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## Five Lessons Learned From Ten Years of Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors

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FIVE LESSONS LEARNED FROM TEN YEARS OF

ORACLE: THE RESEARCH JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF FRATERNITY/SORORITY ADVISORS

DAN BUREAU, PH.D. AND GRAHAEME HESP, PH.D.

In 2005, the Association set out to develop a journal to both promote and publish research about the experiences of fraternity/sorority members and those who work with these organizations. As written, all those involved in these discussions believed that the mission of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the [then] Association of Fraternity Advisors* would “advance the study of college fraternities and sororities through a peer-reviewed academic journal promoting scholarly discourse among partners invested in the college fraternal movement” (Association of Fraternity Advisors, 2005, p. iii). Ten years later, we are pleased to confirm that this publication fulfilled its intended purpose.

From email files, it appears that the name was finalized, ironically on Friday, May 13th. When asked to write an editorial for this issue to commemorate this occasion, we examined just how far the journal had come and where it is that we still can go. As the first Editor (Grahaeme) and Associate Editor (Dan) of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*, we have used this short editorial to outline five lessons we have learned as a result of launching the journal and watching its success (and failures) over the decade. Through these observations we not only reflect on the past but examine future opportunities.

*Success must be attributed to many.*

To be very clear, Grahaeme and Dan did not just sit in a room and develop a strategy to make this happen. In fact, as far as we can tell, the earliest indicators of the Association’s desire to produce a peer reviewed journal comes from the 2000 strategic plan, crafted under the leadership of Charlie Warner, then President. Additionally, it appears that Rosalind Alderman, former board member, reviewed how the Association could produce a journal. Limited Association resources and industry expectations about what would have been at the time a print journal (in addition to *Perspectives*) severely limited progress.

However, desires for a journal did not go away and the field of higher education and AFA’s propensity for risk taking was changing with the new millennium. Dan expressed in his 2004 AFA Presidential inauguration speech that the need for fraternity/sorority research-based practice was strengthening. Grahaeme was doing full-time doctoral work at Florida State University and working on the *Journal of College and Character*, an emerging online-only journal (now published by NASPA: College Student Educators International) connected to Jon Dalton’s Institute on College Student Values. With the Association’s peers moving to models of non-printed, online only (and open-access) journals the AFA leadership determined that it was be the right time to move ahead with plans for our own journal.

Dan gathered a group of experts representing peer associations and higher education faculty at the 2004 Annual Meeting. From that time on, phone calls were made and people signed on to the effort.

And it was not just AFA members: Outreach was made to higher education scholars, including

Susan Komives, Penny Rue, Larry Roper, Nancy Evans, and many others. Shockingly they said yes when asked to serve as part of the Advisory and/or the Peer Review Boards. Many others signed on to serve as editors and recruit articles. Central Office staff, at that time 2.5 individuals, worked with Grahaeme and Dan to develop protocol, guidelines, and layout. It took hours upon hours to bring even the first issue to life.

And the support never stopped. Oracle has had eight editors and associate editors and close to 50 different people served on the advisory, editorial and peer review boards. In addition, numerous central office staff, Association Board leaders, and other invested partners have made Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors what it is today.

### *Labors of love can be messy.*

Launching a journal is hard work. Keeping it going is even harder. For the better part of a year, we had to develop style guidelines (even documenting the exact font to be used), review layouts (central office staff proposed more than one that Grahaeme and I debated over), and manage personalities (smart people can have big egos with lots of ownership over even small roles). Reviewing emails for this editorial, there were a number of times that the two of us, friends and colleagues now for 17 years, argued over what might be thought of as small issues or approaches to work. These challenges – to launch the journal but more so to encourage and promote interfraternal research – stand out as messy but they also remain some of our most rewarding professional hurdles to date.

Finding suitable research stands out as one of the messiest of our tasks. One of the reasons for not launching an AFA journal back in 2000 was that it was industry standard to have about two years worth of articles in the pipeline. Two years? Launching Oracle, we had enough articles for one issue and then struggled to recruit articles one at a time. Survival of Oracle was often in question. We found theses/dissertations online and begged people to write. We went to sessions at conferences and basically promised anyone from young master's students to well-known scholars mentoring and support in authoring articles. Our rejection rate was low; we took what we could. We even reprinted articles (Dan always thought we should reprint one article from another journal in each issue to achieve a secondary goal of the journal: to promote existing research) to make sure we got five articles in every issue. Sometimes we got four, but to date there have been 73 articles (not including editorials) printed in 16 issues during these ten years with authors ranging across all aspects of higher education and the fraternal movement. These articles may not have ever been published had it not been for this specific forum for fraternity/sorority research. Some are better than others, but each brings forth new information about how those involved experience the complexities of fraternity and sorority life.

### *Sometimes taking the leap is just necessary.*

The publication conditions around us at the time allowed AFA's leadership to consider launching a journal, but we still had to reconcile one other question: are we best positioned to take this on? To us it seemed The Center for the Study of the College Fraternity was the appropriate forum for such a journal. However, the Center had been relatively dormant for a few years at that point. While it had gained some momentum around the start of the 2000s, it really had not been producing monographs or other publications. It was minimally staffed and its volunteers, Dan one of them, were not able to pull enough resources or person power together to start the journal. AFA took action because the Center could not "own" the journal. To be clear, CSCF board members, most notably Dick McKaig and Chuck Eberly were highly involved in the launch of the journal and each continue to contribute in ways to this day.

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Taking the ‘Oracle leap’ also meant that we may fall on our face, particularly since we had not “stockpiled” articles for future issues. We knew that the risk we were taking was that we might have an issue and then need to take some time off to get enough articles for the next one. This indeed happened as we did not produce an issue in 2007. It was not only that we did not get submissions, but also the process of helping emerging authors turn their articles into publishable work was time consuming. We focused on working with authors very closely to ensure that if the promise was there for an article that it would somehow see the light of day printed in the journal’s pages. Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors has always had this developmental approach and it persists to this day. When some other journals may flat out reject articles, we look for promise. We still have a respectable rejection rate (because that’s important when ensuring scholarly journal publication!), but our approach stands out for the last ten years: we exist to provide the forum for the publication of research into the fraternity/sorority experience. We need to get research out there that provides evidence about experiences in these organizations.

More importantly, we were surprised just how willing other people were to take the leap with us. We mentioned some of the people who were willing to work on our advisory and peer review boards. That list is way too long to print here, but the first issue had 39 experienced higher education professionals listed as contributors in some way. Many were past leaders in other associations such as ACPA and NASPA. Some were working on completing their doctorates. Some submitted articles that may have been better off printed in a more established journal just because they valued the mission of Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors. We are so grateful for those leaps of faith and the people who contribute today. Look at the number of us on the Editorial Board TODAY who started in “the field” of Fraternity/Sorority Advising and now have terminal degrees. We feel like involvement in this journal was a playground for many of us to try things, to prototype approaches, to learn how to conduct good and less-good research.

### *Persistence pays off.*

We have established that it was not always easy to pull together issues. We also can see from a basic review that we have had some articles that never would have seen the light of day in another higher education/student affairs journal. However, examine the research in this issue that highlights five excellent award winning articles. There is good stuff here. We have more evidence of how these students experience the best and worst of these organizations; for example, Asel, Seifert, and Pascarella explored these complexities in their 2009 award winning article.

We have also been able to pull together an entire issue on leadership development, one of two areas identified early in our work as potential focus issues (the other being an issue focused on BGLOs and culturally-based chapters). The current Editorial Board examined some of the best work in our 10 years to select the articles in this anniversary issue. There could have been others as well!

An early goal was open-access to the journal. Grahaeme was particularly passionate about this and fought the good fight to make sure that while the Association staff and leaders were concerned about giving away resources (and possibly undermining potential members who might pay in order to view issues), our leadership was clear on the value of making sure ANYONE can access the research produced by our association. By the third issue, Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors was indeed open-access! While the current issue remains only for members, previous issues were then opened for anyone to access via the AFA Website.

However, another early strategy was to have the journal indexed through ERIC or even the emerg-

ing search engine Google. By indexing the journal, we could make it easier to access for practitioners and students to use these articles. While Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors was indeed open-access, it was not until the leadership of Patrick Biddix as Editor (circa 2010) that the journal became indexed. Now the journal is much more easily found and many of the articles can come up quicker in general searches for “fraternity/sorority research”.

### ***Research on fraternity and sorority life is just complicated.***

When recruited to serve as a peer reviewer, Larry Moneta, Vice President for Student Affairs at Duke University, basically told Dan “I will not serve if all you want to do is print articles that promote the good parts of these organizations”. Larry’s intent was that Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors should not glorify only the contributions of these organizations. We know from 10 years of this journal’s articles as well as research from numerous other journals that the fraternity and sorority experience is complicated and to quote one of our reprints in this article “complex”. We never rejected an article due to negative findings. In fact, many of our articles have a finding that fraternity/sorority advocates might find challenging; many acknowledge the nuances of fraternity/sorority research and membership. Oracle has not existed to tout the experience but rather to provide scholarly discourse that is also critical, reflective, and useful.

### ***Next steps.***

And complicated describes a little bit of our future. What is next for this journal: more of the same? Yes with some caveats. As AFA has strengthened its relationship with the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity and added Central Office staff to ensure research (and assessment) of the fraternity/sorority experience is an Association priority, we can do more to recruit high quality articles. We can do more to work with researchers of varying experience and expertise in writing to ensure articles see publication. We can do more to make sure search engines allow everyone to easily find these articles. We can make sure we continue to publish a journal with integrity bringing forth new studies on key issues not only in the fraternity/sorority experience, but also how these students experience the broader higher education context. All Association members can better use Oracle to guide their practice and to develop ideas for future research (and not just students but as practitioners infuse research and assessment more and more into their work), after all if this is just printed for prosperity how will we improve our work in advising these organizations?

### ***Conclusion.***

In closing, not only had we developed a mission but we also had an end state in mind. We developed a vision for the future of the journal grounded in positioning the Association firmly in higher education and contributing to the body of information about the experiences of fraternity and sorority members. Ten years on the vision continues to read:

*Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors serves as the premier forum for academic discourse and scholarly inquiry regarding the college fraternity and sorority movement. (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2015, p. vi),*

The vision may be easy for us to reach: no one else necessarily wants to “own” the research of this functional area. It is not like the *Journal for College Student Development* is going to stake the claim on advancing fraternity/sorority research when there’s an endless list of possible research topics on the

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college experience. However, inherent in this vision was a sense that we wanted to become stable and relevant. We wanted to be contributory. We wanted to be valued as a publication. We wanted to be respected as a profession. With these end states in mind, we believe we may have not only fulfilled our mission, but have begun to realize our vision. We are thankful to all who have previously led in this effort, those who currently help this journal come to life, and all who will be engaged in the future of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*.

## References

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Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (2015). General information. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*, 10(1), p. vi.