

# The Challenge of Values Congruence

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Conversations about values and values congruence have been a ubiquitous feature of the “fraternal movement” for at least the last decade. There is nothing wrong with the idea of values congruence. It is a noble goal, for ourselves as individuals, and for the organizations we advise and with whom we work. The problem with the values movement is not in the nobility of the goal but in our manner of promoting values congruence. We have taken a beautiful goal and dumbed it down to the point of irrelevance – instead of creating opportunities to promote values congruence, our approach has been to promote values congruence by “guilting” students into living their values. This is an incredibly ineffective strategy. Here are four reasons why:

## 1. The term “values” is nebulous

Imagine the average, run of the mill fraternity chapter on your campus. Imagine walking into a chapter meeting at that chapter house and asking them, “What are your standards?” You might expect to hear about minimum GPA requirements or minimum standards for recruitment. Now, imagine walking into a chapter meeting and asking them “What are your expectations for members?” Again, you might get answers related to paying dues, attending events, and certain behavioral expectations.

Finally, imagine asking them, “What does your chapter value?” What answers do you expect that you might get? The values written in their ritual book, or the values espoused in their daily activities? As my colleague Josh Schutts (2013) has suggested, we value those things on which we spend our time. So, what does that chapter value? Drinking beer? Chasing girls? Hazing pledges? Are those not values? If a student values those things, and does those things, are they not “living their values?”

Merely using the term “values” is problematic. It is nebulous. It could mean anything. Different people respond to the word in very different ways.

## 2. Values are not an explicitly overt part of brotherhood

Brotherhood can be thought of as the foundation of the fraternal experience. It is the currency of fraternity – it is exchanged by members and sold to potential new members. My research with Josh Schutts has identified four distinct ways that fraternity men think about brotherhood – brotherhood based on solidarity, brotherhood based on shared social experiences, brotherhood based on belonging, and, the highest form of brotherhood, brotherhood based on accountability. When building the Fraternal Brotherhood Questionnaire (FBQ), the instrument we designed to measure the four schema of brotherhood, we used the terms “values” “expectations” and “standards” interchangeably in building items to measure the accountability factor (i.e. brotherhood is best demonstrated when members are held to the chapter’s standards/expectations/values). When we completed the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the proposed factors, a funny thing happened – many of the items that used the words “standards” and “expectations” loaded onto the accountability factor as expected. Not a single item that used the word “values” loaded to the accountability factor.

Naturally, we suspected that perhaps values are separate from standards and expectations, so we attempted to force a fifth factor using the “values” items. In the resulting EFA, the values items did not even load with one another, indicating absolutely no consistency in how the participants responded to the term “values.” In other words, when it comes to holding chapter members accountable, the “values” of any given chapter are completely different

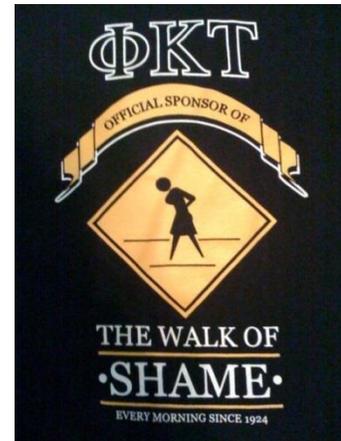
depending on who you ask, and members do not think about values when they think about accountability. Rather, they think about standards and expectations.

Conceptually, this makes sense to me. Moses didn't come down from Mt. Sinai with the "10 Values." Two major world religions are not built from a list of vague values – they are built from a set of very specific standards and expectations. After all, "thou shalt not kill" is a little more straightforward than "thou shalt value human life." If we are looking to alter behavior through accountability to values, then we may be spinning our wheels.

### **3. New members are not joining values (or are they)?**

We have all seen our fair share of distasteful "rush" T-shirts. Have you ever stopped to wonder why we continue to see them, year after year? Could it be they are effective at recruiting new members?

Many of us live in a bubble where the majority of the students we interact with on a daily basis "get it" and want their chapters to be more congruent with espoused values. I would argue those students represent a very small fraction of the fraternity/sorority members on any given campus. I would further argue those students likely have little to no influence in the day-to-day operation of their chapters, which is probably why they spend so much time in our offices.



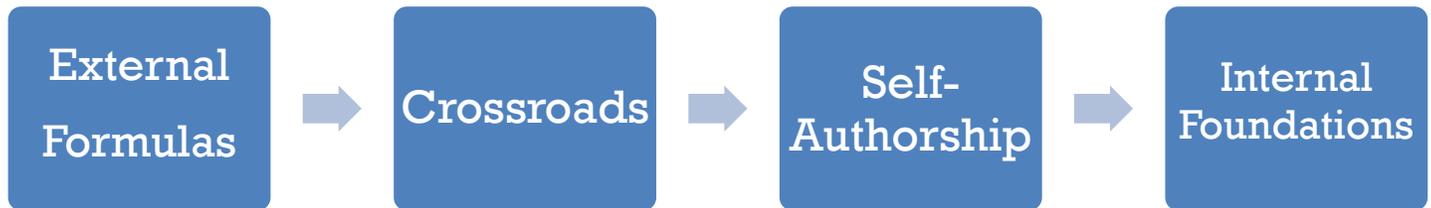
Some of us may have even deluded ourselves into thinking that WE joined OUR organizations because of the values of the group. I would call this selective memory at best. When I came to the University of Tennessee in the fall of 1997, I had no idea what a fraternity was. I could not have been less interested. But my friend Lake Elliot convinced me to go with him to the Alpha Gamma Rho house our first weekend on campus, and the rest is history. It was a place where I felt comfortable, with a group of guys I really connected with. I joined because I felt like I belonged there. In hindsight, it is easy for me to see the connection between my sense of belonging and the values I shared with both the organization and those in the chapter, but I would be lying to myself and to you if I said that I joined the values. I joined a group of people with whom I felt I had a great deal in common. I valued those people, but I didn't join for values.

The fact is students join chapters for a variety of reasons. Many join to get drunk and have a good time, because that is what they value. In those cases, would the rush shirt depicted above not qualify as "values-based recruitment?" Students are not joining values, but their values play a significant role in where and why they join. The term "values-based recruitment" is one we need to remove from our lexicon. Students are not joining values, and we need to break out of our fantasy dream-world where they do. Expecting people to live out the values of an organization, when those values had little to no influence in their decision to join that organization, is an adventure in futility.

### **4. Trying to force students to live the values of their organizations presents some developmental challenges**

As a field, we love to talk about students "getting it." I cannot count the number of conversations I have had with colleagues either bragging about their UIFI group "totally getting it" or lamenting the students on their campuses "not getting it." In the spirit of conformity, I may have even uttered those words a few times myself. But what is this

mythical “it” that students are supposed to be “getting.” What is it, exactly, that we want from our students?



I assume we want our students to “live their values.” Turns out, most of us studied a theory in graduate school that directly speaks to this idea. If you’ve read Baxter Magolda’s (2008) theory of self-authorship, then the graphic above should look familiar. As adolescents, external formulas guide our path, as we largely pursue our lives as others (parents, teachers) have told us. At some point, we hit a crossroads where those external formulas no longer work for us, and we begin to develop self-authorship (the ability to determine our own life course). Finally, we develop internal foundations, which is a fancy term for values congruence – we develop our own set of personal values, and live our lives in accordance to those values. According to Baxter-Magolda, most adults don’t reach Internal Foundations until their mid-thirties (which means, ironically, that most fraternity/sorority advisors have yet to truly establish values congruence).

So what does this all have to do with the values movement? We like to tell students that they should live their organization’s values (the ones that are written in the ritual), instead of whatever values they happen to be living at the time. When we do this, what we are actually doing is imposing a different external formula on them. In effect, we are saying “I don’t like your values, so here – take these values and live them.” If we were truly concerned about student development, we would be creating cognitive dissonance in a way that would lead to a series of crossroads and, eventually, self-authorship. Conversations about how actions reflect values can and should be part of creating that dissonance, but when we impose new external formulas on our students, we are potentially retarding their growth and development.

### **So, What *Should* We Be Doing?**

I am ready to declare the end of the “values movement” and the birth of the “brotherhood/sisterhood movement.” We have been talking about values congruence for the last 20 years, and where has it gotten us? We need a new paradigm – a new entry point into the conversation with students. My research and work with students has led me to believe, very strongly, that conversations about values need to be replaced with conversations about brotherhood and sisterhood. Through these conversations, we can allow students to see for themselves that brotherhood/sisterhood without accountability isn’t really brotherhood or sisterhood at all. Once they embrace accountability as an essential part of the fraternal experience, the movement to chapters that are congruent with espoused values is inevitable.

I also think we need to focus more of our time, energy and effort on the moral development of our students. As I asked in *Perspectives* (2012), what if we spent as many resources on the moral development of our students as we did on the leadership development of our students? Leadership is sexy, but the empirical evidence linking increases in moral development with declines in anti-social behavior (hazing, sexual assault, cheating, to name a few) is overwhelming. If we do more to boost the moral judgment of our students, then

values congruence should come about as a result. We can do this by infusing co-curricular experiences that involve social justice and service learning into the fraternal experience, and by incorporating moral and ethical dilemma into our conversations about leadership.

### References

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