

What if Alumni/ae Volunteers were the Focus of our Work?

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What if . . . we were to think about our work differently?

What if . . . our advising emphasis is on the wrong population?

What if . . . our primary responsibility was to work with volunteers rather than student officers?

What if . . . the primary focus of campus-based and headquarters-based professionals was to identify, select, train, and support the volunteers who work with undergraduates?

What if . . . transformation of the fraternity and sorority experience was not solely in the hands of the undergraduate members, but an intentional and cooperative effort involving highly trained alumni/ae volunteers and student leaders?

Thinking about the work of professional fraternity and sorority advisors, there is a well-defined cycle of events and a limited amount of time to truly impact the experience of an undergraduate sorority woman or fraternity man. Many professionals focus their time and efforts providing training and development to new officers including Chapter Presidents, Member Educators, Risk Managers, Recruitment Chairs, and so forth. The opportunity for undergraduates to learn and grow through serving in these critical leadership roles is powerful, and when done well, is very rewarding for both the students and the professionals who are supporting them.

The current chapter development model for both campus-based and headquarters-based professionals is to offer annual training to undergraduate leaders with the intention to provide these leaders with the skills and abilities they will need to support the growth of undergraduate chapters. This training and development is implemented in order to impact both the individual member as well as enhance the overall health of the undergraduate chapter. However, many campuses and inter/national organizations are missing a critical piece: the training and development of alumni and alumnae volunteers.

The tenure of most undergraduate officers is 12 to 18 months at best. However, the tenure of a chapter advisor may range from three years to 20 years. If fraternity and sorority professionals were to use simple logic, then the human and financial resources of campuses and inter/national organizations may be better invested providing annual training and development for the volunteers who work with the undergraduate chapters rather than the undergraduates themselves.

Imagine what a development curriculum such as UIFI might provide if written specifically for chapter advisors. A group of 50 adult men and women, learning about the 21st century fraternity and sorority experience, and being provided the tools, information, and resources to be able to support the undergraduate chapter in its efforts to be successful in the current collegiate environment. One could imagine many of the same conversations would take place regarding foundational values, hazing, risk management, academic achievement, member recruitment and intake practices, etc. The difference would be in the impact of that experience for a volunteer who may work with a specific undergraduate chapter for several years versus an undergraduate leader who may only have one more year of time as an undergraduate member.

Many campus-based and headquarters-based professionals choose the profession of fraternity and sorority advising because of their desire to work with students and use student development theory to inform their work. For both groups of professionals, there would continue to be ample opportunity to engage in high-level student interactions. However, if a professional could shift their responsibilities to 50 percent recruiting, training and developing alumni/ae volunteers and 50 percent working with undergraduate students, how would this change our work?

A well trained and educated volunteer has the opportunity to impact the experience of the undergraduate chapter at a higher level than any professional staff member. These valued volunteers spend time with the undergraduates at their meetings, travel to conferences, advise the membership selection process, and are mentors and guides to many members. However, a number of our best alumni/ae volunteers get burned out and/or are selected to “move up” in the volunteer organizational structure of the inter/national fraternity or sorority. If both campuses and inter/national organizations were to shift their focus to the recruiting, training and support of the alumni/ae volunteers, how might that impact the experience of the volunteers, their desire and ability to continue working with undergraduate chapters, and improve the overall health of the undergraduate experience?

Shifting the primary focus of our work away from undergraduates and toward alumni and alumnae volunteers could be seen as radical; however, it may be time for some radical thinking. Undergraduate fraternity and sorority members need and want mentors and guidance, and it may be the responsibility of fraternity and sorority professionals to change their focus away from the student experience and toward finding alumni/ae men and women who can focus on the undergraduate experience.

What if . . . the alumni/ae volunteers were given the tools to ensure the existence of fraternities and sororities into the 22nd century?