

Using Our Experiences to Move the Needle

Karlee Nuttelman, University of Nebraska—Lincoln

As professionals, we can do a better job of keeping our senior members involved so we don't create disengaged seniors who become disengaged alumni. This is only one part of the vicious cycle currently affecting fraternities and sororities. As headquarters-based professionals, could we create more relevant programming for seniors? Could we consider re-evaluating what mandatory attendance looks like for our senior members? As campus-based professionals, what programming are we providing? Are we capitalizing on opportunities to partner with other campus services and/or offices (i.e. career services) our students may already be utilizing and help seniors transition to post-collegiate life? As David Stollman (2015) addressed in a spin on his well-known keynote "Buy In or Get Out!" we are relevant to the younger members of our organizations, but then lose focus as they progress in membership. We don't adapt our programming and our organizations to meet the needs of our junior and senior members.

My story is not uncommon, and it can be used as an example to inform our practice as professionals. As a high school graduate, I was ready to participate in Panhellenic recruitment. My freshman roommate was from the town where I was attending college, so it was inevitable I was going to get all the dirty details about the chapters before recruitment. I was the typical potential new member who listened to the stereotypes and had a closed mindset. I was one of the women who, as a professional, I despise: the ones who think they know it all, who only want to join the "top tier" chapter(s). Unfortunately, I was released from the chapter I had my heart set on, but luckily, I ended up opening my mind and falling in love with a group of women who would later help me develop into the woman I am today.

Fast forward to the fall of my sophomore year, and I was a newly elected executive officer. In one of my first meetings, I participated in an executive hearing where I, and the rest of the executive board, had to recommend expulsion for four women from my new member class. It only got harder from there. I felt isolated because I believed in what my organization could do for the women of my chapter, if "sorority" was done right. I was determined to do the sorority experience justice. Again, my story is not remarkable by any means, but serves as a teachable moment for me now as a professional.

Graduation was always my light at the end of the tunnel. I had this notion that if I made it to graduation I would be able to "feel the sisterhood." All the hard work I put forth was to better the organization, and I just knew they would thank me later. Even though I had this hope that as graduation neared the issue would resolve itself, all my chapter focused on was bringing in that next member class. As a result, nothing was done for the seniors until three weeks before graduation. We had a few senior spotlights, which preceded our senior celebration week. The spotlight pieces only highlighted those seniors who were adored by the majority of the chapter, the informal leaders who typically perpetuated the alcohol culture and often caused more harm than good. This only left me feeling further isolated, right as I was about to graduate. This was supposed to be one of the times where I should have felt the most connected, reminiscing, and slightly heartbroken my collegiate career was coming to an end. As professionals, this is when we hope our members are feeling loved, appreciated, included, and like they matter to the university and their organization. In my case...well, you get the picture.

I made it to graduation and the beginning of my alumna life. Finally, I was going to begin to truly feel like I mattered. I moved back to my hometown where I was going to start graduate school. I joined my local alumnae chapter. I paid my alumnae dues. I volunteered to serve as an advisor for a local chapter. This is where I am now, and I still do not feel like I truly belong. Is there something I am doing wrong? Because my story isn't exactly unique, I do not think it is just me. I do not feel responsible for the disenchantment. I keep putting forth effort and keep getting the door slammed back in my face. Where are we, as professionals, going wrong? How can we help improve the member experience to create satisfied, engaged alumni? I think we need to reevaluate what expectations we are setting for our members.

I was always told, as we tell many of our members, fraternity/sorority is not just four years, but for life. I believed it. After graduation, I had these high expectations my sorority experience was going to continue, but in reality, I felt like it came to a screeching halt. I am thankful my spark for fraternity and sorority was and is still lit, but it's not because of my affiliation. My spark began with my mentor. She took the time to invest in me, hear me, and truly try to understand what I was experiencing. She knew I was having a tough experience within my chapter, but she fueled my fire to believe in the fraternal movement, not just my chapter. She helped give me what I was missing, what I was expecting. As my mentor, she is still investing in me. She knows how I have continued to struggle with my alumna experience. I know that if it were not for my mentor, I would have given into the common practice of being a disengaged alumna because in the fraternal world, we are perpetuating it. I believe mentors can help prevent disengaged seniors and alumni by serving them in the individualized manner they need, to believe in them while helping them to understand their new or future role.

While mentoring is relevant for both seniors and young alumni, it is only one form of engagement. Many, if not all, organizations have inter/national staff or volunteers dedicated to alumni engagement. Organizations may provide alumni with the resources to help them be successful, but we have to dig a little deeper. We cannot hand our members some information and hope they read it. We have to engage them and catch them before it is too late. We need to help them understand what the real expectations for alumni life are, but also help members to set their own expectations and goals to meet them. If we can redefine our expectations, or at least how they are expressed to our members, we will be taking the first steps to address the issue of member disengagement.

From my observation, it seems as if fraternity and sorority life is being driven in a direction, but not of our own accord. We have become reactionary. We need to take action in order to regain control of the steering wheel. In the area of member engagement, we can reevaluate and redesign our members' experiences. Turn programming on its head, and incorporate topics that are relevant to members today, while maintaining the pieces necessary for the chapter to remain operationally sound. By combining both, we are doing due diligence to the founders by keeping our organization moving forward, but also to our members by providing relevant programming for their development. I would have appreciated participating in a chapter program that discussed the expectations of my alumnae membership and helped me to determine how my expectations and the sorority's aligned.

I don't have all the answers of how to take the steering wheel back, but I do have a few ideas, a story to start the conversation, and the desire for change. As fraternity/sorority professionals, we need to prove to the world, and to our members, that we are relevant. We need to provide for our students before they become distant and we lose them forever. Based upon my experience, we need to provide members with more purpose and make them feel like they truly matter. We can survey our membership, but once we do, we need to truly capitalize on the information that we receive and put it into action. I know not all members will have the spark and desire to keep them going like I did, but I also know we have the power to inspire. Let's stop praying they stay because what we did was good enough. Instead, let's fan their flame. Let's begin by starting the conversation on how we can keep their spark alive before it's too late.

References

Stollman, D. (2015, February 17). Buy in (and don't) get out! [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.campuspeak.com/news/buy-in-and-dont-get-out>