

Communicating Assessment through Storytelling

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Great stories challenge us to think, provoke emotional reactions, and can entertain and engage us. Stories have the ability to captivate our attention and help us retain information. Would applying storytelling skills to assessment help us communicate the impact of fraternities and sororities in a more meaningful and influential way?

Sharing assessment data can be dry. Framed in research, the focus is often methodology and individual data points. Even the best presentations may leave audience members with little to relate to or to apply to their own work.

Storytellers take a different approach, focusing on the story and the audience. Narratives are cohesive. Stories are familiar and relatable. We discuss and remember stories as shared experiences. The best examples show up in films, television, books, but also our day-to-day work. We see examples of students living our values, enjoying their experiences, and developing as leaders. Framing assessment in these stories can create powerful narratives that are impactful and memorable.

What is a Story?

A story is essentially a set of events, often told for entertainment. Stories are part of our everyday life. Families, organizations, and groups are full of stories which communicate our values, culture, and collective experiences. In fraternity and sorority life, we have stories that describe the histories of our organizations, stories that tell about our best and brightest members, and stories of events and activities we share. By connecting individual pieces of information to a larger whole, the stories provide meaning around who we are and what we aspire to be. They connect to our emotions ensuring that we remember the details long after we hear the story. Great stories do more than tell us. They help us to experience, through details and imagery, the story alongside the narrator or characters. Imagine that power and how it could be applied to assessment.

Foundational Elements

Stories are typically structured around key elements – quests, hooks or inciting incidents, and dramatic questions. Quests are missions like those seen in science fiction movies and travel stories. Hooks are compelling events or challenges that provide the foundation for classics such as Hamlet (his father's death) or modern movies such as Pitch Perfect (Aubrey starts the movie vomiting at nationals and spends the movie working to redeem herself). Dramatic questions are broad questions that the story seeks to explore or answer. For instance, in the Imitation Game, Alan Turing works tirelessly through the movie to crack the enigma machine. These elements are unifying themes, steering the narrative and holding it together.

In fraternity and sorority life, our new member story could be told as a quest, with assessment data illustrating each step in the journey to membership. Stories could also be built around the hook of leadership development chronicling the journey of a student gaining skills and experience. What efforts and experiences are members participating in that lead to leadership success after college? Foundational elements frame a holistic picture enabling us to tell the bigger story and focus our audiences on themes in the assessment data.

Moving Beyond the Foundation

As stories develop, storytellers can use methods to continue the plot and hold attention. For instance, progressive complications can add complexity to the narrative. Progressive complications can be small details that present impediments on a quest (Harry Potter not being able to find the 9 ¾ platform at King’s Station) or a series of events that keep us engaged (Frodo’s journey to destroy the ring in the fiery depths of Mount Doom). Plot twists are the unexpected surprises that reset the narrative or change audiences’ opinions of a character. Pivotal events are critical events, anticipated or unexpected, that mark significant places in the story. Conflict between characters or perspectives is used to evoke emotion and interest. Conflicts do not exist exclusively between superheroes and villains. They may occur between protagonists in a love story (Silver Linings Playbook) or conflicts among friends (22 Jump Street).

Two final story elements, the set-up and pay-off, work together to guide the audience. Set-ups provide foundational pieces of information, often unimportant at the time, that advance the story toward the pay-off. The set-up is known to the audience, but the characters may be unaware. The pay-off is the reward or culminating event that follows the set-up. In House of Cards, Frank Underwood’s work sets up his pay-off at the end of each season, being selected as Vice-President and ascending to the Presidency. The audience watches in fascinated horror as the characters head to the house with the killer because the audience knows what lies ahead.

We can weave in these same story elements to engage our assessment audiences. When presenting fraternity and sorority assessment data, audiences may be looking for the easy answer. However, data rarely tells a simple story. Caveats, exceptions to trends, or even subgroups with diverging trends need to be explained. For example, members say the fraternity and sorority experience helped them understand their personal values (69% of respondents to the 2013-2014 AFA/Skyfactor Fraternity/Sorority Assessment); however, members who do not plan to be involved as alumni are less likely to say the same (49%). Stories could also focus on conflicting data. Or, they could focus on conflicting campus or student values. Similarly, we have pivotal events on our campuses, in our organizations, or faced by our students. Any or all of these could focus and move a compelling story.

Endings

Storytellers use different ending types to evoke different reactions. Up-endings, for instance, make the audience feel good (Katniss and Peeta both survive the hunger games). Down-endings,

on the other hand, leave the audience disappointed. But, they can also be used to spur action. Not every story resolves clearly – some stories just end. Depending on the ending, we may be inspired to act, repelled and dejected, primed for questions, or craving more.

In assessment, we often do not consider the power of endings. An up-ending would be useful for talking about the value of fraternities and sororities or our successes. For instance, 85% of members would recommend their fraternity and sorority experience to other students. Negative results, a down-ending, may prompt strategic and resource discussions. An unresolved or open-ended story may prompt the audience in discussions about both positive and negative results.

Final Thoughts

For those steeped in research traditions, storytelling may feel uncomfortable. Methodology, protocols, and validity remain important and need to guide the work of assessment and research. But, to drive the use of data, audiences have to be engaged. Audiences are not focused on research methods. They want to improve their organizations and the lives of their students. A story can help them see the connections between assessment and students.

If we aspire to share the stories of fraternities and sororities, we may need to think less like researchers and more like storytellers and our audiences.

“At the end of the day...it’s about the story.” – Zach Staenberg

Resources

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