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INVOLVING STUDENTS IN SECURING A FUTURE FOR FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

Dennis C. Roberts, Ph.D. and Matthew Johnson

Started in 2002, the Fraternal Futures initiative offers students, staff, faculty, and general community members a new way to think about change in fraternities and sororities. The project models the National Issues Forum (NIF) deliberations, a process where participants are encouraged to engage in a different way of framing complex issues. Fraternal Futures deliberations offer participants a chance to discuss change strategies from various lenses, recognizing that a typical debate style of conversation often leaves many participants unhappy and does not address the intricacies that go along with tough decisions. With over 1,100 student participants at ten different colleges/universities, results from Fraternal Futures indicate that if serious change is to occur in fraternal life, it must begin by engaging students in authentic, meaningful conversations. Further results denote that students are not only willing to have these conversations, but many students become more informed, committed, and reflective in their actions as a outcome of their participation in the program.

As fraternity membership has declined 30 percent in the last decade (Reisberg, 2000), the importance of understanding the contributing issues behind the drop has dramatically increased. Some believe the decline stems from a soured public image due to hazing incidents. Others purport that fraternal organizations boast an increased social agenda over service and academic pursuits, which limits their appeal. A number of workshops, speakers, and initiatives have sought to address the issues behind declining membership, only to incur marginal success. Whatever the true reasons are, it is clear that declining interest in fraternal organizations is a complex problem with no easy solution. Nonetheless, this decline remains an issue worth exploring with students in a deep, meaningful way.

The Fraternal Futures initiative is a campus-based program sponsored by the Kettering Foundation that offers students, staff, faculty, and general community members a new way to discuss fraternity and sorority issues at a deeper level, and to think about approaches to solving them. This article documents the Fraternal Futures initiative over the last four years, examining theoretical frameworks that informed the project, chronicling partnerships with other campuses, exploring outcomes from the deliberation processes, and discussing implications based on this work.

Taking Responsibility

Fraternal Futures is based on the juxtaposition of students' interests and local issues, within an atmosphere that empowers students to create solutions. We believe that fraternity and sorority members co-create their future, with assistance from fraternity and sorority administrators and fraternity and sorority regional and/or inter/national organization leadership. Through the

deliberation process, students are empowered and challenged to implement critical thinking skills in solving complex issues.

The theoretical foundation of Fraternal Futures is based largely on Marcia Baxter Magolda's (2004) Learning Partnership Model, which explains how we, as educators, can engage with students in the learning process. Specific to the fraternity and sorority movement, this model demonstrates the ways in which we can work with students to address concerns in their fraternity and sorority chapters and communities, while stimulating a commitment to civic responsibility within fraternity and sorority communities.

Three additional models helped inform the developmental perspective of the Fraternal Futures program. One such model stems from the Wingspread Summit on Civic Engagement, where, in March 2001, 33 undergraduate students met to explore their views of civic engagement. Sarah Long (2002), a student participant, documented these views in *The New Student Politics*. For the Wingspread students, involvement in civic affairs meant transcending the conventional view that political involvement meant only voting and petitioning. The three key tenets of involvement for Wingspread are 1) having access to collective decision making, 2) possessing a personal interest, and 3) pursuing one's involvement through small, local efforts. These conditions are directly aligned with the basic notions of deliberative democracy and are consistent with Baxter Magolda's Learning Partnerships Model (2004). Both the Wingspread Summit statement and the Learning Partnerships Model include the following propositions (Roberts & Huffman, 2005): civic participation must stem from students' own experience (situating learning in students' experience and validating students as knowers); students must see the direct impact of their involvement in small groups at the local level (portraying knowledge as complex and socially constructed); and students must see civic participation as available to all (defining learning as co-constructing meaning through the sharing of authority and expertise).

The two remaining perspectives that helped illuminate the conditions that discourage or support serious student involvement in campus issues came from Richard Keeling (1998) and Alan Berkowitz (1998). Keeling proposed new ways of addressing HIV/AIDS on campus. His primary concept was that homophobia is partially responsible for perpetuating risky sexual practices by making it uncomfortable for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to be open about their sexual orientation. This veil of secrecy resulted in poor information about and reluctance to adopt healthy sexual practices.

Berkowitz (1998) studied the accuracy of students' perceptions about the drinking behaviors of others, concluding that students' belief that there was a high use of alcohol on campus encouraged individual personal abuse, while the belief that there was low use reduced personal abuse. For both Keeling and Berkowitz, prevention depended on honesty, accuracy, involvement of broad numbers of students, and attention to the campus environmental conditions that have perpetuated risky sexual and alcohol use practices. Baxter Magolda (2004), Wingspread (Long, 2002), Keeling (1998), and Berkowitz (1998) have four themes in common: 1) they encourage honest and realistic analyses of shared problems, 2) they foster a personal commitment to change, 3) they encourage a more complex understanding of the issues, and 4) they empower citizens to be involved in civic issues (Roberts & Huffman, 2005).

These models challenge traditional forms of civic engagement by focusing on collective decision-making that affects local efforts (e.g., deliberative democracy). The blending of the Learning Partnership Model and the additional models emphasize that civic participation must stem from students' own experiences, where they see the direct impact of their involvement at local levels, and making civic participation available to all (Roberts & Huffman, 2005). The deliberation process provides opportunities for students to engage in solving local issues by encouraging honest reflection and realistic analyses of shared problems; fostering personal commitments to change; and encouraging complex understanding of issues.

How the Process Works

Trained student moderators lead approximately 10-20 students through the two-hour Fraternal Futures deliberations. These deliberations include the use of a student-created discussion guide that frames the issues of fraternity and sorority life by presenting a summary of the problems within the fraternity and sorority community and three approaches to solving them. The three approaches are opening recruitment, focusing on accountability and values, and collaborating to address campus health and safety problems. Participants work through the issues by considering each approach and exploring potential tradeoffs, or outcomes to their decisions. Moderators ask participants to reflect on their experiences and discuss potential next steps (e.g., continue the discussion, schedule additional meetings). Finally, students take pre- and post-forum surveys comprised of both quantitative and qualitative instruments. These assessments ask students to choose which approach they favored most and the tradeoffs they are willing to accept by implementing this choice. The pre- and post-assessments assess their perspectives on fraternity and sorority life and their views on civic involvement. Results of the deliberation are tabulated and distributed to the fraternity and sorority administrators, fraternity and sorority governing bodies (e.g., IFC, NPHC) and student participants. Logistical preparations (e.g., time, space) for Fraternal Futures deliberations are arranged with various campuses, chapters, or individual students before the actual deliberation.

Where and How has Fraternal Futures Been Used?

As of summer 2006, Fraternal Futures has been utilized at ten institutions: Miami University, Kutztown University, Jacksonville State University, Westminster College, Florida State University, Ohio Wesleyan, Drake University, Franklin & Marshall University, Eastern Michigan University, Northwestern, and Simpson College. These institutions range from large, public institutions with large populations of fraternity and sorority affiliated students, to small, private colleges with less-affiliated populations. At these various institutions, Fraternal Futures served as either a culmination of new member programs, was incorporated into "Greek Week" activities, or had been a separate program. Each program resulted in different outcomes with varying degrees of success.

Fraternal Futures Outcomes

The first method used to discern outcomes was a quantitative questionnaire administered by the student moderators before and after the deliberation. Four statements were used to gauge students' attitudes:

- I am concerned about the future of fraternity/sorority life.
- I feel that I have a role in securing the future of fraternity/sorority life.
- I feel I have the ability to further the future of fraternity/sorority life.
- I am committed enough to take action.

The instrument utilized a Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The results indicate a modest positive shift across all four attitudes, with an average of one in three students claiming a positive increase in their attitude toward fraternity and sorority life. The greatest positive shift relates to the question, "I feel I have the ability to further the future of Greek life." Thirty-two percent of students indicated an increase. A moderate positive shift was exhibited in the remaining three attitudes as well, with one in three students indicating a positive change. These data provide supporting evidence that we are meeting our goal of fostering change in fraternity and sorority communities.

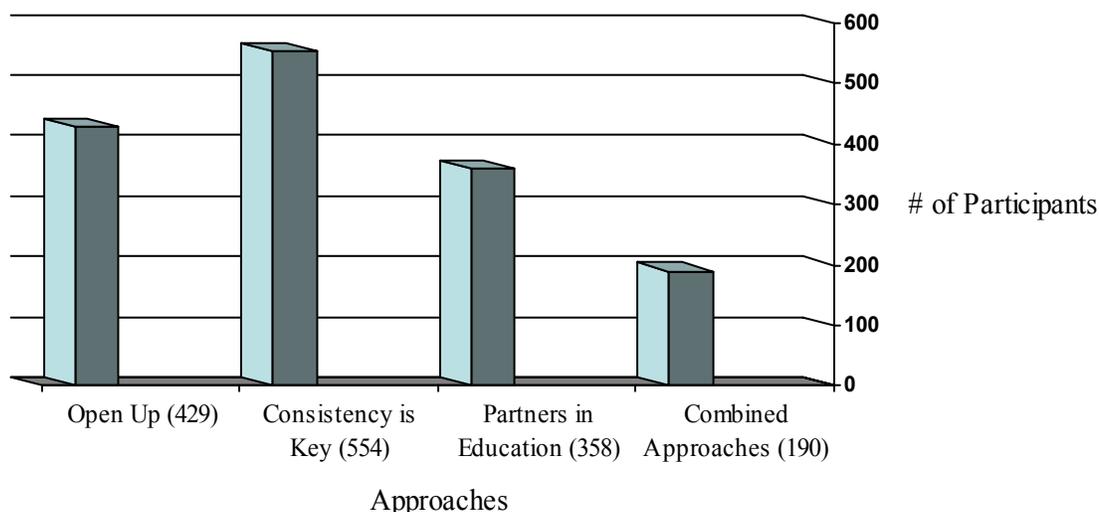
In addition to ascertaining students' attitudinal shifts, moderators ask students to decide upon the approach(es) that they favored most. Students consider if they favor the first approach, which relates to changing recruitment procedures, strengthening diversity, and targeting a wider array of individuals for membership. They also consider the second approach that looks at holding members more accountable, developing and enforcing membership standards, and implementing more values-based programming. Finally, students reflect on the third approach, which includes addressing health and safety concerns by collaborating with other organizations and administrators. As the chart indicates, the most popular approach is the second, a focus on values and accountability. This suggests that students are concerned about acting on their values and holding those members who are not in alignment with those values accountable for their actions.

As students select their approaches, moderators ask them to determine which tradeoffs they are most willing to accept within each approach. Of all the tradeoffs within the three approaches, students were least willing to accept a potential decrease in the bonds of brotherhood or sisterhood, which could occur if approaches one or two were adopted. In addition, we found that students were willing to accept one tradeoff considerably more than the others presented. For example, twenty percent of respondents were willing to accept the potential tradeoff that values-based recruitment (approach one) would force recruitment to become more exclusive and time-consuming.

In addition to our quantitative assessment, students were asked two open-ended questions at the end of the survey. The first question was, "How have your perspectives on the future of fraternity and sorority life changed?" Responses to this question were grouped into eight themes, listed here in order of most frequent to least frequent: community focus, the realization that others face similar problems, a better understanding of issues and broadening of perspectives, a realization of the problems, increased optimism, feelings of empowerment, increased pessimism, greater concern and commitment. Results were analyzed by two raters, the lead researcher and an

assistant. The two most frequent themes account for nearly half of the total responses (48 percent), indicating a very clear perceptual shift among students toward either a more community-focused effort or a realization that others have similar problems.

Table 1. Fraternal Futures Barometer



A junior from Westminster College remarked, “I’m glad to know how much we really all have in common. I’ve never realized that before.” Another Miami student asked, “If we’re all fighting the same battle, how come we don’t work together?” A Drake University student echoed their sentiments, “We have a lot of work to do, and it’s going to take everyone firing on the same cylinders to make it work.” Students believe that their individual chapters are doing well prior to participating in this initiative, but the forums help to shed light on the multitude of issues associated with fraternities and sororities, sparking curiosity and a willingness to get more involved.

In regards to the second most prevalent theme, having a better understanding of issues and broadening perspectives, one Miami woman stated, “I’ve seen that there are a lot of different perspectives and that there is so much that could be done to help better the future of Greeks. We just need to take action now.” One fraternity member commented that he is now “better in tune with the larger scope of Greek life.” These responses, and the others categorized in this theme, indicate that participants gain a deeper understanding of issues through the deliberation process. Participants have the opportunity to visualize issues on a larger, community scale, and consider how individual actions affect the greater fraternity and sorority community.

The second open-ended question asked students to reflect on how their views regarding civic participation changed because of the program. Responses were also grouped into eight themes: community effort, individual action, dispelling stereotypes, a need for continuing dialogue, an appreciation of diverse viewpoints, empowerment/excitement, increased accountability, and no change. Participants identified community effort as their favored form of civic participation and viewed issues not as individual in nature, but as collective problems. One Drake student remarked, “I’ve realized that [civic participation] is really the only way that we are going to

change; without it, we're simply going to maintain." The second most common theme was "no change." Students in this category indicated that their views remained the same or that they saw little value in the deliberation process.

Another component assessed among the Fraternal Futures' outcomes was how student moderators viewed the deliberation process. Student moderators were actively recruited and trained to lead the deliberations, which resulted in students having the opportunity to travel to other different institutions. The student moderators noted that they were apprehensive prior to their visits, mostly because they felt as though they must possess "all the answers" or they were simply nervous that the participants would not engage. With a little coaching and encouragement by the program directors, the moderators set out on their travels. Despite these challenges, student moderators report meaningful learning experiences, as exemplified by one junior moderator from Miami University:

"I had so much fun and learned a great amount about myself as an individual, the campus/Greek system of [this college], and also the Greek Community as a whole. Anyone who participates in this program will definitely come back to [this university] with a better understanding of Greek issues, and themselves. It was so interesting to note the differences in the systems of our two schools, but the sharing of these differences caused all of us to benefit from the experience. It was rewarding to see (and listen to) all that they had gained from the forum that I had led for them! It was so much fun and the amount that I learned from the experience was immeasurable!"

Nearly all of the moderators expressed similar sentiments upon their return. Some even indicated that they planned to apply their experiences as moderators to their respective fraternity and sorority chapters.

Conclusion

Moss Kanter (2004) states that a main reason why organizations find themselves in a "losing streak" is decreased communication because of an unwillingness to have "tough" conversations and address fundamental issues. Fraternal Futures moves in the opposite direction. It attempts to provide a forum for candid conversations where students know their voices are heard and the tendency to blame is avoided. Another characteristic of a losing streak noted by Moss Kanter (2004) is increased isolation, which she contends contributes to continued decline by creating barriers to fresh ideas. Deliberations can expose such isolation. One sorority woman said, "It's like we live in a bubble here. I barely even know other Greek members outside of my chapter." Such comments indicate that fraternal organizations are headed for a "losing streak" unless they increase communication among organizations, and begin to take responsibility for resolving their problems.

Fraternal organizations will not survive unless they adopt deep and sustained conversations that renew them as not only part of, but as essential to, their campuses. The initial efforts of Fraternal Futures created momentum for the campuses where the model has been used. Students have spoken and continue to dialogue due to their participation. The students who have been involved have told us that they appreciate being heard and that they want to be part of positive change. Their responses to post-participation questionnaires indicated that students have also learned

that, at least in this example, they see the potential, the benefit, and the importance of becoming civically engaged in matters that are important to them.

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