From Butting Heads to Building Partnerships

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Do you ever feel you and your alumni advisors have competing priorities? How can we move from competition to collaboration in order to best serve our students and the future of our chapters?

On a campus with 145 years of fraternity/sorority life, and with nearly 50 fraternal organizations having called Lehigh University home at one point or another, alumni engagement is a significant piece of the work we do. Whether partnering with alumni who have advised a chapter for a few days or a few decades, these partnerships require constant upkeep to ensure both sides are benefiting. It is important to first reflect on what type of relationship you currently have with your alumni advisors and the ideal relationship you wish to achieve. From there, the next step requires shared visioning to ensure both parties have a similar understanding of the direction a chapter should be going in.

In order to accomplish these steps, we approach our work from a philosophy of full transparency. There are a lot of stakeholders engaged with and invested in fraternal organizations. If these stakeholders do not know what the others are doing, we often find ourselves spinning our wheels in frustration as students receive competing messages. As campus-based professionals, bringing alumni advisors into the fold in understanding university operations and creating a true collaborative advisory approach is to the benefit of not only the stakeholders, but the students as well. We do this through a multi-pronged approach of strategic communications, shared advisory efforts, and programmatic opportunities.

Strategic Communication

Communication and information sharing is at the heart of our work with advisors. Communications can refer to a variety of platforms or initiatives. At our institution, we employ both direct and indirect communication strategies to reach our alumni and advisor audiences. Indirect strategies consist of our office blog and resources offered on our website. Our office blog is built upon our philosophy of full transparency. We use this platform to share student reflections, progress on investigations and cases from the Office of Student Conduct and Community Expectations, and community-wide updates. The advisor-specific page on our website is a fairly new strategy for us. On this page, we display follow-up resources from our Advisor Academy. Additionally, we provide a breakdown of which staff members advise specific councils and chapters. This allows potential alumni who we may not already be familiar with to reach out to the appropriate staff member based on their needs.

As for direct strategies, we focus our efforts around regular touch points throughout the year as well as messaging at critical moments. The regular touch points occur multiple times throughout a given year, whether over the phone or in person. Staff members from our office reach out to alumni advisors at the beginning of each year to reintroduce themselves as well as confirm all contact information is still accurate. Depending on the nature of the relationship, these can range from a simple email communication to a phone call, or even a lunch meeting depending on how local the advisor is. Our more critical touch-points result from organizational conduct, our chapter accreditation program, or the unfortunate closing of chapters. Throughout an organization's conduct process, we maintain constant communication with the chapter's alumni advisor each step of the way. Through this frequent communication, we feel that both our office and the chapter's advisor can work together in order to help the chapter successfully navigate their conduct process. Our mass communication with alumni and advisors for more critical moments are a result of a chapter closure or an unaccredited result from the chapter accreditation process. Regardless the reason, as a team, we respond to all alumni communications whether through email or over the phone.

Shared Advising Efforts

Both campus-based professionals and alumni advisors share a goal of guiding chapter leaders in best practices to develop better members. With this shared goal, our office has developed procedures that allow for our staff to work in tandem with alumni advisors on various organizational operations including new member education plan reviews and approvals; acknowledgement of use of funds from chapters' campus accounts; and serving as panelists through our chapter accreditation process. For new member education, we require each chapter to submit their plan well in advance so that it may be reviewed by the university, inter/national headquarters, and their alumni advisor(s). Our office requires approval from all stakeholders in order for a chapter to be able to move forward with extending invitations for membership and beginning new member education. From a financial standpoint, we seek acknowledgement from alumni advisors before pulling funds from their campus account, especially as the campus account is comprised of alumni donations. This also ensures both the university and alumni advisors understand where these funds are going. Finally, for our chapter accreditation process, we require an alumni representative to serve on each chapter's review panel. While they would not serve to judge their own organization, it still allows them the opportunity to understand and uphold university expectations for our fraternal organizations. Additionally, it increases transparency into how the accreditation process works so they can better serve their own chapter.

Programmatic Opportunities

In recent years, alumni relationships and communication have become a more prominent priority for our office. With the development of an associate director role, we were able to make these direct job responsibilities for a member of our team. Part of the work of our current associate director has been the development of an Advisor Academy. Prior to this Academy, our team reached out to chapter advisors and alumni boards to get feedback as to what they felt they needed from us in order to better advise students. As a result, we hosted a number of both large group and small group breakout sessions across a day-long program. Among these were round table discussions based on our three fraternity/sorority councils. During this time, leadership from each council reflected on what they would been working on, challenges they were facing, and how they thought alumni could better support students in our community. Based on the program assessment, this component highly resonated with our alumni as they were able to chat with students outside of their typical demographic. Lastly, as part of our Advisor Academy, we were able to host fireside chats in order for alumni to chat with the staff member who works most closely with their chapter. These were operated similar to the fireside chats hosted during the AFA Annual Meeting.

Another programming strategy we offer is a Panhellenic pre-recruitment meet and greet for the alumni advisors who are on the ground during the Panhellenic primary recruitment process. This gives the recruitment advisors and/or inter/national headquarters staff a chance to put names to faces and review the primary recruitment process, with an emphasis on the nuances of our university's community. These nuances include our specific RFM format, logistical aspects, and the mindset and culture surrounding recruitment in our Panhellenic community. We found this created a much more comfortable relationship with the advisors throughout the week and provided an opportunity to answer common questions up front.

Future Implications

While our team is happy with the current status of our alumni and advisor partnerships, we recognize there is still room for improvement. One direct communication strategy we are currently exploring is the possibility of a regular newsletter sent to alumni and advisors. This is because a majority of our assessment from our inaugural Advisor Academy recommended we research what this method could look like. While our alumni advisors are more in the loop as to what their chapter and the community is working on, our more distant alumni base is not as in the know. Some of the options we are still exploring for a newsletter consist of frequency, platform, and relevant content.

Remembering that campus-based professionals and alumni advisors are working towards the same goal of the prosperity and success of our fraternal organizations, we need to put in the work to create a shared vision and maintain a reciprocal relationship. At times, this is complicated by competing priorities, turnover on either side, and lack of available time. Treating advisor relations as a core function of our work allows us to prioritize building those partnerships. We recognize what has worked for our experience may not work for others and we are fortunate to have the resources available to develop and implement new initiatives. It is also important to remember that building alumni partnerships and initiatives is a cyclical process. Assess where your current relationships are at, seek advisor feedback to identify gaps, try out different strategies, and reassess to identify what made an impact.