

Op Ed | **The Value of Fraternity Membership**

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Personal standards guide us and provide the individual code by which we live. Each of us conducts our self within a range of behavior and actions defined by standards we develop over time and through experience. We accept clients based on personal and professional standards. We choose friends and partners and make every decision, both daily and long-term, based upon them. Our future, and our personal success, depends upon the depth and breadth of the standards we continually develop.

As the president and CEO of the North-American Interfraternity Conference, representing 73 major men's fraternities operating on more than 800 U.S. and Canadian campuses, I agree that college is a time when young men and women develop into the persons they will become.

Extensive research on education supports the extent to which we develop throughout our late teens and early 20s. In that time, we formalize our personal standards based upon what we know, have seen and are taught. At that time of life, our brains want to understand the meaning and importance of social engagement, of achievement and the importance of goals, of accountability, of self-worth and the importance of giving back to community. And the many definitions of community become clear – the family, the campus, the city, state and country, and the world.

Since the American Revolution, fraternities have embraced the principles of freedom of inquiry and liberty of thought and expression. They celebrate and advocate excellence in the liberal arts, sciences and all endeavors in today's academic realm. They recognize students with high standards and aid in their development by encouraging young men with like ideals to share with each other and debate their thoughts, vision, goals, aspirations, and personal standards. Younger members develop by watching, listening and pushing boundaries, and older members grow by teaching, by establishing boundaries and by providing accountability.

This process never ends because the age of student members largely always remains 18 - 22. This is important because the younger members always have considerable development ahead of them, and the older members, just at a time when they come to understand themselves and use that understanding to guide younger members, move on to use that preparation to build their lives. Developing – growing up – is a process that continually repeats itself every year on every college campus. And in every fraternity chapter that process is purposefully guided by standards. It is one of many added values to membership.

The fraternities of the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) operate by an agreed-upon set of standards. Developed by the membership with the goal of helping younger members clearly understand what membership means, and helping older members understand their responsibility in teaching and modeling, the standards provide an excellent co-curricular education for every member, and in turn, this emphasis adds to the co-curricular experience on every campus.

NIC standards encourage and support academic achievement; campus involvement and leadership; risk management on topics such as alcohol use, fire safety, hazing, and sexual abuse; the value of ritual; and the importance of communicating the value of education, career preparation, civic engagement, leadership development, values, and ethics.

NIC standards encourage the colleges and universities that host fraternity communities to provide for-credit leadership classes; to encourage faculty advisors for chapters through incentives; financial management, property and account collections support; and programming to inhibit/prevent problem behavior.

To help the campus and the fraternal movement quantify development and success in these areas, the NIC standards also ask campuses to provide data documenting academic achievement, membership and graduation rates among other information. From this, we know fraternity membership continues to be attractive to today's college student. Membership and the number of chapters have consistently trended upward over the last three years – and in a fairly dramatic way.

We also know student members internalize the NIC standards in other quantifiable ways. In 2009, fraternity members contributed 1.2 million hours in volunteer community service. They raised \$6.2 million for philanthropies through events and service. On more than two-thirds of campuses hosting fraternity/sorority communities, the all-fraternity grade point average exceeds the all-men's average, and on well over half of those campuses the all-fraternity average exceeds the all-student average.

Further, the NIC's annual tracking of data consistently reveals that fraternities and sororities are the largest and most visible values-based organizations on campus; they are the most successful leadership development program for college students; they provide the largest network of volunteers in the U.S.; combined they provide an average of more than 10 million hours of volunteer service annually; and they are the largest not-for-profit student landlord, owning and managing more than \$3 billion in student housing for more than 250,000 students in 8,000 facilities.

The fraternity experience allows young men to learn business models through the operation of the organization. They set, monitor and maintain budgets; facilitate leadership succession; create and implement member education plans; organize and implement community service and philanthropic events; monitor member behavior, academic achievement, campus involvement, and the overall development of their chapter's unique brand.

And the importance of their unique brand helps them to realize and value healthy competition and the benefit of successful results. Older members come to realize the higher the standards, the better the brand; the stronger the brand, the greater the chapter's attractiveness; and the more attractive the operation, the greater its success – in recruiting new members, in developing young members, in leading the fraternity and campus community, in developing a solid college student through a man with standards who is prepared to lead a life of significance and relevance.

Relevance, significance, and the early, co-curricular life lessons that create those, are the tangible results that begin with a first-year student's vague understanding of what it is to have standards. They are the tangible results today's fraternity men receive on campuses in California and throughout the U.S. and Canada.

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