

Love Them or Leave Them: How to Engage your Alumni Advisors

Kristen Wing, GreekGab

It is a brisk, fall Saturday morning when football season kicks off on a university campus. SUVs full of alumni pull into the fraternity parking lot, ready to pre-game before kickoff. A sheepish fraternity sophomore walks through the maze of cars in the parking lot, towards a middle-aged, beer drinking alumnus to tell him: “Sorry, but we are dry at this chapter. We do not allow alcohol.”

“WHAT? That’s crap. When I went to school here, we partied where and when we wanted. You have got to be kidding me! I write checks to keep your damn doors open,” screams the alumnus.

Does this alumnus know about the number of alcohol-related incidents at this chapter house the previous year? No. Does he care? Probably not. Does this chapter need alumni like this? No.

Unfortunately, this is a reality on many campuses: alumni who do not understand the contemporary issues and challenges facing campus advisors. They are disengaged, relishing in their memories of how things ‘used to be’ before social media bubbled up negative news about the fraternity and sorority community. Behaviors that were applauded years ago cause us to audibly gasp when we hear about them now. Few understand how onerous legislation and public outrage are influencing how chapters are perceived and as a result, how they operate. As a campus professional, you can help your chapter advisors in a number of ways:

Check them in before they check out. Why do chapter advisors leave? For the same reason employees leave companies. They do not feel appreciated or valued. When you deal with housing headaches, out of control members, and employee issues such as hiring and firing staff, even the best advisor can begin to question if it is worth the effort of advising a chapter. Just like a prized employee who turned in a resignation, losing a high performer is painful to any organization. Another challenge is lack of training for advisors. Fraternities and sororities are doing a better job of providing webinars and materials that address the role of an advisor, but what is really impactful is hands on training. Even if your staff is thin and there is little time to even think about training for advisors, you can take an easy step by facilitating mini-sessions where they can share best practices with how to work with chapters.

Open up your campus training to advisors. Think about the number of programs you have on your university campus to help students get the most from their fraternal experience. If it is appropriate, invite the chapter advisors to the trainings you are offering. The best leaders are those who are learners; just offering the opportunity alone to participate in a campus training event sends a positive message to chapter advisors.

Leverage their talents. Sometimes, alumni can influence specific situations and take the pressure off your staff.

Facing a sticky decision regarding banning hard alcohol, one university recognized the opportunity to have a sorority and a fraternity advisor lead the discussion about the topic with their members. The institution’s fraternity/sorority life staff leveraged their alumni advisors to manage an afternoon conversation with over 100 sorority and fraternity leaders about the pros and cons of a hard alcohol ban. Sorority women met with the sorority advisor, while the men met separately with a fraternity advisor. After reconvening as a group both chapter advisors led a discussion with the entire group about the proposed ban.

Educate them about legislation and legal issues. Offer a half-day workshop to update volunteer advisors on the latest news about Title IX and state and local laws, starting with the basics. Remember, volunteer alumni are juggling family, work, and other commitments; staying on top of current laws probably is not a priority or it may be so overwhelming they may not know where to even start. Look at the composition of the volunteer advisor group: are there alumni with special skill sets that can be used to help others or that can do the research and present findings to the group? Providing training on the latest trends in legal issues can equip advisors with a foundation to engage students.

Find the advocates. Within house corporation and advisory boards, there are followers, leaders and “seat warmers” – those who show up without adding any value. Chapters that have a highly functioning board will have the enthusiastic person who is willing to improve the chapter. By focusing on these people, you can encourage them to create momentum to engage others to get involved, lead the difficult discussions, and hold each other accountable for change. Remember, these dedicated volunteers are giving of their time because they got something from their fraternal experience and feel the need to pay it forward.

Get out in front of small problems before they become big ones. A simple “we have got your back” phone call paid off big for both staff and the chapter advisors. A fraternity advisor received a call from the fraternity/sorority life staff with a story about a member whose behavior was “not in alignment with the chapter’s values.” A ten minute phone call with the advisor did two things. First, the advisor had no idea of what had happened and now had time to process the situation before addressing it. Second, the level of trust between the advisor and the university’s fraternity/sorority life staff improved. That simple connection allowed the staff and the advisor to address an issue before the situation got out of control.

Be transparent. Building trust with an army of volunteer alumni is critical to making your job easier. Arming them with relevant updates on what is happening on campus will go a long way to creating trustful relationships. Be unambiguous and unmistakably clear when you are communicating with them. You may have to balance confidential institution-related information about specific policies or updates, but when possible, giving them notification beforehand will go a long way.

As a campus professional, you are committed to giving students the opportunity for a life changing experience as members of a sorority or fraternity. This ever-changing environment also requires you to build relationships to not only make your job more effective, but the experience for your students even more meaningful. Just like other relationships in your professional life, you will find yourself loving the time you spend with highly engaged people (the love them!) and less enthusiasm for the “not so engaged” (the leave them!) people. The same holds true for working with advisors. By honestly communicating, supporting, and educating them, you will have engaged alumni who can support you.