

## Do we really need to be #AFAFamous?

Kristen Kardas | Ohio University

Open up any form of social media and it's there: the posts on traveling for facilitation and keynote speaking, photos of small groups and connections with students throughout the country, nametag ribbons, buttons, and program guides. But what does it really mean to us as professionals to volunteer for free for associations, campuses, and organizations? Is all of this really helping to move the needle and change behaviors? Or, are we just trying to make ourselves feel a sense of belonging and importance in the field?

The industry needs to work on re-defining what success means in this profession. Looking critically at the industry, it may appear that success has started to be defined by the programs you are invited to facilitate, the number of commitments you have, and the ability to have conversations during the Annual Meeting about who had the worst year of chapter closures or risky student behaviors. As someone who used to define success by being the person constantly posting facilitation photos on social media, I began to question if all these things really made me "successful," or were true professional development. Instead of improving my ability to do my professional role, they likely just made me "AFA Famous." I had let the expectations of others define what it meant to be successful, instead of setting my own goals to define success.

Last summer, after having the opportunity to attend The Gathering, a program by the Association of Fraternal Leadership & Values (AFLV), I was asked something that has resonated with me ever since, "Do you really need to be "AFA Famous?" It hit me in that moment that all the side hustles, volunteer work, and constant travel may appear great from a professional development standpoint. However, these were taking a toll on me from nearly every aspect of wellness. What started off as a desire for genuine growth as a new professional became something more: this desire to be a part of the "in crowd," to be known, and to feel like I knew what was going on in the field.

Instead, I saw signs of my physical, mental, and emotional wellness being unfilled and found myself questioning if any of these systems I had set up for myself were necessary or meaningful. This made me wonder if the side hustles were distractions from the true issues on my campus that need to be confronted. I considered if these outside opportunities were simply diversions from the students on my campus who I leave behind during the facilitations. These students, I have determined, are the ones in need of support, guidance, and connections to other campus resources. On further reflection, I confronted the idea that my identity was wrapped up in my job and these facilitation opportunities. I realized I wasn't fulfilled and still

struggling to fight the feeling that no matter what I did, I would still be an imposter in many spaces.

When the field socializes graduate students and new professionals to believe that they have to do all of these things, the way we define success as a profession is quickly blurred. Success should not be classified as ribbons on your nametag. It needs to be possible to seek out opportunities and be a competent professional without having to go in debt from over-volunteering. Success can be something more than constantly traveling out of pocket for conferences, facilitation experiences, and volunteer roles with associations.

The conventional wisdom in this field has been that we are the most under-funded and understaffed areas, and we have determined that a solution is to volunteer (or ask for volunteers) to supplement these areas with facilitation, judging, and presenting. The output of this has been that in order to be successful in the field, you need to be “AFA Famous” and do “all of the things” so you can make your “facili-friends” to hug at conferences. We’ve become stuck in the thought process that these side hustles are the only way to develop or gain competency as a professional. Instead, what if being “AFA Famous” meant utilizing our limited funding to attend a different industry’s professional conference or seeking involvement in our local campus and community agencies? We need to shift the idea from “famous” in the field being a recipient of a plaque at a ceremony, to the people buckling down to do the work, creating key moments that move the needle.

Being “AFA Famous” is okay, but improving the lives of our students and the function of their organizations is better. We need to switch our thinking away from seeking facilitation and volunteer opportunities as the only means for professional development. There are a multitude of other areas (some outside of higher education) that are uniquely positioned to do some of this work, and we can grow more as a profession through the development of those partnerships and opportunities. We can redefine our successes and goals in a meaningful and more impactful way, but we also need to be willing to look more critically at those definitions. As an industry, we have created the structures that have allowed us to become the problem – I’m ready to start dismantling them. Will you join me?

---

*Kristen is from Avon, CT and currently serves as the Assistant Director for Sorority & Fraternity Life at Ohio University and also volunteers with her sorority, Delta Delta Delta, as a regional Recruitment Specialist. She received her Bachelor’s degree in Communications from Adelphi*

*University, and her Master's degree in Higher Education Administration from the University of Massachusetts Amherst where she served as the Interfraternity Council advisor.*