Assessing Programmatic Outcomes: Doing "Less with Less" during a Time of Resourcefulness

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Administrators often find themselves working to ensure that the intentionality of their programs adheres to the needs and wants of not only students but outside constituencies as well: employers, alumni, family, etc. However, fraternity and sorority advisors on campus as well as at inter/national headquarters have a unique political climate to navigate when developing programs for students. What seems to be one of the most challenging aspects of program development is the fact that colleges and universities are being charged with doing more than ever before with little to no increase in financial support. Not only this, but the need to assess programmatic outcomes, especially in the co-curricular, has added more work to advisors to ensure that students are in fact learning and that these programs align with the overall academic mission of the institution (Culp, 2012). Many administrators may be familiar with the phrase of doing more with less, but in times of budget cuts, financial restraint, and consolidation, senior-level administrators have been pressured to consider doing less with less and have to determine which programs are worth keeping. This is when assessment plays a vital role within fraternity and sorority life.

Prior to this sudden surge of assessing programmatic outcomes, many of the programs instituted by fraternal organizations stemmed from the pillars that the organizations hold so dearly, which is a great starting point. However, the challenging task lies with the fact that many of the programs that align with such values are complex and difficult to assess, at least in the long-run, and require much more time and summative approaches (Suski, 2009). Many of these programs look at super-cognitive skills; examples include: diversity awareness, time management, and conflict mediation all of which require direct measures of evidence when it pertains to student learning. Although all are important, these skills can cause additional work for advisors who may not consider them as urgent or pressing. Part of this challenge is also determining what type of outcome advisors seek from their students. These outcomes can vary: knowledge transfer and awareness, tangible and/or physical skill set, or a modified change in behavior or ability (Holzweiss, 2012). Regardless of the outcome, stakeholders want data to support the funding for many of these programs; otherwise they have the potential to receive less support in the future.

For example, many states have recently instituted requirements for educational and preventive programming centered on sexual assault and bystander intervention to comply with Title IX; yet execution for effective programming has varied across the country because it has been open for interpretation. Many of these programs are spearheaded by the fraternity and sorority community because of the group's influential prowess on many campuses, even though this topic can be presented to all students. Increasing knowledge and awareness is one approach; however, if institutions are not tracking changes in behavior over a period of time or showing how students utilize the skills taught to them in relation to the increased education, then advisors may have difficulty presenting how their efforts made a positive or lasting impact on the overall campus community (Keeling, et. al., 2008). Some institutions are already doing this, and receive continuous support; however, some are still missing this vital piece which is essential to the overall validity of these programs. Advising fraternal organizations is time consuming, but being

reluctant to assess our students and programs can lead to poor utilization of funds and can result in budget cuts.

In addition to tracking and measuring the learning from programs, collaborative efforts between campus-based professionals and headquarter professionals should be strengthened when assessing the outcomes of the students they both serve, and information should be shared accordingly. Many institutions and inter/national headquarters regularly assess chapters via some accreditation program based on a set of standards. The better question is how do the two entities collaborate to ensure that the programs are congruent with one another and align with the values of the organization overall.

Demographics of students are ever-changing and so are their needs and wants. It is important to routinely update these accreditation programs to ensure their effectiveness. In times when students have many competing priorities; part-time jobs to help pay for tuition and dues, increased academic major requirements, etc.; advisors both on and off campus must make a concerted effort to review the standards and expectations posed on these respective groups and ensure that both parties are in agreement with the programming asked of them (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). This is considered best practice, and in *The Student Learning Imperative* collaborative efforts between entities for assessing student learning is encouraged. Some students might even argue that they are over-programmed, so advisors developing these accreditation programs should see what really needs to be measured and develop the programs to achieve the stated expectations. Involving students in these conversations would behoove the student-centered efforts fraternal organizations seek and would determine what students are lacking to be more effective and competitive within a global society.

Creating a culture of measuring student learning in the co-curricular can be daunting, but when incorporated it into the daily routine of one's work, it can lead to greater outcomes in the long run. This can be started very simply with the students advisors work with regularly, whether in one-on-one meetings or in a collective group setting. Asking students to routinely assess the overall progress of the group, the effectiveness of meetings, and reflecting on their own personal growth and development can lead to solidifying this culture and providing tangible evidence that showcases what and how students are learning (King, 2012). At times it may seem redundant and time consuming, but if practiced regularly, becomes second nature. Students begin to do it regularly on their own, and it is indoctrinated into their everyday life. Although this type of practice is mainly qualitative in nature, it offers the student voice and shows direct evidence of learning as compared to quantitative measures that may be more indirect (Starcke & DeLoach, 2012).

Part of developing programmatic outcomes that matter and are of value, stems from answering three questions: 1) What is it that you want students to learn from the program and why? 2) How does this program align with the institution's mission and/or the values of the fraternity/sorority community? 3) How do the benefits outweigh the costs for conducting the program? By incorporating answers to these questions in a proposal, heightened validity to the program can be achieved; otherwise, practitioners just develop programming for the sake of programming (Keeling, et. al., 2008).

Researching best practices for assessing programmatic initiatives is challenging, especially when considering congruency with the values of fraternal organizations, but it is not impossible. It takes a concerted effort from multiple constituencies. When developing programs for students, it is important to develop an assessment plan that corresponds with the program and if it is worth instituting before executing the plan or if funds should be allocated elsewhere. Practitioners working with programmatic budgets should ensure that students will acquire useful information and/or if the program itself benefits the well-being of the campus community. Being good stewards of financial resources and adding validity to programs with data supports the endeavors of fraternity and sorority life as a whole. This should be common practice to propel the functional area forward. Otherwise, programs may cease to exist in the future (which is not necessarily a bad thing in all cases). Change is inevitable, and it is important that as students on our campuses change so do our programs.

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