

Focus on the Formative, not Transformative

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It's a question we get all the time: "Why did you get into this field?" How many times have you said or heard the response: "Well, I had such a wonderful experience when I was a student, so I wanted to create this experience for someone else." This kind of response has been so normalized because their life-changing or transformative experience often spurs individuals to enter the field and become a fraternity/sorority advisor. But, when our goal is creating these transformational experiences for our students, are we missing the real objective of fraternity/sorority life?

When we talk about "challenging conventional wisdom" in the field, it's time we talk about how we're approaching our work and what philosophies are guiding our work. It's not a mystery that many of us are here *because* of that transformational experience, and that is *okay*. This isn't meant to discount that experience, but using our experience as a blueprint for how we approach fraternity/sorority membership is not only not our job, it can be detrimental to our professional roles and our students. It is not our role to create "transformational" (life-changing, high-impact, "feel good") experiences for students. If this is an outcome of the work we do, *great*. But this shouldn't be an intended outcome guiding the work we do, and here's why:

1. Ascribing to this philosophy implicitly creates unequitable environments, resources, and support for certain students over others.

Think about it — we lend so much time, effort, donations, late night texts/emails, etc. to our "highest performing" students and organizations. We justify it by saying "but they're doing fraternity/sorority right!" — yet chances are, this is an infinitesimal percentage of the students we serve. If fraternity/sorority is meant to be developmental, we need to seek for it to be developmental for all.

We need to think critically about our biases about which experiences are the most transformative and investigate how these ideas might influence how we advise our students and organizations. Which experiences do we define as "transformational" — attendance at conferences, participation in a Council, membership in a "top" organization — and how does that affect how we advise students or push them in certain directions?

2. Our longevity in this field should not be determined by our student’s “transformational experiences.”

It’s no mystery that the profession of fraternity/sorority advising has a high turnover rate. There have been many variables studied, and an additional area of further research should be how we’re philosophically approaching this work. If our professional approach is to create the prototypical “fraternity/sorority rockstar,” where do we go if this isn’t met? How are we setting up our graduate students and new professionals as they enter a field if these are their expectations and goals? They’re in for a rude awakening when they realize doing this work is a lot more than just creating rockstars.

Some students leave their fraternity/sorority experience having “enjoyed their time” but not defining it as life-changing. Do we feel we have failed if our systems produce this experience?

3. Creating transformational experiences is not actually a professional competency or an institutional objective.

AFA has recently come out with new Core Competencies, and it’s time we genuinely start ascribing by those to guide our work. The “Student Learning” competency is about contributing to the learning and development of students through membership; what about the vast majority of students who are not visiting our office every day? Likewise, it’s time we start aligning our philosophies and professional approaches with those of our institution and/or departments/divisions. If you do not know your division’s/institutional goals and where FSL fits in and contributes to them, it’s time to ask that question and have that conversation. Ensuring a handful of students fall in love with their membership and fraternity/sorority life office will *not* be an intended institutional objective.

4. We allow our personal transformational experience to guide our work, which is problematic.

We need to be able to separate our undergraduate experiences from our professional life. It’s meaningful we had such wonderful experiences, but to expect a similar experience for students can be problematic. Our personal advocacy for fraternity/sorority cannot be dependent on how “transformative” our personal experience was, or still is. Our professional philosophy must be driven by something other than how meaningful our personal experience was.

In addition, this way of thinking implies our unaffiliated colleagues, those who didn’t have a transformational experience, and/or those from local chapters are somehow “less” than —

because they just don't "get it." Professionals unaffiliated with a nationally recognized organization have been consistently marginalized, whether through conference experiences, how they are treated by colleagues, resources afforded to them, etc. The idea they just don't "get it" is essentially code for "they didn't have the transformational experience I did, therefore they are less valued professionals." It's important to understand a professional's undergraduate experience(s) shouldn't have an impact on their professional reputation or ability to successfully do their jobs.

Creating and supporting systems where students have life-changing, transformational experiences is certainly not a negative outcome, but it shouldn't be a prioritized intended outcome. We should be careful when we assert certain students' experiences are "more valid" than others, because the validity of these experiences is different for everyone. Expecting a certain experience for students is not only disadvantageous, it might be detrimental to the greater communities we serve. Aligning our professional philosophy with the AFA Core Competencies, our institutional/organizational objectives, and supporting environments that are developmental for all, should be where we focus our efforts.

Alex Dudek has served as Assistant Director for Fraternity and Sorority Life at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte since 2016. In his role, he is responsible for the advisement of the Panhellenic Association and Independent Greek Council. Alex is also responsible for the development and implementation of all educational programs, leadership development training, and harm reduction initiatives for the fraternity/sorority community. He graduated with his B.A. in Political Science at Bowling Green State University in 2014, and his M. Ed. in Higher Education Administration - College Student Affairs Leadership from Grand Valley State University in 2016. Passionate about student development and risk reduction, Alex volunteers for a number of national organizations, professional associations, campus/community partners, and his own fraternity, Pi Kappa Phi.

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company, tasting local craft beers at the many Asheville breweries, or cozied up with a good book.