

The Role of the AFA President

Compiled by Jessie Ashton

The “West Wing” plays constantly in the background of my office, my favorite book is “The President’s Club” by Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, and I often tell chapter presidents, “find your president best friend. Find someone you trust because no one else will truly understand what you’re going through or what this role and responsibility is like, and you’ll need someone to lean on.” The role of a president is truly something that fascinates and interests me, no matter the scale. It’s something I often wonder if we can really understand unless we experience it. So, when colleagues suggested we compile a Q&A with former AFA presidents to learn more about the role, I jumped at it. While AFA isn’t quite the United States of America, I am so thankful for all of these folks and their leadership during their tenures leading our association. This piece is longer than most Essentials articles, but it was near impossible to cut content or perspective, when each voice added so much. *Thank you to Jay Anhorn, Gary Bonas, Douglas Case, Thad Doyle, Rick Funk, Jennifer Jones Hall, Kelly Jo Karnes, Larry Lunsford, John Mohr, Veronica Moore, Bridget Guernsey Riordan, Gregory Singleton, Amy Vojta, and Carrie Whittier for their contributions.*

What do you believe is the primary role of the president of AFA?

Amy Vojta: This is a tough one. I thought about saying, “to lead” or describing this person as being “the face” of AFA (both of which I think are true), but I guess the primary role, which would encompass so much of what I think an effective president can do, is to be the CEO — Chief Engagement Officer. When I think of “engagement,” I think of qualities like being knowledgeable about the topics, interested in the work, excited about the role, and energized by the people. That is what the role of the AFA president should encompass. Our president needs to be a credible professional who understands this job, advising fraternities and sororities, is rather nuanced. Our president needs to have an interest in all areas of our work, not just whatever is the hot topic du jour. Our president needs to be excited about the opportunities we have to make the profession, and our professionals, better. Lastly, they really need to love the people they lead because when your heart is involved, you’ll always do a better job.

Carrie Whittier: The current role of the AFA president is significantly different than when I served in the role. Today, I believe the president serves more in a board chair role, leading the board of directors in their efforts to guide and shape the association. The president works in cooperation with the board of directors to give direction to the central office staff on strategic action items and future plans for the association.

Bridget Guernsey Riordan: To represent the association to external partners and lead the strategic vision of the association.

Douglas Case: The role of the AFA president has changed over time. When I was president in 1991, we had no staff. In addition to managing the board, I also was responsible for overseeing all of the day-to-day operations of the association. Our board was more of a working board (implementing programs and initiatives and handling all association business), but we also operated as the policy governance board like we have today. In addition to managing the board and overseeing the operations of the association, the president was the primary spokesperson and an ambassador, representing AFA at various higher education and interfraternal meetings and events. (I might note that in those days, we didn't have email, texting, or other forms of instant communication we enjoy today. We relied on faxing, mail, and relatively expensive long-distance telephone calls to conduct business.)

Gary Bonas: First and foremost, to provide leadership to the organization. Now, leadership means different things to different people. To me, leadership is an influence relationship between the president and AFA members, who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes. Thus, presidents need to draw their organizational vision and goals certainly from themselves but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the broader membership. Then they need to facilitate actions to achieve these common ends. Additionally, the president represents the association to the other associations in student affairs and fraternity/sorority life.

Gregory Singleton: The role and purpose of the AFA president has certainly changed over time. With the addition of a central office and increased staff, the president today serves as the convener of the executive committee and provides guidance to the membership at the Annual Meeting. I believe their focus should be in providing guidance and direction for the professional association and staying abreast of key issues facing the fraternity and sorority advisement profession.

Jay Anhorn: To manage the board of directors and staff to set the vision and direction of the association, its members, and the industry.

Jennifer Jones Hall: I believe the president runs the business of the association, being transparent to the membership, and being the face in interactions with our partners in higher education and other organizations closely associated with fraternity/sorority life.

John Mohr: Broad leadership of the association, representation in dealings with related professional organizations, creative and sensitive work with staff and/or association management, ability to work closely with other capable volunteers in leadership positions, and effectiveness making appropriate public statements and op-ed opinions.

Thad Doyle: The role of the AFA president is to serve as the chair of the board of directors and help to fulfill the mission and vision of the association. They should be a strong leader and possess the ability to guide the association forward strategically, while maintaining and cultivating partnerships and relationships amongst interfraternal partners, as well as other higher education associations.

Rick Funk: That is a tough one now that the executive director is onboard — the president should still serve as the overall representative for the group and work on setting the direction of the organization, while not being as caught up in the day-to-day needs.

Larry Lunsford: To keep the organization on track in meeting its objectives and representing AFA to other fraternity/sorority and non-fraternity/sorority professional and volunteer groups.

Kelly Jo Karnes: During my time on the board, the president served as the “face” of AFA. They were the person that met with other higher education and fraternal partners on behalf of the organization. They also served as the chair of all board meetings, as well as all business meetings. I would assume that today’s chair role, serves in a similar capacity, just with a different title.

Veronica Moore: I believe the primary role of the president of the association is execute the strategic initiatives of the organization. There are many moving parts to manage, but if no progress is being made on the desired outcomes on behalf of the members, then just idle work is being done. In addition to the vital role of executing the goals set forth by the organization, it is also important for the president of AFA to be an interfraternal AND higher education partner and convener of minds that place priorities on an impactful student experience.

What is it that you actually worked on as AFA President; how did you spend your time?

JM: Collaborated with others in getting an initial structure for the organization, planned meetings such as the group's structuring session in June 1977, the first annual meeting (with National Interfraternity Conference in December 1977), and small group gatherings with key people, most notably Jack Anson and NIC "advisors," Bill Schwartz and Bill Jenkins (as well as others), and tried to provide resources for those carrying out specific responsibilities. It should be noted that NPC and NPHC became involved with and supportive of the organization from the beginnings in Williamsburg. My key collaborator was probably Barbara Tootle, which was important and fun.

LL: I served two terms, and those were in AFA’s infancy. I worked to increase AFA’s visibility and make it a viable and respected organization. My time was spent doing much planning and meeting with or communicating with other players on the national level. My administration was the first to invite and include the women’s groups (NPC) at the annual meeting. This was an unpopular move

with the NIC staff and most of its member organizations. They did not want the women's groups in attendance.

RF: I was the last president that didn't have the executive director in the position. The proposal for executive director had been approved the year before, so a good bit of time was spent overseeing the search process and working with the NIC to find the space within their office that they graciously offered to us. We interviewed candidates at the mid-year board meeting and offered Gayle the position that summer. One of my duties as president-elect was to complete the development of the job description which meant we researched associations of similar size. My strategy for the presidency was to set aside one day a week that I would dedicate to AFA work, usually a Friday, and there was an inbox on my desk where I would put letters and updates that I would need to respond to. There was also regular communication with the board — usually monthly with an update sent via snail mail since email was just beginning to take hold.

GS: During my term as AFA president, we worked on strengthening the membership base (we exceeded 1,000 members during my term in office) and continued to work on the establishment of the AFA central office (it had only been open for a couple of years when I became president). Additionally, one of the biggest objectives was to change "Perspectives" from a newsletter format to a magazine format. This was accomplished during my term with an emphasis on continued communication to our membership.

JJH: Serving as president in 1999, where computers finally hit the scene, I spent a great deal of my time answering questions of the members, keeping the executive board on task, running conference calls of the board, running meetings of the executive board twice a year, and reviewing resolutions that were on the docket from years past. Our executive director at that time was a part-time employee with a very tiny office in the original NIC office. Also, during my time as president, Gayle Webb, our executive director, made the decision to find new employment, so I was heavily involved in interviewing and selecting the next executive director for our association. In my time as president, we were also in the midst of the NIC/AFA meeting breaking apart, so it was a time of fear with many people not sure we could run an Annual Meeting without the NIC as a partner. (But as you can see, we rebounded just great!)

AV: When I was AFA president, I spent a lot of my time working in partnership with our executive director, Sue Kraft Fussell, and the members of our executive board. Sue and I had a call scheduled once a week to talk about the projects she was working on, to give her info or affirm how she wanted to handle whatever new thing had popped up that week, etc. At that time, we had a professional staff of two, so AFA board members were far more hands-on in executing, implementing, and

evaluating the work of the association. We also had far more volunteer positions because we didn't have a large staff, so a lot of time was spent in volunteer management — assigning roles, providing oversight, checking on progress, redirecting when needed, basically a lot of program management. In addition to our calls, I spent a lot of evenings and many weekends working on association items. We were launching “Oracle” that year, still had over 100 volunteer positions that needed some level of supervision, training, and oversight, were approaching our first year of a budget in excess of half a million dollars, and we were grappling with all the upheaval from the newly created Franklin Square group, trying to figure out the best way to respond. I remember counting it up, and I spent 30 days out of the office and away from home representing AFA at various conferences and meetings. It was a lot ... I loved it, but that year really took a toll.

JA: In the years leading up to 2008, the Fraternity and Sorority Coalition Assessment Project was coming to fruition. During my term as president elect and president, I was tasked with partnership building and connecting with the other professional associations and fraternal organizations. I spent a lot of time traveling to conferences, attending board meetings for NPHC and NALFO, and connecting with newer organizations like MGC and NAPA. At the time, our leadership talked a lot about not just being involved in discussions about the industry, but that many of our colleagues in higher education and the fraternal world expected us to host the discussions. And, so we did.

CW: In 2009, I spent my time supervising the AFA executive director, leading our efforts to join CHEMA (the Council of Higher Education Management Associations), establishing our first exhibiting relationship with NASPA, establishing the Professionals' Institute hosted at the 2010 SEIFC, AFLV Central, and AFLV West conferences, advising our work with interfraternal partners on the development of resources for working with NALFO, NAPA, and NMGC groups, and managing the day-to-day activities of an operational board.

KJK: When I was AFA president, we were in the middle of the transition from a “working board” to a “governing board.” Much of my time was working on this transition and how do we get the board position (at that time) out of the day-to-day work that could be managed by the staff. We were also in transition without a permanent executive director, and we were in a one-year contact with an Association Management Company (ACUI). Finally, I spent a lot of time listening to members' concerns as our 2010 Annual Meeting was in Arizona. The then governor of Arizona was telling people of color they needed to carry papers at all times to prove their US citizenship. This was a huge concern for our members and interfraternal partners. As a board, we had to balance the financial commitment with the hotel property versus our member's needs. It was an excruciating decision, and we had some very upset members after the decisions, some of which choose not to

come to Arizona. We did our best to live-stream much of the meeting to accommodate for this. That was tough.

TD: During my term as the 2014 AFA president, I worked on the implementation of the first board of directors under the new governance model as well as the creation of the Strategic Framework. At that time, there were five key strategic priorities guiding our work, and it was our first time moving away from the strategic plan model of a 5- and 3-year plan. We focused on priority areas that allowed the association to be more nimble and fluid to stay current and support the ever changing landscape of both the fraternal movement and higher education. I spent time on the implementation of the board of directors and utilizing best practices from ASAE in terms of board development.

VM: My presidency was a time of transition for the association. We were in year five of having changed the entire operational footprint of the organization. If you know anything about organizational change and development, the five-year mark is the point the “testing” of sustainability occurs. I also spent a lot of time navigating through highly contentious times of conflict with interfraternal partners due to the scrutiny that was happening with fraternities at the time (e.g., high-risk behaviors like excessive drinking, increased number of sexual assaults, hazing incidents, etc.). The stance on community-wide suspensions was also one of great debate. Much of my time was spent leading and directing the board and organization through each of the time periods mentioned above. However, I could not have done it without a very supportive and competent board of directors team.

What is the most important quality for an AFA president to hold?

AV: Hmmm ... to take the work seriously, but not yourself seriously.

CW: For the AFA president today, the person needs to be able to be strategic and thinking about the association's direction in the next 7-15 years. The staff should be paying attention to the day-to-day management of the association and development of resources.

DC: The ability to be collaborative and to be an effective delegator. I also think it is important to be dedicated to the mission of the association, to be committed to student development, and to have a vision for how to advance our profession and the fraternal movement.

GS: To me, personally, the most important quality for the AFA president is to be transparent in leadership and open to suggestions from the membership.

JA: Active listening skills. With the caveat you will not know all of the answers nor expect to speak on behalf of a diverse membership. We need to hear, listen, reflect, and refer where possible.

VM: The most important quality for an AFA president to hold is tenacity. There are many nuances of the fraternal industry. Issues arise that you may not be ready for, but one must learn how to be steadfast as they move through the journey.

RF: A number of adjectives come to mind, but the one that jumps out is being inclusive — being respectful of the differing opinions within the membership, the different associations we partner with, and the individuals in the membership that are not speaking up. As a new professional, I remember being overwhelmed at my first AFA meeting and was one of those in the back of the room or along the wall thinking, “What the hell am I doing here?” So, it is important to reach out to them.

KJK: Tough skin! You will have to make unpopular decisions at times or ones that will not make everyone happy. With today’s technology, it is not unusual for members to take to social media to complain or express frustration. This is the nature of our world. However, I think until you sit in the presidential seat, have all of the information in front of you, and truly have the best interest of the association in mind ... people may never really know that the board makes tough decisions all the time. But we have to trust they will do no harm to the association and the membership.

What is one thing you wish you would have known before becoming AFA president?

VM: I feel I was well prepared for the role of AFA president. There were many great examples that came before me. Having served on the board of directors for four years prior to being elected into the role, I had an inkling my call to serve would come sooner or later, so I paid close attention to the issues prior presidents endured and the lessons they learned along the way. One bit of advice from my AFA presidential predecessors that stuck with me was each president has their own battle. They advised I prepared for what’s to come by always keeping the best interest of the membership at the forefront of my actions and decision-making. Although there were issues I didn’t predict I’d have to address, I was fortunate to be under the wing of many great mentors equipping me with I needed to serve our members.

BGR: How rewarding it would be, but I may not have believed it.

RF: How quickly it would go. For me it was an amazing experience because I never really pictured myself in the role. Even though we accomplished a lot that year, I remember sitting at the exec

board meeting the day following Kim getting sworn in as president and thinking of all the things I should have done if only I had a little bit more time.

GB: That the world of AFA cannot be recreated in just one year.

CW: I knew this before becoming president, but it became even more clear during my year of service — being a good campus-based professional has nothing to do with being a good executive leader for the professional association that supports fraternity and sorority advisors. Managing an association has nothing to do with the day-to-day work of a fraternity/sorority professional, and skills in one area will not automatically transfer into the other.

JA: We as an association have always been and will always be relevant and necessary in higher education. With that responsibility comes a lot of expectations of others to make position statements. It was a challenge to balance what we were uniquely positioned to be and do. The association has definitely experienced growing pains with positive results.

JM: To have recognized then how ambitious, interesting, and influential the organization would become, far more so than I was capable of envisioning.

When voting for AFA president, what do you look for?

KJK: I look at their experience within AFA, as well as I read their “why.” I think people may have different reasons to choose to run for the AFA board. For those that truly want to continue to build this association to be a higher education leader and a support system for our members, then that will shine through in their application.

TD: I look for a person who has a breadth of experience in their professional work, in their key involvement with associations, and ideally, in association management. An individual who is respected and connected amongst the fraternal landscape as well as within higher education.

VM: I look for forward thinking people who are visionary. I also look for those who can speak to the many facets and needs of our members.

JA: Someone who demonstrates a passion for advocacy and compassion for our members. Someone whose presence is known and is clear with her/his expectations while being transparent with their motives

AV: I look for a candidate who will ensure all decisions (financial, personnel, strategic) are in the best interest of the association. Someone who understands the importance of our Foundation and will be a proponent of it. A candidate who is a partner to our executive director and who can clearly define and communicate the needs of the association to her. Someone who I believe to be credible, sincere and who can represent us to a wide array of stakeholders.

CW: An understanding of the future direction of association management, and a respect for the basics of developing exceptional fraternity and sorority professionals. I also look for someone who knows who they are and are authentic in their presentation as a person and leader.

JJH: I look for a candidate who has experience in many different AFA committees, on different college campuses, and one who can represent our association in a positive manner. Someone who knows the role will include travel and time taken away from their job and family. Someone who is transparent and who can have the hard conversations with our members, our higher education peers, and peers within the fraternity and sorority movement.

RF: This will make me sound old school, as I'm no spring chicken, but I first look for someone in a campus professional role — a person that is experiencing the issues directly impacting chapters and their membership. I realize AFA has changed. Many professionals are serving in leadership roles, and they understand what is going on with their chapters, but there is something about being at a fraternity house the night of a fire or working with a sorority that has lost a member in a tragic accident that puts things in a different perspective. I have many friends and former students who have served as consultants and professional staff for their organizations who have a great deal to offer AFA, but I honestly believe someone in the trenches is best suited to serve as president.

How would you describe your AFA presidency in one word?

AV: Stewardship

BGR: Fulfilling

CW: Engaging

DC: Challenging, yet Rewarding

GB: Eye-opening

GS: Exhilarating

JA: Restorative

JJH: Challenging

JM: Trial-and-Error

VM: Accountability

TD: Rewarding

RF: Hectic

LL: Innovative

KJK: Fulfilling