

The Fallacy of Self-Governance

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“The creative project of self-government - hard and frustrating but necessary - is to produce that political commonwealth that changes over time, that can change sometimes by the minute, if circumstances intervene.” –President Barack Obama (NPR, 2012)

Upon examining the current trends and challenges within fraternity and sorority advising, one of the phrases often arising is “self-governance.” In an age when student activism has shifted the conversation regarding how students, organizations, and even administrators are being held accountable by their constituents, students are calling for the opportunity to self-govern their fraternity and sorority communities in a way that gives them more ownership over their shared fraternal experiences. Merriam-Webster broadly defines self-government as the “control of one’s own affairs” (Merriam-Webster). For fraternity and sorority governing councils, this can be seen in a variety of capacities from organizations that are entirely removed from the sphere of influence of the college or university to organizations that operate completely underground – making decisions without input from the various stakeholders of the fraternity/sorority community.

At Presbyterian College in Clinton, SC, this concept of self-governance was manifested in a Panhellenic Council that had completely removed itself from the purview of the Division of Campus Life in order to gain control over their daily operations. In years past, there was often tension between staff within the Division of Campus Life and the officers of the Panhellenic Council as a result of differences in opinion on topics of risk management and recruitment. In that time, the Panhellenic Council had degraded into an umbrella organization that had title, yet no power. Overseeing a community of three National Panhellenic Conference sororities which boasted membership of roughly 250 women, the Council had nine officer positions for roles that were unnecessary for such a small community. Often times, positions were left unfilled because of lack of interest or worse, filled by women who saw the positions specifically as resume builders with no intention of actually fulfilling their obligations. This lack of leadership led to bitterness between the chapters, as seen specifically by the number of infractions and mediation meetings surpassing what would be considered normal for a community of Presbyterian College’s size.

Thus started the conversation on self-governance: how could an organization whose mission is to serve the chapters it oversees, thus innately giving those chapters power over the organization, be completely self-governed? How could an organization that is a part of a complex hierarchical system comprised of a Student Government Association, Student Life Council, Office of Student Involvement, and Faculty Senate have complete control of their affairs without interference from others? From both sides, the organization is experiencing influence from stakeholders. By refusing to acknowledge the roles of each stakeholder and the opportunities for collaboration with said stakeholders, the organization becomes adrift, trapped by the notion that any

involvement from outsiders is an encroachment on their ability to govern themselves. This is the fallacy of self-governance.

In an effort to move towards this model of shared-governance, the Panhellenic Council at Presbyterian College completely dissolved their executive board and worked collaboratively with staff, administrators, and sorority community members to re-establish the purpose, mission, and vision of the Council. After reviewing the needs of the community, a Panhellenic Executive Board was created to address problem areas within fraternity and sorority life as identified by the key stakeholders at the College. These Executive Board Members have two specific obligations to facilitate the shared-governance model: they must communicate community accomplishments, challenges, and opportunities for collaboration to their stakeholders and then, work within the framework already established by the stakeholders to advance the community.

In theory, this ideal of shared governance sounds simple: the organization will listen to all of the voices at the table and work to fulfill goals, programming opportunities, and judicial processes with the input of those groups. However, anyone who has ever sat in on a large committee meeting, in which everyone wants their opinion heard, even if it conflicts with the opinion of the group at large, knows this is a nearly impossible task. The model of shared-governance must work through a two-way street. Stakeholders must be informed of the mission, vision, and goals of the organization and provide feedback, knowing the experts at hand are directly involved in the organization. For example, when it came to working through recruitment infractions with the Panhellenic Council's three chapters, feedback was given from the Office of Student Conduct as how to best collaborate on instances violating both Panhellenic Recruitment Rules and the College's Code of Conduct. As such, individuals were held accountable through the College's judicial process while the chapter went through the Panhellenic Council's mediation process. The obligation of holding students/members accountable was shared between stakeholders.

The model of shared-governance briefly and loosely defined above is not perfect and will not work for every community. However, in a time in which fraternity and sorority life is under constant scrutiny from the mainstream society, the media, and even the administrators who oversee these communities, creating a system with checks and balances that listens to the voices of the very stakeholders who may be called to defend our groups is necessary. As stated in the quote from Barack Obama that opened this article, a governing body that is fluid and ready to adapt to the challenges that may come its way is the benefit – and challenge – of self-government. In today's state of fraternity and sorority life, it may often be the only way to create positive change in our communities.

References

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