

What If I Had Saved Them From Failing?

Scott Isenga, University of Central Arkansas

About one year ago, the men of the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) Interfraternity Council (IFC) unanimously voted to buy imprinted koozies for recruitment marketing purposes. The plan was simple: Potential new members would visit various IFC tables across campus, register for recruitment, and receive a koozie. To the men of IFC, it sounded like the easiest and most effective way to convince 500 men to register for recruitment. Even though I saw potential problems with this plan, I encouraged the men to do whatever they felt would work as long as they did not break any recruitment rules. With no objections, the men designed and ordered the koozies. Two weeks later, I had 500 brand new IFC koozies sitting in my office ready to be exchanged for recruitment registrations. The men were enthusiastic and set forth to work the tables they had reserved and potentially bring in the largest semester of men in UCA IFC history.

Flash forward one year, and 470 of those koozies remain in my office closet. I could have easily stopped the men before ordering the koozies and saved the council over 300 dollars. I also could have explained in detail how their plan would most likely leave me with a half-empty box of koozies in my closet and not many additional recruits, but that is not my style. Instead, I let them fail. I saw this situation as a great learning opportunity for the men because they would most likely arrive at one of the following scenarios: 1) Have an enormously successful recruitment due to the koozies; or 2) Spend 300 dollars on a doomed product without any negative consequences to their current recruitment efforts. There was little risk associate with a potential failure, so I let them make their own decision on the matter.

Even though the men had the best intentions with these koozies, the plan quickly fell apart. While the details of the failure are not essential to this piece, it is important to note once the failure of their plan was obvious, the men of IFC quickly forgot about koozies until somebody asked about the previous year's recruitment budget in our August 2013 retreat. During this retreat a fraternity president asked, "Where did all of our recruitment money go last year?" A delegate from another fraternity sarcastically responded, "Koozies." Everybody laughed, but the president remained serious and wanted an answer. I used this question to segue into a discussion about how a large portion of the budget was used on koozies, and the men of the council needed to be more effective at managing their funds. From this point, I was able to lead the group into a brainstorming session about what IFC should be doing with the money it collects and what role these funds should have, if any, in their council recruitment efforts.

The discussion the men had was long, necessary, and still ongoing. Even though there is no definitive answer at this point, the men are now taking a greater interest in their council and having difficult discussions about various aspects of the council. From that one recruitment discussion came other intelligent and thoughtful chats about dues, leadership opportunities, marketing, and academics. Even though the ideas varied in quality, the simple fact remained that great conversations did and continue to happen because of koozies.

With a new year ahead and the koozie fiasco in the past, the men of IFC are free to explore other avenues in their council recruitment efforts. Rather than being haunted by previous shortcomings, the men are equipped with the knowledge of a poorly executed recruitment plan. They also learned the important lesson—their advisor will not always save them. I told the men at the retreat I let them fail so that they would learn. After saying that, I watched light bulbs go off in many of the men's heads. Some of them even smiled and laughed about

how bad the idea seems in retrospect. I made it explicitly clear to the men they are learning to walk on their own and that means they will take some falls along the way. I will be there to help lift them back up, but they need to take greater responsibility for themselves, their chapters, and their governing council. This explanation was not what everyone wanted to hear, but it encouraged the men to take their decisions more seriously.

Watching a council grow up and then walk on their own is the dream of every advisor. It is often the crux of our profession. Fraternity/sorority professionals across the nation throw out the words "self-governance" like they are candy, but how many of us really understand what that means? Better yet, how many advisors out there are willing to sit back and let a group, or even an entire council, fail? Each of us wants the best for our councils, organizations, and members, but that does not mean we should interject every time there is a bad idea. Instead, some professionals need to remember to take a step back, challenge students to make their own decisions, and live with the results. Whether good or bad, students need to be able to take some risks, especially in the semi-safe environment of a college campus. Taking risks at this age allows students to hone their decision-making skills before stepping into real-world situations where their careers and/or reputations may be on the line.

As advisors, we need to remember our roles are not to tell groups and individuals what to do, but instead to guide people in the proper direction. Advising is not about correct answers, but instead proper guidance and support. Individuals and groups need to make their own decisions, whether good or bad, in order to reach a place of deeper learning. If we take decisions away from our students, then we risk robbing them of their crucial, developmental learning opportunities. This is especially true in fraternities and sororities, where leadership is the cornerstone of nearly every organization. Knowing this, professionals need to remember letting go and watching students fail is sometimes the best learning lesson available. This methodology is not always the most cost and/or time-effective, but it definitely provides unique learning opportunities that cannot be replicated anywhere else.

The next time you are meeting with a student or a group and they have ideas you know may not be the best, consider the following questions:

1. Will the decision bring down an organization and/or council?
2. Do you and/or the organization have the time and/or resources for a potential failure?
3. Regardless of success or failure, will students learn from their decisions?
4. Can you utilize a potential failure as a future learning experience?

Use those four points to make a quick assessment about whether letting a group fail will be beneficial or harmful. If potential failure is not going to be an issue, then be sure to pay special attention to the fourth point. Utilizing that last question, any advisor can turn a failure, whether intentional or not, into a meaningful learning experience. With that type of learning experience, students can gain valuable knowledge and insight for future situations, programs, and life. Allowing for a failure may seem like an uncomfortable idea, but advisors need to be willing to take that risk for the continued growth of students. Therefore, take a leap of faith, and let the students fail because you may end up with fantastic results and a more mature organization and/or council. This system has worked for me, especially in situations involving koozies, and hopefully it will work just as well for you and the organizations you advise.

Oh yeah, does anybody need a koozie for football season?

