

You Be the Judge: Awards & Community

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Your awards process probably takes a while. First, there's the act of creating good content. As more and more programs, resources, and opportunities become available within fraternity/sorority life, chapters have an increasingly long list of areas to target in order to build a case for awards contention.

Then second, there's the compiling. The typically time-consuming process of filtering such accomplishments to match desired formats (which is often different for headquarters and campuses), picking and choosing content pieces, trimming and extending length to match appropriately, and ensuring it all comes together with a nice bow.

And finally, third, the judging. Those in charge must find people to volunteer, show why it's worth it for them to invest their energy into that process, and then hope they can carve aside the time to make it happen and show some attention to detail in the process.

The length of the cycle may be tough to change, but the bigger fear is doing all of it for nothing. Often, the hard work is not connected to enough tangible outcomes. Before beginning an awards cycle, consider the following question: *Who is your awards process benefitting, other than the winners?*

If all chapters are not involved in the process, it is easy to spend effort getting them to submit the bare minimum expectations. Fair, but if they cared enough about contending for the award they would have submitted on their own. So, let's take a look at another alternative: ensuring the office benefits through strategic involvement of judges.

Many fraternity/sorority awards are currently completed by staff who already spend a great deal of time working with the chapters, or they are outsourced nationally to other friends in the industry. When the process involves people who work with these organizations all the time, it can be difficult to remove bias. On the flip side, industry friends scoring these awards have likely never interacted with these chapters before on a personal level and likely will not in the future. Where is the true return on investment, other than finding judges to fill the spots? Such realities build the case for a more local scoring process. It is time to get awards judging in the hands of our campus partners. Below are three benefits to consider.

Benefit One: Building awareness of your community. When national organizations expand to a campus, whether through expansion or extension, the process almost always begins the same way. Professionals reach out to any staff on campus that interact with students and seek to gain an introduction. The process has become a staple because it forms personal connections as fast as possible. When done right, two strangers can gain a useful understanding of what the other is working towards and find overlap as soon as possible. No future benefit can occur without that meeting taking place. This is the same reason many new campus hires are set up to meet with other campus staff during their first few weeks on the job.

It is a strong process of rapidly building a large network, creating positive first impressions, and raising awareness of their organization's goals and how they fit with campus. How would the same process look like if taken on by the fraternity/sorority life office on campus?

The office would clearly have two advantages compared to expansion and extension staff: they aren't leaving for a new campus after a few weeks (hopefully), and they are not seeking student referrals for membership. Expansion and extension have proven there are professionals across campuses who would genuinely be interested in supporting fraternity/sorority life if asked. Sometimes when they are, it's difficult to find an efficient and scalable formula to make it easy for them. Awards can be that first step, a much more appealing way than asking for referrals.

Benefit Two: Developing further advocacy for the FSL experience on campus. Only when an introduction is made is there opportunity for further collaboration. At minimum, the introduction can build an on-campus friendship based on newly-discovered passions or work that aligns. This is especially relevant for a population with a limited time window to make meaningful connections before exploring career advancement elsewhere.

But the true benefit goes much deeper. Involving professionals in the awards process allows campus partners to gain a much better understanding of the positive impact fraternity/sorority has on students. Most campus faculty or staff work with a specific group of students in one area (e.g. residence life, intramurals, chemistry, etc.), while fraternity/sorority life impacts a broader group of students that indirectly touches nearly all areas of campus. Involving more local friends in the awards process helps boost understanding of the uniqueness of the fraternity/sorority experience. By definition of the word "awards," it sheds light on the areas these chapters are best contributing to the community as a whole. Simply reading the material creates further interest in advocacy.

Benefit Three: Connecting students with local mentorship outside of their chapter. Do recognition applications need to be a fully electronic process? In-person presentations or interviews are common for determining awards in other industries. Given the social nature of our organizations, it is surprising so few awards processes include a social component.

This “face time” reduces awards writing for students, streamlines time professionals need to analyze writing, and plants seeds for a potential non-member advisor. Health and safety concerns around our organizations are causing campus advisor positions to be challenging to fill, and even more challenging to maintain. Starting low-risk relationships may be the easiest way to get student leaders and future advisors excited about working together. Verbal components of awards also encourage chapters to tell the story of the positive impact they’re seeking to make, rather than feel like they’re fitting it into someone else’s requirements.

The on-campus view of fraternity/sorority is constantly changing. Our peers outside of the office may not be sure which opinion to take, but they have the capability to be powerful mentors and advisors for our students. If we can simply make more of our on-campus partners aware of the work we do and begin gaining further advocacy, the opportunities are right in front of us.

Could transforming the awards process be our starting point?

Matt Farrell is a brother of Phi Gamma Delta, two-time graduate of the University of Connecticut, and worked as FIJI's Director of Expansion before joining the Phired Up team. He has a passion for advancing the new member process in fraternity and sorority through harnessing student input. Matt enjoys college sports, political satire, and visiting national parks.