

The Journey to Mastery: 10,000 Hours and the Fraternity/Sorority Professional

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One of my favorite books is *Outliers: The Story of Success* by Malcolm Gladwell. I read this book several years ago on a plane returning from serving as a facilitator at UIFI. The timing was perfect as I had been experiencing a “crisis of career” so to speak, and this book had a profound impact on me.

Gladwell describes people who succeeded at a high level because of external circumstances, such as starting their careers at a time when their passionate interest was supported by the economy or a booming expansion in the technology related to their passion. In addition, he also posits “The 10,000-Hour Rule” in my favorite chapter of the book.

In this chapter, Gladwell provides study after study that suggest innate talent is important, but hard work, dedication, and practice, practice, and more practice is needed for one to become an expert in their craft. The magic number for mastery of anything seems to be 10,000 hours. That is the equivalent of about 20 hours of practice every week for 10 years.

What does this have to do with the fraternity/sorority professional? Those who intentionally choose a lengthy career in fraternity/sorority advising are few and far between. Only in this area of student affairs is the “industry standard” for a director to be a young professional with often less than five years of experience post graduate school. Unfortunately, if you work in a Division of Student Affairs that does not value expertise, as evidenced by providing support, resources, and appropriate compensation, the mastery you seek that comes with many years of practice may prove elusive.

However, we must consider another possibility. Perhaps your Division of Student Affairs indeed does value mastery, but you have not achieved mastery yet because you have not practiced your craft for roughly 10,000 hours. Be honest; we work well more than 40 hours each week, but if we were to really analyze how many of those hours were spent in true practice of the craft, working on the [*Core Competencies for Excellence in the Profession*](#), it would rarely be all of them. In other words, few of us become experts at our craft before moving on to another area of students affairs.

Dr. Gentry McCreary astutely posted [*Building a Case for Careers in Fraternity/Sorority Advising*](#) last October during Careers in Student Affairs Month. I wholeheartedly agree with McCreary; a career in fraternity/sorority advising can be just that, a career. But, who would want to stay stagnant in a career without practicing toward mastery? I offer the following recommendations for young and seasoned fraternity/sorority professionals on your road to mastery and a lengthy tenure in your role.

Frequently revisit the [*Core Competencies for Excellence in the Profession*](#). Are you an educator, values aligner, collaborator, advisor, administrator, researcher, innovator, and leader? There is a good chance your supervisor is not aware of this list of competencies,

so you must be. You cannot excel at all of these competencies at all times, but they do provide a solid frame of reference to guide you toward mastery.

Constantly engage in self-reflection and evaluation, and invite evaluation from others. As a young professional, I was often embarrassed by a program, project, or group of people gone awry (sometimes it was in my control, other times it was not) and was too proud to ask for (or hear) feedback. Know yourself – your strengths, your personality preferences, and your weaknesses – and be willing to spend the time growing in needed areas.

Invest in your own development. You *do* have time to do so, and the office *will* survive without you (even if you are a one-person office). Always attend the AFA Annual Meeting – it will recharge your batteries and provide you with a deep connection to colleagues not found in other professional circles. However, do not limit yourself to once-a-year AFA conversations and workshops. Attend NASPA, ACPA, ACUI, The Gathering, or an institute on assessment, conduct, gender identity, or another area of interest to you. Enroll in a graduate level course. Take an all day workshop on campus or in your community on a new and interesting topic. Read a book for fun and learning (Gladwell’s book, for example). The point is to keep learning.

Take time for yourself. No really. *They* will survive without you for a day, a week, or more. While you are away, be away. No really. You should not be checking/responding to email or other mind-numbing dribble. Time away could be a yoga class during the midday lunch break or it could be pick-up basketball at the gym on campus. Try making new friends with shared interests via a meet-up or go on a date (but not with any of your students, obviously). Just do something for yourself.

Finally, I offer these recommendations that parallel McCreary’s suppositions.

The politics interwoven in the business of fraternity/sorority life are very, very real. Find a mentor that can assist you in learning to navigate the complicated mixture of ethics (your own or of our profession), money, loyalty (sometimes misplaced), and relationships. A seasoned and successful professional in the University Foundation would be a smart choice.

As a fraternity/sorority professional, you will juggle relationships with more constituents than most of your professional colleagues. In order to make relationship building a priority on your schedule, you will need to be creative with the rest of your time. Look for efficiencies in administrative processes (i.e. go paperless for starters). Determine where you will make the biggest impact, and let go of what you can that will not really make an impact (i.e. relinquish control of every detail of every student-led program).

Develop a strategy to get what you need to be successful and become a master fraternity/sorority professional. Invest in yourself and be on the road to becoming a master – the type of professional your Division of Student Affairs cannot do without. Concurrently, develop relationships and find mentors that can help you advocate for your area’s human and fiscal resources. Students can be your greatest ally and advocate when

they see value in your work as a professional (surprisingly even if/when they do not *like* you) and may champion your cause with key stakeholders.

Fraternity and sorority professionals matter. Practice matters; it is the only thing that will lead to mastery.

References

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