Rethinking Fraternity and Sorority Advising: The Role of Coaching and Technology

By Terry Hogan, Mark Koepsell, and Chuck Eberly

Fraternities and sororities remain an integral component of student life on college and university campuses across the country. Approximately 200 national organizations sponsor some 9,000 chapters with more than 700,000 undergraduate members. They collaborate with each other through a variety of super-structures, including the National Asian Pacific Islander American Panhellenic Association, National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, National Multicultural Greek Council, National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), National Pan-Hellenic Council, and North-American Interfraternity Conference. Campus-based chapters receive guidance from alumni leaders and professional staff members of these organizations.

Despite positive outcomes noted throughout the fraternity/sorority movement’s history, higher education institutions still grapple with a complex and interrelated set of concerns about the culture and related student behavior. Today, most campuses rely on fraternity/sorority advisors to enhance Greek life opportunities for students. These staff members often hold entry-level positions and work in one-person departments, yet they must support multiple levels of governance structure, oversee individual chapters, provide leadership training,
manage campuswide recruitment processes, support Greek-related honoraries, limit risk by monitoring events, and provide a comprehensive, timely response to incidents at any given moment. This set of expectations has grown slowly but steadily over the last 40 years.

Is this the best mechanism to support fraternity/sorority members and is it the best use of the capabilities of advisors? What could be gained if fraternity/sorority advisors, and chapter consultants who work for the national organizations, spent more time cultivating a team of alumni volunteer “coaches” rather than focusing most of their efforts on working directly with student leaders? Should advisors cultivate other stakeholders as helpers rather than try to provide all of the help themselves? How could technology further this process?

A group of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) and national fraternity and sorority leaders, under the sponsorship of NASPA’s Fraternity and Sorority Affairs Knowledge Community (FSKC), have met almost annually since 1997 to discuss the potential of fraternities and sororities and the associated challenges. Dubbed the Greek Summit, this rotating group of approximately 50 leaders has convened a “think tank” format to consider the state of affairs and offer ideas. The gatherings reflect a common commitment to the intellectual, social, and character development of students, relying on honest, mutually-beneficial dialogue by participants.
The most recent summit was held prior to the 2011 NASPA Annual Conference and hosted by FSKC Chair Scott Reikofski, director of the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania. The meeting was planned by James E. Scott Academy members, Barbara Jones, vice president for student affairs at Miami University; and Tisa Mason, vice president for student affairs at Fort Hays State University. John Stafford, dean of students at Immaculata University, served as the group facilitator. Much of the discussion focused on an evergreen issue: How can campuses and national organizations maximize the impact of the staff and volunteers they deploy to support fraternity/sorority life on campus?

Current State of Affairs

The roles of fraternity/sorority advisors hired by campuses, chapter consultants hired by national fraternities and sororities, and volunteers drawn from faculty members and alumni of both Greek life and the institution have remained fairly consistent in recent years. Advisors generally work with the entire Greek community versus individual chapters. With a focus on system-level activity, they meet most often with system-level student leaders, such as Order of Omega, Intrafraternity Council, Panhellenic, and All-Greek Council leaders, and have less routine contact with other student leaders, non-officer chapter members, or volunteer advisors of individual chapters. Unfortunately, their interactions with
chapters are more often reactive to a particular issue or problem rather than proactive in terms of group or member development.

Chapter consultants visit their chapters, meet with student officers and volunteer chapter advisors, and often visit the campus fraternity/sorority advisor to discuss chapter progress. Chapter consultants supplement more routine communication and support to campus chapters provided by the fraternity/sorority advisor and their local volunteer chapter advisor(s), but are limited in their impact since headquarters consultants likely visit chapters only once or twice a year.

Volunteer chapter advisors, whether off-campus alumni or on-campus staff or faculty, take approaches ranging from administrative form signers to active participants in chapter life who meet regularly with an executive team and attend chapter meetings. It is often a single individual such as a volunteer or faculty advisor who juggle myriad administrative, advising, management, and counseling tasks as they work to meet the needs of national offices, campus administrators, chapter leaders, chapter members, and other volunteers in state or regional roles. For faculty members, this work is typically not valued relative to tenure or promotion, and it is often undertaken contrary to the wishes of department chairpersons.

Stakeholders serving in these separate but connected roles strive to achieve broad, shared goals, but also face a common set of tensions. How is “putting out
fires” balanced with the investment of time and effort required to support healthy student development? How is educating young people and growing vibrant organizations balanced with the need to reduce liability? How is student leadership nurtured while minding the bottom line?

Individuals serving in these three intersecting advising roles often have common personal experiences in a fraternity or sorority, limited professional experience in student and/or organizational development, and little or no training. Although they want to work collaboratively, the number of moving parts and supervising stakeholders makes their circumstances challenging at best.

**Coaching Student Leaders**

What potential exists to formalize an approach that both fraternity executives and SSAOs know intuitively works well? The chapter with an engaged alumni board and/or an active faculty/alumni advisor is almost always a better-performing organization that requires less attention from either campus or headquarters staff. Summit participants suggest that the current central campus advising model be refined with efforts focused on developing an expanded cohort of certified alumni volunteers to “coach” individual student leaders and employ technology more effectively to advance the effort. This approach would broaden the active support system for undergraduates and, by extension, supplement the work of campus fraternity/sorority advisors.
Summit members offer the following six recommendations:

**Shift the focus to leadership coaching.** Much of the interaction between advisors and the fraternity/sorority community occurs at the group level. Volunteer advisors attend chapter meetings at which they can ostensibly influence the entire group and better understand the entire organization’s health. Fraternity/sorority campus advisors support inter-fraternal or governance bodies that provide a consistent message and offer systemic solutions to persistent problems. Chapter consultants meet one-on-one with the leadership team of a given chapter to promote adherence to standards and demonstrate support for undergraduate executive leaders.

Though group-level activity is an explicit part of the overall venture and will never disappear, could chapter performance improve if individual student leaders were mentored by trained coaches whose sole purpose was to help student leaders excel in their roles? Coaches provide private, honest feedback and advice in an attempt to improve individual performance within a team context. Coaches could develop trusting relationships with student leaders and help them visualize a clear path toward their goals, identify markers to measure progress, and perform daily leadership activities without encroaching on individual scholastic performance.

It should be noted that volunteer chapter advisors, chapter consultants, and fraternity/sorority advisors regularly mentor, counsel, and advise individual student
leaders. More formal coaching would add a new, high-impact campus and national organization-supported volunteer resource to the mix and strengthen student organization leadership, service, and development.

Take a team approach. Team advising is implicit in this approach. Many sororities that are members of the NPC have used this approach with great success, sharing the workload across a group of trained volunteers. One volunteer advises the president, another the treasurer, another the new member chair, and so on. Additional team members can call on colleagues for assistance or backup; the chapter is no longer reliant on a single advisor who may leave without warning. In addition, the range of skills and knowledge provided by the advising team will likely be greater than any single volunteer can offer.

With campus-supported, headquarters-approved individual volunteer coaches assigned to each student leader, faculty and/or alumni volunteers may be more willing to serve as overall chapter advisors. Current volunteer chapter advisors will continue to play a key role and will undoubtedly welcome the help of a coaching staff to support their advising role.

Expand volunteer alumni involvement as coaches and advisors. As national fraternities and sororities seek to positively engage more alumni in the activities of their respective organizations, the opportunity to coach student leaders could be appealing to graduates seeking a more personal connection to their alma mater.
With a more narrowly-defined job description, a smaller piece of the overall pie to manage, and less constraints associated with a regularly-scheduled face-to-face group meeting, more alumni may be interested in getting involved.

Youth mentoring programs across the country have grown in number and impact, and more young adults are serving as mentors through schools or national organizations like Big Brothers and Big Sisters. Today’s young college graduates and prospective alumni coaches are familiar with the model and attracted to it, in part, because they can see the direct impact of their volunteer efforts. Add readily available, virtually free technology like Skype to the mix, and new alumni coaches could envision themselves meeting weekly with student leaders without traveling to campuses.

The more focused role of a leadership coach could be appealing to alumni regardless of whether or not they were fraternity or sorority members. The fact that a coach for the fraternity/sorority treasurer is an accountant or the chapter president’s coach is a business owner or agency executive director could be more important.

Reshape the roles of fraternity/sorority advisor and chapter consultant.

The implementation of a coaching model requires reframing the roles of campus fraternity/sorority advisors and chapter consultants and suggests a change in curriculum for graduate professional preparation programs. Most campus
fraternity/sorority advisors and chapter consultants assume the roles following positive, personal fraternity/sorority experiences in college. Many choose to pursue master’s level graduate education to transition to entry-level professional positions on a campus or at national fraternity or sorority headquarters.

Both current professional practice and graduate education focus on student development and seek to provide staff with knowledge of developmental theory to inform their work advising, counseling, guiding, and assisting students. The given activity or organization, in this case fraternities and sororities, serves as a vehicle for individual student development. Volunteer development, organizational development, and leadership coaching are less evident in the toolbox of emerging student affairs or fraternity/sorority life professionals.

Provide uniform training to certify coaches and advisors. One of the many significant challenges of this approach is a lack of consistent volunteer training for campus personnel or alumni who elect to assist chapters. Alumni and faculty members vary widely in their degree of motivation, availability, understanding of student and organizational development, knowledge of applicable policies and regulations and, essentially, methods to effectively coach student leaders and advise organizations. Training offered at regional and national meetings and online resources are helpful, but neither are proven to boost the overall effectiveness of volunteers in these roles.
The use of technology to extend training to individuals across the country is growing. “AlcoholEdu for College” and “Student Success,” among others, have demonstrated the viability of technology to not only deliver training online, but to assess learning through online testing and document the successful completion of training by a defined set of participants.

With the use of technology a common, core curriculum can be developed to train all leadership coaches and student organization advisors. The curriculum can be further customized with organization-specific content. Though the cost is greater and the implementation more complex than using Skype for one-on-one meetings, the deployment of such technology could have a far-reaching impact.

Encourage preparation programs to address volunteer development as a required professional skill. Current graduate preparation programs devote little attention to recruiting and training volunteers for any purpose or training volunteer coaches to provide leadership education. In fact, little attention is paid to specialized skills required to be a successful fraternity/sorority campus professional. For this reason, the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) includes a graduate preparation program training track in each AFA Annual Meeting and coordinates a First 90 Days Program for new campus professionals.

Given recent “engaged learning” initiatives to promote integration of in-class and out-of-class learning activities and burgeoning interest in campus and
community service learning, graduate program faculty are well advised to include instruction in volunteer training and coaching activities in master’s level curricula. Such training activities should be included if for no other reason than educating all campus academic and cocurricular student organization advisors on their responsibilities for risk management, an issue that impacts both academic and non-academic student organizations.

**Role of the SSAO**

SSAO leadership is critical in rethinking the current role of campus fraternity/sorority professionals and formalizing the role of volunteer student coaches as integral parts of fraternity/sorority operations. Consider the following five steps to advance these concepts.

**Meet with student leaders.** SSAOs often look for specific initiatives to engage student leaders in improving the quality of the fraternity/sorority experience. By convening a meeting of student leaders, SSAOs can check their reactions to these ideas. What do they think of a team of alumni advisors, some or many of whom might not be affiliated with their national organization? From their perspective, what would it take to make such a coaching initiative work?

**Ask the Greek advisor and his/her supervisor.** Share these concepts with student affairs staff and test their viability. Would the current campus environment support the development of a staff/alumni chapter coaching program? Is your staff
ready to make changes like these? Would alumni coaching volunteers profitably serve other areas within student affairs?

Explore the idea with alumni affairs’ leadership. A fraternity/sorority advisor might not have the clout necessary to engage potential alumni coaches in a paradigm shift. As SSAO, contact your counterpart in university advancement to suggest a collaborative effort to expand the engagement of alumni in the undergraduate life of the college or university. Your direct involvement will affect how the idea is received.

Test the idea. Given sufficient interest, consider supporting the development of a pilot effort with a limited set of participating organizations. Charge a senior staff member to collaborate with alumni affairs to test the concept with several chapters. Appeal to alumni who are already involved in supporting student affairs or to the leadership of area alumni chapters. Support the pilot and assess the outcomes measured by chapter and individual member performance.

Support related professional development. If the volunteer coaching model gains traction on your campus, encourage its expansion by supporting the professional development of your staff. Your staff member and the fraternity/sorority advisor would benefit from greater knowledge of volunteer development skills. Review existing resources within higher education and in the
world of non-profit organization management, philanthropy, and campus/community service learning.

**Shifting the Current Reality**

The current reality for most front-line fraternity/sorority professionals is a combination of work with council and chapter leaders who support their individual growth and development as officers balanced with the inevitable task of reacting to the risk management “issue of the week.” Expected to manage this tightrope with precision and poise, most campus advisors work in environments where the cards appear to be stacked against them. Many campus officials view the fraternity/sorority advisor role as an entry-level position and accept a high rate of turnover. Fraternity/sorority professionals are often the youngest directors within student affairs, or they are buried deep within the layers of larger departments.

Shifting to an alumni/staff/faculty coaching model has the potential to greatly improve the experience of students and the success of fraternal communities, but it cannot be successful without active and thoughtful SSAO leadership. Regardless of the viability of any new model, consider how fraternal communities are currently supported. Is the staff-to-student ratio reasonable? Is the Greek advisor appropriately positioned within the campus hierarchy with sufficient support and authority? What financial and logistical resources are provided? What
other steps might be taken to enhance the fraternity/sorority experience and the overall student experience?

Shared values underlie the long-standing relationships between colleges and universities and fraternities and sororities, but approaches to enacting those values continue to evolve. The deployment and support of front-line staff directly affects the growth, development, and success of students, but is accompanied by budgetary, operational, and risk management implications.

Many questions remain. Does volunteer coaching really differ from student group advising? Would a larger and different set of alumni find coaching opportunities appealing? Who could or would organize such a venture? Is there enough common interest among different national organizations and between national organizations and campuses to support the development of a common online training platform for student leadership coaches and/or chapter advisors? Would fraternity/sorority advisors and chapter consultants view their work differently if they were asked to spend more time educating volunteers and less time working directly with students?

Would the concept of volunteer coaching for individual student leaders work on your campus? For your organization? For your staff? For your students? Share your perspective as well as suggestions on this topic through the FSKC discussion board at http://naspafskc.wordpress.com/. Several programs related to this topic
will be proposed for the 2012 NASPA National Conference in Phoenix. SSAOs interested in participating in the next Greek Summit should contact KC Chair Scott Reikofski at reikofsk@exchange.upenn.edu.

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