

Why We **Should** Close More Chapters

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Authors' note: At first glance, one may think that an article on the need for the aggressive closing of fraternity and sorority chapters across North America is counter-intuitive to the advancement of the fraternal movement. This is not our intent. A real, systemic, cultural change is needed in our profession. We believe the views offered below have the ability to influence and impact the future our fraternity and sorority communities.

Hope is not a strategy, but we rely on it frequently. We *hope* things will just get better in regard to declining membership numbers, atrocious hazing practices, and alcohol abuse beyond comprehension. We *hope* someone will do the hard work for us.

Some may say, “But there are still a few good members.” These few good members have not been able to produce the results needed to keep a bad chapter open. Period. To put it bluntly, we are tired of the excuses. We are tired of the misplaced arguments associated with keeping poor chapters alive. Aren’t you?

In this article, we hope to dispel the myths, circular reasoning, logic traps, and false statements that we have heard in the collective 20 years we have worked professionally with fraternities and sororities.

Chapters across the nation continue to falter because professionals in positions of leadership do not have the knowledge and sometimes the fortitude to *be* adults. We are all contributing to the problem of fraternity and sorority community mediocrity, one chapter at a time.

We believe that advisors, inter/national organizations, and universities, in our sincere and genuine desire to help young adults, actually get in the way of ourselves – at the expense of true student development. Because of the belief in education, student affairs professionals often miss the obvious answer.

If we are serious about making real, positive change for an experience we love and believe in, it is time for an honest dialogue that has the potential to contribute

significantly and make a lasting impact. This impact can occur if we internalize and act upon it to create a systemic, revolutionary and cultural change. So let’s get to it.

Priceless Rationalizations and Excuses (see page 5)

In this quagmire of cultural challenges, we have identified three central supporting players and roles: fraternity and sorority campus-based professionals, professionals working for inter/national organizations, and advisors/alumni. Each constituency has their own excuses and rationalizations – those “logical explanations” as to why we cannot close a chapter. Isn’t it interesting that in most aspects of life we all thrive on implementing positive change? But for some unknown reason that same spirit and logic just doesn’t apply when it comes to chapter accountability.

From an Organizational Learning Perspective

The problem with closing chapters is that no one involved is comfortable being the bad guy. There, we said it. Was that so bad?

Of course we want to be liked, and we want to give the undergraduates a chance. In organizational learning literature, distinctions exist regarding how and why organizations learn. One of these concepts is the difference between single-loop and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning is reactive and does not involve knowing or thinking about why things are done. On the other hand, double-loop learning involves restructuring of organizational norms and restructuring of strategies and assumptions associated with those norms.

It involves fundamental changes in frames of reference or prevailing theories in the organization (Argyris, 1977).

For example, a thermostat is programmed to turn on if the temperature in the room is cold, or turn off the heat if the room becomes too hot (single-loop). *Double-loop learning* occurs when errors are corrected by changing the governing values and then the actions. A thermostat is double-loop learning if it questions why it is programmed to measure temperature, and then adjusts the temperature itself (Argyris, 2002, p.116).

We argue that collectively fraternity and sorority communities are just simple thermostats responding to the environment but not understanding *why* or *how* we should be doing things.

Why is this important? Peter Senge (1990a) states that for organizations to learn and improve, people must have a shared vision and must share their mental models with others. Senge (1990b) goes on to describe that there is often tension between our current reality and where we want to go. In this article, we are sharing our vision and the mental model behind it. We realize this will cause tension, but it is through that tension that our shared vision of having all fraternities and sororities on campus serve as truly values-based organizations in deed *and* name can occur.

From Fraternity and Sorority Campus Professionals...

COMMON LOGIC...	REALITY CHECK...
“Why doesn’t the organization close this chapter? They’re horrible!”	If you know so much about the chapter’s culture that warrants closure, why are you not taking the initiative? Gather documentation, make the case about why the chapter needs to close, share this information with the appropriate stakeholders, and make it happen. Force the issue by making the documentation public to the stakeholders who are supposed to be making good decisions. This does not allow key stakeholders to ignore the situation.

From Inter/National Organization Professionals...

COMMON LOGIC...	REALITY CHECK...
“We cannot close a chapter this large because of the financial hit on our budget.”	What is the insurance/liability cost associated with keeping the chapter open? The loss of \$10,000 this year is preferable to the multi-million dollar lawsuit that will likely be served in the not-too-distant future. That sounds like a risk worth taking.
“They are not that bad – especially compared to some other chapters on that campus.”	Not the best defense for a jury to hear. And if it is a low membership issue, a new chapter three times the size of the current one would be an awful dilemma, wouldn’t it? Get real.

From Alumni...

COMMON LOGIC...	REALITY CHECK...
“If you close my chapter, I will not give any money back to the fraternity/sorority or university.”	The reality is that they are probably not giving any money to the inter/national organization or university in the first place. It’s an empty threat meant to distract the decision makers and invoke emotional and fear among the organization’s leaders. Most big-time donors are level-headed, common-sense, and smart leaders. They understand in business that an organization has to constantly prune itself in order to spur new growth.
“The university will not let us back on campus.”	Says who? Yet another myth that rarely involves factual exchange between the university and alumni leaders.
“Our alumni will not support the closure.”	WRONG! We all know which chapters should be closed – and so do most alumni. Many are likely to say, “Thank goodness someone finally put us out of our misery.”
“We will never be able to recruit against the larger groups on campus if we close and recolonize.”	Uh huh. And the current chapter is competing so well in recruitment?
“If we disband, we will lose the house. We cannot afford to close the chapter.”	Because the 18 individuals currently living in the 50-bed house are paying the bills in the first place? Come on! The opportunity cost is too great with rogue chapters: unfilled bed space, heightened legal liability, damage from inappropriate behavior, etc. This does not include the number of alumni turned off each year because of the manner in which the undergraduates treat the property/organization they helped build. Creative financing can and must be done to demonstrate responsible leadership.
“If the chapter closes on my watch, it will be a reflection on my abilities and involvement.”	Ego, verbalized or not, is a powerful thing. Ultimately, if we are about self-governance and student development theory, it is not about the alumni – it is about the students. Thus, the the students’ behavior and performance must be the central issue, not an alumni volunteer’s overly inflated ego.

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At the end of the day, many problems within our fraternity and sorority communities stem from the fact that double-loop learning is not happening within our shared-governance system. “Double-loop learning involves restructuring of organizational norms, and restructuring of strategies and assumptions associated with those norms. It involves fundamental changes in frames of reference or theories in use prevailing in the organization” (Shrivastava, 1983, p. 12). The problem is that negative consequences exist to this reality. “Decision-making tends to take a long time because of the involvement of so many people, and the simultaneous membership in several committees poses a severe time scheduling problem for individual managers” (Shrivastava, 1983, p. 23).

Because so many people are involved in the process of supporting a chapter, the length of time to get all of the main stakeholders



to agree on the actual state of a chapter is virtually impossible. Frequent turnover among university and inter/national organization personnel, undergraduate students, and alumni volunteers makes it difficult to close a chapter because the circumstances are never fully understood by decision-makers. In the case that the reasons for closure are apparent and understood, the action is frequently too late. A major incident has to either seriously injure someone or the chapter has to just fade out of existence after limping along for years.

Eventually, as a new campus professional or chapter counselor enters the arena, the cycle begins anew. The only constant is the culture by which the chapter operates.

The Real World

In order to get a more objective lens, we must temporarily depart from fraternity and sorority life. Think of the worst restaurant in town. What makes it the worst restaurant in town? Poor service? Bad food? Deplorable environment? Do you think they would be better if those employees just recruited more labor like themselves? What if those same people just went to a seminar on how to be a better restaurant? Do you think things would change then?

It is unlikely. A culture like that will probably never change because the people are the problem – not the food or environment. After all, the people are the ones preparing the food and overseeing the environment. Simple concept, right?

No author better describes this scenario than Jim Collins (2001) in the best seller *Good to Great*:

The executives who ignited the transformations from good to great did *not* first figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. No, they *first* got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and *then* figured out where to drive it (p. 13).

If we are going to make real change in our fraternity and sorority communities, we need to get the *wrong* people off the bus (e.g., close chapters that we know will never “get it”), bring new chapters on campus that can fuel a positive revolution, and then hold the standards high while at the same time pouring resources into the community like gasoline on a fire. It is simple:

if you want real change in your fraternity and sorority community, start cutting the bottom-feeders and begin adding new or recolonized chapters at the top. As Kevin Kelly, executive editor of *Wired Magazine*, says, “It is much easier to kill an organization than to change it substantially” (Peters, 2003, p. 32).

For example, since 1996, Beta Theta Pi Fraternity closed 51 chapters. Roughly 80% of those chapters were eventually restarted (fire) coupled with the *Men of Principle* initiative (gasoline). The results are striking:

	1998	2006
All-Beta-Chapters Grade Point Average	2.836	3.01
All-Beta-Chapters Recruitment Growth	-2.9%	+13.9%
Advisors per Chapter	1.95	4.19
Leadership Development Program Participants	15	1,060

(Beta Theta Pi Fraternity, 2006)

Unfortunately, in the higher education environment, we tend to think that rules of consumerism, capitalism, and competition just cannot apply. This is an unfortunate and misguided notion. As a former executive vice president for the Kroger Grocery Company recently shared, “There were always stores that couldn’t turn a profit. Thus, the company assessed and evaluated their progress and hired consultants to help coach them to better days. If they couldn’t cut it after a certain period of time, the stores were closed. End of story” (R.L Cottrell, personal communication, October 19, 2006).

Partner This

In considering the closing of chapters, the reality is that we cannot agree on who needs to be let off the bus. Further we cannot decide how to get them off the bus once we know who they are! We seem to take Collins’ *Good to Great* recommendation too literally, assuming that it is just individual members that need to be “excused” from the fraternity and sorority community (Collins, 2001). Using research from Collins’ first book, *Built to Last*, it would be entirely appropriate to dismiss *entire chapters* just as the leadership does to individuals who choose to not

buy in or support a company's core ideology. We should "eject them like a virus" (Collins, 1994, p. 121). Sure, individually they are good people. However, together they perpetuate a culture that is cult-like – in a bad way – and one that will not change. Enough is enough.

Of course, in late-November/early-December at the Association of Fraternity Advisors' Annual Meeting, we join hands and talk about partnerships. Ironically, when people begin considering closure for a chapter, everyone runs to their corners. The inter/national organization wants the university to act, and the university wants the organization to act. The alumni want someone to make it all go away or, perhaps worse, they are in denial that anything is wrong to begin with.

It is times like these when it is perfect to show a backbone. Let us call it "unity." Of course, when it is one-sided it is not a partnership. Today, each entity (university vs. organization) wants the other to do it – so the other thinks the other should do it – and in the end nothing is done while we equally blame each other. All the while, the undergraduates continue to haze, continue to abuse drugs and alcohol, continue to "just get by," and we wonder why the chapter isn't making progress. It is simple – we have enabled them all along the way.

Sometimes "student development" means saying no. No more. Not here. Not now. Not in this way. You will no longer exist as a collective group on this campus because you are hurting yourself and others or you are not fulfilling the mission of your organization on this campus.

Of course, good partnerships help to provide a stiffer spine for each major entity. Passionate yet firm. We cannot be selective in applying the terms of partnership.

The Expansion and Extension Issue

We believe it is impossible to talk about closing chapters without addressing the reasons that are preventing us from taking these aggressive yet appropriate measures. These reasons include the campus and inter/national expansion.

While many campus professionals think they know what is best for their campus regarding expansion and extension, we would like to explain how we all can "win" and:

- ✓ Become more closely aligned with our fraternal values
- ✓ Eliminate the worst chapters on campus
- ✓ Have a stronger fraternity and sorority community

- ✓ Be more student development focused
- ✓ Have better leadership education from fraternal organizations
- ✓ Decrease the response time of organizations
- ✓ Improve campus/organization relationships in the process
- ✓ Work with more consistent and better fraternity/sorority consultants

Sound good? Well, you can have this all tomorrow if you just do some simple steps today.

In many cases, campus professionals are predicting what they think will happen if the campus entertains expansion. But do we truly know what the students will do in the future? We do not know whether or not this group of students will fail or succeed. If that is the case, then who are we to decide which groups can and cannot succeed on *the* (not *our*) campus? We frequently hear students say "that won't work;" many of us are saying the same when it comes to expansion.

Often, campus professionals make general decisions based on limited information and opinion. We have seen many advisors make decisions on expansion and extension by variables that have nothing to do with a chapter's future success. Examples include:

- ✓ Who advisors know/like
- ✓ Which fraternity or sorority presented the best expansion and extension presentation with cool PowerPoint and printed materials
- ✓ Which fraternity or sorority has a lot of alumni/ae in the area – but not necessarily whether the alumni have signed up or committed to do anything
- ✓ Who advisors take "bribes" from by attending that fraternity or sorority's educational conference or convention
- ✓ When advisors rely on the size of the national fraternity or sorority
- ✓ When advisors choose a "brand name" fraternity or sorority

In other words – politics.

If, as campus-based professionals, we do not like poor consultants or lack of responsiveness in risk management, and we want better alumni/ae training and development, undergraduate training and development/programs, etc., then all the money (currently spent on the "dog and pony show") could be used to improve these areas. Doesn't it make sense that if resources aren't going toward unnecessary expenses, then that money could be utilized for other, more substantive investments?

Arguments for Open Expansion and Extension

A classic rationale commonly heard from campus professionals is, "We are not ready for expansion yet. We need to stabilize the other groups on campus before we bring on another group." Here are some alternative arguments for a pro-expansion community.

- ✓ An open expansion policy is more student development focused than a closed policy because it allows the students to make their own decisions about the success of the chapter. A favorite student affairs line is: "People support what they help create."
- ✓ A closed policy is a bad business model – it invites bribing and lobbying which lead to failure.
- ✓ Undergraduates are voting on an issue they know very little about and have competing conflicts of interests or biases during their vote (i.e. fear of competition).
- ✓ In general, poor chapters are not closed because of the lack of an open expansion policy. Without a guaranteed recolonization date to ensure the university's commitment to the fraternity/sorority, the organization and alumni/ae are reluctant to close a chapter.
- ✓ How much money could be allocated to the future success of the colony vs. the money it takes to do presentations and visit campus? Some fraternities and sororities would rather use that money to send new colony members to UIFI, Future's Quest, regional leadership conferences, LeaderShape, etc.
- ✓ New and innovative groups put pressure on existing groups to improve – or help them die if they refuse to improve.
- ✓ New fraternity and sorority colonies are frequently the closest example of truly following the ritual and its intent.
- ✓ Having a new colony is like having a constant educational program because the members are continually learning and dealing with reality issues in a supportive and nurturing environment.
- ✓ By having more colonies, the campus and organization professionals alike have more students approaching issues from a perspective of "how should I do this" rather than "we don't do that."
- ✓ When colonies are starting they look for leaders, and in most cases these individuals have been rejected or turned off by the existing chapters on campus.
- ✓ Expansion, more than any other recruitment technique, seeks out individuals better aligned with fraternal values and

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those inclined to make decisions based on those values while increasing the size of the fraternity and sorority community.

- ✓ Expansion improves and serves as role model for year-round recruitment for the entire fraternity/sorority community.

Implications and Directions for Our Future

Minor earthquakes rarely topple well-designed buildings resting on solid foundations. Similarly, environmental jolts rarely threaten the survival of soundly designed organizations with well-maintained environmental alignments. However, seismic tremors often disclose hidden flaws in the architecture and construction of buildings, and environmental jolts trigger responses that reveal how organizations adapt to their environments (Meyer, 1982, p. 515).

One hidden flaw in our design of fraternal organizations is how, why, and when organizations are closed and when they can reopen, expand, and colonize. Instead of these being seen as “environmental jolts,” we could have well-designed and well-maintained policies, procedures, and practices that create a natural evolution of chapters that need to be closed, while allowing others an opportunity to succeed.

Knowledge grows, and simultaneously it becomes obsolete as reality changes. Understanding involves both learning new knowledge and discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge. The discarding activity – unlearning – is as important a part of understanding as is adding new knowledge. In fact, it seems as if slow unlearning is a crucial weakness of many organizations (Dodgson, 1993, p.385-6).

Our reality is changing. It is appropriate that our policies and procedures change as we become better educated and understand at a deeper level. Part of our unlearning is not doing things simply because we have always done them that way. That logic is, after all, how many of our less developed

students think. Much of fraternity and sorority policies are based on a protectionist perspective rather than the good of the community. Think of why many of the rules we have are in place. It may be because someone once felt they were wronged and now we have a rule to legislate the behavior of everyone down to the lowest common denominator. How inspiring. It is time to add new knowledge and discard the old.

Critics of this philosophy could include fraternity and sorority advisors who dislike organizations who “crash” campus. Will this model stop this? Not likely. On the converse, will those organizations be able to expand everywhere, all the time, whenever they want? Also not likely. Besides, do you think students considering the formation of a new fraternity on campus will not be able to determine the real deal from the fake? Given a better alternative, we believe in the power of people to make the right decision. Kind of sounds like student development theory, does it not?

If at this point you are still saying to yourself, “it will never work,” we ask, “why?” Why can we not let the students decide their own fate?

Ultimately, we need a plan of action. But first, we must educate ourselves and move from single-loop learning, just reacting to situations, to double-loop learning, knowing why we do what we do. We believe it will be important to educate ourselves but also to educate the other stakeholders involved, too. This includes a plan to educate upper level administrators on these reasons so that we can actually move forward and start our very own chapter recycling program on campus. Bad chapters go in the garbage, and new, better chapters emerge.

Hope is not a strategy. Bad chapters are labeled as bad for a reason and it is not going to change. It still will not change even if you just send one more person to UIFI. Sometimes the best student development strategy is saying no. Unfortunately, many times we are enabling individuals and chapters by allowing them to perpetuate serious bad habits, both in their personal and soon-to-be professional lives. What does that say about all of us as student

development professionals? If only we had a little more courage to say no.

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