

What if we drastically rethought learning in fraternities and sororities?

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The credit hour. The course grade. In American higher education, it is what we use to define performance in and completion of the credentials needed for a college degree. Our students amass a collection of credit hours from a pre-determined pathway, demonstrate they completed those credits with some level of proficiency, and are awarded a credential (in this case, a college degree). It is the financial and academic model that has defined learning in college for many years, but it is based on the concept of “seat time” – that regardless of the individual student and what they bring to the table, the knowledge needed to demonstrate proficiency can only be achieved during a fixed time frame.

Fraternity/sorority isn't much different. Many of our educational milestones in fraternities and sororities are based upon the concept of “seat time.” This is evidenced by initiatives such as new member education, specific boutique experiences for sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and member development programs emphasizing an increasingly more challenging portfolio of experiences. Students collect programs, experiences, and sessions which craft a portfolio building their knowledge base – sort of a “Pokemon Go” approach to fraternity/sorority...gotta catch 'em all. And that's learning, right?

To some extent, yes. However, what we know is despite our current efforts, there are still significant gaps between what students perceive they have learned in college and what employers perceive students have learned in college (Hart Research Associates, 2013). This gap has caused us to disrupt our current model of college learning, moving away from thinking only about seat time, and leaning towards a different outcome – mastery of a skill or competency – as the marker for completion.

Competency-based education (CBE) has emerged as a model focusing on education towards specific competencies – which can include written communication, cultural competence, and problem-solving. Certification comes not at the completion of a specific timeline, but through the student's ability, often through a series of work products, to demonstrate they have mastered that specific outcome. CBE has challenged our notions of college access and affordability, and has allowed us to rethink both the purpose of higher education and how we move students through higher education institutions. Additionally, it has been endorsed by the American Council on Education as a legitimate, although controversial, method of postsecondary education.

So let's take a break from the current model of learning in higher education and walk down a different path focusing on competency development.

This question emerges: what would happen if we thought about a student's movement through fraternities and sororities not on "seat time" or "a collection of experiences," but through a member's direct ability to demonstrate mastery in a series of skills or competencies?

Walk with me on this journey. We often make a critical assumption that, at the end of a pre-determined period of time, a student emerges from a fraternity/sorority as a transformed individual. However, we don't often provide an opportunity for that learning to actually be demonstrated, measured, and certified. Additionally, we often treat students who come to the fraternity/sorority experience with different levels of proficiency as the same, unable to honor previous learning they have brought with them. What if individual educational pathways allowed our members to master skills and competencies at their own pace? Would we provide a different pathway for the first-year student as opposed to the returning veteran? How would this reframe how we think about roles and responsibilities of membership educators? Would we have one membership educator, or would we have multiple designed to focus on specific skills, such as problem-solving, cultural competence, civic engagement? Let's think about achievement. What would mastery of a skill look like and how would a student demonstrate it? What if a student was unable to be initiated or move through membership levels until they demonstrated increasing levels of proficiency in a specific set of skills?

Our current conversation on how we think about learning is challenging the model used for over 200 years in the American university. If the world is shifting beneath our feet, what if we responded in a way no one expects us to?

References

Hart Research Associates. (2013). *It's more than a major: Employer priorities for college learning and student success*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities.

Additional Reading:

Kelchen, R. (2015, January). *The landscape of competency-based education: Enrollments, demographics, and affordability*. Washington, DC: Center for Higher Education Reform.