Using Values as an Advising Tactic: Why the Current Approach is Flawed but Worthwhile

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Values development has been an intended outcome (or at least a hopeful byproduct) of membership in fraternity/sorority since the inception of these groups. In modern day practice, organizations espouse values front and center on their websites and in materials. Advocates of the collegiate fraternity/sorority experience believe that when members demonstrate their values, they can be seen as relevant and contributing organizations on a college campus.

Informed and trained advocates also recognize that values congruence is very difficult to actualize with traditional-aged college students.

While it is easy to say that the values movement has "always" been a part of these organizations , I believe that the last 30 years have made the topic of values and fraternities and sororities as values-based organizations a more salient focus point because (1) legal challenges have positioned us as defending the meaning of our product, (2) fraternities need a distinctive niche in a flooded market of involvement, (3) college and university presidents told us we had to focus on this (Franklin Square Group, 2003) and (4) new member and intake programs have become more focused on concepts of student development, which coincidentally has components of aligning actions with values (think Kohlberg, Baxter-Magolda, etc.). A more extensive examination of the recent history of the "values movement" can be found in Veldkamp and Bureau (2012).

Asking students to align their actions and values has been a strategy for advising fraternities and sororities for some time now. I have written numerous articles that examine strategies for using values as an approach to advising (for example, Bureau, 2007; 2009). In these articles I have used practices fraternity and sorority professionals view as vital to our work as well as literature on student development and organizational change as frameworks. I have not done research on the application of the "live your values" approach to advising but believe it has the potential to be transformative for members.

Values congruence has also been an approach promoted in numerous workshops and trainings for fraternity/sorority professionals (see any listing of AFA Annual Meeting educational sessions). Finally, AFA has a core competency focused on values alignment (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2014), which demonstrates that the field in which we work believes this skill to be essential to good advising. We have "put it out there" that this approach works, so do we now need to abandon the approach?

I believe using values as an advising tactic CAN work, but as McCreary (2014) points out, it's flawed. For me, that does not mean we need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. While I cannot counter McCreary's (2014) assertions that values as an advising tactic merits reconsideration, especially since his work is based on empirical research, I believe that by using his research and observations, as well as other student affairs and organizational change literature, we can determine ways to be more effective with using values as an advising tactics. Five reasons exist that the values conversation is more important than ever, but work needs to be done.

1. **Beginning with the product, at all levels**

McCreary (2014) posits that the term "values" is nebulous and that members do not identify values as a part of why they joined a fraternity/sorority or that they are commonly discussed among members. For values to be a recognized and celebrated part of the developmental processes that college students experience in the context of a fraternity/sorority then all educational programs and all persons responsible for the administration of educational programs should be clear on the definition of values in general and the shared values of those who choose to participate. Those who train future and current members should be prepared to have the conversation about how values develop, are sustained, and influence action. Additionally, discussions on fraternities/sororities as organizations in which values are developed and strengthened must be explained during the intake and recruitment processes.

The action needed is that all educational programs should emphasize values development, not just hope it happens. Intentionality matters in how we construct and enact educational processes to facilitate values development.

2. **The product must be aligned with student development and educational outcomes**

One of my favorite articles ever written in *Perspectives* is by Kurt Foriska (2004). He explained that we have an obligation to "push students through the vectors." This reference to Chickering's theory of identity development is loaded with a charge to our work: we must commit to helping students progress through natural and appropriate stages of development, acknowledging they will not always "get it" and that they will make mistakes. Regardless of the challenges, helping students progress through these outcomes is indeed our foremost priority. McCreary (2014) uses the concept of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008) to explain a reason that values exploration is not a proper advising technique. I argue that because of the goals of self-authorship, which includes grounding one's self in a foundation of values and beliefs, that we SHOULD incorporate values exploration into our work with students. The challenge lies more in how persons who are tasked with facilitating student development are prepared and competent to be good company "on the journey" as Baxter Magolda (2008) might say.

The action needed is that we have to become more skilled at having conversations that foster the basic human development of the students with whom we work.

3. **Shifting language is needed**

"Values" conversations happen all of the time but they are not always framed as a "values" conversation. In his piece in this issue of *Essentials*, McCreary (2014) presents the option of using "brotherhood," "standards" and "expectations" as options. I agree. These can be effective strategies. I think these words, while more recognizable, are actually VERY value-laden. Language matters: we have tried to change the language often in the fraternal movement (think rush to recruitment, think pledging to intake) but what we fail to do is understand the power behind the words or the need to explain the language in a way that makes sense to those with whom we are speaking.

The action needed is that we must become better at talking about values in ways that make sense to those who have yet to define these values for themselves. Emphasizing the vehicles and practices through which we develop values (i.e. practicing brotherhood) and the

actions that demonstrate values (i.e. living up to the expectation of my chapter) may be better conversation strategies.

4. **Expand the reach of our work**

McCreary (2014) explains we spend most of our time with the students who "get it," our campus and community leaders. I agree. I also believe we spend a decent amount of time with those who do not "get it," for whom values conversations will be even more difficult. Using values as an advising tactic must be tailored to the audience to whom we are speaking – values congruence may be easier for those who "get it" but values congruence is an important conversation for those who do not. As explained above, part of our job is to move students to be more in line with community values, expectations, and standards. However, there are those in the middle with whom we likely never interact. This is a failure of our work.

As T.J. Sullivan (2012) explains, we need to spend time with the middle; figure out what drives them. When we go to the middle, rather than wait for the top and bottom to come to us, we can advocate for a cause. If our cause is values congruence, then we might spend time helping those in the middle get closer to where we hope they will be and where others expect them to be.

The action needed is to reach beyond our typical students and help all members move to a place where values are recognized and they are working on aligning their actions and beliefs with those of the group.

5. **We ourselves must be clear on how our work, our organization, and personal values align**

McCreary (2014) does well to explain the challenges of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008) in young adults. These same young adults that have yet to internalize their internal foundation in college, become student affairs professionals on campuses and at headquarters, as well as alumni and graduate volunteers, who have yet to actualize their sense of self. Our journey occurs alongside of the students with whom we work. We should be further along; however, we are also exploring who we are, what drives us, and how we commit to the fraternal movement and higher education as a profession. Sometimes when we attempt to have values conversations, the students with whom we work can see we are not authentic: they see we do not always demonstrate the values we ask them to uphold.

My dissertation research (Bureau, 2011) focused on how student affairs graduate students developed a set of values they believe were important in student affairs. Each of the 17 students in the study were able to identify values but many said they were still cementing them as their own. They knew abstract concepts such as diversity, responsibility, and caring were values of our field, but their enactment was not yet perfect. They were still learning. While they were admittedly not perfect, they knew they needed to align their selves with the values of the profession. Similarly, our students' movement toward values congruence may be more progressed than we might think or maybe they are not as far along as we hope. It does not matter, the movement toward adopting and integrating values is a part of socialization in any part of life; should we not help our students move closer to these (yes, externally defined but still meaningful) ideals espoused of their fraternity/sorority?

The action needed is that we must also be good company on the journey, acknowledging we are also a work in progress. Understanding human limitations toward aligning desired values with actions but pushing forward to nurture appropriate student development and learning,

we can guide all students to the place they may not know they want or need to go but that our organizations, campuses, communities, and society needs.

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