

Creating Student Ownership through Accreditation

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Assessment and accreditation processes are becoming increasingly prevalent in our fraternity and sorority (FS) communities as well as on college campuses. It has become a part of the culture with many campuses and national organizations, which is undoubtedly a good thing as it has provided the opportunity for FS professionals to measure what chapters have accomplished during the previous year. Typically, campuses have an accreditation process with certain standards or values by which these chapters will be assessed and awarded.

An interesting aspect for us to consider is what criteria students are being assessed on, and who is coming up with the criteria on our campuses. Who is defining what it means to be a successful organization on a given campus? Typically this will be a campus-based professional who is developing them and making adjustments. As campus-based professionals, I believe we need to put more responsibility on the students to define what it means to be successful. This begins by giving chapter leaders an opportunity to define the standards they will be accountable for during the accreditation process.

By doing this, students are likely to develop more of the coveted buy-in that is sometimes missing from the accreditation process. Not only that, but student participation will help when the time comes to evaluate your standards and accreditation process. As stated in the fraternity and advising programs section of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), FS communities should “regularly review their missions” which must be “appropriate for the institution’s populations and community settings.” The way groups are assessed needs to continue to evolve and improve with the changing landscape of higher education and our FS communities. Continuing to involve students during this evaluation process can give the students an opportunity to re-commit and also be pushed to improve the standards of the community.

In addition, as a part of the process of assessing and evaluating these standards, community stakeholders should be made aware of the results (Mitistifer, 2012). I believe we need to continue to promote the concept that community stakeholders should be involved during, as well as after, the accreditation process. There are times when the human element is taken out of the accreditation process. Contrastingly, I believe we should strive to incorporate it as much as possible. Asking campus faculty, staff, and other stakeholders to conduct interviews or another form of in-person assessment could help to benefit the community in different ways. Students would be able to connect with the campus more by meeting new people and receiving direct and immediate feedback. The people conducting these interviews will not only be able to connect with the community better, but also be able to provide ideas on how to better serve the mission of the institution. In fact, other than hard statistics (such as dollars raised or grade point averages), I believe these in-person assessments should be utilized heavily in the accreditation process. Recognizing that there is a subjective element to this, there should be an appropriate balance between reports and interviews.

As Steve pointed out, there are a number of instances where a chapter’s headquarters will be asking for the same information as the campus. It is important that campus-based professionals streamline this process for the students, and work to collaborate with headquarters staff to make this an easier process. As students and staff can attest to, the accreditation process can be very time consuming, especially if students are filling out long reports and binders. Campus and headquarters staff, as well as students, are very busy people and having all three work together on reporting processes would benefit everyone in

the long run. This is especially true for the students as they could be spending their time doing more for the community rather than filling out repetitive reports.

Student and stakeholder involvement in the accreditation process is important to creating a long-term vision for the community. Involving the students in the formation and evaluation of your community mission and accreditation standards helps to create ownership. Furthermore, this could help to ensure your students are not limited in their standards, and it can create an opportunity for students to take on some of their community's biggest issues as a part of their accreditation. Consistency is important, but so is steady improvement, and allowing more involvement from stakeholders and students can greatly help in that process.

References

Mitstifer, D. I. (2012). *CAS professional standards for higher education*. Washington, DC: Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education