

What if Assessment Advanced Our Practice?

Joseph D. Levy, Western International University

How can you ensure objectivity in reviewing chapter performance, including consideration for awards? How could chapter leaders make decisions to improve their chapters based on reality instead of perception? What are you using to tell the story of the fraternal experience at your institution?

It would be impossible to answer those questions on behalf of everyone reading, but it is safe to say a solution to all of the above (and more) can include assessment. Palomba and Banta (1999) emphasize the role of assessment is not only to document and improve quality within an institution, but also to communicate strengths of institutional programs and learning opportunities. While data-minded professionals know this, fraternity/sorority advisors are likely not taking full advantage of what assessment could do for them.

Being multi-faceted entities with emphasis on leadership development, education, philanthropy, and programming, fraternities and sororities have a wealth of assessment opportunities. While this certainly means collecting data, it also connects to a number of necessary operational processes. Consider the following staff processes:

- Evaluating chapter performance
- Ensuring effectiveness of member education
- Measuring chapter contributions towards pillars or values
- Working to improve fraternity/sorority culture as it is and as it is perceived

All of the above elements can be accomplished more effectively with intentional assessment processes. Assessment can be particularly interesting when it allows us to accomplish required tasks and produce necessary operational data, as well as provide targeted feedback to chapters or individual members. The following example answers our first posed question about objectivity in chapter performance or award review. A rubric could be created with dimensions or components necessary to judge the performance or award, differentiated across scale points with descriptions. See the example rubric dimensions and descriptions below:

	1 –Beginner	2 –Developing	3 –Competent	4 –Advanced	5 – Expert
Risk Management	Student is unaware of the risk management strategies.	Student is aware of risk management strategies but does not follow them.	Student implements risk management strategies inconsistently.	Student consistently implements risk management strategies.	Student consistently implements risk management strategies and can teach others to do so.
Organized approach	Student lacks program preparation in the areas of marketing, budget, and planning important elements of the event.	Student is successful in one of the three areas of marketing, budget, and planning important elements of the event.	Student is successful in two of the three areas of marketing, budget, and planning important elements of the event.	Student is successful in all three areas of marketing, budget, and planning important elements of the event.	Student is successful in all three areas of marketing, budget, and planning important elements of the event and can teach others.
Effective evaluation	Event is not evaluated.	Informal evaluation was attempted but not successful.	Informal evaluation was successfully carried out with some valued information collected.	Formal evaluation or assessment was attempted with some planning or implementation issues.	Evaluation or assessment was well planned and implemented correctly.

The descriptions for each scale point take the subjectivity out of scoring and allow for consistency and fairness across judges. In addition to accomplishing the task of scoring the particular area, it provides direct feedback to the chapter, and shows them what is necessary to advance to the next level. Aggregated scores could easily be used to show where respective chapters stand within their inter/national organization or campus community. As rubrics provide rich quantitative and qualitative data for multiple operational and feedback purposes simultaneously, it is difficult to see why other, less multi-faceted methods might be employed.

Assessment should not just be the domain of paid staff, either. If students and volunteers are aware of assessment methods, they can work to ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place to collect data and use it to later make decisions based off numbers instead of opinion. In keeping with the event planning example, utilizing short, but focused, evaluation surveys for attendees and event planners could provide valuable information on topics such as: how to enhance a program, what could be replicated with other events, and even whether or not to retire the program and try something new. Surveys aside, having tracking mechanisms for event attendance, volunteer hours or actions, and other elements could also prove valuable for a chapter to review for executive position elections or candidate requirements. With so many ways a chapter could infuse or utilize existing data collection efforts, decision making becomes much easier. While members' memories or opinions may differ or change over time, data remains true.

Building off the concept of data informing practice, it is important to recognize data can tell the most powerful of stories. Think about it: number of events, amount of philanthropy donations, and GPA comparisons – just a few elements to make a chapter stand out or speak to accomplishments of the fraternity/sorority community – are all told through

quantitative data. Additionally, sometimes the most influential and honest testimonials come about when answering questions. Surveys, reflections, focus groups, interviews – all of these assessment methods can allow for qualitative data to be captured and showcased for respective audiences. Why not include such information on websites and brochures? Sharing data can not only help paint a picture of a fraternity or sorority culture, it can also provide an opportunity to express why changes are being made for intentional reasons.

There are so many ways with which assessment intersects with existing priorities and practices. Unfortunately, many people may not see those connections. Misunderstandings and fears around assessment also exist, perpetuating myths that only statisticians can conduct assessment and any data collection project must be the equivalent of an in-depth research project. Assessment can be included in everyday activities and operations for staff. If approached correctly, it can accomplish multiple purposes while also providing rich data to report. Students can also experience a number of assessment benefits. With some training and familiarity, assessment efforts could be integrated in a number of fraternity/sorority life efforts from staff and students alike. Once in place, data would provide invaluable information with which to use and improve.

What if staff were more comfortable with assessment?

What if students knew about assessment?

What if data told a story?

What if?

Reference

Palomba, C. A., & Banta, T. W. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.