More than Just a Buzzword
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I hate student affairs buzzwords. Anyone in this field who knows me can tell you there's very little I hate more. I once proposed the AFA Foundation should do "buzzword bingo" as a fundraiser at the Annual Meeting, so every time a presenter said "live your values" or "toxic hegemonic hypermasculinity" participants could mark off a square and win fabulous prizes (much to my chagrin, this idea was immediately rejected).

For the last few years, I have lumped "vulnerability" in with all of the other buzzwords that get mindlessly tossed around in our industry. I heard colleagues using the word without really describing what it meant, or the context in which they meant it, so I wrote vulnerability off as another shiny object that would soon hit the FSL garbage heap alongside the values movement and bystander training.

I was wrong.

Vulnerability is an incredibly important aspect of the fraternity and sorority experience, because vulnerability leads to belonging.

Much has been written about the importance of belonging in higher education in the last 10 years. Perhaps the most well-known work in this area is the research of Terrell Strayhorn (2012), whose "College Students' Sense of Belonging" provides an in-depth review of the belonging of various student sub-groups and provides us with a working definition of belonging as it relates to college students: "a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 3). Belonging has been connected to retention, persistence, graduation, and overall satisfaction with the collegiate experience (Strayhorn, 2012). Through research at Dyad Strategies, we have found strong linkages between belonging and organizational commitment, identification, and overall satisfaction with the fraternity/sorority experience. In other words, the single most important predictor of the ultimate success or failure of a fraternity or sorority is the extent to which members feel a sense of belonging, and nothing creates that as much as activities which foster and encourage vulnerability.

Fraternities and the Solidarity/Belonging Mistake
The research we have conducted at Dyad Strategies demonstrates most fraternity chapters in America are focused on the creation of solidarity as the primary outcome of the new member education process. We have measured this quantitatively through our Hazing Rationale Scale, which measures fraternity members' beliefs about the underlying purpose of new member

education (Solidarity, Loyalty/Commitment, Social Dominance, or Instrumental Education), but we have also observed this mindset qualitatively. In asking fraternity new member educators about the primary purpose of their new member education program, the most common response is "to build a bonded, unified pledge class." In other words, the building of solidarity.

This belief is strongly predictive of hazing attitudes – the "tried and true" method of bringing a group of new members together is to put them through a difficult experience. In the struggle to survive the rigors of the new member process, the conventional wisdom goes and new members come together, unify, and demonstrate a commitment to one another in overcoming the obstacles of pledging.

As we have studied this topic in more depth, we have found solidarity of the new member class is not an end, but rather a means to an end. In other words, fraternities do not seek to produce solidarity for its own sake, but they seek to produce solidarity in the hopes the creation of this unity will create members who are committed to one another and, subsequently, to the chapter. Solidarity is the means by which commitment is hopefully achieved.

This is the biggest mistake most fraternities in America make. Through research at Dyad Strategies, belonging, and not solidarity, is what produces the most committed members. A difficult new member process designed to build solidarity will produce a bond ending with the feeling of accomplishment at the conclusion of the process, and the shared pride in having persevered through such a difficult task. But, if the fraternity has not taken steps to ensure these new members are connected to one another in deep, meaningful ways, the bonds of solidarity will be short-lived and will not result in any long-term commitment to their chapter brothers or to the chapter itself.

The creation of belonging, and not solidarity, is what builds the most committed members, and nothing has shown greater effectiveness in building belonging than moments of vulnerability. Most famously, Brene' Brown has spoken and written about vulnerability a great deal in recent years. If you are unfamiliar with Brown's work, she has spent 20 years trying to understand human connection, and her research has led her to an understanding that, in order for meaningful connection to happen, people must allow themselves to be seen. What Brown (2010) has found in her research suggests people who feel a real sense of belonging and connection share a few traits in common. They demonstrate authenticity – they are comfortable with who they really are and do not feel the need to pretend to be something or someone they are not. In addition, they are vulnerable – they demonstrate a willingness to share things about themselves with no guarantee of how people will respond. Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in fraternities and sororities.

In new member education, this happens through the creation of activities which require new members to open up to one another and share deep, personal things about themselves. This creation of vulnerability – sharing things about themselves with no guarantee of how others will respond – is a powerful force for building belonging among new members. The good news is most fraternities are already doing this through a pre-initiation ritual requiring new members to open up and share deep secrets about themselves. Many fraternity members will readily talk about the impact of the experience, and will often say it was the most powerful moment of their new member process and the time where they felt the most connected to their brothers. But, most fraternities have an activity like this only once during their new member process. Imagine how much more powerful the sense of belonging would be if fraternities had these activities regularly throughout the new member process. As professionals, we would be wise to spend our time helping our fraternities first understand the importance of belonging, how vulnerability leads to belonging, and then helping them develop activities for their members (both new and old) which will create opportunities for that vulnerability to occur.

Sororities and the Shared Social/Belonging Mistake
Sorority women make a similar, although distinct, mistake to the one made by fraternity men. Instead of focusing on solidarity during the new member process, they focus on the shared social experience. The logic in sororities tends to be "if we can make sure the new members have lots of fun, they'll love the sorority and be good, committed members." In most cases, instead of showering their new members with hazing, they shower their new members with gifts and fun social activities, seeking to build emotional commitment through a host of fun activities. But, as is the case with fraternities, these activities often fall short of building a meaningful connection leading to commitment. Our work as professionals with sororities should focus on helping them develop activities for members (new and old) which promote deep conversations, vulnerability, and authenticity in ways that help these women establish powerful emotional connections to one another and to the organization.

Our research at Dyad Strategies has shown women in sororities often feel less of a sense of connection and belonging than fraternity men. This is likely the result of a confluence of factors – a recruitment system that does not allow for the creation of meaningful conversations and relationships, larger new member class sizes which make intimate, vulnerable conversations more difficult to facilitate, and a culture often rooted more in the protection of social status than in authentic and meaningful connections. Regardless of the cause, the lack of belonging experienced by sorority members is a problem worthy of our attention as we seek to help our chapters succeed.

Conclusion
Phired Up Productions has published some excellent research related to the reason fraternity

and sorority members leave their organizations. They found lack of connection and misaligned expectations are the most common reasons members leave (Coffey-Melchiorre, 2013). I would advance that research by suggesting members join looking for a group of people with whom they will truly belong – a place where they will feel connected, valued, and appreciated. The members who leave are those who do not find a place of meaningful connection. *The greatest unmet expectation in the fraternity/sorority experience IS the expectation of belonging.*

The single most important thing fraternities and sororities can do to address apathy, retention, or motivation issues is to focus more time, energy, and effort on the creation of belonging. By providing more opportunities for members, especially new members, to engage in deep conversations – conversations requiring courage, authenticity, and vulnerability – our fraternity and sorority chapters will see less apathy, better retention, higher motivation, and overall happier and more connected members.

As fraternity/sorority professionals, the single most important thing *we* can do is provide guidance and frameworks for chapters to develop brotherhood and sisterhood programs aimed at fostering vulnerability though meaningful dialogue and a deeper sense of connection.

Indeed, vulnerability is more than just a buzzword – it is a powerful force for good and may offer us our best hope at helping our students experience fraternity and sorority to the fullest.

References

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