

Learning to Help Students Learn: Professional Development Focused on Increased Competence as a Student Affairs Educator

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Student affairs professionals have been asked to be educators (Collins & Roberts, 2012). Professional associations tell us a competency needed within student affairs work is a focus on student learning and development (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). This has also been highlighted in the [AFA Core Competencies for Excellence in the Profession](#) (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2010). Progress has been made within the field of student affairs and the functional area of fraternity and sorority advising. Learning has become a focus of student affairs and, to some extent, fraternity and sorority life (Bureau, 2011). This focus needs to become stronger to continue to be relevant in today's higher education (Barber & Bureau, 2012).

Examining learning as a part of student affairs practice is one thing, but what about the learning student affairs professionals need in order to become more competent in their work as educators? What about fraternity/sorority professionals increasing their competence to facilitate learning as an outcome of the fraternal experience?

We should not assume just because the fraternity/sorority professional has a master's degree or has a title that references learning or development that they know the right strategies to help students learn. In fact, learning to facilitate learning is something each and every one of us should identify as a lifelong priority if we are to ensure fraternity and sorority members benefit fully from their experience. This article identifies four strategies to help readers develop professional development plans focused on increasing our competence in creating learning environments.

1. **Understand learning theory.** Many have written about how college students learn, including how co-curricular involvement influences learning (Barber, 2012; Nelson Laird, Seifert, Pascarella, Mayhew, & Blaich, 2014). Theories exist (see Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) that explain learning processes particularly cognitive development. Theory provides a framework for our practice and ensures learning experiences are grounded in methods that have been tested and proven to be effective. Incorporating theory into a professional development plan is vital for practitioners who want to become better educators. A course in graduate school does not create expertise and the nuances of theories are constantly examined within a growing research base within student affairs (Evans et al. 2010).

Takeaway: Revisit student development theory and in particular learning theory as a part of your professional development plan. Test a few out as you interact with students and create learning experiences. Use the [AFA Student Development Theory Resource Guide](#) as a resource (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2012).

2. **Be intentional by predetermining primary outcomes.** When we start a fitness plan we develop a desired end state. When we embark on a trip we have a desired end state and potentially some points of interest at which we stop along the way. Much of how we conduct our lives is grounded in being intentional and determining desired outcomes. Many student affairs professionals have an idea of what they want to achieve in a workshop, program, or even a long-term advising relationship; however, we are not always intentional in that our outcome is not documented, specific strategies to achieve the outcome are not determined, and a method to assess such outcomes is not always in place.

In my experiences, most student affairs educators view learning outcomes as important; however, it is the writing of the outcome that professionals often feel is daunting. Writing a good learning outcome is as simple as following a formula: audience, behavior, condition, and degree. For example, 90% (degree) of Fraternity and Sorority Chapter Presidents (audience) will be able to identify practices that demonstrate risk management awareness (behavior) as a result of attending the annual leadership retreat (condition). Other resources go more in depth as to how to write a good learning outcome (see for example Collins & Roberts, 2012). Key is that if you do not learn how to write and practice writing learning outcomes then you will not write good learning outcomes.

Takeaway: Review the literature on writing learning outcomes and practice, practice, practice.

3. **Clarify levels of learning.** It is easy to say you want something to occur, but is it the right something? Given the theoretical foundations we are using and the goals of our program, what should students who attend, at their respective developmental levels, take away from a program? I believe different members in our communities start at different levels and learning experiences must be catered to their specific needs.

Take risk management, for example. New members are at the level where they have to remember, know, and understand such policies. Yes, they must follow and enact but developmentally they are just coming to know these practices (few other forums have such specific policies in place outside the fraternity/sorority world). Members who have “active” status or have “crossed” into full membership should already know risk practices, but they may now be tasked with applying them. Members who have been around for a while may find that risk awareness practices can be examined and new approaches proposed. At this level they are likely analyzing and synthesizing information and events to develop new practices.

What I have just explained is the learning ladder of Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson, Kwarthwol, & Bloom, 2001). The levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy (which has been revised since first conceived) go from the foundation of learning to more advanced practices: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing,

evaluating and creating. Each level demonstrates progressed knowledge on a topic. When developing learning outcomes, it is important to use Bloom's to specifically state what level of learning is accomplished. It might seem like you are being a grammar snob but verbs really matter in learning outcomes and creating learning experiences. When you want someone to know or remember, you do not use terms like apply in your learning outcome – this is too advanced for the level of learning. Similarly as you move up the ladder you would not remediate experiences by focusing on outcomes that are too basic. Student affairs educators who are committed to facilitating student learning will take time to learn how to write good learning outcomes at the correct level for the student audience (Grunn & Kegolis, 2013).

Takeaway: familiarize yourself with Bloom's Taxonomy and practice writing learning outcomes at each level of learning.

4. **Apply frameworks for good practice.** Theory has already been explained as appropriate framework for learning environments. Focusing on theory is one way student affairs educators can increase their competence at enacting learning experiences. Another is the use of the CAS Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2012). These standards provide an outline about how functions in higher education, including fraternity and sorority advising programs (FSAP) should operate. They are used for self-assessment as well.

Since 2004, CAS has also been focused on helping student affairs educators enact learning environments. Within the second section of CAS, which is the "Program" section, there are six domains of learning: (1) knowledge acquisition, construction, integration and application, (2) cognitive complexity, (3) intrapersonal development, (4) interpersonal development, (5) humanitarianism and civic engagement and (6) practical competence. Each has a series of dimensions included (see Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2012 for a general overview). Knowing these domains exist can help with adopting and writing appropriate learning outcomes for fraternity and sorority life programs.

It is vital that student affairs educators who work with fraternity and sorority life be aware of the CAS Standards generally and to have a specific understanding of those for FSAP. The FSAP Standards are found in the CAS Book of Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2012) but are also free to access from the [AFA website](#) (Association of Fraternity Advisors, 2015). The use of the CAS Standards for a simple review exercise or for a more extensive self-assessment is a great professional development opportunity.

Takeaway: Review the CAS Standards for Fraternity and Sorority Advising Programs, in particular the learning domains and dimensions in the Program section.

In closing, fraternity and sorority life professionals should be focused on educating students. We should also be focused on educating ourselves to increase our skillset in a range of student affairs competencies; one of these competencies is student learning and development. However, we need to make sure that as we educate students we are prepared to do so in way that truly achieves long-term learning. As fraternity/sorority professionals focus on their professional development, incorporating attention to improving our skillset as educators should be a priority. Focusing on theories, improving abilities relative to writing learning outcomes, understanding levels of learning, and applying widely known frameworks for best practices are strategies that can result in our increased competence and benefit student learning and development.

Resources

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