

Making Your Consultant Program Count: Assessing and Evaluating Your Traveling Consultant Program

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Field Consultants, Leadership Consultants, Collegiate Development Consultants: no matter what you call them, traveling consultants are brand ambassadors for fraternity. They gather information on the front-lines and share that information with fraternity/sorority professionals, both while visiting campus and back at their respective headquarters. The formula is fairly simple and has been utilized for more than fifty years, but how do we know if it is “working?” Can we articulate the purpose of these programs? What is the guiding philosophy behind these visits? Are our campuses actually benefitting from traveling consultants?

The Why

Delta Gamma Fraternity began to ask those and other questions as a result of a combination of factors. Since 2011, Delta Gamma had seen five mid-year resignations from its traveling consultants (two in 2011-2012 and three in 2013-2014). This statistic was alarming and warranted immediate attention and action. Additionally, after 20 years, the program changed leadership in fall 2014. This proved to be an ideal time to evaluate practices from a different perspective. New leadership meant the opportunity to evaluate, analyze, and implement changes that were needed for the program.

The Plan

According to Worth (2014), benchmarking is an ideal tool to utilize when comparing programmatic performance against your peers. Were our peers facilitating their consultant programs differently? Were we missing a key component in our consultant program? Were our peers experiencing similar issues? In order to appropriately measure our consultant program, Delta Gamma initiated a benchmarking study among the NPC member groups. The instrument was sent to all NPC member groups’ staff contact for their respective consultant programs, inquiring about everything from consultant selection processes to retention strategies to training curriculum.

The NonProfit Times (2011) tells us that successful benchmarking requires six basic practices:

1. **Identify the right point of contact.** In Delta Gamma’s benchmarking study, that point of contact was the staff person who manages the traveling consultant program at each NPC organization headquarters. Who would be the “right point of contact” for the program you’d like to benchmark?
2. **Be upfront.** Be transparent about why you are seeking their partnership. Being vulnerable and sharing the significant spike in mid-year resignations from Delta Gamma’s traveling consultants allowed our peers to understand why we were seeking information about their programs.
3. **Make connections.** Share how you came to learn about their work or their program. Clarify how you got their contact information and that you view them as a partner in this process.

4. **Make it a two-way street.** In the spirit of partnership, make it clear that you, too, would be willing to share information about your program. The goal is that this will be a reciprocated relationship where both parties can mutually benefit. In our situation, we benefitted from learning from the other NPC member groups, and they too could learn from the responses we collected.
5. **Share results.** In a benchmarking study, all participants can benefit from better understanding the work of their peers. Delta Gamma ensured their participants knew that not only would their responses be anonymous, but that a summary report would be shared with all participants at the conclusion of the project.
6. **Respect their time.** Spend time refining your instrument to ensure you are asking for information that only that individual/partner can provide. For instance, Delta Gamma could easily discover what each organization calls their respective consultant programs by perusing their organizations' websites, but could not learn valuable information such as hiring practices without asking for that information in the benchmarking study.

The Response

Our benchmarking study received a response rate of 38.5 percent, representing 10 of the 25 other NPC member groups. Below (Figure 1) are a portion of the quantitative results, at a glance:

Benchmarking Results	
8.5	the average number of traveling consultants hired
0	the average number of regional or province based consultants
4.8	the average number of resident consultants hired
2,000	the average monthly consultant pay (in dollars)
100	the percentage of chapters that receive a consultant visit annually
90	the percentage of respondents who have their headquarters staff manage consultant training
4	the average length of consultant training (in weeks)
50	percentage of respondents who have their outgoing consultants train their incoming consultants

Figure 1: Benchmarking Results

Qualitative results included information regarding hiring strategies, consultant benefits, retention programs, training models, reporting formats, and program philosophies. For a complete copy of the NPC Consultant Assessment Summary Report, please contact the authors directly.

Benchmarking is a valuable tool for learning about your organization in relation to your peers, but not necessarily a valuable tool for evaluating your program (Worth, 2014, p. 138). Therefore, Delta Gamma initiated a self-study in order to utilize the benchmarking data as a catalyst for our consultant program review.

The Evaluation

Using the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) program review model (2012), Delta Gamma began by establishing and preparing an interdisciplinary team to participate in the evaluation, henceforth referred to as the working group. The working

group was comprised of a combination of staff, volunteers, and former consultants. Their work was dictated by a charter outlining the expectations of the program review and projected deadlines for their recommendations. The program review was conducted via monthly conference calls and in-person meetings over an eight-month timeframe, which included reviewing the benchmarking data, collecting input from various constituents, and preparing a proposal outlining the working group's recommended changes.

Some of Delta Gamma's recommended changes included adopting a program philosophy, identifying core competencies consultants should possess, changes to the application and interview procedures, adapting the consultant training model, redefining the types of visits consultants make, and repurposing the consultant visit report.

The Outcome

In December 2014, the working group presented its recommended changes to Delta Gamma Fraternity's Council, and all of the recommendations were fully supported. Many recommended changes that could be implemented mid-year were enacted immediately, with the goal of full implementation by July 2015 when the training program for the next year's consultants is scheduled to begin.

Conducting a program review is easier said than done, but the efforts are worth the reward. Let's revisit where we started: Is your consultant program working? If the answer is unclear, ask the difficult questions, question the status quo, and adapt!

References

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