

Thank U, Next: CBFOs - Founded in Self-Worth, Fueled by Skilled FSAs

Hunter Hartwig | The Ohio State University

Ashly Horton | The Ohio State University

Inspired by Ariana Grande's hit #1 bop empowering self-love and self-worth, this article aims to acknowledge what practices lend to a skilled and knowledgeable advisor of culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs). The founders of CBFOs said "Thank u, next" to the exclusionary environment that barred them from fraternity life and created a vibrant community of their own based in unity, culture, and identity. With a dynamically rooted founding, there is an added responsibility for sorority/fraternity advisors to understand systemic challenges and to assess what further steps are necessary to support CBFOs. Understanding the varied aspects of the historical and societal contexts of the existence of CBFOs helps to guide our work in supporting these groups through cultural competency, elements of visibility, relationship building, and active engagement.

Cultural Competency

A better understanding of what it takes to be a valuable resource for CBFOs starts in acknowledging how you show up in spaces as an advisor. Born out of necessity due to being prohibited from joining existing fraternal organizations, marginalized and underrepresented students found solace in the creation of a unique community of Greek-letter organizations. Your fraternal and/or lived experience as advisor may not match a similar motivation for existence, and what does that mean in fraternity/sorority advisor (FSA) realm?

In order to be more successful in their endeavors to support CBFOs, FSAs must face what identities, biases, experiences, goals, and diverse experiences they bring to this specific functional area within higher education. With potentially limited initial training on what it takes to support the complexity of multiculturalism, higher education practitioners must develop the soft and hard skills necessary to offer meaningful services as a student's success is contingent upon an advisor's willingness to comprehensively understand the varied and diverse experiences that shape a student's life (Pope, Reynolds & Mueller, 2004). It is important to expand your horizons beyond the everyday elements of advisory work and make conscious efforts to learn more about the students you serve, yourself, your college's environment, and how to best forward the growth of CBFOs amongst all these elements and more. The work of Chang, Witt, Jones, and Hakuta (2003) examined the racial dynamics at colleges and found that "expanding educational practices to acknowledge, appreciate and reflect the contributions and perspectives of all racial and ethnic groups is necessary to benefit all students" (as cited in Strayhan & McCall, 2012, p.700).

Intentional growth and educational efforts to be more well-rounded in your understanding of the student experience on many levels not only will make you more efficiently equipped in decision making, but will give you skills to better understand the diverse experiences that lend to the unique experiences of CBFOs. Below are sampled highlights of the table of “Characteristics of a Multiculturally Competent Student Affairs Practitioner” from Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller’s “Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs” (2004, p. 271):

Pope et al. (2004, p.271) categorizes the characteristics of the multicultural competencies into three sections, awareness, knowledge, and skills:

- Multicultural Awareness:

1. A belief that cultural differences do not have to interfere with effective communication or meaningful relationships.
2. A willingness to self-examine and, when necessary, challenge and change their own values, worldview, assumptions, and biases.
3. A belief in the value and significance of their own cultural heritage and worldview as a starting place for understanding others who are culturally different.
4. A personal commitment to justice, social change, and combating depression.
5. Awareness of their own behavior and its impact on others.
6. An openness to change, and belief that change is necessary and positive.

- Multicultural Knowledge:

1. Knowledge about how gender, class, race, ethnicity, language, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion or spirituality, and disability and ability affect individuals and their experiences.
2. Information about culturally appropriate resources and how to make referrals.
3. Knowledge about within-group differences and understanding of multiple identities and multiple oppressions.
4. Information and understanding of internalized oppression and its impact on identity and self-esteem.
5. Knowledge about institutional barriers that limit access to and success in higher education for members of oppressed groups.
6. Knowledge of diverse cultures and oppressed groups (i.e., history, traditions, values, customs, resources, issues.).



- Multicultural Skills:
 1. Ability to gain trust and respect of individuals who are culturally different from themselves.
 2. Ability to use cultural knowledge and sensitivity to make more culturally sensitive and appropriate interventions.
 3. Ability to challenge and support individuals and systems around oppression issues in a manner that optimizes multicultural interventions.
 4. Capability to accurately assess their own multicultural skills, comfort level, growth, and development.
 5. Ability to identify and openly discuss cultural differences and issues.
 6. Ability to differentiate among individual differences, cultural differences, and universal similarities.

Visibility Matters

We witness members of CBFOs consistently ask for more campus resources via finances, dedicated space on campus, and national organization support. While most FSAs can't immediately affect change here, we can create small changes that build up to what students truly need. This is why first and foremost - visibility matters. Visibility means more than just simply attending a council meeting each week or "regramming" a chapter's latest service event from the university Instagram account. Instead, visibility for CBFOs shines when FSAs prioritize their time and energy around the needs of the members. Questions an FSA can ask themselves and their students to improve visibility might include:

1. Is it more important that I attend a council meeting/chapter program, or is it better to schedule dedicated time with my students to provide insight and support that make these student-led activities better?
2. When was the last time my students in CBFOs interacted with university staff outside of the sorority/fraternity life office? Are they connecting with area experts, or are they relying on old information due to poor transitions and lack of knowledge to make important decisions?
3. How are students in predominantly white fraternal organizations interacting with and supporting CBFOs and their members? Where might the FSA intervene to construct meaningful peer-to-peer interactions?
4. If I asked a colleague at my own institution to describe the sorority and fraternity community, what would they say? Pay close attention to see how CBFOs are brought up in this conversation – are they the primary focus or an afterthought in the offered information and opinions? In what ways do others see or experience CBFOs on campus?

Build Key Relationships Quickly and Often

As a new FSA enters their role, knowing who students trust is vital to the FSA's immediate successes. When considering CBFOs, we've learned this not only reigns true but also weighs heavily on how the FSA is able to affect positive change within these groups. To put this in perspective, think about a time when you needed help on a personal or professional matter to improve your current situation, but you didn't know where to turn first. Who, or what for that matter, would you reach out to first for help? By answering this question you may learn how your own students react to similar situations, and if one of their answers isn't the FSA, there is work to be done.

Alumni involvement, of course, looks different from chapter to chapter, but as there are many young CBFOs, locating experienced and well-versed advisors can prove difficult. Be sure your office has identified the best contact (i.e. HQ staff, regional volunteer, etc.) for each CBFO on your campus. If none, help your CBFO members locate a faculty or staff advisor at your institution they trust and supports a positive fraternal culture. In addition, your undergraduate chapters might find a great resource in the graduate chapters around your area. It's important to consider the educational influence and impact these groups can have at the undergraduate level, so we advise offering recurring training for these alumni groups and volunteers so they are sure to support university-wide initiatives and sorority/fraternity high-impact practices.

Be alive, awake, alert, enthusiastic!

If this energizer song didn't immediately pop into your head, be sure to ask a friend and thank us later!

1. Be alive by showing up for your CBFOs and their members ... again – visibility matters. Showing up looks different on every campus, but most of all it means you care about their individual success and their own fraternal experience. Ask questions, actively support their chapter/council initiatives, and make yourself available as you are able.
2. Be awake by monitoring local and national news/trends that could involve CBFOs and their members on your campus. Check out the resources on your campus that can best support CBFOs and relay this information to them as needed. Keep an ear to the ground and know what your students are discussing outside of their fraternity/sorority experience. Showing you care and have concern for them around these issues helps you gain trust and builds a holistic understanding of your students. Take this to the next level by actively engaging and supporting them should they choose to act.
3. Be alert by understanding what your campus climate is like at any moment. Ask yourself how a racist incident on your campus, or even on a national scale, might affect the

needs of your CBFOs and their individual members. Have you noticed a change in the behaviors of your CBFOs? Trust your gut and do what you can to identify the source.

4. Lastly, be enthusiastic! ... And no, this doesn't mean you have to change your personality to be overly extroverted or positive. Instead, we recommend taking an inventory of how CBFOs are represented in your office and in student spaces on campus. Ensure your CBFOs feel welcomed and supported by including them in community-wide communication, training, and activities, but be aware that these can often feel tailored toward predominantly white fraternal organizations.

There is no perfect formula for supporting the experience of CBFOs, but acknowledgement of the unique responsibility to do so is vital in being a true advocate for these member groups. Utilizing key focus areas of cultural competency, visibility, relationship building, and active engagement, FSAs can help be a knowledgeable voice standing with CBFOs. It is important to listen and learn from the people in their environments, to know when you are not the key answer or resource for CBFOs, and when to apply challenge or support. With a lens that acknowledges the varied experiences of CBFOs, FSAs can understand the importance of specific space on campus, advocate with compassion at high levels, and combat a potential "lesser than" mentality compared to other councils or not immediately being thought of as "the" fraternity/sorority life experience especially at predominately white institutions. In this journey, we will all face adversity and missteps along the way and must be willing to learn from mistakes and keep trying. To be a true supportive advocate for students and CBFOs is "a continuing and unending process that requires learning and relearning" (Pedersen, 1988, p.107). Whether the lessons from failed efforts to support CBFOs are in love, patience, or pain — it matters that FSAs put in the effort to better themselves with the intention to continuously support culturally-based fraternal organizations in their efforts to progress and thrive.

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Hunter Hartwig is the Assistant Director of Sorority and Fraternity Life at The Ohio State University in Columbus. In his role, he advises the National Pan-Hellenic and Interfraternity Councils. Hunter is a member of Sigma Phi Epsilon and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication from Louisiana State University and a Master of Education in Higher Education Leadership from The University of Texas at Austin.

Ashly Horton is the Coordinator of Sorority and Fraternity Life at The Ohio State University. In her role, she advises the Panhellenic and Multicultural Greek Councils. Ashly is a member of Alpha Xi Delta and holds a Bachelor of Science in Business (Marketing) from Miami University



and a Master of Education in Postsecondary Administration and Student Affairs from The University of Southern California.

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