Where Were You When It Happened?

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The Great Recession of the 20s. I remember when I heard the reports from different outlets. The boom was over. We had seen the writing on the wall for a couple of years, but we didn’t take action because we felt comfortable. For over a decade profits soared, records were broken, and we slapped each other on our backs for a job well done. And now it was gone. Gone faster than an ice cube in the desert. Gone quieter than the mouse on the night before Christmas. Gone like a flash of lightning. I mean you get it … it was gone.

And now here we are, with our future’s best and brightest students nearly wiped out. But how did it happen?

Fighting among the governing bodies tore brothers, sisters, and siblings apart. Some staying true to tradition, others supporting new identities. Quarrels between those on the front lines and those who haven’t seen battle in years continued the chasm of support for those that needed it most: our members. There were so many fires to put out that it became the norm to see yet another wildfire while saying to each other “we knew it was coming,” or “if we only had more help.” Even touting our amazing numbers and how much we served and raised couldn’t help us achieve what we wanted most: to be relevant.

But just like “who shot JR?” was a dream, we can wake ourselves up from this too.

With national enrollment numbers on the decline, we’re having to ask ourselves more questions about higher education and our role supporting it as fraternities and sororities; however, two questions continue to ring true: Is it (college) worth the cost? Are we relevant?

I like questions. Actually, that’s a lie. I’m not a huge fan of questions because sometimes I get answers I don’t like, or I have to do some hard reflection and face the facts. Two of my favorite people to talk with are James Robilotta and Mark Gehrke. Why? Because holy crap they ask well-articulated and hard to answer questions. You see, there are a plethora of other questions we should be asking ourselves, hard questions, questions that might not have answers right away. But those are the ones we need most. Questions like:

- Why isn’t there a national rubric to identify thriving fraternal communities? Or better yet, to identify those that need life support? Almost every campus has their own scoring rubric to identify award-winning chapters and some regional conferences do a good job recognizing council or community successes; however, I’m talking about a legit
inter/national/regional rubric that could tell us as a profession who is actually doing great work.

- **Where’s the data to support our claims?** While we’ve come a long way in the last few years, we need to continue to invest in research, but not to show only how great we are. We need to show both sides of the coin, owning the good and the bad. For a campus-based example, of course our collective fraternity/sorority GPA will be above the all-student average, especially when we have GPA standards in order to join. What if you averaged just the students with at/above the required GPA to join and compared that to the member GPAs? I’d bet cash money a majority of our communities would be below the all-student GPA and we could no longer tout how great our GPAs are. Or what if the annual reports also included the number of incident reports and judicial cases? Again, show the whole picture and own it.

- **Why don’t undergraduates have more say?** Oh, sure we give undergraduate members a vote every year or two about some sort of inter/national/regional rule or policy change, but we aren’t allowing them to govern themselves anymore. We “empower” alumni boards and regional officers to force undergraduates to vote a certain way. Let’s keep in mind that all of our organizations were founded by undergraduate students. Maybe we can get out of their way and let them show us their actual potential, rather than making them ask permission to raise their hand.

- **Can we do our jobs with less ego?** I say this as someone who suffers from high ego and low self-esteem, but there have been times I let my ego control my actions and words. I do feel our general profession and association is in it for the right reasons; however, when I hear “us versus them” as it relates to campus versus headquarters, I have to roll my eyes a little. I’d like to think we’re all in this fraternal movement for the same reason in the end — to make fraternity/sorority an impactful and safe experience for our members (both students and alumni). So, can we drop the peacocking and showboating and do this together?

- **What if we supported more “what ifs”?** Is there a way to support dreaming of new solutions on the campus or headquarters level? Is there a way to do our responsibilities while supporting our possibilities? What if we stopped doing tradition for tradition’s sake? After all, most of our traditions are really just peer pressure from people that have been dead for a while.

Once we start asking the harder questions, we can start to move forward and be better equipped and prepared for what’s in store. My hope is we continue to provide engaging and developmental opportunities for our members, while working side by side as we look for innovation and inspiration from outside of our silos. Tomorrow’s solutions will come from today’s questions, and they will be done by those who are brave enough to have a conversation that matters.
Dan Faill worked as a campus-based fraternity/sorority life advisor for over a decade before becoming a full time professional speaker in 2018. Dan was a founding father of his chapter of Theta Chi Fraternity at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and he traveled as a leadership and education consultant after receiving his BA degree. After traveling, he attended the University of the Pacific and received his MA degree. Then he worked in higher education at the University of the Pacific, Loyola Marymount University, Elon University, and UCLA serving as the fraternity/sorority advisor in most of those capacities. Dan is now a full time coach, consultant, and speaker with CAMPUSPEAK, engaging students and communities on topics such as the intersection of alcohol and consent, leadership, and masculinity in an effort to encourage them to be brave enough to have the conversations that matter. He served on the AFA Foundation board of directors for two years and currently serves as a Critical Conversations facilitator for Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women. He enjoys whatever free time he has spending it with his two children who also live in Los Angeles, mostly dreading serving as a referee for his daughter’s soccer team because he knows squat about sports.