

Navigating the Intersection of Fear and Identity: A Paraprofessional's Account of Overcoming Differing Identities while Advising Fraternities and Sororities

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As student affairs professionals (or those of us aspiring to be), we understand our identity plays a large role in the way we show up in different spaces. I came to this realization within the last few months, and I give much of the credit for this to my graduate program. Classes on history, theory, and assessment have shaped my foundational knowledge of working in higher education, and they have provided me with the vernacular and theory to adequately verbalize and understand my experiences. After learning of Critical Race Theory and Astin's Input-Environment-Output model, I started to truly accept my intersecting identities. Though I am happy – and wildly proud – that I am finally figuring out who I am, I am now in the position where I need to accept what that means for me in how I interact with others.

With my impending graduation next year, I am beginning to shift my mindset from that of a student to that of a fraternity/sorority advisor. Because of inevitable change, I'm developing an ever-present fear I may not be able to leverage my identities in a way which supports fraternity and sorority members who identify differently. Now, through self-reflection, I see my fear had manifested itself throughout my entire experience with fraternities and sororities, both as an affiliated and unaffiliated member.

When I first decided to go through Panhellenic sorority recruitment, I feared I would not receive a bid because I am Black. When I decided to hold leadership positions within my fraternity/sorority community, I feared I would be viewed a joke simply because of how society looks at Black women. Now, as I work toward becoming a full-time professional in the field, I fear the intersection of my gender, racial, ethnic, and organizational identities will, in some way, inhibit my ability to advocate on behalf of the fraternal organizations I will advise. This fear is especially salient for the organizations whose members and I do not share gender, racial, or ethnic identities.

As a Black woman who also identifies as an Afro-Latina, I consistently wonder, "How do I gain respect as an advisor from an Interfraternity Council organization that is historically White?" Furthermore, how can I, as a member of a historically White women's fraternity, support members of a culturally-based fraternity or sorority? To address these insecurities, I spend a lot of time reflecting on my experiences. I have determined that being an excellent advisor relies on being an excellent mentor and inquisitor, despite differing identities.

While I do not intend to pursue mentorship with students on a personal level, I do think it is important to embody the qualities of a good friend. For example, I have found honesty and reliability have gone a long way during my interactions with students. Even more important, I think, is perfecting the skill of "calling in" rather than "calling out." When confronted with difficult conversations, my approach to "calling in" is to first vocalize that I understand their point of view, and then validate their feelings without supporting a problematic ideology from

which their feelings might stem. From there, I'm able to enter a civil discussion where I can share an alternate viewpoint because we've already established that although we may not be on the same page, at the very least, we're reading the same book. In my experience, when students were "called in," they appreciated my honesty, and they were also more receptive to a different way of seeing things.

Student affairs professionals often boast about being lifelong learners; however, the occasional monotony can interfere and result in just going through the motions. To combat this slight sense of apathy, I ask my students questions allowing me to better understand their experiences through their lens. By doing this, I show students I care about what *they* care about as a person. For example, as a Panhellenic woman, I am continuously seeking information about culturally-based fraternal organizations, whether through literature, anecdotes from members, or observational research. By taking the time to continuously seek information about the procedures of culturally-based fraternities/sororities, I can show my students I am equally invested in their success as I am in the success of those with whom I share an organizational identity. Furthermore, by taking on the task of educating myself, I am able to ease the burden of students having to educate me.

All in all, I am learning through constant self-assessment, I may be able to develop into the type of advisor my students need. To my surprise, that hope alone helps bring me one step closer to overcoming my fear of not being able to relate; however, I recognize that does not come without a challenge. So, I challenge you to continue to attend events from organizations outside of your own council and to ask students what they need. I challenge you to be more aware of your majoritized gender, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, etc., if you have them. And finally, I challenge each of you to reflect on how your identities impact the organizations and individuals you work with each day. If you aren't already doing those things, I challenge you to ask yourself why.