

An Approach to Fraternity/Sorority: Advising Across the Spectrum

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Advising. This word represents a broad brush stroke of a role that has many prongs for the campus-based paraprofessionals and professionals who work with fraternities and sororities. While many can provide their own thoughts, within the term “Advisor” exists a teacher, a motivator, a values aligner, a problem solver, and a guide, just to name a few. Naturally, it is the hope that when an individual seeks to enter the hallowed halls of student affairs with a desire to become a fraternity/sorority advisor, they take seriously the role of advising and strive to be the best as they can be, all while comprehending that there is no “one size fits all” model for providing our students with the support they need.

Within this world of fraternity and sorority, having an understanding of (and also having the ability to navigate) the distinctions that come with advising our various types of councils is crucial. FSAs must understand the needs that are germane to our various councils and chapters, as that understanding is a necessity for all who work with our organizations from the newest graduate student to the seasoned professional. FSAs, no matter the level of experience, must be provided with the opportunity to have their professional development shaped through the support of chapters and councils outside of where their particular affiliations are derived.

Prior to becoming the FSA I am today, my experience was limited to that of NPHC at a historically black institution. In 2005, when I began my graduate assistantship in the Office of Diversity & Cultural Affairs and Greek Life at a predominantly white institution, my concept of fraternity and sorority, and the idea of advising and educating, was flipped on its head. Thankfully, our director at the time had the foresight to place me in spaces where I would learn, evolve, and at times experience discomfort, not due to anything detrimental, but because I was now in a space that I was unfamiliar with and placed me at the onset of developing as a professional. I learned the mechanics of Panhellenic recruitment, I was provided the opportunity to interact with our men of IFC, and I participated in experiences where I coached and advised our multicultural Greek organizations, which provided me with a lens to see not all culturally-based fraternities and sororities are built alike. It was through these experiences I started to develop my own ideology on advising, and replicated what I was taught during that time to challenge and support the professionals whom I would have the opportunity to develop in the future.

For me, working to learn as much as I could about Panhellenic, IFC, and Multicultural organizations was a necessity, as I had a goal of working to become the most well-rounded

fraternity/sorority advisor I could be. As members of CBFOs who work in FSL, we oftentimes have to prove our ability and our skillset, equating to immersing ourselves as much as possible into Panhellenic and IFC. Conversely, however, there exists a need to provide that same level of immersion for colleagues who are affiliated with NPC and IFC organizations as their understanding of CBFOs, especially in the climate of our nation and happenings on our campuses, is vital. Whether one identifies as a member of a culturally-based organization or one that is historically White, the following points may prove helpful in educating and training professionals from various backgrounds as it relates to the work that we do with students from councils and chapters different from our own:

- Be present and make the effort to learn. As educators, we too must be willing to open ourselves to experiences that can enrich our practice. Put yourself out there and engage students where they are and realize that this is a learning opportunity for all parties.
- Language matters. Avoid “othering,” and correct language when you hear it. Oftentimes, we may hear our Panhellenic and IFC students (and some colleagues, disturbingly enough) refer to Panhellenic/IFC organizations as “mainstream” or “traditional” organizations, or place a “tier” on organizations that fall outside of those councils. This also holds true when there is a discussion around housed and unhoused organizations.
- Reading is fundamental. There are print and electronic resources that provide phenomenal education on our fraternities and sororities. Utilize them! However, I personally have learned through general conversation and asking thoughtful questions, one can learn useful information to help inform advising practices.
- Be vulnerable to the point of having a willingness to address the fact you don’t know it all. However, be open to informing yourself as the FSA and a member of the greater fraternity/sorority community. Our students are the purpose of our work, and they deserve professionals who are willing to do the work of enriching their experience.
- Supervisors/seasoned professionals - create experiences for new professionals to have opportunities for development outside of their affiliated council and guide them along the way. To pigeonhole your NPHC grad or new professional in only working with CBFOs will hurt them in the end, and indicates that you may not trust their ability outside of a small scope. Just as we are training our students for the real world, we must continue to train our staff, and ourselves, to do diverse work.

Many of the points presented above are truly common sense, however, as our new professionals continue to enter the field and our seasoned professionals continue the work, it is

imperative we continue to improve our practice and hone our skills to better serve our ever-evolving fraternity/sorority populations as they encounter challenges different than our own experiences. There is more to it than attending the rounds at recruitment, showing up to a new member presentation for a CBFO, or stopping by the philanthropy event. It's about being present in the day-to-day work with our students whether it is from the ground level or the 30,000-foot view.

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Dr. Zachary E. Shirley currently serves as the Assistant Dean for Sorority and Fraternity Life at Indiana University Bloomington, where he oversees the operations for a sorority/fraternity community of more than 8,000 members across 69 chapters. A native of Dallas, Texas, Dr. Shirley graduated with his Bachelor of Science Degree in Secondary Education/English from Paul Quinn College (2005), his Master of Science in Higher Education Administration from Texas A&M University-Commerce (2006), and his Doctor of Education Degree from the University of North Texas (2014), with his dissertation research centered on the perceptions of Fraternities and Sororities from the perspective of a single institution and its community. Dr. Shirley has worked as a Student Affairs professional for more than ten years, with previous experiences from Texas Woman's University, the University of Texas at Dallas, Texas A&M University-Commerce, and the University of Cincinnati in areas such as Fraternity & Sorority Life, Student Activities, Orientation, Student Government, Volunteer Services, and Mentorship Programs. He is an active member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Incorporated and the fraternal organization of Prince Hall Masonry.