

## A Call to Action

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As we approach the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA), there seems to be a desire to *dust off* some of the Past Presidents and put us back to work. I have been asked to contribute to a number of interesting projects, including this article. The combination of these projects has caused me to reflect fondly on the work to which I was able to contribute along with several teams during my seven years on the AFA Board. Similarly, it has caused me to consider the enormity of the work that lies ahead and to wonder how we strategically position professionals and volunteers engaged in fraternity/sorority work to rise to the occasion.

As is true for many professional communities, the fraternity/sorority world is faced with a choice between two guiding philosophical directions as we consider how best to ensure our long-term sustainability. One direction assumes we have articulated our best ideas, we have a solid framework, and our challenge moving forward is to become more skilled and consistent in executing these ideas and operating within this framework. The other direction assumes the environment is rapidly shifting around us and that our fundamental assumptions are in need of an update that considers a dynamic and rapidly changing reality. Given this (admittedly oversimplified) dichotomy, I am far more inclined to align with thought leaders like Thomas Friedman, who speak of a world moving at a rate that is impossible for us to harness, until and unless we are fully and unequivocally committed to poking holes in outdated frameworks and assumptions. Make no mistake, the higher education landscape is shifting around us and we are mostly powerless to slow it. However, I remain optimistic we will be powerful enough to harness it – if we want to. As Charles Darwin said: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one that is most responsive to change.”

As someone whose day job obliges me to navigate myriad and diverse manifestations of these shifting environmental realities and their implications for all corners of a college campus, I can attest to the fact the fraternity/sorority world is lagging behind many other areas in grappling with shifts in the broader higher education landscape. As a product of this professional community and as someone who continues to believe in the value of the fraternity/sorority experience, I have spent an extraordinary amount of time considering why we aren't further ahead of the curve. Why is it we seem to be buried up to our elbows in perspectives from 2003 (or in many cases, 1988)? It isn't because we're lazy – we aren't. It isn't because we don't have access to good information and solid data – we do. It isn't because members of this community are indifferent – they're not. I don't claim to have the correct answer or the silver-bullet solution, but I do think I'm in a position to offer a bit of perspective related to what I see as challenges we still need to overcome together.

### Herd Mentality

It is always easier to go along with the conventional wisdom of our professional community than it is to risk being out-of-step with it. Having spoken with many young professionals about this, I've heard time and time again that they're hyper-conscious of pushing against

conventional wisdom because doing so places their ability to earn professional *currency* in jeopardy. Because of this, our professional norms and assumptions begin to clump together into a vanilla mass of unchecked assumptions and Orwellian buzzwords. This makes us slow to change our minds and ultimately more likely to embrace the status quo. In doing so, we delegate our thinking to the *herd*. The herd moves slowly and will never be able to keep up.

### **Effective Use of Time**

During *The Gathering* this summer, we arrived at a place in the conversation where we considered perhaps one's passion for this work was not necessarily correlated with how skilled one is at accomplishing the work – and further, that it was arguably a barrier. Left to our own devices, we tend to prioritize what we like over what is necessary. Then we tend to justify the necessity of things we like. Every September, my newsfeed is filled with fraternity/sorority professionals competing virtually for the nonexistent title of *most stressed and committed sorority recruitment facilitator*. I could write another 1000 words about how this is misplaced effort, but I can safely say in this paragraph this is not among the top five time expenditures most likely to move the needle related to broader higher education outcomes. Having worked on a campus where nearly 2000 women participated in a student-facilitated process with minimal input or assistance from professional staff, I speak from experience when I say they don't need us spending time there. But since we like it...it's somehow necessary.

### **Competing Priorities**

The fraternity/sorority world is an interesting amalgamation of higher education professionals, volunteers, non-profit organization staff members, and distantly connected fraternity/sorority board members. Each group talks in platitudes about “the students,” but each of those groups also has its own distinct ideology; distinct set of assumptions, values, and aims; and distinct beliefs about what all the *other* groups ought to be doing differently. Until we are all clear on our end goals, it's unlikely we will be fully equipped to navigate our competing priorities. We can value many things at once, but ultimately all that really matters is what we value *most*. Some examples: Regarding NPC extension and mega-chapters, do we value parity more or the student experience more? Regarding fraternity headquarters and their boards, do we value additional chapters, larger chapters, or better chapters more? Regarding campus professionals' priorities, do we value our own professional ideology or our institution's needs more? Regarding our professional associations, do we value the volunteer experience or the average member experience more? In each of these examples (and the 100 others I don't have space to mention), there aren't necessarily wrong answers, but there are certainly better answers if we're all clear about what we're trying to accomplish. Right now, we're not clear.

This isn't meant to be a cynical, doomsday reflection (there's plenty of that in our political environment right now), but instead a call to action. All that matters is what happens next. I sincerely believe in this experience and in our ability to collectively articulate a set of shared aims and values that will focus our efforts on what's truly worthwhile. We all bring some baggage, but we also all bring necessary contributions. I hope we can own our baggage and begin the hard work of moving forward. Together. With intention and purpose.