

Why We Should Be Closing More Chapters

by L. Martin Cobb and Michael McRee

Writers 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 college fraternity movement. Nothing could be further from the truth. And yes – at first glance – this expose on the topic may seem a bit lengthy. This is intentional and by design because it correlates directly with our passionate belief in the need for drastic action. Indeed, real, systemic, cultural change is needed in our industry. And we believe the thoughts offered below have the ability to positively influence and impact our fraternity and sorority communities for generations to come.

So...grab a cup of coffee, sit back and open yourself (and campus, headquarters or alumni/ae group) to the possibilities.

Hope is not a strategy.

Yet we rely on it constantly. In regard to declining membership numbers, atrocious hazing practices and alcohol abuse beyond comprehension, we hope things will just get better. We *hope* someone will do the hard work for us.

“But there are still a few good members.” And? And they have not been able to produce the results needed to keep the chapter open. Period.

Ultimately...to put it bluntly...we’re tired of the excuses. We’re tired of the misplaced arguments associated with keeping poor chapters alive. Aren’t you?

Over the course of this article, we hope to dispel the myths, circular reasoning, logic traps, and just plain false statements that we have been hearing as long as we have been working professionally with fraternities and sororities – collectively for over 20 years.

So, why are we writing this? Well...

Chapters across North America continue to falter because adults in positions of leadership don’t have the knowledge and sometimes the guts to *be* adults. That’s right. We’re all contributing to the problem of fraternity and sorority community mediocrity – one chapter at a time.

We believe that we (advisors, headquarters, and the university), 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 we all believe in education, we often miss the obvious answer right in front of our own noses. Sometimes doing the hard thing is confused with not doing the right thing.

So, if we’re serious about making real, positive change for an experience we love and believe in, it’s time for straight-talk. A dialogue that will – once internalized and acted upon – contribute significantly and make a lasting impact – one aimed at systemic, revolutionary, cultural change.

So let's get to it.

Priceless Rationalizations and Excuses.

In this quagmire of cultural challenges, there are three central players and roles. Advisors. Headquarters. And alumni/ae. Each have their own excuses and rationalizations. Through the course of our jobs we've all heard them. Those undeniable "logical explanations" as to why we can't close a chapter. Isn't it interesting that in most aspects of life we all thrive on just the opposite: "doing the impossible." But for some unknown reason, that same spirit and logic just doesn't apply when it comes to chapter accountability. Why?

From Fraternity and Sorority Advisors...

Common Logic...	Reality check...
<p>"Why doesn't the headquarters close this chapter? They're horrible!"</p>	<p>Everyone hates being the bad guy. But if <i>you</i> know so much about the chapter's culture that warrants closure, why are you not pulling the trigger?</p> <p>Gather documentation, begin making the case about why the chapter needs to close share 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 will force the issue and not allow them to ignore the situation.</p>

From General Fraternity/Sorority Headquarters...

Common Logic...	Reality check...
<p>Unspoken thought: "We can't close a chapter this large because of the financial hit on the Fraternity's/Sorority's budget."</p>	<p>And what is the insurance/liability costs associated with keeping them open? The loss of \$10,000 this year pales in comparison to the multi-million dollar lawsuit that will likely be served in the not-to-distant future. That sounds like a risk worth taking...</p>
<p>"They're not that bad – especially compared to what some other chapters on that campus are dealing with."</p>	<p>Yeah, that's what a jury will think, too. And if it's a low membership numbers issue, a new chapter three times the size of the current one would be an awful dilemma, wouldn't it? Get real.</p>

From Alumni/ae...

Common Logic...	Reality check...
"If you close my/our chapter, we won't give any money back to the fraternity/sorority or university."	Whatever. The reality is that they're 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 fear amongst the organization's leaders. Most big-time donors are level-headed, common-sense, smart leaders. They understand in business that an organization has to constantly prune itself in order to spur new growth (we know – we both work in fundraising).
"The University won't let us back on campus."	Says who? Yet another urban myth involving no factual exchange between the university and alumni/ae leaders (see expansion and extension arguments).
"Our alumni/ae won't support the closure."	WRONG! We all know which chapters should be closed – and so do most alumni/ae. Many are likely to say, "thank God someone finally put us out of our misery." It's an education issue. And isn't that our job? We are in "higher education" after all.
"We'll never be able to recruit against the larger groups on campus if we close and recolonize."	Uh huh. And the chapter is competing so well in today's marketplace already.
"If we disband, we'll lose the house. We can't 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., not to mention the number of alums turned off each year because of the manner in which the undergraduates treat the property/organization they helped build. Exercising responsible leadership means getting creative – even in terms of financing a chapter house. It has and can be done!
Unspoken reality: "If the chapter closes on my watch, it will likely become a reflection on my abilities and involvement."	Ego – verbalized or not – is a powerful, powerful thing. Ultimately, if we're about self-governance and student development theory, it's not about the alumni/ae – it's about the students. Thus, the students' behavior and performance must be the central issue – not one's overly inflated, fragile ego.

The Truth – From an Organizational Learning Perspective

The problem with closing chapters is that no one entity feels comfortable being the bad guy. There; we said it. That wasn't so bad, was it?

So we want to be liked. Of course we do. And we want to give the undergraduates a chance. Naturally. And, and, and...

But why not draw from widely accepted concepts in organizational learning here? In organizational learning literature there have been distinctions created about 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 doesn't involve knowing or thinking why things are done. Double-loop learning, on the other hand, 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 (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 would argue that collectively, fraternity and sorority communities are just simple thermostats, just responding to the environment, but not understanding *why* or *how* we should be doing things.

And why is this important? Peter Senge states that for organizations to learn and improve that people must have a shared vision and must share their mental models with others (Senge, 1990a). Senge goes on to describe that there is often tension in between our current reality and where we want to go (Senge, 1990b). In this article, we are sharing with you 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 truly be values based organizations – not just in name, but in deed – can occur.

At the end of the day, many problems within our fraternity and sorority communities stem from the fact that there is no double-loop learning going on 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 there are negative consequences 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).

To boil it down, because there are so many people involved in the process of supporting a chapter, the length of time to get all of the main stakeholders on the same page regarding the true state of a chapter is next to impossible. And since the university, headquarters, undergraduate and alumni/ae turnover is so extensive, it's virtually out of the question for a chapter to be closed because the circumstances are never fully understood by the ones charged with such decision-making. And if they are, it's usually 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 10 to 20 years.

Eventually, as a new fraternity and sorority advisor or chapter counselor enters the arena, so the cycle begins anew. The only constant is the culture by which the chapter operates. Nice.

The Real World

In order to get a more objective lens and take on things, let's depart from fraternity and sorority life for just a moment.

Wherever you live – think of the worst restaurant in town. Why is it the worst restaurant in town? Poor service? Poor food? Deplorable environment?

Hmmm.....

Well, 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's unlikely. A culture like that will probably never change. Why? 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 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" (Collins, 2001, p. 13).

In life, we have to be willing to get the wrong people off the bus if we plan to go to higher ground. If we're going to make real change in our fraternity and sorority communities, we need to get all of 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's real simple: if you want real change in your fraternity and sorority community, start cutting the bottom-feeders and then begin adding new or recolonized chapters at the top.

To express this concept even more poignantly, let's take a quote from Kevin Kelly, executive editor of Wired Magazine, who says "It is much easier to kill an organization than to change it substantially" (Peters, 2003, p.32).

In Beta Theta Pi's case, for example... Since 1996, 51 chapters have been closed. With roughly 80% of those chapters eventually restarted – 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-ed environment, we tend to think that rules of consumerism, capitalism and competition just can't apply (actually, we know they apply, but we have a lot more autonomy and flexibility if we operate in an anti-standards and anti-accountability manner. After all, many of us have no numerical expectations to meet in regard to our chapters' and community's membership, there's little to no accountability on the leadership of the fraternity and sorority communities if they miss the mark in terms of grades, etc.).

And it's an unfortunate, 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 2006).

Partner This.

In considering the closing of chapters, the reality is that, unfortunately, we can't agree on who needs to be let off the bus and, further, how to get them off the vessel once we know who they are! And that's really the heart of the problem. We seem to take Collins' *Good to Great* recommendation too literally – that it's just individual members that need to be "excused" from the fraternity and sorority community (Collins, 2001). Not to be too crass, but to use some research from Collins' first book, *Built to Last*, it would be entirely appropriate to dismiss *entire chapters* just as the leadership does to individuals that choose to not buy in or support a company's core ideology: "eject them like a virus" (Collins, 1994, p. 122). Sure, on their own they're good kids. Good kids. But 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 Annual Meeting, we join hands and talk about partnerships. "We need to be better partners." "We should have a true partnership." Ironically though, when people begin considering closure for a chapter – everyone runs to their corners. The national headquarters wants the university to act, and the university wants the headquarters to act. Naturally, the alumni/ae want someone to make it all go away, or they are in denial that anything is wrong to begin with.

So, why does it have to be one-sided? At times like these it is a perfect time to show a backbone or a spine. Let's call it "unity." Of course, when it is one-sided – it's not a partnership. Today, each entity (university vs. headquarters) 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's real simple – we've enabled them all along the way.

The reality is that 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're hurting yourself and others, or you're not fulfilling the mission of your organization on our campus. Period.

Of course, good partnerships help to provide a backbone and a stiffer spine for each major entity. Passionate yet firm. No, we can't be selective in applying the terms of partnership. "As long as it's convenient for me"-type thinking.

The Expansion and Extension Issue.

We both believe it is not possible to talk about closing chapters without addressing those things that are preventing us from taking these aggressive yet appropriate measures.

One of these is our – generally speaking – policy on expansion and extension at campuses. Another is the approach taken by headquarters. And a third is how decisions are being made as to who finally comes to campus.

How many advisors ~~think they~~ know what is best for their campus regarding expansion and extension? Well...we would like for you to consider another point of view. And just so we aren't being "that guy" we will try and explain it, in print, with explanations, so that we all can get this one right.

Why do we need to get this one right? Because this is one of the most continuous issues (that actually does have a viable solution) that we, as a fraternity and sorority community, have the power to solve – now. Unlike alcohol issues, hazing issues, etc. the issue, problem, challenge, or opportunity with expansion and extension can actually be solved immediately. We will explain how we all can "win" and...

- Be more closely aligned with our fraternal values
- Eliminate the worst chapters on campus
- Have a stronger fraternity and sorority community
- Be more student development in our approach to students
- Have better leadership education from headquarters
- Increase the response time of headquarters to negative chapters
- Improve campus/headquarters relationships in the process

- Work with more consistent and better traveling consultants from fraternities and sororities

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

How do you know for certain an expansion and extension will or will not work? And you know this because you've been formally educated on this...? In many cases advisors are predicting what they "think" will happen if the campus entertains expansion. But do you – or any of us for that matter – know what the students will do in the future? None of us know. So it stands to reason that we don't know whether or not this group of students will end up failing or succeeding during the expansion and extension. If that's the case, then who are we to decide which groups can and cannot succeed on *the* (not *our*) campus? Just like when our students say "that won't work," many of us are saying the same.

Often, fraternity and sorority advisors are generally making decisions ~~or hoarding power or withholding information~~ based on their own ~~personal agendas or preferences~~ research. We have seen lots of advisors make decisions on expansion and extension by variables that have nothing to do with a chapter's future success.

- Who advisors know/who advisors like
- Which fraternity or sorority presented the expansion and extension presentation and whether or not advisors like them
- Which fraternity or sorority has a cool PowerPoint or cool printed materials
- Which fraternity or sorority has a lot of alumni/ae in the area – but not signed up or committed to do anything
- Who advisors take "bribes" from by attending that fraternity or sorority's educational programming (or convention) over the summer
- When advisors have a boyfriend/girlfriend/friend they really personally like
- 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 fraternity and sorority advisors, we don't like poor consultants, lack of responsiveness in risk management, want better alumni/ae training and development, want better undergraduate training and development/programs, etc., then all the money (current spent on the dog and pony show) could go to improving 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 human investments?

Arguments For Open Expansion and Extension.

A classic rationalization we've commonly heard from advisors is, "We're not ready for expansion and extension ...just yet. We need to stabilize the other groups on campus before we bring another group on." Here are some alternative arguments for an open market and pro-expansion and extension community.

- An open expansion and extension policy is more student development focused than a closed policy. How? Because it allows the students to make their own decisions on whether or not the chapter fails. Remember our favorite student affairs line: “people support what they help create?”
- A closed policy is a bad business model – it invites bribing, lobbyists, etc. which lead to it not working (it’s not working in our own current two party political system and it’s not working on our campuses)
- Undergraduates are voting on an issue that they know very little about and have competing conflicts of interests or biases during their vote (fear of competition)
- I know you don’t want to hear this – but freedom of association is the law of the land (how can you so publicly support the drinking age, but not our constitution?). We know this isn’t a popular argument – but does that mean we just disregard it?
- Poor chapters are not being closed because of the lack of an open expansion and extension policy. Without a guaranteed recolonization/extension date to ensure the university’s commitment to the fraternity/sorority, headquarters, and alumni/ae are reluctant to pull a chapter’s charter (everyone knows this!)
- How much money could be allocated to the future success of the colony vs. the money it takes to do presentations and visit campus?
 - A few fraternities and sororities provide a great example of how they send new colony members to *UIFI*, *Future’s Quest*, Regional Leadership Conferences, *LeaderShape*, etc.
- New and innovative groups put pressure on old school groups to perform better and to improve – if not it helps them die/end/decide their future
- New colonies and new fraternities/sororities are the closest example of truly following the ritual and its intent vs. any other current form of the organization
- Having a new, ongoing colony is like having an educational speaker 24/7/365 because they are continuing learning and dealing with reality issues – vs. an hour keynote and it’s educational impact
- By having more colonies the fraternity and sorority advisors and headquarters have more students coming/approaching advisors and headquarters of “how should I do this” vs. “we don’t do that” mental models which allows for more shaping and molding
- When colonies are starting they look for leaders, and in most cases these individuals have been rejected or turned off by the existing models and chapters on campus
- The simple fact that expansion and extension, more than any other recruitment technique, seeks out individuals better aligned with our values and those inclined to make decisions based on our fraternal values
- Expansion and extension increases the size of the fraternity and sorority population by inviting others that were originally turned off by what was available to join in with their own voice
- Expansion and extension improves and role models year-round recruitment

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 ~~unbelievable~~ hidden flaw we have 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 to create a natural evolution of chapters that need to go, while allowing any others who want to try, 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).

The truth is, our reality is changing. It only seems prudent that our policies and procedures will change as we become better educated and understand at a higher level. Part of our unlearning means not doing things because we’ve always done them that way. Remember – that’s how uneducated students think. Much of all fraternity and sorority policies aren’t based on the good of the system or community, but rather from a protectionist perspective. Think of how many rules we have. Why are they in place? It’s because someone, one time, felt they were wronged, and now we have a rule in place to legislate the behavior of everyone down to the lowest common denominator. How inspiring. It’s time to add new knowledge and discard the old.

Criticisms of this philosophy could include fraternity and sorority advisors who dislike a few headquarters who “crash” campus. Will this model stop this? No. But will they be able to expand everywhere, all-the-time, immediately? No. Besides, don’t you think students considering the formation of a new fraternity on campus will 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 doesn’t it?).

If at this point you are still saying to yourself, “it will never work,” we ask why? Why can’t we 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 and just reacting to situations, to double-loop learning - knowing why we do what we do. We believe it will be important to not just educate ourselves but 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, new chapters emerge – so fresh and so clean (thanks to our friends from Outkast).

Come on. Let's do something real and meaningful at the next AFA business meeting – let's pass a pro-open expansion and extension policy that we recommend all universities follow.

No. Hope is not a strategy. Bad chapters are crappy for a reason. They are horrible for a reason. And it's not going to change. It won't change even if you just send one more person to *U/FI*. Sometimes student development and student development theory means no. And sometimes it means no more.

Unfortunately, we are many times 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 had a little more courage...to say no.

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