

Writer's Note: I owe gratitude and thanks for several people's unknown contributions to this article. Much of what I am sharing and where I have learned these techniques are from veteran professionals, both on campus and at headquarters, who are the tough debaters. I have also been highly influenced through those colleagues and friends that I have worked with and have collaborated with. But when it comes to debating, there are two individuals who stand out for me – Mary Peterson and Dave Westol. Thank you for your guidance and inspiration to deal with our worst chapters members head on.

That's Fratastic!

Debating Idiot Fraternity and Sorority Logic

– Mike McRee

THE RATIONALE

Have you found yourself in the position of having a conversation with a chapter member or alumni/ae that was completely ridiculous? They were so far off from the point (or reality) that you were saying to yourself, "How can I convince this person that not only what they are saying is stupid, but their argument is horrible (their points are either irrelevant or they are using bad logic), and it's obvious that they don't even know what they are talking about!?" Well I have – and I think I've got a lot of friends on this one. My experience has led me to believe that there is actually a formula that anyone can apply to effectively debate uninformed and unenlightened people. Just so I don't confuse anyone, when I am talking about debate, this could be debate in a traditional sense, or it could be dialogue, or it could even be good ol' confrontation. You could even call this honest, straight-forward talk. This is what I'm writing about – the skills, the techniques, the arguments, and the answers I've found you need to be a successful debater. But before we can get to the best techniques, it is important to understand our current reality, the underlying patterns/models, and to focus on getting to the core of the issue.

THE REALITY

Strap on the boots and get ready for a healthy dose of reality. And believe me, it stings a little. You know, the kind of sting you felt when you were a kid getting the antibacterial spray from a cut you had.

I've been working in this field as both a professional and a volunteer for the past eight years. And in all my experiences, I believe that you're either good or you suck. It's that simple. That black and white. And that hardcore. And, I believe you know I'm right. Think about it. Alums either get it or they don't. Administrators either get it or they don't. Heck, even students either get it or they don't. Why is that so bad to say?

All of us have worked with people who just aren't on the bus working toward the common good. I mean, let's face it. If a student really believes in and is committed to hazing, how much education will it take to convince them differently? The better question is, is that even worth my time?

Now, let me be clear here. When I am distinguishing the difference between people who get it and those who don't, I'm not talking about stylistic differences. I'm talking about the fundamental differences between people and ideas. The people who don't "get it" right now, but are trying to "get it" or who are willing to learn are the people who get it. It's those individuals who don't "get it," won't even try to "get it," and don't care to "get it", those are the ones that I'm saying don't "get it."

My perspective may be a little different than most for several reasons. First, I've been lucky to have out-of-this-world good advisors and mentors to help me along the way. Second, I traveled initially for the North-American Interfraternity Conference and not my affiliation. This forced me to

learn how to debate on the issues and not rely on the "come on, brother" style of debate. I walked into rooms and environments where people thought I was affiliated with their chapter, and then found out that I wasn't. All of the sudden, it moved to the "Why is he here?" conversation. When you start behind the eight ball, you are forced to either sink or swim. But from all of my travels, there have been some universal themes that have emerged. I have found the following to be true:

WHAT CHAPTERS REALLY WANT:

- To break the law when they want with no ramifications for their actions.
- The college newspaper to report only the good things rather than what they are really doing.
- The police to help the chapter when they want but not enforce the law.
- To have good grades but skip their classes and play PS2 (Playstation) for five hours a day.
- To have the college let them do what they want because their alumni/ae have money.
- To have their cake and eat it too.

WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING:

- We drink too much.
- We drink more than average students.
- We binge drink more.

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- We skip class.
- We cheat more.
- We test dumber after one year of college.
- We haze our new members.
- We do drugs.
- We are elitist.
- We are racist.
- We are homophobic.
- We have a higher chance of rape at our parties.

These last statements about what is actually happening are often the smelling salts that wake me up and that compel me to pay attention. Even some of the best people in our field after hearing these kind of "reality" statements about what is actually happening immediately jump into the knee jerk response of reciting their campus community service stats or how this is really happening with other students on campus too. How long are we still going to use the 85% of Fortune 500 Company executives are "Greek" statistics? My response: who cares? Folks, you may not know this, but that research was done by the CFEA and distributed by the NIC in early 90s! Those statistics aren't even true anymore. If you want to most recent statistics all you have to do is call the NIC and talk with a staff member – they have them. The reality is that those negative actions and events are still happening in our membership – right? Then shut up and deal with the problems. I mean, are we really going to get into a debate of one death or alcohol poisoning or sexual assault = \$30,000 of community service. Maybe because so many U.S. Presidents belonged to a fraternity it will make it better. Come on people, get real. No one outside of the fraternity/sorority community thinks like that.

THE UNDERLYING MODEL

This kind of thinking – where we try to justify the behavior or our actions but we are really trying to divert others' (and our own) attention to the positive stuff we also do – is just the tip of the iceberg. We want people to see us in a certain light or in a certain way. We want people to like us. We want people to appreciate us. We want more friends to join us. And all of that is completely understandable. We're human.

This type of surface-level-thinking elicits the classic comments like:

- The administration hates us.

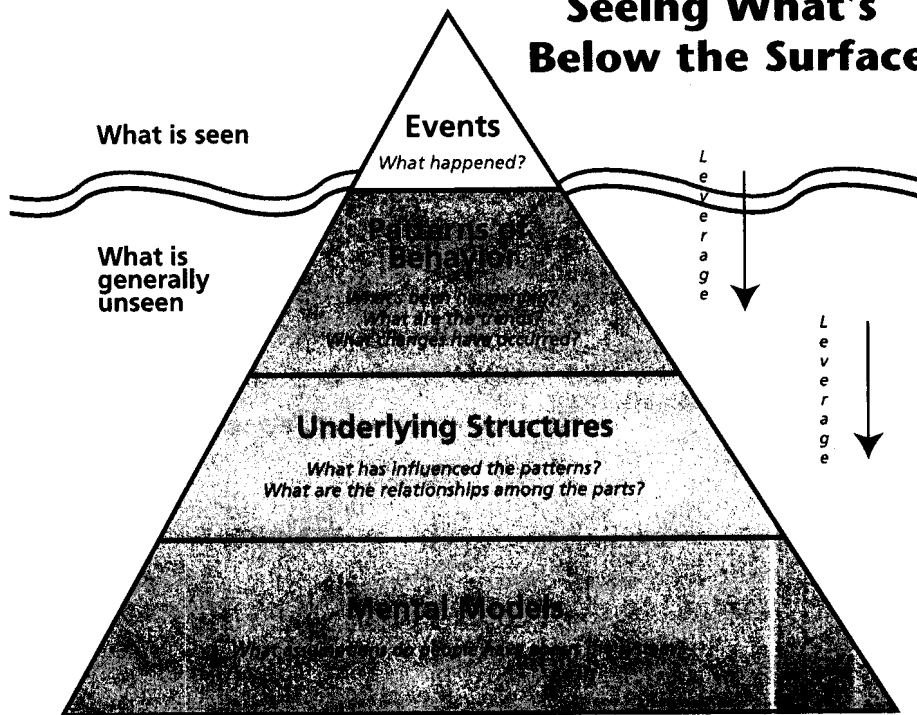
- The campus newspaper is anti-frat.
- There's nothing to do in this town.
- We aren't the only ones drinking.
- They do this in the residence halls too.
- We're not like other universities.
- It's different here.
- Everyone's always out to get us.
- Why won't they just leave us alone.

But if you begin to look below the surface (and what mental models bring forth these kinds of questions or statements), often there is a much deeper motive – like trying to justify our actions on Friday and Saturday night because we do a certain amount of community service. This is what I call Idiot Fraternity and Sorority Logic. Reasons, explanations, and rationale that have been passed down from uneducated chapter member to uneducated chapter member, year after year. You know it is passed down and incorrect when the students try and use it even when it's not true. "They should leave us alone, because we do so much for the campus. I mean, this campus would be dead if it wasn't for the fraternities and sororities. We do everything – Student Government, Student Alumni Board, Homecoming, Greek Week – we do all of that. And besides, our grades are above the all men's and women's GPA."

On almost all campuses, these series of statements are so wrong it's hard to know where to begin – what makes it almost comical is that with this campus, several other organizations raised more money than the fraternities and sororities for community service, fraternities and sororities weren't well represented throughout all organizations, and their grades weren't higher than the average male or female on campus. They've just been taught to say that.

A model that helps to illustrate this layered thinking is the Iceberg Model. As professionals we must begin to look below their surface comments and behaviors to begin to see what assumptions are being made, what patterns are emerging, what structures are in place that support this, and what mental models are they using for their foundation. To be effective in debating students, alumni/ae, and professionals on these subjects you must be able to articulate the problem and show what the underlying structures are. If you do this it acts as kryptonite on Idiot Fraternity and Sorority Logic arguments and you can impact learning. And if you impact what's being learned, being shared, and what's being passed down, then you have leverage.

**Iceberg...
Seeing What's
Below the Surface**



Adapted by Waters Foundation, CFSO from Innovation Associates, Inc. 9/97

THE HIDDEN MEANING

When you break down the hidden meaning you help to connect the dots of what is really going on. Over time and without being challenged, people inappropriately attach meaning to events and situations – often they are wrong. But if this goes unchecked over time, it is easy to see how things get passed down from generation to generation. It's the blind leading the blind. You can debate these issues on an individual action/behavior level or at a chapter level. I have found that it is very important to first separate the facts. After you do this, then you can facilitate a conversation about choices and consequences. Then and only then can you begin to have a conversation of whether or not they like it. An example to illustrate this point is alcohol-free housing (AFH). First, we must discuss and define what AFH actually means, factually. Second, we can talk about what the consequences are for not following the rules, the policies, the law, etc. Then we can have a conversation about how the drinking age should really be 18 and how much we dislike this law. In that order and in that progression enables you, the debater, to focus on each issue, one at a time, instead of in layers. Another way to do this is to take an issue and separate what they think the behavior is accomplishing, and what it is actually doing. Here are a few real life examples that I've heard and dealt with in debating:

INDIVIDUAL

CHAPTER

I have learned in debating so many students and alumni/ae that most people are generally well intentioned. They just don't know how to get from what they want to do to reality. It's like teaching them how to bridge the gap, and being able to explain things in a way they understand is important.

THE CORE

Students want to understand the WHY and HOW of things. Every time I've sat down and really tried to explain the rationale and multi-layered level of a situation I inevitably win over 50 percent of all individuals. They may not like it. They may disagree with it. But, at least they now understand and this forces them to think about the problem or situation objectively. So why don't we have a grid sheet that explains all of the past major decisions in fraternity/sorority life and what the rationale was behind each decision? Why wouldn't we pass something like this out at a Greek 101 or all new member educational program? Sure, they may not agree with it, but it would accomplish the following:

- It would be a lot harder for them to debate it.
- If they did try and debate it, at least they would not use the Idiot Fraternity and Sorority Logic that has been passed down for years.
- It might make them think before they speak (that is crazy talk!).
- It might even get people to understand or buy into the changes immediately.

Elimination of kegs

WHY: I've never been to a party where people say, "Goodnight, I'm going to bed" with a keg still half full. What happens? You stay until you finish it. I mean, isn't it easier to control who drinks if you have one source to manage vs. beer cans everywhere?

HOW: Prove to me you can't handle it, and I will take it away from you. There are always some chapter members who won't leave it alone until the keg is drained – and chapter members have been unwilling to step in and regulate it. Canned beer is ultimately more expensive per drink than a keg. Canned beer helps to shift the liability from the chapter to the individual.

Shortened new member education programs

WHY: There's not enough time to teach everything there is to know about being a good member in 8 weeks. The pledges need to earn their right to be a member in the chapter. The pledge class isn't unified yet.

HOW: Shorter new member programs allow more time to study, make grades, get initiated, and stay in school. I'm not sure if any of you caught the Frat Boys show on the History channel this fall. Phi Delta Theta was highlighted as one of the strongest chapters at Ole Miss. Did any of you also catch that over half of the new member class didn't make the 2.25 GPA to get initiated? Do you stop learning after you become initiated? As sophomore? As junior? As senior? As an alumni/ae? Learning never stops in the fraternity/sorority, so to try and set an arbitrary date like November 4 or February 16 is just as ridiculous. Besides, on the unity thing, what is the one thing that always unifies the chapter? Could it be initiation? So to deny or delay the one thing that would actually accomplish what they want to have happen is just ludicrous.

Alcohol-free recruitment

WHY: Everyone is using alcohol in recruitment too. I mean, we're just trying to show

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the guys a good time and let them see what the fraternity is all about. Besides, IFC never really enforces the policies anyway.

HOW: Every year LeaderShape has a huge company-wide picnic. And at that event, I just get wasted! I mean I really tie one on. And my boss and the board are like, "Hey, that guy is awesome, let's promote him!" Is that what really happens? No! Is it ever possible that you would need to talk with people you don't know without alcohol, women, or big parties? I think so. How about we start trying that now – it is a lifelong skill that you will need.

Offensive party t-shirts

WHY: No one can tell us what we can and cannot put on our t-shirts. We have first amendment rights and freedom of speech to do and say anything we want.

HOW: Tell you what, I'll let you put anything that you want on your t-shirts so long as you never complain about your media image or how the campus newspaper is anti-fraternity/sorority. I'm sure that moms at Wal-Mart see your party t-shirts and say to themselves, "Gosh, I should really talk to Billy about joining a fraternity!"

Alcohol-free housing

WHY: I'm 21, it's my right to drink whenever and wherever I want. Besides if we remove alcohol from the fraternity house, more people are just going to drink and drive. And who would want to join the fraternity if we can't drink – this is going to kill us in recruitment. We should do more education. Listen, prohibition didn't work then, and it's not going to work now – you can't stop college students from drinking.

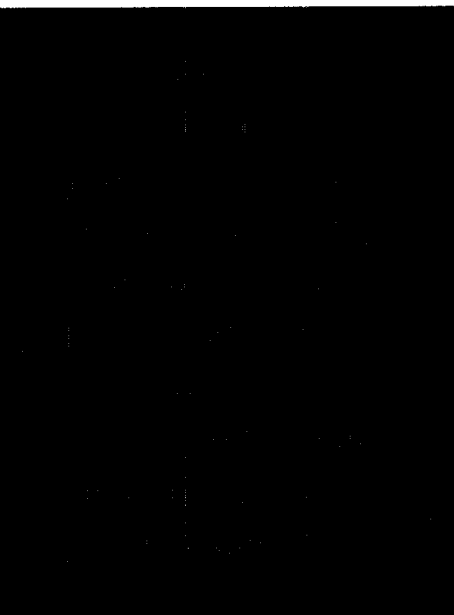
HOW: Let's role-play. You are the fraternity executive director. So what's your job? To make sure the fraternity lives on, prospers, and grows. So, as the executive director you know right now that you have underage drinking at your chapters. And you know that any one event could shut down the fraternity. So, what do you do? Well, you provide education – through conventions, leadership schools, etc. You also employ consultants that you send to each chapter to help educate and assist the chapter. And, of course, the chapter always implements 100% of what the consultant says – right? So if you care about ensuring the fraternity lives on, and you know this is currently happening, what do you do? By this rationale, even the biggest supporters of alcohol are forced to realize that alcohol-free housing could be an option.

New Member Study Hours

WHY: The pledges have to do three hours of study hall every weekday night. It helps them make their grades and have structure from the transition from high school to college.

HOW: Are there particular times of the day that everyone studies the best? No. So why are we trying to force the new members? Hasn't every person in the chapter already taken the classes that I'm currently taking as a freshman? Then give me one reason why

each new member shouldn't have a minimum 3.5 GPA? I mean, you've got built in tutoring, right? It's actually the chapter's fault if a new member doesn't make grades. They failed to help and assist their incoming brother/sister to help them get initiated. In fact, study hours is just an excuse of why I shouldn't have to help you. You had time in study hours to study, now we're going to make you do all of the other things like clean the house, serve everyone dinner, and do all of the crap jobs that I don't want to do myself because I'm lazy.



DEBATING IDIOT FRATERNITY/SORORITY LOGIC

I have to admit that when a chapter member mentions one of the following statements, I have an internal bell that just starts ringing. It's like I've hit the jackpot. The motherload. The gold mine. These are the quintessential things I've heard over time that just smell of "I've personally never really thought about this myself...but someone told me that..." It's like I'm saying to myself, "Oh, no you didn't. Wow, now I'm just going to have to make an example out of you." I really don't feel like I'm trying to be malicious, but I honestly can no longer stand to have Idiot Fraternity and Sorority Logic be around me. This is really at the same level of a racist or sexist comment for me these days. You can believe whatever you want, but if you say those things around me, then I'm going to let you know what I think. It is frankly totally inappropriate and ridiculous to be at an institution of higher education, but never think about what you are saying before you say it! Can you even believe how crazy that sounds?!

In the end, I have found that it is very important to try and be in the student's head. You have to think about it from their perspective, their angle, and their situation. If you think about where they are – and given that – how can you illustrate your point in the most effective way? You have to know and be where they are in order to know where you need to take them in the conversation. The best way I have found to do this is to actually think about what I did as a student at their age, remember what I was thinking about and dealing with, and then try and understand what was the ultimate purpose or goal of what we were doing – and is there another, more efficient, and better way to do this?

Here are some of the arguments that, for me, have proven to work over time:

When Someone Says: The administration hates us...The Fraternity/Sorority Advisor is out to get us...**You Might Say:** First off, if they or we really wanted to do that, we would have done it already – there are colleges and universities that already have. But if the Fraternity/Sorority Advisor really wanted to get rid of you and systematically was trying to close every chapter then that would mean they would be out of a job. Why would they want to do that?

When Someone Says: The campus newspaper hates fraternities and sororities...**You Might Say:** When you turn on the 6:00 news how much of that is positive or negative? Almost all of it is negative. I mean, maybe there is a last minute segment about some children or something, but the vast majority of the media is negative. And we know this already. When you see something on TV or in the newspaper, how did they find out about it? Did they lie and just make it up or is it factual? Besides the *Enquirer* or other quality publications like that, isn't what they put in the paper something that actually happened? Now, I'll agree they may not get the total facts right, but it's not like they made it up out of thin air. The reason it is in the newspaper is because it actually happened. So let me get this straight – you're mad that the newspaper is actually reporting the things that you are doing? Because that seems newsworthy.

When Someone Says: There's nothing to do in this town...**You Might Say:** Get out the phone book and rip out the yellow pages. Break the chapter members up into groups based on the letter of the alphabet. Have each person or group brainstorm 5-10 ideas from their letter of the alphabet. You will easily have over 50 new ideas that

the chapter can do for social events or new recruitment events.

When Someone Says: We're not like other universities... It's different here...

You Might Say: [Laughing] OK, if your college or university is so different, then would you mind telling me why I've heard the exact same things at every other university I've traveled to? If you can answer that one, then I'll be happy to listen to your arguments – but if not, then I'm going to assume that you really aren't different, you just think you are. Oh, and just because your friend at another university tells you they get to do everything they want, the cops don't enforce the laws, the newspaper loves them, and 85% of their campus is in a fraternity/sorority, doesn't mean any of that is actually true. When you get your facts right, I'm happy to entertain an educated discussion with you.

When Someone Says: It's tradition...

You Might Say: Since when? Did your founders' start it? Is it something that has been officially produced and sent out to all chapters by the fraternity headquarters?

When Someone Says: Hazing is good because...

You Might Say: Then why is it against our organizations' laws, those of colleges, universities, and now in over 40 states? Then why don't we advertise it during recruitment? If hazing is a motivator, why do we have members who drop out? Then why don't we videotape it and show it at the next parents' weekend?

When Someone Says: If a chapter is just completely set on hazing and you've tried everything else, try this...(Mary Peterson) **You Might Say:** Here are the top 10 legal ways to haze:

1. Must have a minimum 3.5 or better Grade Point Average (GPA)
2. Must do a minimum of 5 community service hours per week
3. Cannot lie
4. Must actively participate or be present during all intramural events
5. Must be involved in another student organization on campus and they must hold a leadership position
6. Must run for office within their chapter
7. Must know parliamentary procedure
8. Must know and use proper etiquette at all times
9. Are required to attend all classes and must know the professors personally and meet with them regularly

10. Can't drink unless they are of age

When Someone Says: We can't recruit new members because we don't have a nice house... **You Might Say:** Do you think you live in the best looking chapter house on campus? No? Well, I think we just proved that one wrong didn't we? If that was really true, then you would have never joined your current chapter. Nobody joins because of a nice house. They join because of the men in the chapter. No one says, "Hey, those guys are jerks but check out the beautiful living room in that house."

When Someone Says: Rush is a preliminary round. Pledging is where we really see if a person will make a good member...

You Might Say: This is a classic sign and statement of a hazing chapter. Do you ever give a bid to someone you don't want in your chapter? Chapters should only give bids to guys they believe will make good members. Why then aren't all the guys in your chapter getting initiated?

When Someone Says: Rush is time consuming...

You Might Say: That's right, rush is time consuming. Recruitment is not. Recruitment is simply inviting the guys to come and join you in doing the activities you're already doing. This doesn't take any more time.

When Someone Says: Most guys want to join because of the parties...

You Might Say: No one says, "Hey, those guys are total jerks, but man can they throw a party! Let's join them."

When Someone Says: Why are we held to a higher standard... Why do have all of these rules ...

You Might Say: Did you choose to join of your own free will? Yes. So no one forced you to join? No. When you chose to join did you take a pledge or an oath? Yes. Did you take a pledge or an oath to uphold certain values? Yes. Is it fair to say that when you take this pledge or oath you are taking a pledge or oath to be better than average? Yes. So you take a pledge or an oath to be better than average for how long? Life. And do you know that no other student group or organization on campus takes a pledge or an oath to be better than average for life? That is exactly why I and others will hold you to a higher standard than other organizations on campus.

When Someone Says: We aren't the only ones drinking... The _____ drink just as much as we do...(residence halls, football team, etc.) **You Might Say:** See above. They never took that oath. You did.

USING SARCASM

When I worked at the University of Oregon as the Greek Advisor I had a sign up behind my desk that said, "Sarcasm: It's Just Another Service We Provide." And I wasn't joking. No charge – I offered it up for free.

I remember when Shelley Sutherland, Scott Rich, the students who "got it," and I were really working toward progressive change at the University of Oregon. One of our strategies was to go to them and deal with the issues on their turf. So we would have regular chapter presentations and debates among the members to get their issues out on the table. Scott Rich was facilitating this particular workshop at a sorority and the subject was alcohol-free housing in the fraternities. A sorority freshman stood up and said, "If we get rid of the alcohol at fraternity parties then people are just going to go to live-outs (people who live out of the chapter house in apartments) and party there. There is still going to be drinking and people getting drunk, except people will have to walk farther home, and I don't think my mom would like me walking farther home, at night, in the dark, alone." One of her enlightened sorority members who "got it" and had learned to be effective debating the issue said, "I don't think your mom would want you to be a lush every Friday and Saturday night either."

Humor helps in the debating arena immensely. It's almost like you are getting people to laugh at the "other" people in the chapter who are exhibiting these poor behaviors. All of the most effective debaters I know use humor and sarcasm in a very effective way. If learning is fun and you can laugh, why wouldn't you want to pay attention and listen? Your goal is to create a new distinction in their mind that didn't previously exist. You have a limited window of opportunity to question their actions and to help them question their own behavior. And humor enables people to relax and think for themselves. Every time I watch or listen to stand up comedy – half of the time I'm saying to myself, "You know, that's right!"

Sarcasm, in particular, provides this opportunity for learning by playing out the scenario that the students or alumni/ae are suggesting. It's kind of like this, "Oh, so then if that would happen, do you believe this too?" When you throw it back at them in this manner, then they begin to realize just how ridiculous what they just said actually sounds like out loud. All of us have learned in this way. I know I have been in conversations just off in my little

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world saying this or that, and the moment I hear myself saying it out loud, I realize that I didn't mean it or don't agree with it at all.

THE TRUTH HURTS

All problems in fraternities lie between what we say we do and what we actually do. Between what you say to me when I'm going through recruitment...and what actually happens when I join. Between what you tell your fraternity/sorority headquarters happens on Friday and Saturday night...and what actually happens on Friday and Saturday night. Between what you tell everyone about the importance of academics and scholarship...and what your actual chapter GPA is. Between what you tell your parents... Between what you tell the Fraternity/Sorority Advisor... Between what you tell the Chapter Advisor...

It comes down to this. We have good and bad members in all of our chapters – whose opinions and thoughts determine whether or not our fraternities and sororities will be around in the upcoming years. If we want to win the fight, we must become better at debating those uneducated chapter members. And even more importantly, we need to help train other students to be just as effective in those arguments with their peers. I certainly don't proclaim that I have all of the answers or even the best examples – these are just a collection of ones that have seemed to work over time and in almost all environments. Sharing the information that was so helpful to me will hopefully help us all continue to move – together forward. Good luck and keep up the fight!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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