

Do it for the Culture: Fundamental Proficiencies for CBFOs

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Attorneys, accountants, and doctors are required to pass their respective licensing requirements to practice in their field. Within each of those fields, there is a need to understand the principles related to a focus within the respective field. A doctor who is a general practitioner (GP) is not the same as an obstetrician-gynecologist (OB-GYN). This past year, the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) shared new core competencies for the industry. We honor those and the work that went into establishing them. After years of working with culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs), we recognize there are unique needs in working and supporting the students who compose these organizations to ensure a thriving community. There are fundamental proficiencies necessary which extend in the same analogous way as the GP to the OB-GYN. As a fraternity/sorority life professional, if you were required to take an examination to advise CBFOs, would you pass?

Often, based on our professional experiences, the answer to this question is *no*. In our collective work, speaking on campuses, engaging in focus groups, assessing the membership of CBFOs at the national level for a number of organizations, we found this unfortunate truth manifests as a recurring theme. The ability to advise across fraternal organizations may be present, while the proficiency may be absent.

In many instances, fraternity/sorority life professionals are products of their experiences and these experiences are frequently lacking healthy CBFO communities. Further, graduate programs do not always include coursework related to diversity and inclusion. For CBFOs, culture comes first. Therefore, a lack of overall experience working generally with students of color, particularly for white campus-based professionals, contributes to a deficit in understanding, connecting, and relating to the demographics present within CBFOs.

The issue of high quality CBFO advisement is not unique to non-CBFO members, or “outsiders.” It also manifests for some CBFO alumni/ae who support chapters that may function differently than their own experience. While being affiliated, as a person of color, can give a professional more insight into the mindset and functioning of CBFOs and their members, it doesn’t necessarily guarantee aptitude in all areas necessary for success. Just because one attends



church every Sunday as a member, doesn't qualify them to have the credentials to preach a sermon at that same service.

In order to bridge this knowledge gap, we developed and based the foundation of our Cross Cultural Fraternal Advisors institute (CCFAI) around uniquely designed CBFO fundamental proficiencies that utilize higher education best practices from the CAS Standards for Fraternity and Sorority Life (2015), ACPA and NASPA's Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators (2015), Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller's (2004) *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs, and Transformational Encounters: Shaping Diverse College and University Leaders* (Gonzalez, A.K., Ching, D.M., White, L. S., & Kelly, R.D., 2018). Additionally, we approached our fundamental proficiency listing for working with CBFOs with a comprehensive and multi-layered approach to better prepare practitioners for the intersecting and overlapping issues professionals may face in their work. For example, a low academic performance for a chapter may be attributed to extensive additional activities outside of the new membership intake process taking a toll on members. Being subjected to additional activities causes less people to join or stick around through the entire "process." Hence student success, anti-hazing efforts and recruitment/retention in CBFOs sometimes intersect and overlap with each other. Ruben, Di Lisi, and Gigliotti (2017) offer, "Today's higher education leaders need a deep understanding of these cross-cutting issues; how they intersect; and how they affect many functional areas at all levels - and they need to be both knowledgeable and conversant with these themes." Accordingly, we provide a general overview of these proficiencies and share specific examples to underscore the significance in incorporating them into your daily practice.

CBFO Fundamental Proficiencies

- 1. Understand the purpose, mission, and origins of culturally-based fraternal organizations (CBFOs), the different categories of those CBFOs, and awareness of the councils that may support them.***

Don't treat all CBFOs the same: A CBFO, by definition, is a fraternal organization founded by an underrepresented racial or religious group to support their membership and serve their respective communities. Asian, black, Latinx, multicultural and Native American fraternal organizations all organizationally identify with their heritage in different ways. Mastering our first fundamental proficiency not only clarifies internal intra- and inter-council similarities and differences on an organizational level, but also increases the sensitivity and awareness of many of the challenges and issues students of color face daily as individuals.



2. Understand the culture/history of CBFOs and the traditions (pledging, stepping, strolling, calls, chants, etc.) associated with them.

Context, context, and context: Does the statement, “We pledge hard,” at a CBFO new member presentation (probate show) automatically mean your students are hazing (pre/post pledging)? Not necessarily. The opposite may be true. If they *couldn’t participate* in illegal new member activities outside of the official membership intake process, they may utilize this language to influence the community to give the appearance they are “made.” Fully immersing yourself in CBFO programs, activities, meetings, and one-on-one connections can broaden your scope to provide context for how these terms are used — or misused. This is like learning another language — knowing is one thing. Fully immersing yourself in a culture to live it, is another thing. This experience provides a deeper appreciation and a more accurate understanding of common local customs, “slang” terminology, and cultural phenomena you may not learn fully from a book.

3. An understanding of how the evolution of organizational development impacts their academics, new member processes, leadership development, and risk management at a chapter, regional, and national level.

Process to Practice: Are the minimum chapter size requirements for student organizations equitable for your CBFO community? Is your hazing speaker focused primarily on alcohol-related incidents that may seem unrelated to your CBFO members? Are your grade reports scaled so they proportionally reflect chapter sizes and are relative to the number of members? Comparing a chapter of 200 members to 7 will have a different result. Additionally, the grade report should reflect aggregate institutional data for individuals from the representative identity groups. Remember, there is no one size fits all. These are a few questions you should begin to ask once you translate historical culture and context to real-time organizational operations.

4. Understand how to utilize cultural competency to identify and address the presence of implicit or unconscious bias (class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) while supporting CBFOs in a professional capacity.

Reflect before you project: What checks do you have in place to ensure you are creating equitable, bias-free spaces for your CBFOs? How are you amplifying their voices to administrators, or giving them the tools to challenge bias within the community? With an increase in bias-related incidents on campuses, are you prepared to assist and



debrief with the CBFO community their concerns or feelings? These are the questions you need to be prepared to answer in an effort to better support your CBFOS.

5. *Understand how to utilize cultural competence to better communicate and connect with CBFO members at an undergraduate level, community level (influential alumni/ae members in your area), and regional/national level).*

Showing up and showing out: You can't control your race and ethnicity — how you physically present. You can, however, have a better understanding of how you show up impacts other CBFO members (undergraduate and graduate) and how advisors may perceive you. What does one see when they walk into your office? Are your actions consistent across chapters and councils? CBFO affiliated advisors are included in this as well — students could think you have a bias towards your own organization or one closely related to yours. Cultural competence is for everyone, and an excellent tool to better communicate and connect it starts with honestly and adequately assessing who you are as a person.

6. *Understand how to communicate the unique characteristics of CBFOs and advocate on their behalf to colleagues that work in a variety of departments/divisions (academic affairs, student conduct, public safety, etc.) on your campus to better serve as a collective unit when preparing undergraduates for holistic student success.*

7. *Utilize these best practices to advocate on behalf of CBFO members for the proper resources, space, equitable treatment*

Allies, assets, and advocacy: As a campus-based professional or regional/national CBFO leader, you are a valuable asset to address institutional inequities beyond your students' reach. Properly utilizing these last two core competencies requires one to have credibility, trust, and experience engaging members of this community. These factors are necessary to unlock this advocacy and are a requirement to successfully implement best practices and operate more effectively and efficiently to serve and support your students. Be the best professional you can: do it for yourself and ***Do it for the Culture.***



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Suzette Walden Cole, M.Ed., Alpha Delta Pi Sorority. Suzette is a doctoral candidate in the Education Administration and Foundations at Illinois State University, studying the factors that contribute to the development of culture in student groups and effective strategies for cultivating change within student groups. As a risk management consultant, speaker, and trainer, Suzette seeks to help individuals and organizations realize their potential — speaking, consulting, and presenting to college/university administrators, fraternities/sororities local and inter/national organizations, and students across the country. Given her expertise, Ms. Walden Cole has served as an expert witness in cases involving hazing within CBFOs, and consulted for several NPHC, NALFO, and NMGC organizations, including Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Chi Upsilon Sigma National Latin Sorority, and Alpha Psi Lambda Co-educational Latino Fraternity.



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