

Leadership is Hard

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Leadership is hard.

The longer I am in the field the clearer this becomes. There are challenges as you rise to leadership and when you are living in it. Leadership is however, the foundation of what is needed to push through the multitude of challenges we face in higher education, on our campuses, at our headquarters, in our communities, and in our Association.

As the first person of color to serve as President of AFA, the first challenge I faced was access. How did a woman of color, Latina, from a sorority that was an “emerging” organization within the newly established National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, Inc. when she first joined the Association back in 1999, gain access to lead an Association that had never before been led by a person of color? Access for people of color is, unfortunately, a consistent issue spanning associations and communities. How do we help to provide a space for marginalized communities? How do we support those who may challenge the process, look, and think differently than ourselves, and challenge the status quo? I was fortunate to have fellow board members who were different than me, respectful of each other and our perspectives, and likeminded in their fearlessness to steer AFA towards transformational change – solidifying its place as a leader and partner among higher education associations. We need to be the change agents who recognize the importance of educating fraternity/sorority members on what it means to be truly inclusive and welcoming of their peers and model that behavior ourselves. Be open to difference, respectful discourse, and debate.

Another challenge was, and continues to be, the need to defend the work we do on a daily basis in addition to the sheer existence of fraternal organizations. One of the main foci of our 2011 AFA leadership was to elevate the discourse among our profession to ensure we were challenging ourselves, our students, and our organizational leaders to effectively assess their organizations. We must evaluate how and why we do our work and effectively demonstrate the learning outcomes of the fraternal experience. We must also be able to provide the facts, the figures, the data, and the definitive knowledge needed to support the anecdotal evidence we have depended on for years. We began offering more research-focused programming at the Annual Meeting and we decided to provide unprecedented access to nationally renowned researchers to evaluate our processes and offer us perspective on how we can continue to elevate the discourse occurring within our membership. We took the risk to be vulnerable and seek assistance in how we could become a stronger organization.

Five years later, I see promise. There is an increasing number of professionals in our field seeking and completing terminal degrees and conducting the much needed research on our communities. We now have the ability to provide our members with valuable data and resources led by the Director of Research and Assessment at the AFA Central Office. Campuses are continuing to challenge the notion of fraternity and data is the key to truly identifying our

strengths and weaknesses and affecting change as a result of what the research shows. We are getting to a place of being able to address and answer questions like: How are we demonstrating our impact on student success? More importantly, what impact are we having? Is there a critical shift needed to align our values with those of the institutions that host us?

Speaking of values: *Sexual assaults. Alcohol abuse. Hazing. Discrimination.* These are issues that plague our communities daily. What are we doing? What are we teaching? What are we expecting of these, on average, 18-24 year old students, and their advisors? How are we truly making a difference in our campus and surrounding communities if members are making the choices they are? How are we reflecting on the role we play in preventing these dangerous, misguided, and misaligned behaviors of our members? Are we role modeling the right behavior? Are we challenging the norm? Are we equipping students with the tools they need to enact their values and hold themselves, and each other, accountable for doing so? Is it easy? No.

This is really hard work. *Leadership is hard.* Yet, it is the most critical piece of the puzzle to making this field the best it can be. Push the envelope. Go against the grain. Read the research. Create the research. Do the research. Teach. Coach. Learn. Educate. Mentor. Repeat. Do not let antiquated systems and structures prevent progress. Dismantle them, as needed, and embrace the opportunity of providing access, education, opportunity, and knowledge. You have the power to transform lives. Be purposeful. Be intentional. Expect nothing less than the best of what we are and what we know we can be. Make the hard decisions. When the challenges come, face them head on. It won't be easy but it will be worth it. Own the power and privilege you have as an educated professional to *do something*. Leadership comes with great responsibility. Challenge comes with great opportunity. Take it. Embrace it. *Do something*.