A Piece of the Puzzle: Creating Programs that Honor Students’ Learning Journeys
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Retreats, conferences, workshops, and national speakers. Professionals in the fraternity/sorority profession typically employ one or more of these programs to support the development of their students. Moreover, many professionals want their programs to meet all of their student’s needs and align with all of the student learning outcomes of their college/university, while also being the best program their students ever experienced.

That was my mistake.

For our fraternity/sorority emerging leaders, my institution hosts an on-campus conference that promotes personal and leadership development. During the planning and preparation of my first year coordinating the conference, I remember thinking “How can I make this conference align with all of the student life learning outcomes at my institution?” Then, once I realized my one-day conference was too short for that. My next idea was “How can I expand our programming to align with all of the student life learning outcomes at my institution?” During that brainstorming process, I had become frustrated because I noticed two trends:

1. The program was scratching the surface of some critical and important topics.
2. My department did not have the capacity or the resources (e.g. time, money, etc.) to dive deep into every topic that we saw as necessary to our students’ development.

I was stuck because I wanted my students to have this beneficial, educational programming but knew that I could not provide it all for them. While in the midst of that rut, I remembered something. It was not solely my responsibility to make sure students developed their personal and leadership skills, but it was truly the responsibility of every professional at my university.

I was introduced to this concept when I was a K-12 educator in Detroit, MI. As many K-12 educators will tell you, their primary responsibility is to ensure their students are prepared for the next level in their learning journey. Now I will admit, it is sometimes easier to conceptualize and approach your work this way when you know what “the next level” is. As a 6th grade mathematics teacher, I knew the immediate next level was 7th grade mathematics. It was also convenient to be in close proximity and attend planning meetings with the individuals that would later support my students’ development at that next level.
However, I took this same philosophy from K-12 and integrated it in the higher education setting. I began researching and meeting with other campus-based professionals to learn more about the programs they were providing for students. During this process, my approach shifted to “How can I make this conference meet student life learning outcomes at my institution while also best supporting students to continue developing their skills at the next level?” This led to the conference intentionally fostering a space of collaboration with other departments at my institution, so they could make connections and promote other development opportunities with our students in the fraternity/sorority community.

For example, we collaborated with the program on intergroup relations to facilitate a workshop that encouraged student development on identity and perspective (one of the student life learning outcomes). The workshop focused on increasing students’ knowledge and foundational skills of self-awareness and meaning-making in regards to social identities. Moreover, this intentional collaboration connected students with resources and learning opportunities beyond the conference at the university that would promote their development in more advanced skills and promote behaviors aligned with not only identity and perspective, but also other student life learning outcomes like collaboration across difference.

The main takeaway: your programs do not need to be the only option for students to develop nor should it ever be. Students are at your college/university for an entire learning journey that should include you, your department, and the many other talented professionals at your institution. We must encourage our students to develop their skills at the next level, and we can do that by focusing on these four areas:

1. **Educating ourselves on other departments’ programs.** When we know more about what our colleagues are offering, the fraternity/sorority programs can become intentional and strategic to complement our students’ learning journey. It also allows us to become greater resources for our students by directing them to other opportunities beyond our department as they navigate their learning journeys.

2. **Collaborating to best meet students’ needs.** Effective collaborations promote a holistic experience for students and help build staff capacity. When strategically collaborating with other departments at your institution, it offers intentional opportunities to connect different pieces of students’ learning journeys.

3. **Assessing and aligning program learning outcomes to larger institutional learning outcomes.** Assessment plays an integral role in developing any program to meet students’ needs. More importantly, programs should align with the greater institutional learning
outcomes in order to strengthen students’ holistic development (e.g. shared language, common indicators of development, etc.) at your university/institution.

4. **Trusting the institution and student journey of continued learning and development.** We have to remember that our college/university serves as a place for students to learn and develop. That simply means there are other talented professionals working hard to encourage student development. We also have to remember that students are on educational journeys. Their journeys will look different, learning will happen at different moments, and we probably will not always be there to see the *a-ha* moments. Our responsibility is to support, promote, and encourage continued learning that best meet their needs of development.

By approaching our programs in this way, we can know how our piece of the puzzle fits within the larger picture of students’ learning journey and promote their development in ways that focuses on their holistic collegiate experience as opposed to just their fraternity/sorority experience.

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