

Does History Dictate AFA's Future?

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In 1976, AFA was formed. The intent of the organization was to "... represent campus advisors/deans, provide input to the NIC (National Interfraternity Conference) and FEA (Fraternity Executives Association), organize in-service training for a highly mobile group of student personnel members, and encourage research and publications benefiting the field" (Lilly, December, 1976, p. 3). By 1978 there were 185 members (Lilly, December, 1978), all of whom were campus-based professionals.

AFA was founded with oversight from the NIC and FEA for campus-based professionals with one of its early goals to "assist in maintaining positive, supportive relationships among student personnel administrators, fraternity executives and staff, the National Interfraternity Conference, and related organizations" (Lilly, June, 1977). It is clear the original intent of AFA was for campus professionals with headquarters staff serving a secondary and supportive role. In fact, as early as 1982, leaders were wondering if the NIC's involvement was still necessary (Beyers, January 1982). That said, it was not until 2002 that AFA and the NIC began to host separate meetings. The history of our field and this association is intertwined with the relationship between campus professionals and staff and volunteers from (inter)national organizations. This short article examines aspects of our organization's history and evolution in light of the ongoing question of who should be able to lead the association.

What does history mean now and what should the future of AFA look like? Over 40 years later, we are asking a simple question: does the story of our origins define what we are today? We must examine how we have evolved as an organization. I have been fortunate to be actively engaged in AFA for 23 years. I have also been able to study and write about its history: a series of "Perspectives" articles in 2006 and 2011 were published explaining our association's growth, priorities, and evolution. We have evolved in many ways, but the biggest barrier that still seems to rear its ugly head is the distrust existing between campus professionals and (inter)national organization staff and volunteers. For 40 years, it has been a consistent and unfortunate theme — particularly when there is so much work to do in this field that mistrust of each other just seems like a complete waste of time. That mistrust has played out in two very significant ways: in our relationships (and the ability to use those relationships to get things done) and in our association's governance.

Our Relationship with “The Other”

Whether or not we are a fraternal or a higher education association has been questioned since our inception. This discrepancy really gained traction in the early 2000s, as the AFA board considered who should be permitted to serve the association in what ways. At this time, the board, through a strategic planning process, came to identify that AFA can be both a higher education and interfraternal organization. President Amy Vojta said in her remarks at the 2004 business meeting (Bureau, 2006):

“The more we discussed this, the more we realized it wasn’t an either/or proposition, but rather a both/and solution. Rather than feel like we were forced to act in only one dimension, the board realized the nature of our work is extremely complex ... we work with those in higher education, but the nature of our work necessitates a commitment and partnership to that which is interfraternal.”

However, this relationship is riddled with biases and perceptions that some on both sides cannot get past. The idea of headquarters staff as educators is not one all campus-based professionals can buy into. The idea campus professionals have the best interests of the organizations they espouse to support is not one all headquarters staff and volunteers can buy into. There is significant mistrust, some founded, but some folklore and reliance on old paradigms, that we have not been able to become an association in which people are not marking territory. A message that has come from many who have come through the position of the president is the time to collaborate is now. Yet, hang-ups continue to prevent such partnerships. The impact on AFA is some (maybe a majority) of current campus professionals cannot fathom the association being led by someone outside of the institutions on which fraternities/sororities are hosted, even if someone from outside may be best able and experienced to lead an association as diverse and complex as ours.

Our Priorities and Objectives

AFA has always had a bit of a problem with members’ perceptions that the organization should be an extension of their fraternity/sorority experience. AFA is a professional association, not simply a group of people interested in a common cause, like an interest or support group. This label of association means we must operate as such. The professionalization of our field has paralleled the professionalization of the association. This makes sense as AFA is a convener for our work and the well-being of the field depends on the association’s ability to do its work.

Our mission launched in 2011 espoused that “AFA enhances its members abilities to foster impactful fraternity/sorority experiences.” How this happens, by whom, and to what degree will

depend on the backgrounds and experiences of each member. Over the last decade there has been a focus on the governance of AFA, shifting from a “doing” board to a “governing” board and changing its size and involvement in the many functions of our association. This was possible because of the expansion of staff from one in 1993 to two in 2003, four in 2007, and now as many as six people serving AFA in some way. AFA is simply in a different place right now than it was at any other point in our history.

So, what has been and what should be priorities of AFA? This question must be asked when considering the engagement of all kinds of members and the potential for non-campus professionals to serve as president. Priorities, as determined by association leaders in partnership with higher education and interfraternal colleagues, have included partnerships to address very broad issues such as tackling hazing, sexual assault, and other evils that all too often find themselves in the interfraternal conversation. Speaking on behalf of the fraternal movement is something AFA has often struggled with in its history, though with the rise of the Call for Values Congruence movement in 2004, it became evident that AFA’s voice was best positioned to speak on behalf of its members and the broad higher education and interfraternal community that supports the collegiate fraternal experience (Bureau, 2006). These are tasks that cannot be done in isolation of each other. Other priorities determined by AFA leadership included addressing the organization’s infrastructure, policies, procedures, and resources: all things that must consider the diversity of our members.

What does this all mean?

The answer to what you think AFA should be today seems to be influenced by how you have experienced membership. Beyond the issue of what we are, is the issue of who should serve. In 2005, we made the decision to have headquarters staff eligible to serve on the governing board. In 2014, the membership passed a resolution that allowed vendor members to serve (though they must also maintain memberships as an affiliate member and they are not eligible to serve as president either). If you believe we are an association for campus professionals who happen to have other members, it seems like you may feel headquarters professionals cannot serve. If you believe all in our association contribute to the educational environment we hope to provide in fraternities and sororities, then you may be more inclined to support non-campus professionals in the role of president.

So wherever you stand on the issue, you have to acknowledge the nature of our work and the nature of how different actors contribute in the association has changed. It is simply a different time now than it was 40, 30, 20, even 10 years ago. To hold onto old paradigms does not seem

like a practice benefitting our work in today's higher education market (a concept reiterated in presidential speech after presidential speech since the early days of AFA).

This does not necessarily mean you should support the legislation but to simply disregard the proposed changes as "that's not who we are or who we serve" is a mistake. If you believe the association's credibility is dependent on a higher education professional on a campus leading, then it is hard to convince you otherwise. However, I would encourage you to think about a person's credentials, not about the category of the person who wishes to serve. Credentials make someone ready to lead, not their designation.

I believe at the end of the day, the Nominations & Elections Committee should select the most qualified candidates to ensure the association membership has the opportunity to elect the best people. I do not believe there should be "one of each" nominated simply to make sure someone is at the table. If the best people to nominate are all campus professionals, great. If they are all headquarters staff, then great. Hopefully it is some of each, but to me their qualifications to serve on a board that must address issues of higher education, interfraternalism, and general association management matter more to me than their professional role or member designation.

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