

Core Competencies: Yeet!

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I still have a mental image of an on-campus interview when I was in my last semester of graduate school. The director of the office asked me on a scale of 1-10, how well versed I was in FIPG. Panic rose internally. Words, letters, all the things I knew swam through my head, and FIPG was not one of them. What do you do in that moment? I may have faked it and said 8. I was glad there was no follow up quiz.

Why am I sharing this embarrassing story filled with my own dubious judgment? I hope to illustrate even though I was about to graduate with a master's degree in higher education, had completed almost two years of an assistantship in sorority/fraternity life, and had an assistantship supervisor who was a giant in the field and (mind you) has won an FIPG award since then, I had no idea what it was. I also didn't realize the gap in my knowledge until this question was asked. Spoiler alert: I did not get the job.

One thing I have found to be true as a sorority/fraternity practitioner full-time since 2003 is I didn't learn everything I ever needed to know about sorority/fraternity life (SFL) in undergraduate school, graduate school, or my first few years on the job. Nor did I necessarily have an awareness what my competencies should be.

As someone who was privileged to sit at the AFA board table from December 2013 to December 2018, I am thrilled I was a part of the team that shepherded the creation of the new AFA Core Competencies. As humans, we often use our phones to map our way to almost any destination. Sometimes I look ahead to see what the exit number I need is to have a better sense of what I am looking for as a way to feel more certain, more grounded. These Core Competencies can serve as a map of sorts, leading us to these exits and roads we may not have encountered yet in the same way.

I heard the conversations and questions firsthand: "What makes one successful in this field? What does a SFL practitioner need to best inform their work?" But, similar to what we say about assessment, if you collect data and then don't act on it or use it to inform practice, what was the benefit of collecting it? I think the same goes for the Core Competencies. If you haven't taken the instrument, please put it on your calendar now as a summer project.

Or, if you've taken the instrument and the results are sitting in an email folder, let me encourage you to dust them off and make them alive. As a supervisor, I admit some of my plans for the Core Competencies are more aspirational than implemented at this point. However, now that I've written this, I have accountability buddies. I think we can use the Core

Competency instrument as a way to measure not only what it is we should be able to do, but also to help inform how we can gain the knowledge areas in which we are not “experts.”

And, it bears repeating that none of us are experts in every area. Here’s another secret: imposter syndrome is real in SFL. Once this is your profession, there can be an inherent expectation that you just understand this work. You’re supposed to have all the answers for all circumstances. You’re supposed to have had all the experiences there are to have. If a student, alumnus, international organization partner, campus colleague, parent, supervisor, etc. asks you, well, sure, you know the answer. Just like my 2003 self “got” FIPG at a level 8. And now, my 2019 self recognizes that FIPG [no longer exists](#).

The newly minted Core Competencies are a great map to use if you are fortunate enough to have a team. And, trust me, I realize we don’t all have teams. Even if you are an office of one, take the tool, identify your growth areas, and then figure out how to learn more about those areas. If you gain nothing else from reading my words today, let yourself be humble and ask questions. Admit those areas where you don’t have a lot of practice, and go one step further and identify what you don’t know at all. It’s the only way to get better.

For example, the first time my esteemed colleague Justin Angotti mentioned the CollegeAIM (Alcohol Intervention Matrix) created by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), I had never heard those words. I was trying to write them down, but I didn’t even realize what he was saying. I didn’t even know this existed. It was not apparent to me this was an area where I was lacking because I did not understand there was such a resource. Write it down, ask about it, and if you don’t learn enough from a conversation, keep asking, until you know what you need to know.

Perhaps, the resource or colleague you need to reach out to is in your health promotions office. You’re better off asking a question that may show ignorance on a topic, than to never learn the information at all. I would expect most people will respond positively when you ask them to teach you about a new idea or tool. And if they are not aware, they will help find someone who is.

Hopefully, my own lived experience has encouraged you to interact with the Core Competencies and put them into action. Here are a few additional ways I plan to use them as a supervisor and leader in my office:

- When we have performance dialogues, my staff will also show me the results of their Core Competencies (CC) assessment.
- When I host on-campus interviews for two open positions in a few weeks, I will ask the candidates if they have heard about and taken the assessment.

- During retreats and staff meetings, we will focus on areas we've identified as needing more work. We will discuss what resources may help us increase knowledge in these areas — and this may involve thinking outside our own division, campus, or the field of higher education.
- When my staff discusses professional development opportunities they would like to explore, we will think about how they fit in with their growth areas identified in the CC evaluation.
- If there are areas some team members excel in, we will find ways they can teach others.
- Before the Annual Meeting and regional programs such as NGLA, I will ask my staff to identify which programs they will attend and also how they fit into their CC plan.
- We will start to use the language in the Core Competencies in our regular conversations in the office and in one-on-ones.
- We will introduce the Core Competencies to staff members who are not members of AFA at our campus.
- We will celebrate growth in our competencies.
- We will be transparent with our students and our upper level administration about what our targeted areas of growth are.
- New hires will be onboarded in a way engaging them in a professional development plan to enhance their competencies.
- We will discuss CC more than once annually at a performance review.
- We will look to other areas for expertise, and we will contribute our learning as we can.

The AFA Core Competencies have given us a road map of sorts. Let's make sure to use them in a way that moves us in the right direction.

Kara received her B.A. in Psychology from Gannon University in Erie, PA, and her M.Ed. in Higher Education from the College of William and Mary in 2003. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Leadership at Colorado State University. Prior to coming to Cornell in 2006, Kara worked as the Coordinator for Greek Affairs at the University of Miami (FL) for three years. Kara has worked with each of the undergraduate councils at Cornell, but her primary role was the advisor to the Interfraternity Council (IFC) before she became the Director of OSFL in Summer 2017.

In her current role, Kara supervises the OSFL staff, helps to plan all programmatic and leadership initiatives for the sorority and fraternity community, is involved in the judicial processes for sororities and fraternities, communicates with sorority and fraternity alumni, and oversees the day-to-day management of sorority and fraternity life. Kara is a member of Sigma Sigma Sigma

sorority and serves on their Executive Council. In addition, Kara served a term as president of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA).