Beyond the Numbers: Navigating the Enrollment Decline
Corry Smith ︱ Indiana State University

As enrollment declines become a hurdle for institutions, we are starting to see the effect it has on the fraternity/sorority landscape. It’s time for us to reimagine the recruitment of undergraduate students interested in pursuing membership within fraternal organizations.

During my time as an admissions counselor, enrollment and numbers were a part of my everyday life. I became obsessed with identifying the enrollment projection for the counties in which I recruited. I was so wrapped up in that process that I neglected focusing on the experience of the work I was doing. My former supervisor used to say, “It is not the service we can provide, but the experience we can create!” We have reached a pivotal moment in fraternity/sorority recruitment, and we must begin helping our students create, model, and showcase the experience unaffiliated undergraduate students want to pursue.

Through my experience, there have been three points that positively contributed to this change: empowering your students to share their experiences, encouraging your students to model membership expectations, and exciting your students to revive the magic of brotherhood and sisterhood.

First, as fraternity/sorority advisors, begin or continue to empower your students to share their experiences with those who may be interested in pursuing membership. Interested students want to hear from those who are currently affiliated. Membership goes beyond fit and is transforming into belonging. I believe students want to know our organizations are providing a sense of belonging for them to flourish personally, professionally, and most importantly, academically. Empower your students to begin sharing the genuine why behind them joining their organization and the transparency of why they chose to stay. Once we empower our students to share their stories, we will begin to see genuine connections form between current and interested students.

Another technique is to continue to encourage your students to model membership expectations. Encourage your students to dig deep and identify what constitutes a great member of their organizations at their specific campus and at the inter/national level. How do these align or maybe they don’t? There will be some challenges associated with this technique as some undesirable qualities and behaviors might be deemed as “great” according to the students’ standards. Therefore, encourage your students to connect the identified expectations to the standards set forth by the inter/national organization. Have them reflect and relate back to their organization’s values to come up with ideas for this.
The final technique would be to generate excitement in your students to revive the magic of brotherhood, sisterhood, and siblinghood. Casually ask your students “What was it about the organization that motivated you to pursue membership? Who is someone in the chapter that you look up to?” Asking questions like these will serve as a reminder to students as to why they chose to affiliate with the organization. When we revive the magic, retention is also impacted. Interested students want to know what is so great about the organization that people felt supported and connected well enough to stay involved. Students cannot appropriately answer those questions if they have not been asked. Begin to ask your students thought-provoking questions like “How have you transformed since you joined your organization?” The more students are provided the opportunity to reflect, the more genuine their answer becomes. This is simply because they have had the opportunity to think introspectively.

Finally, if your institution is experiencing an enrollment decline, be transparent and inform your students, even if you think they already are aware. You want to continue to build on the trust you worked so hard to create with the organizations represented on your campus. Remind your students that while the enrollment decline may seem threatening to their organizations, there is still room for opportunities to grow. Encourage your students to adapt. Adaptability is a skill that is not just applicable to an individual but can be represented in a group. Have the conversation with those chapters who may focus more on the numbers and challenge them to begin recruiting quality potential new members and to focus less on the quantity.

This past summer, I decided to focus in on the enrollment decline and searched for the opportunity to advance the Indiana State FSL community in this situation. I tapped into my admissions background and began having conversations with council officers, chapter advisors, and stakeholders. I asked thought-provoking questions, engaged in numerous one on one conversations, but most importantly, I empowered the students to tell their stories of brotherhood, sisterhood, belonging, and personal development. Deploying these strategies allowed for a mindset shift to occur and the core values of the organizations to emerge through the members and their stories.

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Corry Smith is a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. and earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Indiana State University. During his tenure at Indiana State, Corry has served in numerous professional roles. He currently serves as the associate director of fraternity and sorority life and as a faculty member in the Department of Communications.