Lessons learned from a study of fraternity advising

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Introduction

From October 1996 to June 1997 I traveled twice to seven different campuses and spent a total of six to ten days visiting with members of six national fraternities about what their faculty or chapter advisor did to work with their chapter. These outstanding adult volunteer fraternity leaders were nominated by either national fraternity executives or campus greek advisors for participation in this qualitative ethnographic study of fraternity advising. The business world studies the actions of outstanding business leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 1987), so within the context of the college fraternity, why not study the actions of outstanding advisors? This presentation is meant to share some of the insights I have gained to date about doing qualitative research, and tentative observations I have made from the study of these men about the process of local chapter fraternity advising. The goal of the project is to create a document which tells the story of these seven outstanding volunteer leaders in a way that both encourages more alumni to become volunteer leaders at the chapter level, and at the same time instructs these potential volunteer leaders in good fraternity advising practices.

Qualitative Research

The process of qualitative research should enable me to create a final document which gives the participants' voices an opportunity to be heard in terms of how important the fraternity experience is to them. I began this project thinking that I could complete it within two years. I have come to learn that it will take much longer. For example, it took John Schuh (Personal Communication, 1999) and a team of eight seasoned researchers nearly four years to complete the work necessary to produce the book, Involving Colleges (1992).

- Qualitative ethnographic research is time consuming, detailed, exhausting work, and worth the effort.

- However much time is planned for an activity, the amount of time needed is much greater.

- It is best to work as part of a research team so that the challenge of the project can be met by the support of the people working with you toward its completion.

1A more complete description of the project and the advisors can be found at http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfcge/acpap97.htm
• I anticipate it will take another two years to complete the project.

Fraternity Advising

The seven chapter advisors I interviewed shared a number of common characteristics in terms of their work with undergraduates. Each was a well known personality on their campus and within their national fraternity. Often they were also major volunteer leaders within the national organization. A select set of observations about these men and their advising follows.

• All seven men spend hundreds of volunteer hours working with their local chapter without personal or professional recognition or reward. None of these men sought recognition for what they did.

• Advisors were well aware of the legal and ethical responsibilities of being an advisor, and they did so in spite of potential negative consequences.

• Campuses make almost no provision in regulations for faculty retention, promotion, or tenure which take into account the work a faculty member might invest in fraternity advising. Academic administrators more likely than not said, "If a young professor has time to work with a fraternity, that is time he could have better spent researching and writing another professional article to add to his promotion portfolio."

• The advisors who were also university faculty made a conscious choice to go against the prevailing "faculty culture" in their decision to become a chapter advisor.

• Not all, but many of the student affairs professionals were unaware of "faculty culture" in terms of the opportunity they had to reward faculty within the norms of faculty culture.

• Undergraduates in all seven groups said they viewed their advisor as a "father figure."

• Undergraduates in all groups said they wanted these men to set high expectations and keep the members to their promises to attain them.

• All advisors operated from a philosophical point of view which was based on their particular fraternity's ritual. Undergraduates reported that advisors often challenged their actions by making reference to ritual ideals.

• Advisors were well aware of their behavior as role models for undergraduate members and tempered their personal behavior accordingly.

• Advisors often spent time with undergraduates in both formal meetings and in informal situations. They expected that members would be open and honest with them as a condition of their continued advising.
• None of the advisors were directive or authoritarian in terms of their leadership style. They did not take a direct leadership role in the activities of their organization, but served as a consultant to the undergraduate officers.

• Even in chapters with well over 100 members, most advisors knew every man in the chapter by name as well as details about each man’s life.

• Each advisor was an "expert" on his fraternity's national and local chapter by-laws.

References


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