

## So, What is Board Governance?

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Board governance best practices are not really something you read about in graduate school or talk about in your assistantship. Perhaps we should have more conversations about this topic, as both universities and fraternities and sororities have governing boards that determine the direction of the organization and a strategy for the future. As the leaders of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA), where do we go to discuss this topic?

There are several resources out there, such as the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) and BoardSource that provide high quality, in-person experiences and educational materials. Specific to our space, there are two higher education groups that AFA participates in.

One is SAHEC, which is the Student Affairs in Higher Education Consortium. This group includes the staff leaders of NASPA, ACPA, ACUHO-I, ASCA, NODA, NACA, NACE, ACUI, NIRSA and ACHA. Although our focus areas may be different, we have very similar issues and concerns. For instance, how can we provide necessary tools to our members, particularly new professionals? How can we help our members advocate for themselves and the students they advise? What trends are you seeing that will impact us now and in the future? Think of SAHEC as one big divisional staff meeting. You each bring a different perspective, but you are all asking many of the same overall questions.

We also belong to CHEMA, which is The Council of Higher Education Management Associations. This is a much larger group, including members of SAHEC and associations representing business operations and academic groups. Our conversations are a little broader in nature and tend to focus on association operation in addition to higher education trends. Effective governance is often a topic of discussion. In both SAHEC and CHEMA, we meet regularly in person and pose questions and share best practices electronically. The spring CHEMA meeting is an opportunity for the chair or president of the board to attend as well, and we were both there in the spring to represent AFA.

The conversations in SAHEC and CHEMA reflect what the two of us have learned through our various roles as professionals. As a leader in an organization (either staff or elected leader), you have to be able to address your immediate responsibilities, while keeping your eyes closely on what is on the horizon that may have an impact, both philosophically and practically. Some days are easier than others in doing this, largely because neither is an exact science. You can have

every risk management plan in place and executed, but that doesn't keep an individual from making a really bad decision that can spell disaster. You can also try and predict the future (recession, anyone?) in an effort to mitigate long-term damage, but you have no real control on what is going to happen and how your organization may be impacted.

In both groups, we try to learn from the past as well as try and predict what is ahead. Now, we are paying attention to and asking questions about the signs leading up to the 2008 recession and shake-up of higher education. One of those things is the predicted decline of student enrollment over the next 4-6 years. The numbers tell the story — there aren't as many high school students graduating, and we will feel the impact. This won't be gloom and doom for everyone, but this will impact all of us at some level. If you have been following the drama in the state of Alaska, where the governor had planned to cut up to 40% of higher education's budget, you know this is not a drill. Higher education leaders and the governor have subsequently worked out a deal for a smaller cut, but universities there will still be forced to make difficult decisions. While things may not be as dramatic in other areas around the country, institutions are going to continue to look for ways to save money and do more with less. The same will hold true for fraternity/sorority membership, which may take a hit from this decline.

Our board makes strategic decisions to ensure AFA is headed in the right direction. The staff takes that direction and executes those directives to drive success. Establishing strategic priorities ensures we focus on what is truly important in order to advance fraternity and sorority advising. Revamping the core competencies and using the results of the self-assessments ensures we are providing educational opportunities supporting the goal of advancing our profession. Tools such as the institutional survey help members advocate for themselves using real data from peer and aspirational institutions. The board continues to discuss and make decisions around what we need to do to address any current needs, while having the foresight to see trends for the future and use those to our advantage or try and mitigate any negative impact. We also participate in discussions, webinars, and other trainings to ensure we are well versed in board governance and we are establishing best practices in making decisions.

We recognize AFA is an association with many younger professionals, and individuals may not stay in the field for an extended period. To develop a pipeline of future board leaders, we are unveiling an educational series this fall on effective board governance. We know we are loaded with talent in our ranks, but we need to develop this talent by providing the tools to be successful. We hope many of you will consider taking advantage of this program and commit to serving the association in a leadership role. Our continued success is only as strong as our leadership, and we need good people to help navigate us through potentially rough times ahead.

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