Filling the gap: Identifying fraternity and sorority member needs through assessment

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overprogramming has become a problem for fraternity and sorority members on many college campuses. Undergraduate members may be expected to attend a membership education roundtable on one day and a study skills workshop on the next. Sometimes these programs are also duplicated by other campus organizations or reintroduced by inter/national organization staff and volunteers. In addition to educational sessions, the calendar of a typical fraternity or sorority member is filled with meetings, service and philanthropic events, socials, and other student organization commitments. The plethora of educational sessions students are expected to attend by campus professionals, inter/national organization staff, and advisors may lead to burn-out. Are all of the lectures, workshops, and discussion groups really necessary? Do they meet the developmental needs of students? Conducting a needs assessment will enable campus professionals and inter/national organization staff and volunteers to engage in purposeful programming, allocate resources effectively, and justify the need for educational programs.

The purpose of this article is to describe how to conduct a needs assessment to identify the skill areas in which students tend to be competent and the areas in which they require additional training.

**STEPS IN THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS**

1. Conduct a preliminary analysis
2. Develop an assessment plan
   a. Create a questionnaire
   b. Pilot the questionnaire
3. Conduct the assessment
   a. Collect data
   b. Analyze data
4. Summarize and report the results

Why Assess Student Needs?
Fraternity and sorority advisors may become stuck in the trap of organizing educational programs simply because they organize them every year or because they believe students could benefit from the programs. There are two problems with this philosophy. First, this is not an effective way of allocating resources. The current state of the economy has resulted in budget cuts at many campuses. It is more important than ever to use resources for programs that are essential to the development or the positive experiences of students. Second, arbitrarily organizing programs does not serve students’ needs. A needs assessment will enable the fraternity/sorority advisor to fill the gap between students’ current abilities and their optimal skill level by purposefully organizing programs that address their needs (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001).

Conduct a Preliminary Analysis
The first step in the needs assessment process is conducting a preliminary analysis of the programs and services offered by the organization or institution. The analysis will provide a better understanding of the programs presently offered, and the results may be used when interpreting the findings from the needs assessment. The following questions should be considered when conducting the preliminary analysis: What programs does the organization or office provide to students? Who attends those programs? What skills are students receiving as a result of those programs? Do other offices or organizations offer similar programs? What areas are not being covered through programming? What areas are being over-programmed?

Over a span of an average year or semester of programming, are all of the department-wide benchmarks, learning outcomes, and objectives covered? Aside from answering these questions, the results of assessment instruments such as the AFA/EBI Fraternity/Sorority Assessment or the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity’s (CSCF) Fraternity and Sorority Experience Survey may serve as an additional source of information regarding the training students receive. Both instruments include questions pertaining to the programming that is available to students.
Create the Questionnaire
There are many ways to conduct a needs assessment, one of which is the gap analysis approach described by Altschuld and Witkin (2000). This approach requires the creation of a double-scaled questionnaire that assesses a current state and a desired state. For instance, students might be asked about their ability to confront their peers (current state) in addition to the confrontational skills one should expect of fraternity and sorority members (desired state). Relative need may then be identified by comparing the means of the two responses. In comparison, single-scaled questions may only assess students’ wants rather than their needs. Altschuld and Witkin (2000) suggested the double-scaled questionnaire is superior for conducting needs assessments, because it has higher face validity and it fits the definition of a need.

When creating the questionnaire, questions pertaining to students’ ability to perform specific tasks, such as speaking in front of large groups, confronting other students to address an issue, and creating and maintaining a budget should be included. Asking specific questions enables students to reflect on their ability to perform the tasks. Broader prompts, such as public speaking, confrontation, and budgeting are too vague and do not allow for distinguishing between students’ knowledge of a task and their ability to perform the task.

A benefit of the gap analysis approach to needs assessment is the ability to differentiate between student wants and student needs. Simply asking students which educational sessions they would be interested in attending may only assess their wants. Another benefit is the ability to identify the relative importance of receiving additional training in an area. It may be determined that learning how to create and maintain a budget is a need for students; however this need may not be as important as the need to learn how to confront peers. Knowing the relative importance will assist campus professionals and inter/national organization staff and volunteers in diverting resources toward programs that are most likely to meet the developmental needs of students. To address low priority needs, fraternity/sorority advisors can educate students on the availability of training opportunities through other sources.

There are several options for designing and disseminating the questionnaire. A recommended approach is the creation of an online survey, possibly through a service such as surveymonkey.com. Many websites allow users to track who has completed the survey and follow-up with non-respondents. An alternative approach would be to create a paper questionnaire that could be disseminated at chapter meetings. Campus professionals may also consider contacting their campus institutional research office to inquire about other means to conduct the assessment. The office may also be a good resource for assistance with designing the questionnaire and analyzing the collected data. Faculty in a sociology or educational psychology department may also provide assistance.

Summarize and Report the Results
An important aspect of any form of assessment is reporting the results (Schuh & Upcraft, 1998). Randy Swing informed the general assembly at the Summer Institute on First-Year Assessment that, “We are all too busy to be doing assessment if its only purpose is filling shelves” (Swing, 2004). The conducting of assessment for assessment’s sake can be avoided by writing reports and executive summaries that include specific recommendations and are easy to understand. In regard to the needs assessment, the report should highlight the areas in which students require additional training and the areas in which they are competent. The report may also highlight the differences and similarities in students’ needs by year-in-school, involvement level, gender, or other demographics.

The recommendation section should include suggestions for meeting students’ needs by using the data from the preliminary analysis as a reference. In some cases, educating students about the availability of resources may be the best approach, whereas in others, consideration might be given to adding or discontinuing programs or marketing current programs in a different way to reach the students with the most need. It is important to consider many factors before launching new initiatives. Such factors include time and personnel requirements, cost, the expertise of those involved, and how the new program will align with existing leadership programs. Prior to discontinuing a program, further research (e.g., focus groups, review of past evaluations) should be conducted to determine if a program should be completely eliminated or just updated to reflect the needs of current students.

The results of the assessment should be shared with stakeholders at the chapter, advisor, inter/national organization staff and volunteers, office, division, and university levels. Working with these constituents to identify

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opportunities for collaboration, mutual priorities, and ways to make the information relevant is critical. Regardless of the findings, intentional procedures should be established to replicate the assessment on a systematic basis, and to provide consistent updates to stakeholders through newsletters, websites, and progress reports. The findings of the assessment and the subsequent implementation process will be as important to constituents as they are to the fraternity/sorority advisor.

Limitations
Any assessment instrument has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, the gap analysis approach described in this article is limited by the possibility of measurement error. The way survey questions are written may influence the way students respond. Simply asking students to rate their skill level on a five-point scale may produce results with low validity, since every student might interpret the five-point scale differently. For instance, some students may rate themselves high because they have a high regard for their abilities, whereas other students may rate themselves low because they are overly critical of themselves. To minimize measurement error, it is important to state what the points on the scale represent. This will enable students to reflect on their skill level based on the stated descriptions. Despite this limitation, the gap analysis approach can result in useful information for fraternity and sorority advisors.

Summary
Conducting a needs assessment is vital to avoiding irrelevant programs that do not develop students’ skills. By identifying the gap between students’ current and optimal abilities, fraternity and sorority advisors can make decisions about revising current programs and developing new initiatives. This type of assessment must take place as inter/national organization staff and campus professionals continue to deal with budget cuts during these challenging economic times. To have the greatest impact, the results of needs assessments should be shared with all relevant stakeholders.

REFERENCES


The following literature provides additional information related to conducting a needs assessment and developing educational programs based on the results:


Sample 5-point Scale

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<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Unsure how to perform the task; You require step-by-step direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moderately able to perform the task; You may require some direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Exceptional performance of the task; You could teach the task to others</td>
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</tbody>
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