

To Award or Not to Award: A Great Debate

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There is a long-standing debate within the fraternity/sorority industry whether we should recognize chapters with awards. Whether provided through an **awards** process or those awards being linked with an **accreditation** process, the debate rages on. A traditional awards model allows chapters and members to be nominated for awards through application. A different method links awards to an accreditation process that encourages tracking of information while hitting some community requirements. We recognized whichever process is completed, the end goal is in question, whether to provide these organizations with the space to be recognized. We, as campus-based fraternity and sorority advisors decided to put the argument to the test. By providing different perspectives and thoughts, we provide the reader with information so they can decide for themselves.

Pro's

Awards for fraternities and sororities at the campus level provide different things for different chapters. A lot of debate has occurred in the past about whether community awards are something that should be continued. Awards are something we do to celebrate the accomplishments of an individual or groups because they have achieved something that is outside the norm for a college student or organization. By recognizing achievements and successes, we give these organizations the reassurance they are valued and needed on college campuses.

Let us consider what value awards have for chapters or individuals. On some campuses, where the fraternity/sorority system is considered an afterthought, awarding organizations for what they've completed during the year could show the campus community and the folks who work there that fraternity/sorority chapters live beyond the stereotypes. By highlighting these organizations and student leaders, we validate their experience. Showcasing the successes of chapters that have put in the work provides more evidence for our campus stakeholders to advocate for the fraternal experience on their campuses. Then again, it sends an odd message when communities have a fraternity/sorority system and afforded no recognition or highlighting their successes. We as professionals must also remove ourselves from the cynicism that "we have seen it all before" and provide space for students to exceed our expectations. If students know they will not be celebrated for their effort, why bother? If there is no expectation of becoming a worthwhile community member, then why engage with a community? We have to envision what the value of awards are and how we advocate for these organizations at our institutions.

There are ways to build awards that hit community benchmarks. Fraternity/sorority advisors must re-envision what our awards are and the message they intend to send. If a community is seeking to develop relationships across councils, let's build some awards for that. However, let's not build awards that are simple box checking. Let's build awards celebrating chapters doing things *not* for credit's sake like their initiatives that made a difference on the campus or community. Above all, we should be measuring the experience those members are having and whether they are developing their skills as leaders and individuals. In Seth Godin's book "Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?", he focuses on the skills and traits that separate individuals from other workers. These skills are unique and should not be measured with preconceived ideas or behaviors. Through this lens, when students are successful in taking personal responsibility for an experience that no one can provide a universal "how to" guide for, they should be recognized and celebrated for that effort.

In the same way, we should be empowering our chapters to think the same way. What can *you* do that makes you essential? When chapters find the answer to that question and act on it, we need to recognize their efforts. Not every chapter is going to be the best at everything, not every chapter is going to contribute tens of thousands of dollars to worthy causes. However, if we leave no avenues for organizations to make their mark and with no measure of local recognition, we are showing them they do not matter to us, thus widening the divide between chapters and campus professionals.

Con

Many campuses provide awards programs meant to recognize the health and operational quality of fraternities and sororities. I believe the intent behind these programs is to highlight and reinforce quality behaviors in high performing groups and to motivate lower performing groups to improve. Unfortunately, awards often fall short in creating any real change because groups become complacent after winning or losing awards each year, or they don't believe it's fair some groups are rewarded and they are not. If the end goal of an awards program is to improve fraternity/sorority communities, they need to be reimaged to create the change we need to see within the fraternal movement.

Awards programs can be problematic because the selection process is biased and can lack appropriate levels of accountability. For example, when professionals outsource applications to fraternity/sorority advisors from other campuses, selections are often made without enough context to recognize the best recipients. Additionally, without an appropriate level of context, professionals may or may not recognize groups based on the reputation of their inter/national or local organization and not on the accomplishments of the local chapter. When professionals

reach out to campus partners to choose award recipients, this group of professionals also may have a level of implicit bias from rumors and false perceptions. Regardless of whether this group is super connected to a fraternity/sorority office, they often know too much to give a fair perspective, or not enough to understand the day to day qualities of a group. Overall, allowing professionals to choose award recipients, whether they work on or off campus, presents a very real challenge when you are trying to recognize the positive elements of your community. Awards are being given to the group that can write the best application, or the one with the best reputation on campus.

If a campus is already showing they value fraternities and sororities by hiring full-time staff or by providing an operating budget to fraternity/sorority programs, does an awards program really demonstrate a campus's value of fraternity/sorority life? Often, these awards are seen by students and advisors as an additional requirement, and they often duplicate or contradict other campus and headquarters award programs. Students spend too much time submitting the same information to separate entities. Are we really demonstrating we value fraternities and sororities if we aren't valuing their time?

Awards should not be given to groups with egregious conduct violations or to organizations that do not live up to their espoused values. Unfortunately, how do professionals really know that groups who get recognized deserve the recognition? Even with strong advisors and resources, our profession has a history of uncovering deep rooted behavioral issues within organizations. If and when one of these groups is recognized and awarded, the awards process automatically becomes less valuable and desired.

Conclusion

In a time when the relevance of fraternity/sorority is being questioned, award programs provide campuses a method to showcase the work organizations do on campus. These programs can provide value, but without industry changes or best practices on they are executed, campuses will continue to recognize groups that do not deserve recognition or will continue to miss groups who deserve it. Criteria should be created using community goals, taking into consideration what headquarters partners require from their chapters. Regardless of which side of the debate you are on, we believe these programs need to be evaluated to ensure fraternities and sororities remain relevant and are improving.

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