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Professional Development in Advising Black Greek Letter Organizations: Foundations for Future Skill Building

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Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) are very unique organizations and can provide equally as unique experiences for the student affairs professional. BGLOs possess very meaningful histories which play significant roles in each organization's existence and modus operandi. Any individual who has the opportunity to advise any of the organizations should build a healthy knowledge base of the fraternity or sorority's place in American history, social relevance and cultural idiosyncrasies. It takes more than the standard cadre of advisory skills to effectively guide a BGLO. Going beyond the norm is what makes advising a BGLO successful.

BGLOs consist of historically Black fraternities and sororities most of whom were founded in the early 1900s. Alpha Phi Alpha was the first Black fraternity founded in 1906 followed by Kappa Alpha Psi and Omega Psi Phi in 1911 and Phi Beta Sigma in 1914. With respect to sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha was founded in 1908, Delta Sigma Theta in 1913, Zeta Phi Beta in 1920 and Sigma Gamma Rho in 1922. The last fraternity, who is a member of what is known today as the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), is Iota Phi Theta founded in 1963 during the Civil Rights Movement. The NPHC was established in 1930, and its stated mission is the "Unanimity of thought and action as far as possible in the conduct of Greek letter collegiate fraternities and sororities, and to consider problems of mutual interest to its member organizations" (NPHC, 2010).

The value of BGLOs to the Black community could never be understated. Hughey (2010) states,

BGLOs took on a vital role within various black communities. They were an integral part of what W.E.B. Du Bois fashioned as the 'talented tenth' – the top 10 percent of blacks that would serve as a cadre of educated, upper-class, motivated individuals who acquired the professional credentials, legitimated skills, and economic (as well as cultural) capital to assist the remaining 90 percent of the race to attain socio-economic parity with the rest of society.

Thus, a student's membership to one of these elite organizations is insufficient for him or her to be considered a significant contributor to the community. Each member is charged to be active in the community and contribute in this manner throughout their lifetime and not simply during their college years.

Professional Development in Advising BGLOs

All student organization advisors should consistently participate in trainings provided by their university, keep abreast of current research in the field and capitalize on workshops offered by professional organizations such as National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and American College Personnel Association (ACPA). The resources these organizations provide are invaluable; sessions entitled "Hazing Evolved: New Definitions, Best Practices, and New Approaches" and "Exploring "Invisible" Social Class in Fraternities & Sororities" presented at NASPA are foundational (NASPA, 2012). Interacting with professionals actively involved in the research of student development is necessary for any advisor aspiring to be effective.

Nonetheless, understanding the relevance of the BGLO to student members is crucial to putting theory into practice. Combining the professional knowledge with cultural understanding deepens the communication with student members, generates cultural exchange, and increases the validity of the advisor's counsel. Therefore, the following strategies for enhancing one's advisory repertoire should be considered.

The first step is gaining a healthy comprehension of the value of the organization to the students. At historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), BGLOs are viewed as an indispensable element of the campus. BGLOs also supposedly represent the best students a campus has to offer academically and with respect to leadership. However, at a predominantly white institution (PWI) BGLOs assume a very different role. Many times the BGLOs are the only places where African American students may find a safe haven. These organizations become venues for fellowship, camaraderie and social grounding. A competent advisor must be keenly aware which role the organization plays.

Building a rapport is critically important in advising any organization. Scheduling frequent individual meetings with the leadership is one strategy to adopt early. This enables the student leaders to view the advisor as approachable and trustworthy. These meetings can address the business of the organization but should also have a social component. Engaging in social discussions about the cultural nuances of the organization should prove profitable especially if an advisor is a non-member. Stepping, fraternal calls, signs, lettered jackets, branding, objects such as canes, unique language and nomenclature are all facets of BGLO life. Acknowledgement of the importance of these nuances will foster a deeper bond. However, advisors must be cognizant that there are limits to the information that can be divulged about the cultural elements since they are secret organizations.

Another strategy to adopt with BGLOs is to promote autonomy and critical thinking. Most BGLOs sponsor state, regional, and national conferences. These are opportunities in which advisors can encourage students to participate in leadership on a wider scale. It gives students the opportunity to be autonomous. These events give an advisor the platform to have students critically think about their chapter in a national context. It expands the scope of students' thinking and the advisory practice becomes more intentional.

Building a network of advisors is imperative to a BGLO advisor, and the nature of the organization lends to this practice. Advisors should introduce themselves to the other NPHC advisors on campus and schedule regular meetings. It will give advisors the opportunity to discuss issues, and develop innovative advising tactics. These interactions will also bring realization of the similarities and differences between the NPHC organizations. Most certainly a context of all the BGLOs will emerge from ongoing discussion. Also emerging would be the unique sense of pride that resides in an advisor's specific organization.

Implications

Although becoming familiar with the nature of an organization is not a foreign concept in advising, the steps necessary for BGLOs are unique and must be executed with intentionality. The aforementioned strategies, coupled with professional workshops and on-campus training can yield rewards. Advising a BGLO can prepare an individual for greater roles in multicultural affairs, director of Fraternity and Sorority Life, and even vice president of diversity.

Like faculty, many White advisors experience ambivalence when working closely with students of another ethnicity. Being an advisor to a BGLO can develop within an individual a greater level of cross-cultural competency (Louis & Michel, 2013). As our campuses become increasingly more diverse, building on these competencies can be a major factor in

adaptation within one's profession. The value of advising an NPHC organization effectively can be the professional experience that enhances one's entire career. In many ways the experience of advising a BGLO provides professional development opportunities that are unique. Such an experience can hone one's ability to interact with diverse populations, and demonstrate a person's propensity to work in unfamiliar environments. This experience also affords the opportunity for any professional to cultivate their cross-cultural communication. These acquired skills can be utilized in multiple student affairs arenas and can prove to be a significant asset as one seeks a professional position.

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