

## **What If We Are the Problem?**

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"We have met the enemy...and he is us." – Walt Kelly

It is a common for professionals in fraternity and sorority advising to lament the issues of alcohol abuse, sexual violence, hazing, and academic dishonesty. The proclaimed problem is students need to start behaving in a more responsible, "values-based" manner. If only students would "get it," fraternities and sororities would be the pinnacle of the co-curriculum. However, when professionals place the onus entirely on the undergraduate, they run the risk of creating an adversarial dynamic. It is "us" versus "them." Furthermore, this is exacerbated as professionals develop the perspective of "I am the one who is right, and you need to change." When one becomes entrenched in this kind of egocentric mindset, it becomes potentially earth shattering to consider the question, "what if I am the problem?"

This concept of "getting it" seems to be important in fraternity and sorority life. However, "it" is not always well defined. Many leadership programs are structured to help students "get it." Facilitators are demoralized or elated based on a participant "getting it." But, what does that mean? Who "gets it?" What are the qualifications for "getting it," and determining whether someone does or does not "get it?" For the purpose of this article "getting it" will be assumed to mean an individual understanding their organizational mission and values, and that they are engaged in a personal commitment to mobilize that purpose through their actions.

It can be problematic to place students in the box of always needing to be taught how to "get it" and professionals in a box of always teaching others how to "get it." Rather, the process of articulating, defining, and actualizing organizational values should be considered an ongoing and shared process for all members. Just because someone has a masters degree does not mean they "get it," and just because someone is nineteen does not mean they fail to do so.

Students are not void of responsibility in aligning their organizational culture with their espoused missions and values. However, a student's decision making and behaviors are influenced by their environmental context. Basic environmental theory supports the notion that much of students' development is impacted by the constructed environment in which they are placed (Pace & Stern, 1958). When considering the present day fraternity or sorority student, their environment was constructed long before they signed a bid. The complexities of organizational culture are extensive; however, there are key components where professionals in fraternity and sorority life may have a much greater impact than students in constructing culture. The symbols, systems, and structures which make up this constructed environment dominate both the daily and overarching responsibilities of our students.

Symbols are a powerful mechanism for communicating values and norms internally and externally on a college campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). New members are taught symbols as a part of their socialization into the chapter and are dependent on these symbols and artifacts to interpret what is meaningful or significant about the fraternity/sorority experience. The symbols of fraternity and sorority life extend beyond the formal stated symbols outlined in an organization's Ritual. One example is the chapter house which stands as one of the oldest and most recognizable symbols in higher education. When one sees an image of a brick chapter house with grand columns, they see not only a building but an idea. Chapter houses are used to communicate prestige, prominence, and tradition. These messages are not constructed by current undergraduates; they are communicated to current

undergraduates. It is important to understand the role professionals have in constructing the meaning of these symbols.

In addition to symbols, there are certain structures in place which help to maintain the way of doing things in an organization or system. The recruitment process can serve as an important symbol in fraternity and sorority life; it is also an important structure for constructing the fraternity and sorority experience. Ironically, while recruitment creates a structure for creating growth and continuation of chapters, it can also facilitate many of the hindrances to their organizations' missions. When chapters are rewarded for achieving certain quotas and fulfilling quantitative expectations, the time they devote to "values-based" recruitment becomes subservient to the time invested in meeting the expectations. If the structure of recruitment is constructed in such a way that organizations have only three to four weeks to amass the largest pledge class on campus amidst heavy competition, chapters may recruit new members without a firm grasp of the expectations and standards of lifelong membership. The structure of recruitment rounds and the emphasis on events dictates the depth of relationships which are developed through the process. Recruitment is one example of a structure which serves to maintain the fraternity and sorority experience while facilitating meaning making to members and new members.

Success for a fraternity or sorority chapter is most likely defined through certain recognition and evaluation systems. These include standards programs, accreditation processes, awards programs, and incentives. When organizations are evaluated based on their social standing on campus, they will invest the majority of their energy toward elevating that reputation. It is essential to note these award and evaluation systems likely have been put into place over time by professionals. Institutions and inter/national organizations construct the majority of the policies and accountability systems as well, impacting much of the daily operations of fraternity and sorority life. Even peer accountability systems operate with a framework as defined by the institution and/or organization.

Ultimately, institutions and organizations have dictated what defines success and failure for a chapter. This definition is created not through mission statements on a website, but rather through the systems which support or discourage certain behaviors. While students are discouraged and censured for their dualistic ways of thinking, professionals in turn often serve as the authority figures that define what "getting it" means. When an environment is constructed where success equates to awards and incentives, it reinforces the black-and-white dichotomy which prevents our students from exploring what Kohlberg (1973) referred to as their "principled conscience" (p. 632).

The sum of these systems and structures can function to create barriers which impede a student's ability to effectively mobilize their organizational mission and values. Thus, occasionally the student may be punished or derided by a fraternity or sorority professional for engaging in the exact behavior which is ultimately supported by the structures and systems of the organization or fraternity and sorority community. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of failure for the student.

Professionals in fraternity and sorority life do an outstanding job developing student leaders who will take a stand for their values; but who will confront those who create barriers to a values-based experience? What if the people the students must confront are the professionals? Fraternity and sorority professionals may protect these barriers unknowingly. They could be acting from a place of self-preservation and protecting their legacy. If one's career and income is predicated on the maintenance of an existing structure then they are unlikely to entertain practices which are outside of that structure. If someone has spent their entire career developing something, they are unlikely to entertain challenges to that

structure, especially when those challenges are coming from 18 to 22 year olds. The relevance of the challenge is likely to have little importance in this scenario.

The adversarial perspective would view the student as the “enemy” professionals face; however, perhaps it is more pertinent to take heed of Walt Kelly's quote. There are numerous references to the need for a “conversation” to take place within fraternity and sorority life. Perhaps it is time to include students as legitimate partners in the conversation. Just because someone is 21 years old does not mean they “don't get it.” With this recognition, it is imperative for professionals to question their own bias and their own perspective to ensure their actions are coming from a genuine place that is in fact creating an outcome which aligns with the best interest of students.

It is not enough to facilitate a values workshop or have a good conversation with a student over lunch. To maximize the fraternity and sorority experience, professionals must create structures, policies, incentives, and educational interventions which facilitate a culture whereby students are in a position to succeed as defined by their fraternity and sorority missions. It is incumbent upon professionals and volunteers to identify the areas where they are in fact creating barriers to a student experience rooted in the mission of their organization.

### References

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