack of excitement for connecting with me was because, to these individuals, I was ephemeral. These professionals, some of whom had dedicated their whole life to a campus, had seen countless individuals like me over the years. I was just a passing organization staff members working to connect to their community, but eventually a time would come when I would probably leave the field. While I was excited to learn about each campus, many campus-based professionals were tired of teaching people like me about their community ad nauseam. I was just another fresh face in a rotating cycle of consultants and young professionals.

As I became more accustomed to this industry trend, I learned exactly why this could be so frustrating for any advisor and conversely, why this temporary nature is equally as exasperating for a headquarters professional. We are an industry of turnover and transition. It is common among young professionals on both sides of the field to stay in their role for maybe one or two years, causing well-deserved annoyance.

It is easy to understand the impacts then of this frustration. It is taxing to create a relationship with a fresh staff member when they are unfamiliar with your organization or institution; especially when training them about your culture may take just as much time as they are in the field. With the frequency of transitions, information is likely to get lost in the cross over, and it can become a guessing game for who is the new point of contact at either a campus or headquarters.

While something could be said about our retention practices, if we are going to thrive in this current system, we need to focus on what we can do with our present tools to create change. As an industry, we need a solution that allows us to build strong relationships between organizations, best connect with new professionals, and properly transition outgoing and incoming staff members. The answer to building

these strong relationships and creating that bridge between offices can be found in how we are keeping records and sharing information.

The primary issue I faced while new to the NIC staff was that I needed to be educated on all the different pieces of a campus community if I were to succeed in supporting their IFC. In the beginning, I was given no information on the 300 campus I was supporting; I was in the dark about community issues, chapter histories, and areas where I could provide assistance. My first few calls with advisors were not focused on how I could magnify the impact of the partnership but instead, concentrated on them filling me in on essential information so I could offer the best support.

If, from the beginning of my outreach, I had been able to jump into relationships with accumulated institutional knowledge on a campus, I could have been more intentional in utilizing the advisor's time. The same is true vice versa. There were a number of campuses I connected with where the advisor was brand new. Pulling from my experience with these campuses allowed me to help new professionals better understand their community. This support could be taxing though, and it took significant time for me to have those growth conversations.

Remember too that these acclimation periods were only between two organizations. Apply this across the countless new professionals entering the field on both the headquarters and campus side, mixed with potential years of this constant relearning and you can see how this frustration snowballs. Dealing with these information breakdowns over time easily creates environments where our relationships become minefields of poor communication. If new relationships are to succeed year after year, we need to create better systems for the storing and transition of institutional memory. Whether our new staff members are recent graduates or have had a few years in the field, we should never accept that a professional working with a new campus or chapter will not have the right information to be successful.

In between everything we are tasked with in our jobs, the idea of leaving behind strong institutional records can seem like yet another burden, especially when partnered with the responsibility of keeping this wealth of specific information current year after year. It is much easier for our organizations if, instead of asking a seasoned professional to constantly retrain new staff members within the organization or campus, that this knowledge already existed. What if our interactions with each other did not need to radically change every summer depending on who was new? If we make sure to store this information and were able to provide it within our organizations, the long term impact could be the critical difference between a communication partnership or a breakdown.

Keeping strong records can help ensure that instead of constantly reeducating our new professionals on the basics during the sometimes short times they have on a campus, we provide information that allows individuals to jump in heads first, taking more meaningful steps. Although I am no longer with the NIC, through my role as a speaker and consultant I have the power to assist my campus partners much better due to the knowledge I have acquired about their cultures and communities.

The sharing of stored institutional memory, whether on the headquarters or campus side, can be the defining factor between our new and seasoned professionals being able to build meaningful relationships

instead of feeling burdened by a new party who is wandering blind into their role. As professionals, we must be sure that we are not like the student that leaves the binder of sparse information during officer transitions, passing on a few notes to their successors and incoming officers, hoping things work out. It is important we focus on what information we are leaving behind to ensure our records can be used to empower instead of gathering dust on a self.