

# Individual vs. Community



**H**ow does one begin a conversation with a student describing the complex challenge between the individual perspective and the community perspective of fraternity/sorority life? After decades of struggle, it was a toy which offered a solution to this critical step in fraternity/sorority development.

At the edge of my desk sits a multi-colored expandable ball. There is nothing special about it; you can buy it at almost any science or knowledge store as well as

Toys-R-Us. Resting there in its compacted state, it looks like a sea urchin or rolled-up porcupine; a solid core with a variety of individual prongs pointing in a 360-degree radius. But, when you pull on this ball, it expands into a beautiful transparent sphere. In the expanded state, the ball is easily four times its dimension and the individual prongs are now an intricate and interconnected structure. In one form, the object is unapproachable and restricted. In another form, the structure is inviting, durable and flexible. It represents a

metaphor describing the difference between the individual and the community.

One of the greatest challenges for any organization is to provide a clean transition for the individual entering the group. This orientation is when we get the opportunity to examine the boundaries of individual rights and the acquisition of group responsibilities. We can use the expandable ball as a valued teaching tool in this initial exposure to our chapters.

In its compressed form, the ball represents a small core with each individual prong firmly anchored into this core. Each prong, like each individual, is pointed in a separate direction and the sole relationship the prongs have with each other is where they are anchored. In this compressed form, the prongs make any forward progress difficult and there is marginal capacity for adjusting to a changing landscape. When an individual chapter operates with the emphasis on the individual member, or the fraternity/sorority community operates with the emphasis on the individual chapter, it is common to see the same results.

Though anchored in similar values – I believe they are equivalent core values – the focus is on the direction of the individual components, and our organizational results are similar to the compressed ball. We have difficulty navigating a change in the landscape, we are smaller than we are capable and we have a limited level of interaction and our relationships are less connected.

So, while chapter members argue about their rights, and members of fraternal councils struggle with the deteriorating image of fraternity/sorority life, the organizational structure actually limits their effectiveness. Perhaps it is time to expand the ball.

When the ball is pulled to its optimum size, it takes on a very spherical shape. The structure is filled with space, opportunity and the relationship with the individual components is easily identified.

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

In fact, the integrity of the relationships is what gives the structure its strength, its flexibility and its capacity.

So, how do we expand our fraternal community from the tight-pronged ball to the larger sphere where there is greater opportunity for success?

**Here are ten tips to consider:**

Incorporate the concept of transparent leadership. This builds trust, empowers leaders and supports emerging leaders.

Provide recognition to the chapter that best represents the ideals of our fraternities and sororities.

Shift from mandatory attendance of programs to creating space that is inviting for the student.

Allow the governing councils to select their own advisors.

Support failure and challenge potential.

Openly discuss that membership means individual rights will be sacrificed as part of the value for value relationship to membership benefit.

Engage in conversations about the dilemma of "not ratting each other out" versus "accountability."

Provide specific training so chapter leadership recognizes a "test of character" when they see it and they understand their duty.

Create programs where the legitimate history of the fraternal movement is explored and compared to contemporary campus life.

Develop a sense of comfort with ambiguity within the leadership cohort.

***These place a much greater emphasis on relationships.***

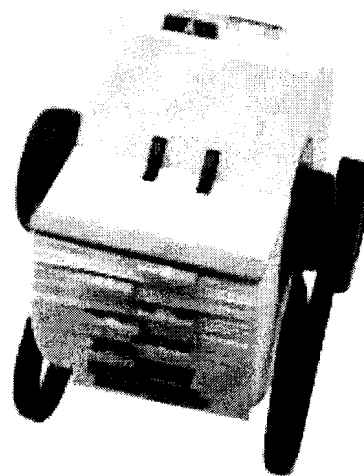
Some of these ideas are provocative. Yet, my professional experience has demonstrated these strategies to provide more opportunity than risk in building a sustainable fraternity/sorority community. If we are to enhance the integrity, sustainability and adaptability of our fraternity/sorority communities, at some very basic level we have to do things very differently than we are doing now.

Achieving the potential of every individual student is married to the basic delivery of a community experience where trust, safety, mutual respect and embracing change are portable life skills that were organically experienced.

My research suggests our fraternal organizations were designed to be like the large spherical ball—open, interconnected and easily adaptable. But, often we act more like the small compressed ball and thus inhibit both individual and community potential. The good news is anyone can get the expandable ball toy and authentic community is possible when we allow ourselves to look at the integration of individuals as a seamless process of developing community.

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