

Together Forward: 2004 Presidency in Review

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I would hope if people say one good thing about me as AFA President, it was that I sought to bring people together: people in the Association, people across functions in the fields of higher education and fraternity/sorority life, and people of diverse backgrounds. For me, the value of an association is its potential to connect people around something bigger than they are, and through those connections we become good and effective colleagues. To accomplish these goals, collaborations, meaningful and intentional, are vital.

So, as I wrote this article, I reflected on how I contributed to collaborations during my time as President. Some of this may be more in my role as President Elect or Past President, because it all blurs together at this point, but also because these actions took time. Connecting people to a common cause, building relationships, and making progress takes a lot of time.

The issues I saw as President were those that required collaborations: for example, addressing hazing practices was something I was able to get behind very easily but I could not do it alone. After being called out by Hank Nuwer on a national listserv for the interfraternal movement's lack of really addressing anti-hazing efforts, AFA leadership felt it was time for us to revisit and reaffirm our efforts to counter hazing culture. As a result, we coordinated a think tank in San Antonio that brought together some good minds around this issue and we had Hank run it. As a result of that meeting, numerous initiatives were born, and in 2004 we hosted our first Hazing Symposium at Purdue University. It was just one of many initiatives that came from that discussion, but it mattered because within that group there were many of us who eventually worked to create HazingPrevention.Org. Look what the collaboration has done for us 12 years later!

More issues, such as our inability as a field to get a hold of the growing work around assessment, launching a journal, or using more evidence based practices to counter our problems, were also pressing for me as a leader during 2004. During this time our AFA Board created a partnership with Educational Benchmarking, Inc (EBI) to collect information about the fraternity/sorority experience through our AFA/EBI instrument. Relative to research, collaborations mattered very much. As explained in my recount of the Association's history (Bureau, 2006c, 2011), there were numerous barriers to launching a research journal, but the biggest barrier was those of us internal to the process being too blinded by the paradigms we thought to be effective or required. When we branched out and used the knowledge of those outside our Association we discovered there were evolving ways that were increasingly accepted to collect, compile, and promote research. By the end of 2004 we coordinated a meeting of six of us to determine immediate steps for a research journal. By the end of 2005 we launched *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*, which recently celebrated its tenth anniversary and 18th issue! Collaborations made it happen.

Within the field of fraternity and sorority life we have struggled to help students address the incongruencies between espoused beliefs and behaviors. This is something some have come to refer to as the “values movement.” While we continue to struggle with this issue, for some very understandable individual and organizational developmental reasons (Bureau, 2014), in 2004 there was a concerted decision to move values to the forefront of the experience. Thanks to the *Call for Values Congruence* (Franklin Square Group, 2003) we had college and university Presidents declare enough was enough and that we were to implement strategies to help fraternities and sororities “return” to values. Being AFA President during this time allowed me the chance to interact with college and university presidents. They were the easy ones to work with, because the role of the umbrella groups – at that time really NALFO, NIC, NPC and NPHC – was to be a sticking point.

Each umbrella group had a different level of interest in the document. For our culturally based groups, they did not see themselves in the document because they were not in there. Focused primarily on NIC and NPC issues, the ills our culturally based organizations were facing then, and face today, were not acknowledged or prioritized in that document. With the NIC and NPC, each had determined its own approach to upholding values congruence. From that, the Standards Documents were developed. While many of us in AFA felt the documents did not go far enough, and we had some tough conversations with umbrella group leadership, it was a step in the right direction. However, the implementation of it all had to be collaborative among the umbrella groups and AFA (and some other higher education partners), and it often was not.

Sitting in a hotel room in Foggy Bottom DC with four college and university presidents, NASPA leadership, and leaders from the NIC and NPC, helped those of us there representing AFA, including Amy Vojta (2003 AFA President) and Sue Kraft Fussell (former Executive Director of AFA), realize our future efforts had to be better. In 2005 we convened a meeting of the four umbrella groups, NASPA leadership, and AFA leadership at our Annual Meeting: all with the goal of increased collaboration around not only values but also about moving forward on so many of our divisive issues. It was a start to get us all in the room and say “we are all invested in these goals but in different ways – how can we collaborate toward a common goal while respecting our unique interests?”

We had to be more collaborative as a “movement” and we also had to each own our responsibilities to meet the diverse needs of our members. In the early 2000s, we often referred to the “emerging organizations” in the fraternal world: those with cultural affinity for Asian American, Hispanic and Latino/a populations, American Indian and even the LGBT and ally fraternal organizations that were forming across the country. While historically Black organizations had existed for almost 100 years at that point, AFA had a mixed record of engaging NPHC leaders in a way that acknowledged the valued role their organizations played in our larger interfraternal movement.

It is easy to consider all of us should *aspire toward the same ends* and *enact the same means*, but really what we needed to do was identify a few key areas in which to collaborate and then

allow each other to work on what mattered most to each of us and address the different needs of “the movement.” The issue of us working together, moving things forward and being committed to address the collective ills of the movement, was something that required and still requires ongoing and deep commitment to nurturing and respecting relationships. This was a theme of my comments at the 2005 Annual Meeting in which a collection of talking heads from the umbrella groups was selected as the opening session: “How do we move forward together around the idea of values?” was our theme from what I can recall, but the real message I tried to convey in my thoughts was “what can we gain by working more collaboratively while also respecting our diverse goals and limited resources?” Again, the issue at hand was not as much the problem as was the inability to label the issue correctly: this was not about values or common goals, but it was about our reluctance to give up space and to let others’ opinions matter equally in sometimes heated discussions. This was a time when our record on collaborations was certainly mixed and it remains as such today.

Finally, relative to issues, AFA has always struggled with the idea some members don’t see value in AFA membership or as an organization we do not do enough to engage (fill in the blank population) in our work. Questions that were prevalent in 2004 and to some extent still exist today included: As our field has become more diverse, have we done well to incorporate professionals from diverse backgrounds into our Association? How can members feel more connected outside the Annual Meeting? How can members feel valued when they are not involved in volunteer roles or do not get the volunteer roles they want? Why is the Board of Directors such a “cool kids club”? What do we need “seasoned professionals” to get at the Annual Meeting? How can we make every member feel valued at the Annual Meeting? So many questions, such energy expended day in and day out.

As I believed in collaborations, I also believed in every person feeling valued, so I made every effort to address the issue and I think progress has ebbed and flowed in this area. I made efforts to be out and about with our members, from all backgrounds, from all tenures in the field, from all levels of involvement in the Association. Connecting with those individuals would enhance our ability to move forward together and to collaborate more effectively through sharing ideas. The best part of it was that so often the answer wasn’t to do something to the Annual Meeting or to the Association, but simply to ask and to listen and to have a conversation. A collaboration can start just from a conversation.

For me, the biggest issue in our field, which still exists today, is that we often do not take the time or energy to have the conversation or we have it in a way that is driven by agenda versus creating shared meaning and working toward some level of consensus. This happens today with our members, the AFA leadership, and throughout our fields of higher education and fraternity/sorority life.

I have written about the history of this organization for over a decade now (Bureau, 2006, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2011). Examining our past and reflecting on where we are now is a natural part of who I am as a leader in this Association. We have done well. We have work to

do. So, where we are now is better, but our reality is also influenced by different contextual considerations, resource decisions, changing roles of key players, etc. I think we are better but at each point in time the important thing to ask is “were we as good as we could be at that time?”

I feel good about my years on the board. I feel like I worked hard, engaged people, and made a difference. I feel like some of the things in which I was involved and the things about which I had the most passion are still in place today and if they are not that is just because the leadership afterwards may have had different ideas about what was right and appropriate to do.

I received four questions to guide this article: what were the issues when I was President, what successes did you see in the field, what do you think about the challenges we face now and what do you think the future holds for fraternity/sorority. To this point, I’ve strongly answered the first two, answered sufficiently about the challenges faced now (cliff note: they’re still the same but may play out differently, and we have made progress on many things, even those we still face). However, I have not answered the question about the future of fraternity/sorority.

I think I’ve alluded to some parts of this throughout this article, but I think the future can be bright and the work we do can matter when we focus on the most important means to the end: building collaborations to get us where we need to go. It could be a one to one collaboration such as a campus professional and a headquarters staff/volunteer commitment to lead efforts to help rebuild a chapter, or someone from our Board of Directors sitting down with an AFA member to talk through an issue of member inclusion in the Association. It could be a group to group collaboration such as some of the efforts around Title IX as well as some of the partnerships we are seeing from all of the umbrella groups that are currently moving the “movement” forward. I think no progress can be made, there will be no (valuable, contributing, positive) future without collaboration and engaging people in a meaningful way to address the shared goals we have. To me that’s the future of this Association and this work and potentially the “fraternal movement.”

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