Strategies for improving the fraternity/sorority experience

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Members of the AFA/EBI Committee recently published a summary report of the AFA/EBI Fraternity/Sorority Assessment for 2009.

To read the full AFA/EBI Assessment Committee Summary Report, please visit the Assessment webpage, under Knowledge Center (www.fraternityadvisors.org/KnowledgeCenter/Assessment.aspx).

The report revealed that the fraternity/sorority experience enabled the majority of respondents to meet new people, assume positions of responsibility, improve their verbal communication, understand the consequences of drug use, and develop pride in being members of their organizations. The report also revealed, however, that the fraternal environment of the respondents was not as strong in developing abilities pertaining to academic and vocational success, offering diversity experiences, and discouraging the use of alcohol (AFA/EBI Assessment Committee, 2010). Using the findings from the summary report, this article describes strategies for improving the fraternity/sorority experience.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The AFA/EBI Fraternity/Sorority Assessment described the experiences of fraternity and sorority members through the use of 18 factors, covering learning outcomes, programming, and satisfaction. The learning outcome factors consisted of questions that asked respondents to rate to what degree their fraternity/sorority experience enhanced their ability to perform a task. The response options ranged from “Not at all” (1) to “Extremely” (7). This article focuses on the learning outcomes with the lowest overall means: Interpersonal Competence (M=5.65, SD=1.17), Leadership Skills (M=5.58, SD=1.30), Diverse Interaction (M=5.61, SD=1.33), Healthy Behaviors (M=5.52, SD=1.44), and Personal Development Skills (M=5.42, SD=1.32). Strategies to improve the fraternity/sorority experience include promoting learning and cognitive development, developing the administrative abilities of members, promoting diversity, encouraging the responsible use of alcohol, and developing the academic and vocational abilities of members.

Promote Learning and Cognitive Development

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), informal contact with faculty is positively associated with persistence and gains in interpersonal skills, general maturity, and cognitive abilities. The following assessment response items, engage faculty outside the classroom (M=4.92, SD=1.71), think critically (M=5.42, SD=1.52), and define problems (M=5.55, SD=1.45), however, had the lowest ratings within the Interpersonal Competence factor. To improve the outcomes of the fraternity/sorority experience, advisors should support the intellectual growth of fraternity and sorority members. This may be achieved by creating more opportunities for student-faculty interaction and by supporting the development of problem solving abilities. Advisors should involve faculty members in fraternity/sorority programming in a meaningful manner. For instance, a business instructor might lead an educational session on managing personal finances or a sociology professor might lead a workshop on creating inclusive social environments. Student-faculty interaction may also be improved through events, such as professor appreciation receptions and scholarship dinners. These engagements may have a secondary effect of improving the public image of fraternity/sorority chapters.

Develop the Administrative Abilities of Members

Response items manage finances (M=5.22, SD=1.63) and run meetings (M=5.52, SD=1.57) had the lowest ratings within the Leadership Skills factor. These items represent administrative abilities that can be useful to members in their professional careers. Advisors may develop the administrative abilities of the students they advise by challenging officers to control their budgets, for instance. This entails giving officers a spending limit that forces them to choose carefully how to spend their funds. To accomplish this task, the chapter leadership should avoid additional disbursements to officers, unless the money is crucial to the success and welfare of the organization. A social chairman who has used all of his funding, for example, should not receive an extra $2,000 in order to plan another social event, as this does not teach fiscal responsibility. The chapter leadership can also train the general membership in budgeting by offering an educational workshop on managing personal finances.

Further exploration of the Leadership Skills factor revealed a significant difference by leadership experience, Cliff’s delta=.28, p < .05. Chapter officers (M=5.81, SD=1.15) reported greater gains compared to respondents who never held a leadership position in their chapter (M=5.17, SD=1.45). In addition to developing
the administrative abilities of officers, advisors should provide leadership opportunities to non-officers.

**Promote Diversity**

*Interaction with people who are different from you* (M=5.52, SD=1.48) had the lowest score within the Diverse Interactions factor. Advisors should create opportunities for members to interact with people with differing backgrounds. This may be achieved by encouraging student leaders to organize events with organizations, campus departments, and community agencies that promote diversity. Campus-based professionals might also consider developing opportunities for diversity experiences. The fitness center at Ball State University, for example, regularly offered wheelchair basketball as part of its recreational program, and Kansas State University recently hosted a leadership conference for “out” fraternity and sorority members. Research shows exposure to diversity experiences positively influences knowledge acquisition, reflective thinking, cognitive growth, and cultural understanding (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Encourage the Responsible Use of Alcohol**

Research is consistent in demonstrating the negative association between alcohol use and academic achievement (Musgrave-Marquart, Bromley, & Dalley, 1997; Wielkiewicz, Prom, & Loos, 2005). An interesting result of the Assessment is that the highest and lowest scores of the Healthy Behaviors factor were understand the consequences of drug use and abuse (M=5.70, SD=1.55) and drink responsibly/abstain (M=5.36, SD=1.68), respectively. Members appear to understand the consequences of substance use, but still feel influenced to consume alcohol. This may especially be the case in chapters that promote a culture of drinking. Advisors should focus on reducing the use of alcohol as a social bond. This may be achieved by encouraging officers to organize alcohol-free social events and eliminating alcohol from traditions such as initiation and new member/mentor activities.

**Develop the Academic and Vocational Abilities of Members**

Personal Development Skills had the lowest rating of all of the learning outcomes. The questions pertaining to written communication skills (M=5.05, SD=1.68), establishing an effective study schedule (M=5.10, SD=1.61), setting priorities (M=5.44, SD=1.50), and time management (M=5.56, SD=1.51) had the lowest scores. These abilities are transferable skills that are vital in college and post-graduation. Unfortunately, these are also skills that students do not tend to develop until later in their academic careers. Most students, for example, do not enroll in expository writing until their sophomore or junior year of college. This presents a great opportunity for fraternities and sororities to have a positive impact on the personal development of members. Organizations should incorporate hands-on educational workshops on developing effective study habits, writing professional correspondences, and creating resumes and cover letters as part of their membership education programs. Organizations might also consider introducing members to campus resources such as the library, tutoring services, and the career center.

The recommendations in this article are based on the aggregate results of the institutions that used the AFA/EBI Fraternity/Sorority Assessment during the 2008/2009 academic year. The results may not apply to a particular institution or fraternal organization. Advisors, organization staff, and campus-based professionals should assess the developmental needs of their students before choosing to implement specific interventions. It should also be noted that the Assessment evaluated the degree to which the fraternity/sorority experience enhanced the abilities of members. While a low rating indicates that the fraternal experience did not adequately enhance the abilities of the respondents, the rating does not imply that the respondents lacked a particular skill. It is possible that respondents developed their abilities through other opportunities.

The AFA/EBI Fraternity/Sorority Assessment revealed that fraternal organizations are strong in developing the social abilities of members. The organizations do not, however, adequately support the academic mission of institutions of higher education. The active involvement and collaboration of campus-based professionals, organization staff, and alumni/ae volunteers is vital in ensuring fraternities and sororities become more conducive to developing the academic, vocational, and intercultural abilities of members.

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**REFERENCES**


