

## **Issues of Access and Affordability in Fraternities and Sororities**

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The socio-economic realities associated with fraternity and sorority membership are often overlooked or brushed aside. It is a complicated topic to fully grasp, and the answers or solutions are not easy to find. Consider the cost associated with membership compounded over the span of an undergraduate career. Think about the extraneous items not calculated on a chapter bill but are inherently necessary, whether right or wrong, to fit in with that specific group, including clothes, spring breaks, and the latest technology. Chapter budgets often include line items for convention or conference fees to which each member must contribute, but of which only a handful have the opportunity to participate. Inter/national educational programs offer opportunities to which some chapters can afford to send 12 members, but other chapters only two.

For organizations that strive to develop the next generation of leaders, we often price ourselves out of reach of many students who would benefit from the fraternity and sorority experience. Perhaps this is a call to our foundations to identify new funding sources centered on inclusion, or perhaps this is a challenge to fraternity/sorority professionals to focus education and training on appropriate budgeting and fiscal responsibility. However it applies, we offer a challenge to consider what you can do in your environment to make a difference in the three areas outlined below.

### **Individual Level**

As an individual looking to join a fraternity or sorority, or for one who has already joined, is there a return on his or her investment? The argument is often made that there is a significant return on investment, primarily through personal growth and life-long relationships, leadership development programs, and networking and career opportunities, but we must consider the following questions in regards to access on an individual level:

- What are local chapters and inter/national organizations communicating during recruitment about the true cost of membership for an individual?
- Are undergraduate members welcomed or encouraged to have part-time jobs? Do chapter activities, rules, and points systems only benefit the members who have more free time?
- Is the chapter budget designed to benefit all members equally, or does it lean toward those elected into leadership positions? Is it built under the assumption that members join as a first-year student and stay until senior year? Is there a differently weighted structure for a member that joins as a sophomore or junior?

- Are scholarships, grants, and payment plans offered for those with financial need? Do members who receive or use these benefits feel encouraged and supported or ostracized?

As fraternity and sorority professionals who find value in the experience, we should examine our chapters and organizations for issues of affordability, but more importantly strive to offer access to membership for all populations on campus, not just the portion that can afford it outright.

## Chapter Level

The chapter environment and the campus culture are other factors that affect the affordability of fraternity and sorority membership. Chapter budgets and dues often vary significantly, even on the same campus or in the same geographic region. Dues range from \$200 to over \$2,000 per semester, and anywhere in between. Campus culture often dictates what is expected of a chapter and the unwritten rules that go along with membership, while service projects could potentially find us in the position of working in members' neighborhoods. Consider these examples on a chapter level:

- Housing – Housing options vary from no facility, to a chapter room or lodge, to a residence hall floor, or full-size chapter house. The different occupancy levels and costs associated with having a chapter facility dictate the chapter expenses and what portion is passed on to individuals. There are often parlor fees or other fees for students who do not live in the chapter facility. How do chapters work with those who cannot afford the housing component or must live on campus due to parental reasons or scholarship requirements? What is fair and equitable to all members, and how are different circumstances taken into consideration?
- Peer groups – Competition between chapters applies in academics and campus awards, but is also applicable to clothing, cars, and other aspects that make up one's identity. Campus cultures are often defined by a certain look for fraternity men and sorority women. Students feel increased pressure to buy clothes, phones and other items needed to be accepted into the community. These are all expenses that are not a line item on a budget and that are not explained during recruitment, but are real costs associated with joining a fraternity and sorority. How can this be addressed in ways that support inclusion rather than exclusion?
- Service opportunities – We encourage chapters to perform service work in our local communities, but rarely do we prepare them for the conversations that could occur if a service project location is in or similar to a member's home area. The emergence of fraternity/sorority-specific service trips also poses a challenge in who is able to attend, and how or if their chapters support the costs and fundraising involved. How do we teach chapters to address those situations in appropriate and educational ways, and how do we give every member the opportunity to participate in an immersion service experience?

Access on a chapter level means opportunities are available for all members to participate, not just those who can afford the extraneous items. Budgets are developed with equity in mind and fiscal responsibility is taught and expected across all positions.

### **Inter/National Organization Level**

Inter/national organizations use a variety of ways to fund their large-scale programs, including through their educational foundation, chapter budgets, alumni donations, and/or individual attendee fees. The following points illustrate how each organization chooses the combination of funding options that work best for them:

- Paying for attendance to programs can place a significant financial burden on chapters or individual members, depending on the availability of funding. Chapters that are able to secure outside funding through scholarships or alumni donations may have advantage over others which cannot send anyone at all.
- The organization may choose to set a mandatory number of members from each chapter who must attend, and bill chapters regardless of if they send members, due to the cost of the program. Some place a cap on attendance, while others leave it open for anyone who secures funding to attend.
- How can we be more cognizant of these differences and support our members to attend programs from a variety of organizations and campuses?

During a recent AFA AdvanceU session, Dan Bureau discussed how fraternities and sororities are meant to be learning organizations, and he challenged us to drive the bus by making intentional learning experiences. One example of where we can do that is through teaching fiscal responsibility and considering the following questions:

- How are we intentionally developing our treasurer position to build a chapter budget and manage expenses?
- How are we intentionally developing other chapter officers to manage their individual budget, search for the best value, and track their expenses?
- How can we develop our volunteers and advisors to better facilitate this learning and help align our chapter budgets with organizational values? This is not just learning the logistics of how to manage an Excel spreadsheet, but rather understanding the “why” behind the decisions.

On an inter/national organization level, we must also work with our educational foundations, advisors, and alumni to develop systems and solutions that address these issues and open access to the changing socioeconomic backgrounds on college and university campuses today.

In writing this article, the authors acknowledge the inherent difficulties associated with addressing access and affordability in fraternities and sororities, but also put forth a challenge to fraternity and sorority professionals to have conversations on this topic and identify steps they can take to improve issues of access and affordability. While written from the perspective of two NIC and two NPC organizations of varying sizes and campus populations, the issues of access and affordability affect us all, and must become a point of discussion as we assess, develop, and implement policies, programs, and expectations.