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Sunday, April 26, 2009

Shertzer on Fraternal Relevance

John Shertzer wrote a thought-provoking blog entry about fraternal "relevance" on his [blog](#) recently. It found it interesting, and it's worth a read.

John is a fraternity man, a former employee of the [North-American Interfraternity Conference \(NIC\)](#), and currently works for [Leadership Ventures](#), a leadership training non-profit based in Indianapolis.

I'm reprinting it here in its entirety, and then I have a few discussion questions at the end. The discussion questions are mine, not John's.

Fraternal Relevancy that Matters (Part One)

via [Fraternal Thoughts](#) by John Shertzer on 4/15/09

The word "relevance" seems to be all the rage right now. I'm reading it and hearing it much more often, and I've spoken with many Greek Advisors who incorporate that term frequently into their discussions with undergraduates. Many Alumni programs seem to grapple with the idea of relevance as well. I have a few observations on that term and its use towards Greek-letter



THE APATHY MYTH: a Blog for America's College Student Leaders

By T.J. Sullivan
CEO, CAMPUSPEAK Inc.

"Apathy is not a result of bad members, it's a result of uninspired leadership."

This blog is aimed at college student leaders, helping them inspire their members while making the most of their leadership experience. It's a blog about trying new things, changing up old habits, and figuring out why some things work and others don't.

This blog was recently named one of the top 10 blogs on student leadership by [BestUniversities.com](#). That was pretty cool.

We welcome your suggestions for topics. Email ideas to sullivan@campuspeak.com.

Please recommend this blog to others. Put a link on your site to www.tjsullivan.com, share postings from your Facebook profile, or use the ideas here in your student leadership program. Any posting here may

organizations.

When examining fraternal relevance we need to add the question, "relevant to what?" A thing cannot just be relevant on its own. It needs to be relevant to something else. Greek-letter organizations can ask if they are relevant to any of the following: host colleges/universities, individual members' lives, and/or the growth of society as a whole. I think most people are considering colleges/universities when they speak of fraternal relevance. In other words, when asking about the relevance of college fraternities and sororities, they are questioning whether or not they are still pertinent to the host institution. That's fine - but we shouldn't use that as our only measure. If we determine that we are no longer relevant to host institutions, then is it over? No. We may still be VERY relevant to the lives of our individual members who will achieve great things because of their involvement. Greek-letter organizations may still be VERY relevant to the growth of our society - particularly American society and its need for leaders and organizers.

If tomorrow, all host institutions decided to cut their ties with Greek-letter organizations, would we go the way of the dodo? I doubt we would. Instead, we would adapt. For instance, we might transform into more community-oriented organizations, much like Kiwanis or Freemasons. We would find a way to carry on.

I'm not making the case that we ignore our relationship with our host institutions. In all possible ways, we need to nurture that relationship. We should be actively concerned with how we impact the academic success of our members. If we house students on a particular campus, we should ensure that we are creating safe and secure living environments. Overall, we should act as good partners to these institutions, because *partners* are what we are.

I understand the need to play nice with our "hosts." I value the perspectives

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One more thing -- I don't control what ads pop up here on the blog, so if you see a cheesy one, I apologize. You clicking on the ads buys me lunch once in a while. Thanks for understanding.

ABOUT T.J.

T.J. is the Vice President and CEO of CAMPUSPEAK, the nation's #1 agency providing speakers and interactive workshops to America's college and university leaders. Visit us at <http://www.campuspeak.com>. He has spoken to more than two million students at campuses nationwide since 1989. He has been awarded top national awards from the Association of Fraternity Advisors and the North-American Interfraternity Conference for his work on critical issues facing college students.

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and call to action brought forth by the Franklin Square group. But, I fear that in philosophical and tangible ways, we are handing over our right to exist to institutions of higher education - most of which never really wanted us to exist in the first place.

In other words, the frenzy over trying to regain relevance to colleges and universities has to be tempered with the following question: were we ever meant to be relevant? Were we ever really meant to compliment the mission of the campuses where our founders happened to meet up? I admit that I am not a "Bairds Manual" aficionado that can speak to fraternity history with precision. However, my understanding of the founding of our movement is that individuals were looking for something that wasn't provided in their college experience. They wanted shared values, camaraderie, spirited debate, and fun. I doubt they took much time wondering how these new organizations fit into the missions of their college or university. My interpretation of our beginnings is that we were borne out of defiance to the host institutions, not in seamless companionship with them. So while we should care about that relationship now, should it really define our right to exist?

Focusing on our relevancy to higher education also puts us on the defensive. We are always stuck responding to someone else's needs. This results in a one-way relationship, with colleges and universities holding all the cards. Simply by asking the question of whether or not we are relevant to our host institutions, we are positing the possibility that we are not. We are falsely expressing that we might not matter.

We do matter. We do make a difference - ask almost any person who has had a fraternal experience. We have a story to share, and lessons to teach. Our values are timeless, and every man or woman who passes through our organizations can be better off by having learned them. If we are to dissolve, it

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will not be because we stopped being relevant to a university or a college - it will be because we stopped being relevant to those who are yet to join.

Discussion Questions:

1. When speaking of "relevance," should we be talking about Greek Life's relevance to individual members, to their host institutions, or to society at large? How are we doing on all three?
2. If fraternal relevance is about being relevant to our members, then why does such a small percentage of initiated members stay involved with fraternities and sororities after graduation?
3. Is John's questioning of relevancy to host institutions representative of an adversarial perspective that some say the [North-American Interfraternity Conference \(NIC\)](#) has taken in recent years against higher education (particularly regarding expansion, etc.)?
4. If colleges and universities eliminated Greek Life, would it adapt and survive, as John suggests? How would this impact the character of fraternities and sororities?
5. John suggests that fraternities and sororities are "partners" of the host institutions. What obligation does that imply on both sides? Who is being the better partner right now? Is "playing nice" enough?
6. In his closing statement, John talks about our future being tied to our relevance to those yet to join. What are the pros and cons of being relevant to 18-year-old incoming freshmen?



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CAMPUSPEAK notes that National Collegiate Alcohol Awareness Week is next week. Does anyone even do anything for NCAAW anymore? Seems to have lost its steam in the last decade.

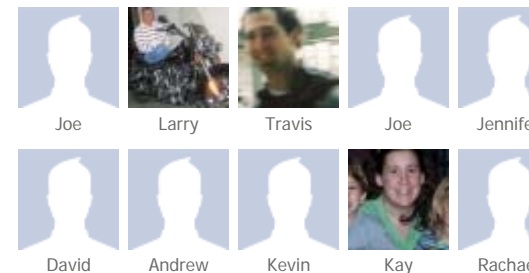
Yesterday at 3:41pm

CAMPUSPEAK we tried to avoid the inevitable conflict: one owner is a Phillies fan, the other is a Rockies fan. Now that it's over, one of us can pretend he doesn't wish a swine flu infected flight back to Philadelphia for the other's team.

Mon at 8:10pm

CAMPUSPEAK If we were a pizza topping, we'd be pepperoni, and our competitors would be extra cheese.

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