

Awards Programs & Accreditation: What are the Outcomes?

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You generally get more of what you measure and what you reward.

It's a common ritual for fraternity/sorority life offices to have an annual awards program to honor individuals and groups for achieving excellence. Some of these programs are elaborate and some are simple. Some will have a large percentage of the community attend while others will have a smaller audience in a banquet format. Some have many awards, even ones named after individuals and donors, and some focus only on a few areas. Some budgets are large and some are more moderate. So, what is the purpose of these programs, and do they make a difference?

The most frequently stated purpose of these awards programs is to honor those who have achieved excellence. It is a way to showcase individuals for their leadership and to showcase groups for their good works. Highlighting individuals and groups who adhere to the stated values of the fraternity/sorority (F&S) community is a way to show other individuals and groups how they can live out their values, and it provides a roadmap for those coming after what they need to achieve. It focuses attention on those who we want to emulate. (Sometimes we pay a lot of attention to those individuals and groups who cause problems and not enough to those who go beyond the basic expectations.)

This process takes advantage of Social Norming Theory. The theory says you get more compliance to rules when you showcase the number of individuals and groups that adhere to the policies, which is generally the majority, rather than focusing on those who are not upholding policies or laws.

The key to awards programs is three-fold: rewarding behavior relatively soon after the behavior (i.e. B.F. Skinner), having meaningful awards, and making the process very public. Many schools conduct these programs relatively close to the end of the year using the previous year's data to determine the awards. There are even some schools that conduct shorter awards programs each semester to take advantage of rewarding behavior closer to when it occurs. Finding meaningful awards can take many paths, but one easy way is to either form an awards committee comprised of various constituents or use your governing councils to check in regularly to see if what you're rewarding and the awards are in alignment with what they value and find meaningful. And publicizing the award recipients outside the F&S community is crucial if they are to have meaning. (Sometimes we're our own best kept secret.) The public needs to know of the good work individual members achieve and what the groups are achieving. I know several schools that take

out full-page ads in their student newspapers listing who wins the awards so members, and non-members, can see the good that is happening.

Part of this process is determining what you're rewarding. For individuals, the process is a bit simpler. Generally, there are some outstanding individuals who are regularly cited. But, if the awards are to be more inclusive, then more categories are needed beyond the usual "Greek Man & Woman of the Year" type of awards.

Choosing what you award to groups is a bit more of a challenge. Some schools choose to award based on their stated values (i.e. scholarship, leadership, service, and brotherhood). This can take the form of simply awarding chapters achieving above a certain threshold (i.e. all chapters achieving a graduation rate higher than the campus, performing an average of 10 hours of service/member, etc.). Or it can take the form of awarding chapters for their performance of outstanding achievements (i.e. a chapter hosting an outstanding service project that made a big impact, a chapter who had an outstanding program on academic achievement, etc.). Using an awards committee mentioned earlier is a good idea to regularly update what is important to a community and thus what is important to award. For example, one community chose, among many items to award, to award fire safety after a tragic fire occurred. This took the form of the local fire chief presenting awards to those housed chapters who had received excellent marks for their inspections. It meant something to the community, and thus, they chose to award it.

One pitfall of these programs can be that many were designed when the community largely consisted of IFC and Panhellenic groups. To be more inclusive of all groups, it is best to re-think how individuals and chapters are rewarded. Perhaps having just a "Greek Man and Woman of the Year" is not enough to capture the diversity of leadership excellence. One school rewards the outstanding leader in each of their communities (IFC, Panhellenic, NPHC, MGC, etc.) as a way to be more inclusive. Rewarding chapters needs to take in mind the diversity of size of these groups. It is not uncommon for some groups to number over 100 and others to be around 10. Using percentages of membership rather than raw numbers is a more equitable way to reward groups. One school takes out a full-page ad in their student newspaper to reward members who achieve Dean's List and then lists the percentage of members of each group that achieves this honor (some of the smaller groups have a higher percentage of members achieving this mark). Finally, using each group's full name honors their heritage and should be used, rather than just their letters. It may appear to be a small thing, but it is meaningful to the group.

With all the energy and money expended on these programs, it begs the question whether this is worth it. One theory shedding some light on this, Bruce W. Tuckman's work on "Forming,

Storming, Norming and Performing,” provides a useful framework. The last stage of the framework summarizes what is trying to be achieved: Evaluating a team’s process and product, with a particular focus on identifying "lessons learned" and passing these on to future groups, including a closing celebration that acknowledges the contributions of individuals and the accomplishments of the team.

There is value in these ritual celebrations by rewarding individuals and groups for upholding our stated values, thereby providing guidance to others as to how excellence is personified. Over time, they tend to elevate the community and provide a more comprehensive picture of what a community is about to our many stakeholders. As we face more scrutiny as a field, it is worth our time to seek out those who are doing well and helping them tell their story.

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