

The More Things Change, The More They Remain the Same

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Things have changed significantly within the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) in the 25 years since I served as President of the Association. Back then, we had no Central Office or staff, and no electronic means of communication and information sharing. It is with pride I have observed the growth in professionalism of our Association over the years. We have earned greater respect within the student affairs world.

Yet, the issues faced during my term are remarkably similar to those we face today. For example, I established two task forces, one dealing with expansion and the other with risk management. There was a philosophical divide between campus administrators who advocated for planned growth of fraternity/sorority communities and inter/national fraternities that advocated for unrestricted expansion. We were unable to fully resolve those differences, but we did agree on a protocol for fewer barriers and more open communication. It is clear, though, expansion processes remain a topic of contention on many campuses today.

The 1970s and 1980s were decades of permissive fraternity behavior including such practices as large, uncontrolled open parties with kegs. By 1990, many inter/national fraternities had begun to put the brakes on these types of activities. AFA's risk management task force was more successful than the expansion task force because we shared common objectives. Most campuses eventually adopted policies similar or equivalent to those set forth by the Fraternal Information and Programming Group (FIPG) and improved enforcement. The environment has changed considerably, but unfortunately the problems persist.

When I delivered my farewell remarks as AFA President, I expressed concern that unless we were successful in addressing hazing, alcohol abuse, sexual violence and related issues, I was not sure whether the fraternal movement would survive until the turn of the century. The good news is fraternities and sororities did live beyond Y2K and have seen an upsurge in membership; the bad news is many of the same challenges still plague us. Indeed, after a rash of recent widely-publicized incidents, the NIC created presidential commissions to deal with these same critical issues.

I do not know how much more time educational institutions and society in general will give us to move the needle further toward eliminating these dangerous behaviors. Don't get me wrong, we have made progress, but it is simply not enough. I do not profess to have the answers (if so, I could probably make a fortune post-retirement as a consultant). I do know policy development, implementation, and enforcement, as well as educational initiatives, while essential, are inadequate. It is worth noting all of these behaviors (hazing, sexual violence and alcohol abuse) are intensified in single-sex environments of young adults. Unless we are able to bring about genuine cultural change, the ability to continue to exist as single-sex organizations may soon be at risk.

On a more positive note, I have seen a couple of positive trends within fraternities and sororities in recent years. The first is diversity. Not only have we seen a robust emergence and growth of culturally-based organizations, but the membership of many organizations is becoming more inclusive. As the national coordinator of Campus Pride's Lambda 10 Project/Out & Greek Initiative, it is particularly encouraging to see fraternities and sororities to becoming more welcoming of LGBTQ students. The newest frontier is finding the best ways to open our organizations to transgender and gender non-conforming students.

To me, the most promising indicator of a brighter future is the attitudes expressed by the current generation of students who are joining our organizations. Today's fraternity and sorority members seem more committed to making their chapters more values-based. It is my earnest hope this will translate into the cultural changes we as advisors have long strived to foster.