

## Reflections on AFA's Founding Years

Barbie Tootle, AFA President 1977-1978

A small group of advisors left the Fraternity Bicentennial Celebration in Williamsburg in 1976 convinced that forming an association for fraternity/sorority advisors would benefit our profession and the students we served. We chose John Mohr as our first president. My first volunteer assignment was drafting a constitution and bylaws. John and I frequently met in Richmond, Indiana – about midway between our institutions at the time, DePauw and Ohio State – to revise and revise again our purposes, processes, and other foundational requirements to get the association on its feet. Would it be “advisors” or “advisers”? Such were the debates.

I was the first president elected by vote of the AFA membership. In AFA's second year, the biggest issue was expanding awareness of our new organization, increasing membership, and developing an effective program for our first annual meeting held jointly with the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) in Indianapolis in 1977, attended by 70 members. We accepted the offer from the editor of the independent *Fraternity Newsletter* (founded in 1974) to adopt it as the official publication of AFA. Oh, to have had a website and email!

The Fraternity Bicentennial Celebration in 1976 was unique because it brought fraternity and sorority leaders together with campus advisors. From the start, AFA included those working with all social fraternity/sorority groups. The encouragement of the Fraternity Executives Association (FEA) and NIC leaders was instrumental in our founding, and the offer to co-locate our meetings with NIC was crucial in those early years when we did not have the membership, money, time, or expertise to handle the logistics of an annual meeting. Even with our separate meeting programs, some fraternity volunteer leaders saw our presence, and that of our association's sorority members, as an intrusion. It was very significant that, thanks to NIC's Jack Anson and others, AFA conferees were included in the NIC Banquet. As AFA president, I was seated on the dais with their board – an encouraging signal to all of us. Our membership neared 200 by the end of my term at the 1978 meeting.

As AFA was forming, the profession was changing on many campuses. The era of the Dean of Men/Dean of Women was phasing out and many Deans of Students or Vice Presidents for Student Affairs looked to consolidate fraternity/sorority advising into a single position. This usually meant a reduction in staff working with chapters. In 1974, I became the first woman to advise all 63 chapters – women and men – at Ohio State. Through AFA, I found outstanding mentors in FEA who gave me valuable advice in managing this change.

Looking back at some of the issues of the day, I am struck with their broad similarity to some of today's topics. As a new fraternity/sorority advisor, I attended the 1975 Interfraternity Institute (IFI) at Indiana University, a year before AFA was formed. IFI was a week-long professional development program for campus advisors (18) and fraternity professionals (22).

We spent a day looking at higher education in a society where values and norms were changing. In a report to my then supervisor, the Vice President at Ohio State, I wrote about the key issues raised by the presenters, including “the authority of ability – not just age or title;” classroom instruction shifting from active teachers/passive students to students teaching each other; and the growing need and demand for “more genuine experiences.” The question arose: “What electronic media can chapter houses tap to make them useful academic learning centers?” (Remember, we were still using punch cards to manage formal recruitment.)

Today, these 41-year-old observations are reflected in the practice of “flipping the classroom” to engage students in discussion, greater student participation in decision making, and the eradication of skits and themes in recruitment in favor of more “authentic” opportunities to meet prospective members. Chapter facilities remain challenged to keep up with new technologies available in on-campus housing.

A highlight of the IFI session on legal issues in higher education was the discussion of Title IX, which had become law just three years earlier. Today, Title IX continues to make headlines and sexual harassment and assault are important issues for advisors and students.

The '75 IFI included a session on goal setting, managing our work, and measuring outcomes. “Management by objectives” was the “flavor of the month” in management tools. Since then, we have asked: *Who Moved My Cheese?* Next, we moved from *Good to Great*.

Did we know AFA would persist 40 years? We didn't know if it would make it to five years. I was determined we would put the constitution and bylaws into action and lay a foundation for success. Collectively, thoughtfully, incrementally, the early leadership team moved the fledgling organization forward. Early on, we identified some extraordinary leaders who elevated the performance of AFA without losing its essential nature as a network of caring, capable professionals who believed in the opportunities offered by affiliation with fraternal organizations and with each other.

What about today's fraternity/sorority advisors? I envy the improved communication tools they have available, and am concerned that reliance on the digital dismisses the impact of face-to-face interaction. I regret there is much more turnover. It is a concern for chapters who benefit from continuity and experience and for the student affairs professionals who, over time, build life-long bonds with remarkable students and colleagues.

At the '75 IFI, the late professor Robert Shaffer said something about our work which has stayed with me. He said that students “are not empty bottles to be filled, but candles to be lit.” That defines the way I viewed my 11 years in fraternity/sorority advising. I hope my younger colleagues today have the chance to stand in the glow of a student's light and know they made a difference.