

Intersect to Connect

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Often as campus-based professionals, we seek out opportunities to help foster stronger relationships among the fraternal communities we support. Common go-to events/activities are Greek Week, cross council step shows, or stroll performances. However, these events frequently fall short in meeting the desired goals when professionals fail to create environments that educate councils about one another's unique cultural and historical identities. As a result, some councils continue to feel misappropriated, overlooked, or misunderstood.

Within the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors core competencies manual (2018), the *Professional Skills* domain calls for campus-based professionals to establish skillsets to “*Work Across Differences* – create environments where people are valued, respected, treated with dignity, and given the opportunity to participate fully in the community” (p. 4,8). New to the University of Tennessee Knoxville in 2014, one of the deficits I observed was the lack of community awareness and knowledge across the four councils.

In efforts to create environments that help, related to the competency area “Facilitate Interactions Across Differences”, *The Cross Council Exchange* (CCE) was established. The premise for this event was to bring together select representatives from each council's organizations to participate in small and large group activities. During this time together, it allowed members in the community to learn more about one another, challenge ideals of thought, and gain skillsets and/or knowledge that helped members be productive citizens internally and externally of the fraternal and global community.

The first CCE hosted 110 representatives from National Panhellenic Conference, Multicultural Greek Council, Interfraternity Council, and National Pan-Hellenic Council. This two-part series provided members with the chance to learn more about the make-up of *all* councils by way of a brief presentation. The participants then formed small groups of 8-10 members to engage in dialogue activities titled, *A Different World* and *Stand Up, Sit Down*. *A Different World* is structured like speed dating but centered on learning more about the unique cultural and historical aspects of said council/organization. *Stand Up, Sit Down* allowed participants the opportunity to identify with unique intersections of identity while expressing feelings like, “As a _____ or as a member of _____, I do not like when...” Other participants who did not identify with that identity listened to members articulate their lived experiences. At the same time, they

were able to ask, “When you said ___ can you explain that further?” This fostered both environments of active listening and *Interactions Across Differences*.

At the conclusion of this program, 94% of attendees reported that they *Strongly Agreed* to *Agreed* they gained an appreciation for the diversity that was represented within the 4 councils. The following were statements students shared about their experience during the *Cross Council Exchange*:

- “I would love to participate in something like this again!”
- “I really enjoyed this and learned a lot.”

Another core competency outlined by AFA (2018) is *Embracing Our Differences* - “acknowledging, learning about, and interacting with people from all cultures, ability statuses, ages, gender identities and expressions, sexual orientations, religions, ethnicities, political ideologies, immigration statuses, socio-economic statuses, and the intersectionality of multiple identities...” (p. 25) As a result, *CCE* is a great way to foster positive collaborations/partnerships across campus and within the community.

During the fall of 2015, another theme added to the *CCE* was the visible and invisible identities within our communities. This allowed participants the chance to observe ways to support, uplift, and acknowledge various intersections of identities within our fraternal communities. Many times, when organizations have members that fall outside the majority/dominant identities of their chapter, they either begin to “other,” stereotype, tokenize, mislabel, assimilate, and/or address them based on binary identities.

As a result, we wanted to be intentional to reach out to campus partners like the Pride Center, Multicultural Student Life, CRU (Campus Ministries), and InterVarsity to create healthy environments that provided the knowledge, awareness, and skills to be more culturally competent when engaging across differences. It is important to note that campus partners may vary based on the needs of your campus and demographic cultural norms (i.e. we are located in what many have called “the buckle of the bible belt”).

When students were asked what they planned on doing differently as a result of what they learned they reported the following actions:

- “I plan on bringing some of the ideas that were exchanged to my organization in order to create a more inclusive environment.”

- “Be an active bystander and address people when they say inappropriate or derogatory things.”
- “Using proper terms for everything and ask the question of "why?" instead of getting defensive when someone doesn't agree with me.”

When considering ways to engage organizations across councils, *Cross Council Exchange* is just one of many intentional ways to *Facilitate Across Difference* that allows students to develop competencies that *Embraces Their (Our) Differences* (AFA, 2018). Understanding that not all participants will embrace differences, campus-based professionals or identified facilitators may witness students expressing a spectrum of ideas of thought which is identified at the *Initial Level of the Cognitive Domain* in the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Maturity* (Perez, Shim, King, & Baxter 2015, p. 766):

- May have difficulty recognizing the concept of culture beyond demography or geography
- Is naïve about different cultural practices and values
- Resists challenges to one’s own beliefs
- Views differing cultural perspectives as wrong

As a result, it is important facilitators adhere to recommended best practices to create environments that embrace respect and engagement across differences:

1. **Create Brave Spaces** - Challenge by supporting and encouraging students to step outside of their comfort zones.
2. **Honor Resistances** - Not everyone will be open to accepting but, encouraging spaces of respect.
3. **Speak from Lived Versus Assumed Experiences** - When engaging across difference, students may feel that their lived experience is universal. Hence encouraging first-person expressions, “Based on my lived experience ...”

Overall, it is important that we as campus-based professionals continue to do the work that addresses diversity and inclusion, social justice advocacy, and equality within our communities. The *Cross Cultural Exchange* is just one way we have made progress on these areas, and hopefully it can serve as an example of what you can do to help elevate your competency and your students’ experience.

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Tenea Lowery, native from Fort Worth, Texas, has served as the Assistant Director of Sorority and Fraternity Life at the University of Tennessee Knoxville for the past 4.5 years. With a Bachelors of Arts in Sociology and a minor in Ethnic Studies from the University of North Texas and a Masters of Arts in Sociology from Clark Atlanta University, Tenea strives to create intentional relationships that foster connectedness, restorative, and strategic efforts. With over 12 years of work experience in various sectors of higher education, small/mid-size institutions (1,000-28,000+) and HBCUs, Tenea's professional work has allowed her to experience engagements with student activities, multicultural life, first-generation college students, first-year students, student conduct, and sorority/fraternity life. Tenea believes that in order to advance the efforts of our fraternal communities, we have to be intentional that all voices are heard, supported, and included. That's not only for our students but for those in the profession as well.



References

- Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors. (2018). *AFA core competencies manual*. Retrieved from <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.afa1976.org/resource/resmgr/publications/afa-corecompetencies-2018-fi.pdf>
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