Four Failures: Lessons Learned from Our Accreditation Program
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Since its implementation in 2006, University of Rochester's Fraternity and Sorority Accreditation program has been transformational for the community, recognized through the NASPA Bronze Excellence Award, and awarded AFA's Outstanding Change Initiative. At the same time, we've made mistakes along the way. The way I approach the accreditation process now is different than when I started at the University of Rochester 10 years ago. Instead of writing a detailed *how-to* guide for how to create your own accreditation program, I want to share four lessons my team learned along the way as a roadmap for others doing similar work.

Lesson One: Ensure your process is unique to your institution's culture and community. When I became director of our office in 2014, I pitched some changes to the process framed around a new benchmark-driven, checklist-style process which reflects my preference for transparent, easy-to-evaluate expectations. My pitch fell flat and was described as uncharacteristic of Rochester. There are unique things about Rochester that were incompatible with many, award-winning accreditation programs that have inspired positive change at their institutions. Many of them would simply fail at Rochester due to lack of community buy-in.

Tierney (1998) states, "To implement decisions, leaders must have a full, nuanced understanding of the organization's culture" (p. 5). For an accreditation program to work, it must be rooted deeply in the culture of the institution. The University of Rochester's academic philosophy stresses autonomy, eschewing required courses and encouraging self-directed study. Our process needed to be rooted in goal-setting, self-evaluation, and continuous improvement, so those became the framework for the accreditation process rather than quantitative rankings or required programs. Of course my proposal, which ignored Rochester's focus on creativity, individuality, and some risk-taking, was doomed to fail!

Lesson Two: Help students and other stakeholders feel invested in the accreditation process. Shared governance is central to the decision-making processes in many universities (Association of Governing Boards, 2016), and we learned quickly how important it was for Rochester students and alumni to have buy-in and ownership over the accreditation process. At first, I failed to see the potential in a process that gave power away from my office. But we increased opportunities for student, staff, and alumni stakeholders to serve on our accreditation review teams, provide feedback to other organizations, and determine accreditation outcomes. Over time, this led to three benefits. First, students who volunteered for our process understood it better. By reviewing other organizations, they did a better job with their own organization's accreditation report.

Second, our community started to hold itself accountable. Student leaders were calling out their peers for poor performance but also volunteering to help struggling chapters. Third, we made some interesting allies along the way as first-time staff reviewers gained greater appreciation for our organizations and signed up for more, time-intensive advising roles.

Lesson Three: Consider how your model is (or is not) applicable to your entire community. While every organization at Rochester completes the same accreditation document, the final product can vary between members of our three governing councils (Interfraternity Council, Multicultural Greek Council, and Panhellenic Association). These differences are mostly due to organization size (e.g., a chapter of 2 versus a chapter of 90), chapter governance (e.g., a single-institution chapter with limited alumni support vs. a city-wide chapter with strong graduate chapter involvement), and programming goals (e.g., a focus on academic development vs. community involvement). Our early mistake was not helping our review teams understand these differences. Alumnae reviewers from a large NPC sorority, for instance, didn't always understand the contributions of a three-woman, city-wide NALFO sorority. Feedback given to some chapters was viewed as unhelpful or inappropriate when making incorrect assumptions about the group or failing to understand their practices. We had to build education into our training about council differences and reports to build fairer mechanisms for evaluating chapter performance. Part of this work was ensuring the standards, and the methods for attaining them, were relevant to all organizations.

Lesson Four: Be critical of your own processes. Confirmation bias is the tendency to look for information that supports a particular point of view while avoiding information that challenges that point of view (Hammond, Keeney, & Raiffa, 1999). In the early years of our accreditation program, evaluating it meant looking for evidence of success in the community and attributing it to our accreditation program (e.g., growth in the community, chapters winning awards, etc.). This strategy helped justify the program but failed to help us improve it. Over time, we shifted from championing our program to improving it. We implemented short surveys and focus groups to gather student feedback on how to make the process less burdensome. We started looking at which of our 12 standards chapters struggled most to achieve, telling us where we had to shift resources and provide greater training. We've become more open to critical feedback, which in turn has prompted improvement.

Through these discoveries, we've streamlined parts of our process, provided greater training in goal-setting and strategic planning, and increased the support from alumni and staff/faculty for the fraternal community. While we've been bold, forward-thinking, and strategic, we've also grown more humble and increasingly recognized there is room for improvement.

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