

## The UNC Charlotte “IT” Factor: Changing Community from a Noun to a Value

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You may have seen us. It is usually at a student conference, in the lobby, at dinner, or during the stroll competition when the UNC Charlotte Unity Team gets on stage with 36 students from five councils and has a great time. Every year we are asked, “How do you do it?” Our response is simple, “Our students just like each other.”

The value of community shapes our work, our goals, and our vision. Community is our “it” factor. It is a word we use to describe the group of students who come together under the name of Fraternity and Sorority Life. It is our mission for students to see this word as a value rather than a noun. Building the value of community requires a culture shift. It is a slow and steady process of working with and for your campus community. Eight years ago, our community was a very different place – only 25 organizations and around 800 students created our physical community with little value placed on the importance of community. We often tell our students that people join people, not letters. We figured out that our students needed to see value in each other; they needed to be friends. Here are our top three concepts that we pull from to build our community.

1. Create and encourage opportunities. How do you create a culture change? One opportunity at a time. Creating opportunities based in theory can provide meaningful interactions among our students. Student leadership conferences provide us with a great opportunity to create meaningful dialogue and friendships. For instance, during AFLV Central, we switch up rooming assignments, and students must attend the stroll competition. We allow our NPHC organizations to have dialogue about creating a stroll and educating on the history of strolling prior to our AFLV performance. We want our students to have the opportunity to get to know someone and something different. We also want to provide a space where all input is welcome, not just input from one council.

COMM3136 is a Greek leadership class with curriculum surrounding two books: *Start with Why* by Simon Sinek and *Motivating the Middle* by T.J. Sullivan. The books guide the class through discussion around students’ personal mission statement and implementing it to motivate and create change in their chapter and the world. Students must apply to be a member of the class with priority given to freshmen and sophomores. This course opens the door for real conversations and real questions: “How does bumping work?” “What does it mean to be paper?” “How involved are your alumni?” Then we give our students opportunities to answer these types of questions for themselves. Our NPHC members stepped into Panhellenic recruitment rooms; IFC members attended new member presentations; and

all class members met with alumni from a different council as part of an interview assignment. Creating opportunities is vital and they come in a variety of forms.

Four years ago, our NPHC council was broke. In typical fashion, our Panhellenic Council was thriving financially. This gave us an idea- let's take the talent and following of NPHC and Panhellenic's natural want to perform and ability to raise funds and combine them into a Panhellenic/NPHC Step Off. Each of our NPHC groups was partnered with a Panhellenic group and had to teach them a stroll and step. The inaugural Step Off raised \$5000. This annual event now raises over \$7500 split between Panhellenic and NPHC, and the community driven relationship that was cultivated is priceless. We do not suggest that you just throw your groups together. There were many months of building relationships and whispering ideas to council and chapter leaders to take a step towards and not away from other chapters. There was education and learning. Without any of those aforementioned steps, there would have been no show. Urging students to ask hard questions and think about how we are more alike than different is the catalyst for change and perhaps something magical.

2. All for one. One for all. In our community everyone plays well in the same sandbox, mostly because we expect them to. John Steinbeck once said, "It is the nature of man to rise to greatness if greatness is expected of him." Our community understands they are all treated the same, and they must rise to the same set of high expectations. All 38 of our groups are fighting for the same awards, the same GPA standard, and at times the same potential new members. Everyone must be held accountable to the same set of standards. UNC Charlotte provides the same paperwork for intake and recruitment; the same document with different wording. All organizations are held to the same 14 Basic Standards and the same Standards of Conduct. All 38 organizations know each other exists, the majority of our 2,100 members understand the difference between recruitment and intake, and all five councils are in competition with each other for single honor for being Fraternity and Sorority of the year (which has been won by a different chapter in ALL of our councils over the past couple of years). Different standards create a difference in responsibility, engagement, and values congruence with the office. It is our goal to know the difference in councils and organizations and change our language to get a mutual standard across; not the other way around.

Additionally, what one has, we want all to have. We push our Diversified Greek Council to raise funds through the year so they can get their recruitment publication out with the other councils. It is an uphill fight all year, and if we have to help them financially we will, but not being included is just not an option when all other councils are represented.

3. Honesty trumps everything. Professionals must model the way for honest and real conversations. At the start of each semester, we break bread with our council leaders – not

for the sake of planning, but for the sake of enjoyment and getting to know one another. We discuss our involvement with fraternity and sorority life outside of work, discuss our professional development, and what is happening in our personal lives. We laugh, cry, and have serious moments. Take your students to lunch, meet for a walk around campus, go grab coffee, and do things an average person would do. Most of all, be a constant and successful role model for them. If we want them to value community, we must value our communities: organization, university, and Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, and be prepared to discuss how we are making these communities better.

In our office, we have a large table that students gather around to talk, prepare for class, and engage with our staff and each other. The IFC president was visiting one day when he began to engage the NPHC president, asking how his organization hosted social events. After a quick explanation, he exclaimed, “Yeah, IFC would never be able to get away with that...” and began a discussion about their social regulations and FIPG. Moments like this allow for honest dialogue, seeds of growth, and community development.

We want our students to understand and exceed our high standard of excellence, and shift the paradigm. Recently our NPHC President, a member of Omega Psi Phi, stated in a retreat that “[The council] must challenge the status quo and engage IFC, Panhellenic, and the Diversified Greeks to make it happen.” Goal accomplished. By utilizing and remembering these three basic sentiments we have begun to achieve our goal through students like this, one rung of the ladder at a time. When it is all said and done, we want our students to care about each other no matter their letters, race, council, or creed. It is when our students start to care about each other, becoming friends and friendly competitors, that we see a culture shift toward valuing community, not just being a member of one.