

## Transparency and the Potential Cost of Clarity

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For decades, fraternities and sororities have been on the defensive in public relation spheres. Following Animal House, organizations worked to distinguish themselves from their Hollywood projected peers: the ravenous, intoxicated buffoons concerned only with having a grand old time. Chapters studied and boasted about their prominent GPAs. Groups collaborated with local and national non-profits to serve their communities. Institutions partnered with Greek-letter organizations to raise funds for causes that matter. We retained and graduated members, we increased membership, and we supported post-graduation well-being (Gallup, 2014). What the self-promotional PR won't tell you is we also sent numerous people to the hospital. That the price of membership is prohibitive at best and debt-inducing at worst. That undergraduates, graduates, and alumni shamed, blamed, and defamed members out of our organizations for failure to adhere to socially accepted norms of behavior. That, in some places, our organizations and communities are both feared and revered. It's no wonder the former half of the story is the one we choose to tell.

Mass media shares the latter half of the story on a regular basis, depicting campuses and national organizations in crisis. I wonder, however, what would happen if chapters, organizations, and communities were transparent about the 'darkside' of membership from the very beginning? If, in addition to the positive attributes associated with joining, we as professionals encouraged one another and the students we serve to be open to talking taboo. I understand, on a basic level, the liability admitting and owning some of the previous statements could incur in a court of law. However, I invite you to suspend your disbelief for a moment, and think what a public admission of the entire experience – the positive and the negative – could mean for the future of fraternity and sorority.

Some individuals may initially wonder how membership, recruitment, and intake would be affected if professionals and students started telling the entire fraternal story. They may worry incredible students would not seek membership or actively campaign against it if they knew as potential members and aspirants what senior and graduate members know now. Those are valid concerns from a membership-driven perspective. But, it could also motivate individuals who care to create a new narrative. By shifting the locus of control from external media to that of the organization and community, members would likely feel emboldened to address drinking, hazing, and other risky behaviors (Haynes, & Ayliffe, 1991). Knowing they must own the sum of their organizations – not just the parts that make them proud to don their letters – could discourage individuals from participating in pro-social unethical behaviors in the first place (Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010; Bersoff, 2016). Those groups and communities that are undeterred by different, more public forms of self-accountability would likely either wither away or continue along the path carved by decades of actions under the guise of 'tradition,' until removed by peers, administrators, headquarters, or some combination thereof. The entities that do not rise to meet our expectations – something that would be admitted in this new model – would be considered defunct by those who do.

Finances are another concern in some communities and organizations. Those seeking membership are often assured finance officers will “work with them,” or “there are some one-time fees” associated with joining. There may be mention of lifetime financial commitments beyond undergraduate membership, but only if the interested individual broaches the subject. Instead, if students, alumni, and professionals openly shared the financial expectations, prospective joiners could make informed decisions about membership. Some would opt not to join, some would delay going through a recruitment/intake process to ensure they can meet their obligations, and others would ask better questions about incorporating dues and fees into their collegiate experience. Moreover, organizations on the local and national level would be challenged to be and do better by those who know what their membership is worth in terms of dollars and cents. If individuals stopped joining, groups and communities could reevaluate what is essential to their membership experience and clarify the purpose of fraternities and sororities on a modern campus.

It's true not every organization haves, that many chapters assist with individual finances, and some members choose not to drink at all while in college. However, it's important to acknowledge our shared fraternal history and the ways unhealthy, unethical, and unappealing portions of it still manifest today. Can we make a commitment to those outside the safety of student affairs to seek out and admit the worst parts of our organizations and communities, with the intent to move beyond what is currently in place? And then actually devote concentrated time and effort towards identifying others to assist us in moving beyond what is to what could be? At a time in our nation's history where dualism and false dichotomies reign the day, I ask my fellow fraternity/sorority professionals, can we be one of the first to move away from either/or and towards a both/and method of promotion? It is not a question of whether these things happen in our organizations. It is a question of whether we have the courage to juxtapose our successes and shortcomings to the wider world as a means of change, accountability, and growth.

## References

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