

Making News, Not Making the News

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How often, as you hurry across campus to your office, do you pick up your campus newspaper? This probably occurs regularly. At lunch you unfold the paper only to see a front page story covering a fraternity or sorority's latest philanthropic contribution to the community. I would assume this half of the scenario does not play out very often. Instead, there splashed in full color and large bold type on the front page is an article highlighting the ever-rare negative behavior of a fraternal organization on campus, classifying members as uncontrollable partiers, intentional hazers and the bane of the University community. Well, if you want to help your students change that perspective and the news presented about fraternities and sororities at your university, it is not only within the organizations that they need to center their focus, but within your campus student media organizations as well.

Most campuses provide a free-speech avenue for student reporters to cover the news and events on their campus through a student newspaper, but how involved are fraternity/sorority members in the process of generating the paper? Ask yourself, how many members of the fraternity and sorority community are on the staff of the newspaper or contribute copy outlining the benefits of being a member of a values-based organization on a regular basis? It may be very few or none, but that can all be changed with a little education in the workings of your campus media.

To start laying the ground work, encourage chapter presidents, community outreach executive board member or councils to schedule regular meetings with the Editor-in-Chief or news or opinion section editors of the newspaper. In these meetings have students be prepared to provide information and details about successful events, philanthropic efforts, upcoming offerings, and spotlight on members that may be of interest to the newspaper. Many campus papers contain weekly coverage of Student Government happenings in a special section so why not have students discuss with the Editor how the fraternity and sorority governing councils would like to have a weekly small section in the paper to keep the campus informed of their activities. Encourage students to keep in mind, the focus should not be on advertising their next big event, but touting those things which shine a spotlight on the contributions their organizations make to the campus community, as well as highlighting individual awards, GPA standings, chapter leader profiles, etc. that will bring light to aspects of their community that many students, faculty and staff are absolutely clueless about.

Another great way to get the word out about fraternities and sororities on campus is to ask the faculty advisor(s) of the student newspaper to meet and discuss how the paper generates story ideas and what guidance the student writers receive when planning a week's issue of the paper. Creating a relationship with the advisor often helps, as the advisor discusses story ideas or leads with the newspaper staff or points important information to them through an informal method. Now that the community has formed some relationships and provided article ideas to the paper, where the ideas go from there is anybody's guess, but there are important facts that they need to be aware of before assuming the story is going to be read the way they think it might be by its readers.

Finally, at some point there is that dreaded email or call from the newspaper staff wanting to speak with you and/or a chapter president or its members about an article the paper is working on for an upcoming issue. Breathe slowly, and do not freak out. More than likely, the paper is looking for concrete facts on which to base an article, not digging for secrets or dirt on the organization. In answering their request for information, it is very important you and the students respond in a timely manner to avoid the reporter moving on to other (perhaps inaccurate) sources for their article. Have an appointed spokesperson who responds to avoid misquotes or careless remarks from individuals. Next, you or the students should ask if the paper's representative requesting the information can email their questions. This allows for time to gather accurate information before forming a response on the spot. This is typically agreeable and avoids misinformation and quotes that may sound fine in their head but come out totally opposite in the text of the article. Generally, the writer will have follow up questions or need clarification on information given, so do not be surprised when asked, simply reply with more information to help them frame the article with accurate data. While asking for prior review of an article after it has been written is not allowed, prior clarification of the angle of the story is not only permissible but highly encouraged to allow chapter members, national headquarters and alumni notice as to the impending article.

Hopefully, from this article you will better understand why building relationships with student media organizations is very important in the university community, and you can help your students see the paper's staff is not the enemy, only the student voice of life and events on your campus.