

Volunteering is the Best Professional Development

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I joined AFA as a graduate student in the summer of 2005. That is when I participated in my first webinar, "Everything You Need to Know To Be a Greek Advisor." While most of my friends were in two-year graduate programs, the one I was enrolled in at Boston University was only a one-year program. I asked one presenter, Amy Vojta, what I could do to make myself marketable in the field and learn through experience what I would be missing in the classroom. Her advice was to get as involved as possible and volunteer whenever possible. I took that advice to heart, and seven years later I am still an avid volunteer for the fraternal movement. I believe that those volunteer opportunities have helped to shape me into the professional that I am today.

A New Spin on Professional Development

As educators we are constantly trying to increase our knowledge and stay current with best practices and trends impacting our field. Traditionally, we look to webinars, conferences and books as a way of learning more, but not everyone has access to those resources. However, volunteering is always free. You just have to be willing to give of your time. Several inter/national organizations are also putting a lot of time and energy into creating training and development programs and resources for volunteers. This is an ideal model in my opinion. The organizations get better and stronger volunteers, and those who serve get the extra educational opportunities at little to no out of pocket cost.

So Why Volunteer?

As mentioned, it is important for us as professionals to stay current if we want to effectively work with our students. Through volunteer work we are able to do that. We have the opportunity try new things, expand our skill set and work with different students and colleagues. While our roles certainly keep us busy and encompass many areas, we do not get to do everything. That is why a volunteer role can perfectly compliment your professional position. The skills that you enhance or develop and the personal exploration that you get to do impacts your work in a positive way.

I got my first volunteer opportunity because I was at the right place at the right time. I was in graduate school in Boston and my fraternity, Theta Phi Alpha, was colonizing at a local university. I had to balance my graduate courses, my assistantship and this opportunity. I am grateful for that role because it helped me to successfully transition from my role as an undergraduate leader to an advisor and was the best way to enhance my time management skills. AFA offered me my next volunteer opportunity and I believe that is what helped me to meet more colleagues in the field and make it known that I was interested in volunteering for other organizations.

It should also be mentioned that volunteering could help you in clarifying your professional goals and possibly your career trajectory. While my first few professional roles involved student activities, orientation programs and fraternities and sororities, it was my volunteer work with Phi Kappa Tau and Beta Theta Pi fraternities that made me realize that working with fraternity men is my passion. That led me to my current role in which I get to focus on advising fraternity men.

Motivation Through Volunteerism

Volunteering is a great way to get motivated. Sometimes our day-to-day work can be exhausting. When we volunteer, there are expectations and standards, but for the most part we are able to build different types of relationships with the students and colleagues that we meet. I am blessed to serve as a Chapter Counselor for Beta Theta Pi Fraternity at



Northeastern University. When I can, I go to campus twice a week to meet with the executive board and chapter members. I often get asked why, after a full day of advising fraternity men at MIT, would I go to another school and advise one more group. The answer is simple: these men remind me of why I do what I do. They are not perfect, but they make me believe that the very same thing is happening on my campus. Those men allow me the chance to see the concept of fraternity through a different lens. They keep me grounded in the reality of working with today's college student, and that makes me a better advisor in my professional role.

Avoiding Burn Out

It's important to note that while volunteering can be an amazing experience, it is equally as important to know your limits. Do not take on too much because you do not want to become ineffective in your work or have so many responsibilities that you don't have any time left for yourself. It can be hard to say no to great opportunities, but other ones will be sure to follow.

Giving of your time and resources is the best thing that you can do to help move the fraternal movement forward. Our students, alumni and colleagues rely on the help and assistance from volunteers. Find that opportunity that fits you and enjoy every moment of it.

Getting Your Foot in the Door

This is my story. Your path to volunteering may look different. Our organizations can always use volunteers. Whether you work on a campus or at an inter/national headquarters there is much good work to be done. It is more common than ever to serve as a volunteer for an organization that you do not have membership in, which greatly expands the opportunities open to you. Talk to friends and colleagues who currently serve as volunteers and ask them how you can get involved. Several organizations post on their websites the different volunteer positions that are open, so do some research that way.