

Fraternity/Sorority Advisors: An Unaffiliated Perspective

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Most fraternity and sorority advisors are affiliated. Many held leadership roles in their chapters, and some even travelled for their organizations. I am unaffiliated. I have never even been through recruitment or any sort of ritual. While I have had countless conversations about being an unaffiliated fraternity and sorority advisor, it is difficult to articulate when I put pen to paper. My intent is not to justify why I am an effective advisor, but I do not want to discount the hard work required to get here. At the end of the day, an advisor's affiliation has little to do with his or her ability to effectively advise fraternity and sorority students. Advising has everything to do with ability to enhance the experience for students and fraternity/sorority members.

In interviews, I used to say the benefit to hiring me is that "I have an outside perspective, and the students learn how to better articulate their experience by working with me." While I do not necessarily view myself as an outsider anymore, everything is still new, shiny, and fascinating. If someone brings up anything fraternity or sorority related, my eyes light up, and I immediately strike up a conversation. I read everything possible and ask a lot of questions. I am a fraternity and sorority nerd.

That being said, I do not look at things the same way most affiliated advisors do; I am a programmer and event planner at heart. I think in terms of logistics, risk management, and inclusiveness. Is it efficient? How can we make it safer? How do we include more people and get others involved? How can it be improved upon? Part of my perspective is that there is always room for improvement. Greek Week is the reason I became involved with Fraternity and Sorority Life. Is it a pain? Usually. Are students competitive for the wrong reasons? Yes. Should it be eliminated on some campuses? Probably. My role as an advisor is to challenge the status quo. When I think about Greek Week, I see a world of possibilities. It is a competition at best and a nuisance at worst. But is there a way to harness that competitiveness and steer it toward the values on which the organizations were founded and create a more open atmosphere for the rest of campus? Absolutely.

Despite my fascination with fraternities and sororities, I do not know everything, and I am constantly learning from my students. When they tell me I don't "get it," I promptly respond, "help me understand." My role as an advisor is to help the students articulate their experience as well as understand the importance of articulating it to outsiders. Sure, you can go to lots of parties and you have a dozen closets and shoes at your disposal. But are those good reasons to join? Probably not.

Many things in fraternities and sororities are foreign to me and always will be. I know how to counsel students and plan a flawless event, but I will never truly understand Panhellenic Recruitment. "Tradition" holds little weight with me if you cannot explain why it is a tradition or why it is important, which makes it difficult to communicate with students who cling so tightly to something so seemingly meaningless. The things that come naturally to an affiliated advisor because of their undergraduate experience, I learned as a graduate assistant.

Ultimately, advising fraternities and sororities is not about affiliation (or lack thereof). It is about the students and advisors' ability to relate to them. It is about helping them make the most of the experience as a fraternity/sorority member and a college student. In my short time with fraternities and sororities, I have found a few things that have made me successful as an unaffiliated advisor.



Be intentional about language. Using words like “my organization” will make a huge difference in conversations with students and potential employers. Instead of getting caught up in the fact that the organization is not a fraternity or sorority, they hear the message and experience. Do the research; learn the buzz words and specificities of organizations on campus. It will be easier to talk to headquarters staff and advisors with an understanding of the organization discovered ahead of time.

Attend events that chapters host, especially when invited. Ask questions about the chapter. Use specific knowledge about each organization in conversations. The students will appreciate your interest in them and the organization. Gaining the trust of the students and advisors is vital to being successful as an unaffiliated advisor. When making a tough call, it is important to know what backing is present. Ask many questions, and secure support from supervisors and colleagues – especially if they are affiliated. Thankfully, my graduate supervisor always supported my decisions. Not only did this give me confidence, but as a result, the students quickly began to trust my thought process and decision-making skills.

Most importantly, be passionate, dedicated, and have a thick skin. There are some things with which an unaffiliated advisor will not be able to identify, and some schools, students, and professionals will not be open to an unaffiliated advisor. Remember why you advise fraternities and sororities and what inspired you in the first place. I love fraternities and sororities and the challenges that come with my job, and I would not change my undergraduate experience. That experience is what gives me my unique perspective and sets me apart as an advisor.

There are benefits and challenges to fraternity and sorority advising no matter the perspective or affiliation. While an affiliated advisor can easily relate to the students based on their shared experiences, an unaffiliated advisor can challenge the status quo and push students to think outside the box. Both types of advisors add value to the student experience and the profession.