

Improving Advising Support through Continuing Education

Pietro Sasso, Ph.D., Monmouth University

The support for college fraternal organizations traditionally is facilitated in the form of leadership training as well as advising. Advising is facilitated by alumni/alumnae advisors who are approved by the national organization or from an administrator who is traditionally located in a centralized "Greek Affairs" office with other related staff or within the student activities office. Within a chapter, alumni/alumnae advisors may be an individual advisor or consist of an advisory board. It is more commonplace for a sorority than a fraternity to have an alumnae advisory board; fraternities may simply have a singular advisor. NPHC and NAFLO chapters may have the local support of a graduate chapter consisting entirely of alumni/alumnae (Gregory, 2003). Formal training regarding how to advise fraternities and sororities does not exist. Therefore, it is the opinion of the author that many chapter members and student leaders are not the beneficiary of the advisors, but are the victim of their efforts. Simply put, there are a significant number of bad advisors.

On the campus side, the majority of fraternities and sororities at large universities are advised by graduate assistants who are overseen by a small, but often dedicated, staff of administrators. At smaller institutions there may be one individual responsible for advising. The age range of these individuals is traditionally under 30; many are only a few years removed from graduate school and traditionally serve in the role less than four years (Gregory, 2003). In other circumstances the advisor may be a graduate assistant, often the same age or close to the age of traditional undergraduate students.

Within the traditional national organizations or the chapter, support structures vary for advising. Sororities traditionally have an advisory board and each has a delineation of responsibility that represents a specific functional area of the chapter such as leadership or recruitment. There appears to be greater age range and more experience within sororities. These advisory boards are also supported by traveling staff members from the inter/national headquarters who undergo extensive training. Within fraternities, support for chapters varies. Traditional fraternities have traveling staff members like sororities and traditionally have an alumni advisor. The alumni advisor appointment structure varies by organizations, but is predominantly a loosely coupled structure. Alumni advisory boards, like those found within sororities, are all too rare. In some instances it is not uncommon, in situations where the chapter has private housing, that the local incorporated housing corporation which oversees the residence assumes responsibilities for advising. NPHC and NAFLO groups are supported by a decentralized structure with volunteer-driven staff members who irregularly visit chapters. Their greatest support comes from their alumni/alumnae advisor or the local graduate chapter.

Advising fraternities and sororities is most often based on little or no professional preparation. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has outlined specific criteria for advising college fraternal organizations (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2009). However, it does not outline the required educational requirements or competencies. The Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) has outlined several competencies (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2011). While these overarching standards from CAS and complementary AFA competencies for the profession of advising fraternities and sororities exist, they do not facilitate any programming to formally educate and certify advisors.

It is the opinion of the author that students receive a disservice when it is assumed an advisor is capable just because he/she has a master's degree related to higher education

administration or has graduated from college. This assumption underlies the expectation that Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning theory would come to fruition and leaves serendipity to chance. This notion holds the assumption that advisors will learn simply based on their experiences. Furthermore, based on the CAS standards for higher education administration graduate programs, advising is not among the required competencies that graduates must have. Therefore, graduate preparation will not prepare students to advise fraternities and sororities. Additionally, alumni/alumnae advisors receive little professional development or training. There is sometimes a guide or manual provided, and there may be an orientation with an inter/national staff member about expectations, but this does not support consistent quality advising. Ignorant chapter-based advisors are dangerous since they can reinforce negative traditions such as hazing and encourage further homogeneity of membership (Kimbrough, 2003; Nuwer, 1999). This phenomenon can become a significant liability and must be addressed.

Advising fraternities and sororities, in its current form, is extremely provincial and is literally "folksy." The majority of advisors draw from their undergraduate experience to inform their advising of chapters. Little evidence supports the notion that any student development or learning theory is intentionally applied in the advising of fraternity chapters (Sasso, 2008). Instead of advising, community standards have been developed in an attempt to legitimize interactions with students. This has led to greater bureaucracy and removed the focus on developmental outcomes of students. Programs with clear measureable outcomes should be focused and facilitated to support student learning and not used to establish more administrative protocol, procedure, and policy. They should not be utilized to replace interactions with students. What would better legitimize interactions with students is not needless bureaucratic community standards programs, but further education concerning how to advise fraternities and sororities.

There are bad advisors, not because they are inherently poor at facilitating their responsibilities, but because they have received no formal training. No forum for formal training currently exists that could support a structure to assist in creating fraternal advisor training or a certification process to mark successful completion. Therefore, a certification process should be established to train and educate fraternity and sorority advisors, on campus and within the chapter, to establish a consistent advising approach across all campuses. Too few advisors are knowledgeable of best practices in advising and of the vast diversity and complexity found within fraternities and sororities. Therefore, an advisor certification process should include content such as student development theory, learning theories, effective advising approaches, contemporary issues in higher education, history of fraternal organizations, and issues specific to fraternities and sororities such as alcohol, hazing, and academic achievement.

An advisor certification process would not serve as a panacea for the ills of advising fraternities and sororities, but it would help advisors navigate the complexity and ambiguity of their roles. Such a program would help to establish consistency and, if mandated for all advisors, would additionally further the fraternal movement and help to centralize the ideal that fraternal organizations are about the development of its members as students and eventually as lifelong members.

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