

Walk It Like You Talk It: Supporting CBFOs & Challenging Toxic Advising Norms

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Undisputedly, serving as a fraternity/sorority advisor calls for a passion for ensuring a meaningful and enriching fraternal experience for students. In addition to passion, a fraternity/sorority advisor (FSA) must continually challenge their education, awareness, and professional skillsets in order to maximize their range of student support. There are many practices and norms that have been interwoven into the fabric of the profession. This calls for a critical examination of what advising and student support currently looks like in order to dismantle harmful practices that have a negative impact on professional development and impedes support for culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs).

In the late 1700s and late 1800s, collegiate fraternities and sororities, respectively, started to make an appearance on the landscape of higher education. Moreover, only white men and women obtained membership into them. These historically white organizations, now governed by the North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) and the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), had at least a century head start in formation in comparison to the CBFOs that came behind them in the 1900s. Unfortunately, today, CBFOs are still secondary to historically white fraternities and sororities, especially those at predominantly white institutions. This becomes more apparent when examining toxic advising norms that are practiced in fraternity & sorority life (FSL) offices. For example, it is rare to see unqualified and unprepared advisors for NIC and NPC organizations. Usually, Interfraternity Council (IFC) and Panhellenic Council (PHC) advisors are stringently vetted in order to ensure the individual has ample years of experience and an in-depth understanding of “culture.” Subsequently, white men and women tend to excel as the “qualified” candidates of choice to provide advising leadership for these student organizations. Additionally, these candidates could have very minimal or no substantive experience with CBFOs. Unfortunately, this antiquated advising structure becomes problematic for numerous reasons, such as displaying a segregated and inequitable leadership model amidst student organizations that have a prevalent history in exclusionary practices, stifling the professional growth and advancement for FSAs, especially those who do not identify as white, and narrowing the exposure of diverse perspectives to students.

Inversely, it is not uncommon that either a graduate student or entry-level professional, with minimal to no experience, advises CBFOs at predominantly white institutions. Typically, the most implicit expectation in order to advise these organizations is that you are a member of a CBFO or a person of color. I acknowledge that there are few instances where the advisor may

not identify as either. While these identities do not determine fit or one's ability to effectively support students, they are seldom backed by a thorough assessment of an individual's skillsets and knowledge regarding culturally based fraternal organizations. This is irresponsible and creates blanket generalizations that a "qualified advisor" is someone who looks the part yet may not have any substantive experience. Thus, the end result could yield a qualified FSA who, unfortunately, is pigeon-held to advise one community of students by virtue of affiliation and or race/ethnicity or an unqualified FSA who lacks experience and knowledge thereby having an advising tenure that is insistent of trial and error. Approaching advising leadership in this manner increases the risk of limited professional development for FSAs and poor quality of support for CBFOs.

According to the Association of Fraternity & Sorority Advisors (AFA) Core Competencies manual, fraternity/sorority professionals must work towards becoming proficient in their knowledge and experiences about various fraternity/sorority systems (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2018). This competency underscores the necessity for FSL offices to be intentional and strategic about how their teams are structured and trained. Cross-training is an important responsibility of an office. Structuring teams to be cross-trained in various areas of fraternity and sorority life can be effective in creating a multi-dimensional advising approach. Cross-training professionals is not exclusive to graduate students. Graduate students are maturing professionals in the field and can be integral in creating a more inclusive and diverse fraternal experience if effectively equipped. In addition to cross-training, offices should avidly critique hiring and selection practices to identify and rectify any implicit or explicit bias that may exist. There should be a consistent expectation that a qualified candidate should be capable of serving ALL organizations within that fraternity and sorority community.

While selecting an effective advisor is half the battle, the other half calls for a continual understanding of the ways in which support is offered to students. This necessitates a critique of current practices to see what is still successful and what needs to be revamped. With regard to CBFOs, I submit that FSL offices should begin to rethink what financial support looks like for these organizations. Historically, National Pan-Hellenic Councils (NPHCs) and some Multicultural Greek Councils (MGCs) have traditionally thrived financially due to performance-based showcases that serve as a fund-generating events. These showcases have generally been step shows, stroll-offs, or yard shows. While there are institutions that still maintain these events as a means of fiscal sustainability, there are institutions where students are ceasing or have ceased their participation.

I am currently in my third year working with a community that has ceased the participation in a fund-generating showcase. This was an inherited norm when I first started serving in my role. As a member of an NPHC organization whose undergraduate experience had a strong culture of putting on these types of events, it genuinely bewildered me when I found out my students were willingly opting out of these traditional practices. For some students, their reasons for opting out were either because of lack of skill and ability, lack of enough members in their chapter, or lack of trust that the council could pull it off. Overall, they were not interested in following through with the concept despite the previous years of executing these events. This has ultimately remained the outcome after multiple attempts to encourage, assist, and plan with students. Eventually, I resolved that this might be a new trend amongst CBFO communities and despite my past experiences I had to become ok with that. Moreover, I recognized that for me to continually push them to have these events would render me complicit in perpetuating this notion that “you must perform to survive” which is rooted in the performance-based exploitation of CBFOs. The financial thriving of a NPHC or MGC council for an academic year should not be entirely contingent on their ability to successfully execute a step show, stroll-off, or a yard show. Nevertheless, I was left to reflect on what financial support could look like for these student organizations in a way that does not hinder their growth and development.

After some thoughtful reflection, I proposed to my team that there should be consideration given to the creation of an annual line item for our CBFO community within our office budget. I suggested this for a myriad of reasons. Council dues, while effective in garnering funds annually, are not entirely enough to meet the expenses of a council without setting them irrationally high and running the risk of one or more chapters being unable to pay. Also, I did not want their fraternal experience to be dependent on whether IFC or PHC could sponsor some, if not all, of their expenses. Furthermore, I believed that IFC and PHC should have free will to spend their money on their council members how they deem appropriate without having to budget for another council. This reigned true when trying to prepare our students to attend the National Black Greek Leadership Conference (NBGLC) and the Association of Fraternal Leadership and Values (AFLV) Central Fraternal Leadership Conference. The cost of registration, lodging, and transportation would make it difficult for us to bring a proportionate delegation of CBFO students. Finally, I believed creating this line item in our budget would be a positive step towards creating an equitable financial experience for CBFOs and removing the burden of dependency on performance-based events. This was an opportunity for our office to reframe support while remaining in alignment with our mission, vision, and values. Excitingly, we were successful in getting that line item of support approved in our office budget for this fiscal year.

With the ever-evolving landscape of fraternities and sororities, we must continually be adaptable in our advising and supporting structures in order to meet necessary outcomes. FSL offices are charged to remain vigilant in trying to foster a holistic and equitable fraternal experience for culturally based fraternal organizations, and all fraternal organizations, if they truly want them to thrive. This can only be achieved when we frequently call for alignment of words, values, and actions.

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References

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