

## **Open the Door to New Ideas**

Ryan Bye, Valparaiso University

Once outside of a degree-granting program it is easy to miss the opportunities to continue learning. When you have hundreds of emails to process a week, hours upon hours of scheduled meetings, and then other countless projects to work on, learning let alone role modeling lifelong learning easily falls to the bottom of the to-do list. Working with college students we have a duty to prepare them for life outside of our walls. At Valparaiso University our mission is specific in that we should be preparing our students to lead and serve their communities. The best way I can think to do this is to teach them that they will need to be a lifelong learner.

This past year I have had the opportunity to serve on the mentor board for the Indiana Zeta chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon at Valparaiso University, and this past month I was able to be the co-advisor on the inaugural fraternity and sorority community spring service trip. Unaffiliated with any organization, but someone who has had occasional experience working with fraternity and sorority communities, I was excited and honored to begin this journey as a mentor for the Vice President of Programming of this chapter. Additionally, having just served as the advisor on the aforementioned service trip, I can confidently say that I have come to understand the best way to promote lifelong learning is to be open to new ideas and put ourselves in new situations. One way this can be best accomplished is to invite someone from outside into the organization to further help the group reach their goals. An “outsider” does not necessarily always have to be someone unaffiliated. I am using this term to define someone who has not belonged to the specific chapter that would be bringing this person into a meeting or a larger role.

Fraternities and sororities offer a unique bond solidified by values, ritual, and a common purpose. Hence, the idea of inviting someone in from the outside can feel counterintuitive. This counterintuitive notion is what gets any organizations stuck in their tracks, keeps groups heading down risky paths, and prevents them from going from mediocre to great. Someone from the outside can often give an organization a fresh set of eyes literally and figuratively. They are able to come in with very little predispositions about the organization or the way it operates. This allows that person to offer ideas and advice that may be next to impossible for members within the organization to think of or even see as a possibility.

Bringing in advisors and mentors to organizations is crucial for lifelong learning to happen on the organizational level. Without these people, organizations have a tendency to be stagnant. There are wonderful student leaders, headquarter-based staff, and campus-based staff, but these resources are stretched thin. An outside advisor can work to challenge and support individual members to make necessary changes within a chapter to move them from mediocrity to greatness and help fill a void left when other interested parties are stretched too thin. Having other members of the college or university communities who show a genuine interest and desire in helping chapters grow can provide a bountiful resource of lifelong learning and continuous improvement.

There are organizations out there, like the Indiana Zeta chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon, that have mentor boards or strong advisor relationships, and there are many more that do not. Why do some chapters choose this path while others do not? By my observation, trust and courage play a large role in the success of bringing an “outsider” into an organization. Chapters have to be willing to be courageous enough to ask someone to come in and provide assistance and trust has to be developed between the chapter and that person to allow learning or in some cases re-learning to take place. The act of developing courage and trust plays a valuable role in lifelong learning. Without relationships being

developed, it will be next to impossible for anyone from the outside to have a meaningful impact on a chapter. Advisors and mentors can begin to develop trust by listening to members, attending events (when appropriate), and providing constructive feedback.

Allowing advisors and mentors from outside the organization allows role modeling to take place. On my spring service trip I was often asked if I was affiliated with a fraternity. Instead of timidly answering no, I was able to explain my path. I shared that I worked on the executive board of Up 'til Dawn as the only unaffiliated member during my undergraduate career and that I currently served as a mentor to a chapter at our University. What amazed me the most was that many of the students had no idea I served in that capacity back at our institution. Call it a little vanity, but I just assumed they had maybe heard through the grapevine. Once they learned that I work in this capacity they were able to begin asking questions. They wanted to know what it meant, what did I do, or did I enjoy the experience. All things that I hope they continue to think about and bring back to their chapters. It also allowed me an opportunity to share with them all the things I was learning about their community. I was able to role model lifelong learning by showing that as an unaffiliated member I was not only open to the fraternity and sorority community, but I found value in it and could continue to learn from them.

With the current state of higher education, organizations should strive to produce lifelong learners. Bringing in more members of university and college communities into chapters across the country can truly teach and help people learn of the tremendous value of the fraternity and sorority community has on individual lives and communities as a whole. Fraternities and sororities must work to find the affiliated and unaffiliated men and women who live their values and invite them in to assist with learning.