

## Social Barriers to Challenging the Process

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I have always been especially strong in challenging the process, whether in my work or personal life. I rarely struggle to speak up with a question of “why,” or to challenge something I believe is unjust or inefficient.

However, a few months ago I found myself questioning my outspoken nature when I posted on an online message board. While I no longer work professionally in fraternity and sorority advising, I continue to serve as a volunteer and try to stay up to date on the happenings and discussions in the field. I occasionally chime in on a topic I can offer some insight on, but I rarely start a thread or conversation topic.

When I observed something on my campus that really made me think, I brought my thoughts to social media to see what others felt about my observation. I had hoped for an inspiring and challenging conversation.

While there were many thought provoking points, I was most struck by comments indicating the thread was a waste of time for a professional discussion board. I immediately questioned if I should delete the post or explain further and more pointedly why the discussion was relevant to our work. I knew my intention was to create a valuable conversation, but here I was being told my inquiry and opinion wasn't important by those I felt to be leaders in the fraternity and sorority field. It honestly hurt and made me consider leaving the group, and even the association.

I immediately thought about the younger members of the association – new professionals and graduate students – who read exchanges like this one. How do such responses and comments from seasoned professionals encourage these new members to join a much-needed dialogue, or ask questions *they* have? How do these responses create barriers to asking for help or expressing what could be invaluable opinions? Do these interactions make members believe they don't have any valuable opinions to offer our profession?

Even though I no longer work professionally in the field and do not have to worry about my employment or future job opportunities, I was left wondering if younger association members think about that in regard to whether or not they join these important discussions. Do they wonder if other professionals will judge them for starting group discussions on something they are observing or question their professional competency for asking what they might think to be a “stupid question”? Would this affect them seeking employment at one of their organizations?

Having worked in this field as a professional and volunteer for over 10 years, I urge my fellow seasoned advisors, volunteers, and staff members to consider how our comments impact the future leaders of our field.

There are some important questions we need to ask ourselves:

- Does labeling a question as worthy or not worthy create a fear in younger professionals that will keep them from speaking up or asking questions?
- Are we encouraging less conversation and support among our membership?
- Are we dominating discussions in a way that keeps newcomers from feeling welcome in the field?
- Are we creating a less inclusive online environment instead of one that should be open and supportive?
- Are we creating empowered professionals who are ready to challenge the process to move toward necessary change, or are we encouraging them to keep quiet and go with the flow?
- How does the fear of judgment and the feeling of being unwelcome contribute to the high turnover rate in our profession?
- Should association or umbrella group leadership censor or limit the discussions its members have in its publications, on social media, or at meetings?

We need to be aware of the messages we are sending to others in these discussion groups and intentionally make the decision to let others express their opinions without fear of judgment. Otherwise we will push professionals out of the field and stagnate needed change.