Let's Talk About Talking: Positive Social Media Use in Fraternity/Sorority Communities

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The start of a new semester often brings out the best in fraternity and sorority communities; members welcome incoming students, officers are setting high goals for their chapters, and councils are gearing up for new member programs. Everyone typically has a rosy outlook on the semester and cannot wait to enact and see positive changes within the college or university community. In most instances, student leaders tend to strive toward goals that are more "utopian" than realistic. These aims are shared with non-members through traditional or social media outlets in an effort to depict fraternities and sororities in a positive light, showcasing happy students engaging in service, philanthropy, or campus-sponsored events. Student leaders set out to change the world during their terms of office, without realizing that things almost never go exactly as planned.

In reality, things do go wrong; goals may become overshadowed by unexpected chapter needs, deadlines, and hectic student schedules. Community members may not have the same goals in mind, or a crisis could occur resulting in negative and widespread media attention. Additionally, it is increasingly challenging for student leaders to manage the flow of less than positive information once it is shared and discussed on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, and/or Pinterest by those outside the immediate fraternity and sorority community. Similarly, some students take pride in being featured on any number of websites portraying antiquated and stereotypical images of what fraternal organizations value and how they should operate. When this occurs, real life experiences get in the way of achieving the idealistic goal of "good PR" causing community and chapter leaders to put other projects on hold while they attempt to respond to the situation. These student leaders often become discouraged or frustrated by the actions that are not in alignment with their goals, aspirations, and vision for the fraternity and sorority community. In the eyes of undergraduate fraternity and sorority members, this media attention perpetuates the negative stereotypes.

Fraternity/sorority professionals often have the foresight to know any one of these things could happen and have the tools to proactively address some of these new challenges posed by social media. We know to expect the unexpected every day, but students are not always prepared to respond to these complex situations. The question becomes: what are we as fraternity/sorority professionals doing to engage our students in meaningful and proactive ways around responsible and positive social media usage? How can we prepare our students to react in positive ways when things inevitably "go wrong?" In an age of instant streaming, live tweeting, and over sharing, it is important that we take time to address these questions in conversation with our students.

Simple and meaningful conversations with fraternity and sorority members acknowledging the challenges associated with social media is the first step toward cultivating healthy online communities. We have conversations with students on a daily basis; from formal goal-setting meetings to simple catch-up sessions, professionals always seem to be in discussions with students. These conversations are places where we can proactively start to address social media usage in positive, direct, and developmental ways.

Great communities exist where students and professionals alike are not afraid to address tough issues openly and honestly. We have the opportunity to talk with students about appropriate social media usage and model the way for what appropriate content might look like to an undergraduate. In this way "you find yourself speaking to people not from a place

of measuring how they stack up against your standards, but from a place of respect that gives them room to realize themselves" (Zander & Zander, 2010, p. 26). Discussing how students can exemplify their values and beliefs through their statuses, tweets, pins, and pictures can give students agency to use social media for the betterment of their fraternity/sorority communities. Similarly, it is important to share with students any community or council-specific expectations regarding social media use. For example, if an inappropriate picture depicting underage drinking at a chapter facility surfaces, what will happen to the individuals and chapter as a result? Being up front and clear about the processes can help serve as a gauge for students before they post.

We should also consider debriefing negative media situations with students through a developmental lens. In these conversations, it is important to encourage students to think about the larger influence negative media has on fraternity/sorority communities as a whole by asking them what happened, how it affected others in the fraternity/sorority community, what might be learned from this, and finally, what might be done to make it right (Healy & Liddell, 1998). Essentially, we must challenge fraternity/sorority members to think beyond the common perspective that the media is solely responsible for fraternity and sorority stereotypes and engage them in "change talk" where students are willing to act of their own accord rather than responding to sanctions (Miller & Rose, 2009). By allowing students to be part of the conversation and meeting them at a place they find valuable, fraternity/ sorority professionals can increase the likelihood that students will follow through with some form of reparation and decrease future instances of poor behavior (Miller & Rose, 2009).

Instead of viewing the media as a problem, let's reframe the conversation and encourage fraternity/sorority members to think of negative media attention as a platform for positive conversations and growth within our communities. Give students another frame or choice to consider regarding social media usage, and they will change how they use those channels of communication (Zander & Zander, 2010).

References

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