Managing Our Growth
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Fraternity and sorority life is booming right now. Even with all the publicity we have gotten in the past year, students are joining in ever-increasing numbers, more chapters are opening and expanding, and headquarters and campus staffs are adding positions to keep up with all this growth. At the 2013 Annual Meeting, I attended a session entitled "Forecasting the Future of Fraternity" in which the presenters articulated their belief that our communities would continue to grow at a massive rate as more and more students attend college and seek out their place to belong. Most recent data shows the 2013 forecast to be holding true as interest in membership in fraternal organizations stays strong and chapter sizes continue to rise.

This is good news. Rising interest and membership serve as signs we do still matter to collegians; the great numbers also enable us to impact the campus and surrounding communities for the better. But, in all of our movement to expand and grow, have we grown too fast? Have we grown beyond our current capacity to provide the care, direction, and support that our organizations need? **The growth we are having cannot be considered successful unless we recognize and address some of the problems that come along with it.**

- Changing things across the board is hard. Kotter (2012) notes the initial steps to change include establishing a sense of urgency and communicating the change vision broadly. With smaller organizations, moving forward is easy; the nimbleness of the organization allows it to create that urgency, communicate visions, and create buy-in across all the membership. With our increasingly large organizations, how do we reach everyone? Most of our communication from headquarters and campuses goes to a few chapter leaders and advisors. We need to ensure everyone understands why a new initiative is essential. And, even more, we need to continue to share and keep the entire membership focused on the shifts in our organizations that we are or ought to be making. In this regard, our continually increasing organizational size can hinder our success.
- Our work and organizations become less personalized and more bureaucratic. In our current educational world, students want that personal touch and want to belong to something where they can know others and be known. With increasing populations, often without increased staff or volunteer support, we move from seeing students as members and people to just a name or a number on a spreadsheet. When we lose that personal touch, we lose our ability to justify or encourage programming to individuals; we cannot say, "this matters to you because…" because we do not have those relationships. We also have to remember Dunbar's number, revisited by Gentry McCreary in his discussion of what mega-sororities can learn from mega-churches. There is a limit to the number of connections individuals can have and maintain, and this does not just go for the chapter members. It also holds true for chapter and campus advisors and headquarters staff – they

cannot help the chapter succeed if they are only able to have contact or relationships with small numbers of officers.

- Standards are harder to maintain. This is not to say that we are not trying to hold all of our chapters to high standards. But, when we have larger chapters there can be a tendency to lean on them for financial support, for staffing, or for housing. If a chapter is struggling to uphold its inter/national standards, but resides in a ten million dollar facility that requires XX members to stay open, removing members can have major financial implications as well. Large groups cause more ripples through the organization. Additionally, for the undergraduate members, addressing negative behaviors from a place of care is harder when you do not know the individuals on a personal level. The bureaucracy tends to set in and overshadow the "we are concerned about you" attitude that ought to be present in standards discussions.

Am I advocating for less growth? Certainly not; it is good for our organizations and good for the communities in which we live and serve. But, for us to continue being people and values-focused organizations, in order for us to continue to be successful, we need to have the people and policies in place that will allow us to keep the standards and performances of our groups high. We need to acknowledge that increased numbers shifts the way we work. To that end, we need to work to:

- Increase staff or advisor support. In saying this, I offer Deeg's Corollary to Dunbar's Rule: for every 150 members in a community or organization, there should be at least 1 staff/advisor touch-point. Many advisory boards have individual advisors for each officer position; this would also provide for advisors for each member of the chapter. In increasing our available and invested advisors, we move away from the bureaucracy and back to the personal foundations of fraternity. Beyond advising the officers, both campus and volunteer staff get a broader glimpse of the chapter's struggles, needs, and strengths, which will allow us to move beyond the generic to more prescriptive work with our members. At the headquarters level, we need to continue adding staff, not to the expansion team but to chapter services, to provide advice and education for our ever-growing numbers. And we need to increase the communication between all of these entities. With the increases in technology, there is no reason our campus staff, volunteers, and headquarters staff cannot be on the same page with the needs of our chapters.
- Embrace cellular division. In McCreary's blog post, he mentions using small groups in chapters to provide greater internal connection. We need to embrace this concept and not grow our chapters so big as to be unwieldy. Gary Hamel (2002) advocates for cellular division, keeping units small, noting "by keeping units small and focused, cellular division keeps general managers close to the voice of the customer" (p. 279). This shrinking can make our chapters and regions more manageable and can lead to that community of care that can be lost as a byproduct of growing beyond our personal reaches.

- Create or increase chapter dossiers. I know we receive some information about the chapter through their awards and reporting process. But, for us to be successful in helping them shape a positive experience, we need to have a broader understanding of the internal culture. When chapter consultants visit or chapter advisors work with officers, beyond checking on the overall health and wellbeing of the chapter, they have an opportunity to gather data on the chapter—what things matter to the members, what is the overall chapter culture, and why are people joining and staying. All of this data can be used to personalize educational and developmental efforts. We always encourage our students to ask "why things matter;" doing this ourselves will help us explain before they even ask.

Our success as organizations cannot be measured by growth; it is measured by the impact we have on the members both during and following their collegiate experience. Increase that impact and we will continue to grow; fail to recognize and address the issues that growth brings with it and we will fail in our ultimate mission to make better men and women.

References

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