

Member Developed Accreditation

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As fraternities and sororities become more scrutinized, it is becoming a norm for both inter/national organizations and campuses to use an accreditation program to assess their chapters. Some call it an award application, some simply call it "chapter accreditation," and others have created catchy names to reflect a university's mascot or organizational pillar. No matter what the program looks like, one common theme is every chapter is expected to turn something in as evidence that they are doing what the university or organization expects.

There are two general approaches for such a system; one approach requires a chapter to submit very specific information, and another approach is a bit more open ended. The first style often includes a binder (or more) full of details about the standards, indicating exactly what is required to meet each level or tier. Included in these large binders are attendance records, reports, and other data metrics to prove chapter effectiveness. An example in the area of scholarship could be requirements asking chapters to submit proof of meeting very specific outcomes such as attendance at programs, number of study hours for each member, etc. One concern with an accreditation program like this is the lack of freedom it allows chapters to develop processes and standards based on the needs of the individual organization. Instead, chapters are given a standardized requirement with little room for creativity.

The other end of the spectrum includes giving chapters a very loose guideline that is not a requirement at all, but just a topic. An example of this might be: "explain your chapter's scholarship program." Programs with these extremely open-ended objectives give no direction. Students are left to do whatever they want or become confused and not take the question seriously. Additionally, without more specific guidelines, it is difficult to create a common standard to benchmark success.

So, what is the appropriate way to assess chapters? Supervisors want data to use as a snapshot of overall performance, students want freedom to do what they think is necessary, and the fraternity/sorority life professional must walk the fine line of meeting the core competencies of collaborator and administrator.

The first step is to work with other parties. If every chapter's headquarters are asking for the same information, then that information should be part of the assessment. What is most important for the Vice President of Student Affairs or an Executive Director to know about each chapter? Collecting data for the sake of collecting data helps no one. Further, a successful accreditation process should exist to best serve the students. When creating (or revising) such a plan, working with chapters to see what they feel is most important in terms of operations could help them meet their needs.

According to Bresciani (2011), an assessment program should also revolve around and begin with departmentally defined learning outcomes, instead of creating outcomes that are based on a predetermined system of assessment. Such a structure should focus "on what students are learning and how they are developing in a manner producing evidence that can lead to decisions to improve learning" (Bresciani, 2011). Therefore, assessment programs must shift from measuring operations of the whole group to measuring the growth of individual members. An example of this could be changing the requirement that a chapter holds an educational program about risk management policy to a system that assesses how well they follow such a policy and how well they understand the importance of it.

Another important part of an assessment program is to continuously work with chapters to succeed. If the application is only discussed in December when it is due, then chapters will give it little thought before then. When possible, regular meetings with chapter leaders to assess performance are more effective than one large meeting once a year. Larger communities (and organizations) with many members and limited staff must become more creative to regularly check up on all chapters, not just those who frequently have risk management incidents. This sort of proactivity will not only help to keep students focused on the accreditation program, but it will also better create a collaborative partnership in time eliminating the *us vs. them* mentality.

Additionally, Sasso (2013) addresses the importance of using member engagement to assess organizational success. This could require looking beyond how many members a chapter has and instead analyzing what members are gaining from their experience. It can be easy to recognize the development of chapter officers, as their growth is likely correlated to the growth of the organization, however general members may be less invested and may or may not be meeting various learning objectives of the community, fraternity/sorority life office, or inter/national headquarters.

Like many things, there is no "one size fits all" model for chapter accreditation. The most important thing to remember is the care that must be taken when using chapter accreditation to compare one chapter to another. A chapter who has traditionally struggled should not be measured against a chapter who is continuously successful but instead should be measured against where they were in the previous evaluation. Even more important is the topic of consistency. A program that constantly changes does not measure growth over time and leaves little for the members of the organizations to understand how they can improve. In the end, the best accreditation program is specific to the individual campus and meets the developmental needs of the members.

Reference

- Bresciani, M. J. (2011). Making assessment meaningful: What new student affairs professionals and those new to assessment need to know. In *National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment*. Champaign IL: Retrieved from <http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/ABStudentAffairs.pdf>
- Sasso, P. (2013). Additional considerations in fraternity/sorority assessment. *AFA Essentials*, doi: <http://www.afa1976.org/Publications/Essentials.aspx>