

Access and Involvement: Structuring Success for Fraternities and Sororities on a Commuter Campus

Michael Giacalone, Rhode Island College

The benefits that come along with student involvement are well documented. The paradigm for involvement, however, is often centered around the traditional residential student. While many students, fraternity and sorority affiliated and not, fit within those limits, there are those that do not. On a primarily (85%) commuter campus, our office defines success as making the fraternity and sorority experience accessible, so it can be used as a pathway to involvement.

Alexander Astin (1984) defines involvement as, “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). Commuter students are often stereotyped as neither being involved, nor being interested in getting involved in campus life. Research, however, shows these students still do want to be involved and can even feel as connected as residential students (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013).

The Rhode Island College student population is reflective of traits associated with commuter students and fraternity and sorority communities on commuter campuses. Students balance a number of life roles and jobs and arrange their courses to fit their schedules, leaving many with little time on campus. With limited time on campus, students can have difficulty creating the support networks they need at their colleges (Wilmes & Quade, 1986). In one of the few articles about fraternity and sorority communities on commuter campuses, Debbie Heida (1986) describes these communities as young, created to increase involvement and school spirit, having smaller than average chapters, and having members who feel their inter/national organizations do not understand their needs as commuter students.

Knowing this about our students and community, our office creates a structure to encourage membership in fraternities and sororities as a way to get involved. For example, our policies support students with busy schedules and multiple responsibilities by allowing the students to participate even if they are enrolled part-time. Events are planned when they are on campus—mainly Monday through Thursday—in order to accommodate schedules. To help the students develop a sense of “place” while on campus, we advocate for them to each have their own office in the Student Union, even though the spaces are limited. Finally, since many of the students are working more than one job to pay for their dues (which are relatively low, leading to small operational budgets), the chapters are supported financially to host all-fraternity/sorority events, and the students are supported financially to attend leadership events such as the Northeast Greek Leadership Association (NGLA) Annual Conference.

Once involved in their fraternities and sororities, the students are positioned to become involved in other ways on campus. They become target groups for service opportunities on and off campus, campus jobs (including orientation leader, resident assistant, and tour guide positions), leadership development programming, and participation in other organizations and their events. The role our office takes in making these connections varies, but many of the students use the fraternity and sorority experience as an initial connection with the campus and that then opens opportunities to further their involvement once they understand its importance.

While we work to make the fraternity and sorority experience as accessible as possible, there are some things we cannot control. We cannot take classes for the students. We cannot waive membership dues. We cannot make an impactful fraternity and sorority experience a thirty minute a week commitment. We cannot change the life circumstances our students have outside of campus life such as caring for family members. Due to these reasons, not all students will be able to participate in fraternity and sorority life. If we believe, however, that the fraternity and sorority experience can be a powerful one, then in order to be successful it is up to us to create an accessible experience that serves as a place to start with campus involvement.

References

- Alfano, H. J. & Eduljee, N. B. (2013). Differences in work, levels of involvement, and academic performance between residential and commuter students. *College Student Journal* 47(2), 334-342.
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 518-529.
- Heida, D. (1986). Greek systems on predominantly commuter campuses. *NASPA Journal* 24(1), 48-50.
- Jacoby, B. (2000a). Why involve commuter students in learning? *New Directions for Higher Education No. 109: Involving Commuter Students in Learning*, 3-12.
- Wilmes, M. B. & Quade, S. L. (1986). Perspectives on programming for commuters: Examples of good practice. *NASPA Journal* 24(1), 25-35.