Cooperation Wearing Greek Letters

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Interfraternalism is cooperation wearing Greek letters. Accordingly, the pursuit for greater interfraternalism is truly an exercise in identifying effective cooperation strategies. Much can be said about cooperation and collaboration – visible every day in group projects, committee meetings, and even queues at the grocery store. It seems simple and ideal. Why, then, is this topic continually vexing for fraternity and sorority communities?

Game theory provides an interesting perspective in the Prisoner's dilemma (PD) example. In a field studying instances of conflict and cooperation among rational decision makers, the PD is notable as an example of where it is in a rational decision-maker's best interest to not cooperate, or defect. In the PD, visually represented in Diagram 1, two crime suspects are captured, placed in separate holding cells and encouraged to rat out the other ('defect'). Each would receive leniency if they defect and the other stays silent (0) and if both stay

	Prisoner A: Cooperate	Prisoner A: Defect
Prisoner B: Cooperate	-1 -1	-3 0
Prisoner B: Defect	0 -3	-2 -2

Diagram 1: Prisoner's Dilemma Payoff Matrix

silent ('cooperate'), police can convict, but on a lesser charge (-1). If they rat on each other, both receive a penalty, but not the maximum (-2). So, betrayal offers the greatest potential reward (0 years in prison) for either player despite the fact cooperating and staying silent guarantees the best result for both (R.G.L., 2015).

Examples of this are aplenty in fraternity and sorority life – chapters who may, for example, withhold best practices utilized for philanthropy, recruitment or scholarship with the intent of wanting to be the best in these areas (i.e. raise the most money, have the largest new member class). This represents a defection with a greater individual reward despite the fact that sharing best practices, or cooperating, would likely lead to greater community outcomes (i.e. more money raised for charity, more members joining the community).

The PD assumes the interaction only happens one time, which is certainly a limitation. What about environments, such as fraternity and sorority communities and their myriad organizations and members, where interactions are infinite? This concept was explored in a 1981 study regarding the evolution of cooperation and conceptualized it in terms of three separate areas – robustness, stability, and initial viability (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981), all of which provide relevant thought experiments for increasing interfraternalism.

Robustness
Strategies promoting cooperation must be able to thrive in "variegated environments' such as fraternity/sorority communities, where myriad interests, policies, and motivations exist among chapters and their stakeholders. The most robust strategy in the study was 'tit for tat' –

cooperating on the first move and then doing whatever the other player did on the preceding move. Strategies promoting interfraternalism should thus be rooted in reciprocity: IFC members attend a multicultural fair hosted by MGC to learn more about their organizations and show support and MGC students attend an IFC-sponsored workshop on risk management later in the semester to learn more about the challenges facing fraternity presidents. The prevalence of this reinforces future cooperation. The fraternity and sorority professional can be a listener and aggregator of opinions and motivations with an eye toward actionable commonalities: organizing, for instance, a roundtable with chapter leaders from organizations with well-defined new member education process and those chapters whose programs have no structure to promote best-practice sharing. Chapters helping one another from places of strength, and receiving assistance from others directed at their weaknesses, reinforces cooperation.

Stability
How do these cooperative practices survive the challenges inevitably plaguing college campuses and threatening relationships within communities? Consistency and transparency can help. Sharing with council leaders, alumni and headquarters partners what the university is doing in times of crisis, for instance, and acknowledging failures openly can be transformative. Council meetings or regular gatherings of chapter leaders should involve conversations about what isn't going well with a goal of re-orientation to shared values. Crises can often be framed, carefully and strategically of course, in a way to galvanize a community into an 'us' against a 'them', which could be a student organization questioning the value of fraternity and sorority life or a policy change adversely impacting affiliated students.

Initial Viability
Finally, there are certainly challenges to incorporating new strategies into predominantly uncooperative communities. Buy-in is important and, ideally, the spirit of cooperation rises from a grassroots level. An astroturfing approach may be more appropriate, in which conversations with key chapter and community influencers create buy-in and provide the appearance of a bottom-up commitment to increasing interfraternalism. The undergirding focus must be to frame interactions in a manner that promotes interfraternalism. Greek communities are often very much like the PD because they focus on fixed interactions, such as an academic semester or the duration of an officer's term. Such fixed perspectives create ongoing challenges to cooperation.

Grade reports are an excellent example. A 'ranking' report frames academics as a competition between chapters and communities where each fraternity and sorority wants to beat one another to be the best, or highest ranked, on the report. So what if rankings went away? Chapters could still receive individual member grades and their aggregate chapter GPA. Campus and community averages could still be run to satisfy requirements from headquarters offices. The only information each chapter would not have is the aggregate academic performance of other chapters. Now the competitive frame shifts. Each chapter is competing not against one another, but against the community average (i.e. all-fraternity GPA); against unaffiliated peers (i.e. all-women's GPA); against their previous academic term's average. It's much easier for

Chapter A to cooperate with and support Chapter B if members don't constantly see Chapter B as "that damn chapter that beat us by two-thousandths of a grade point average for first place!"

Myriad action steps to foster cooperative environments exist aside from reconsidering the value of producing a grade rankings report. Keeping master calendars that publicize chapter and community events and sharing those broadly encourages attendance to show visible support, further validated if chapters or councils incentivize attendance (i.e. attend three events sponsored by a council other than your own and get entered into a raffle). Offices that produce curriculum, especially for emerging leaders, should purposefully incorporate cross-council relationships at a micro-level by creating cohorts and building in touchpoints throughout a student's four-year experience with those cohorts. Finally, to create viability, invest time wholeheartedly in the all-star students: the ones who understand and want to create community. Empower them to create a convincing appeal to their peers to create grassroots momentum towards a more cooperative fraternity and sorority community.

References

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