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shrinking resources

sparks

regional collaboration

Budget cuts within higher education seem to be a time honored tradition. Institutions are facing fiscal challenges due to decreasing enrollments, rising costs of resources, and lack of state and federal funding. The state of Illinois, for example, is approaching its third fiscal year without an approved budget. Without having an approved budget releasing public dollars, institutions have been forced to rely on unknown sums of "stop gap funding." This funding source is crucial for institutions to continue basic operations. However, according to the Chicago Tribune, these stop gaps barely made a dent. For example, Northern Illinois University operated at \$26.4 million dollars for the year, although the university typically operates at \$91 million dollars per year (Rhodes, 2017).

These fiscal challenges force institutions to identify alternative cost saving measures. Some alternative measures utilized are choosing not to "front" monies for regularly funded student state aid in the hopes of being reimbursed by the state; staff taking mandatory furloughs; reducing some staff and administrative positions from twelve month positions to ten or eleven month positions; extended term interim executive positions; and in some cases, the elimination of positions, entirely. In addition, shrinking or nonexistent funding also impacts staff availability for students. The uncertainty of these factors has caused the morale of both staff and students to plummet.

A common response to these cuts can be professionals shutting down, or throwing their hands up and saying, "I guess, I will deal with it." In Illinois, a different solution has emerged combining the collaboration of colleagues with a desire to overcome obstacles. The Central Illinois Fraternity and Sorority Advisor Coalition brings together professionals from public and private institutions to form an approach to overcome budgetary impasses and other shrinking resources. This coalition helps advisors grow professionally while striving to support fraternal communities across the state.

Responding Externally for Fraternal Support

In the summer of 2015, fraternity and sorority professionals from the central Illinois region came together to support one another during these financially difficult times. A meeting was held to create the Central Illinois Fraternity and Sorority Advisor Coalition. The discussions identified universal needs across campuses. The need for risk reduction programming, new member development, expansion/extension, management of databases, and leadership development were common themes. The easy solution to many of these problems is to host a speaker or purchase a developed program. This option is not always available, however, when funding is limited. At the initial meeting, a comment was made eluding to need for another professional to be "the expert" for students needing to hear a different voice stating the same issue their campus advisor had already stated. This statement was the spark that created solutions.

One solution was to utilize professionals in the Coalition to present to other campuses, at cost or for smaller fees, through the use of different technologies. This would help the professional grow by developing their presentation skills, fine-tuning their message, and reaching students from another perspective at a rate that was affordable. These discussions led to the concept of "lightning talks" from around the region. Lightning talks would be live or pre-recorded talks that would be accessible to all campuses around the region discussing various topics. The talks would provide an opportunity for students to hear from professionals on different campuses to address and discuss similar issues among campuses.

Additionally, the group explored opportunities for student governing council leadership to connect through various technologies. Having the opportunity for peer-to-peer connection to build unity among the region would allow students to pool resources in combating some of the issues faced by fraternity/sorority life. In creating these relationships, multi-campus programs, initiatives, and opportunities for leadership development would receive more buy-in from students, as these students want to meet and interact to facilitate these discussions.

After forming the concept of developing relationships among the campus councils, the Coalition discussed how to deliver traditional programs in a nontraditional way. Conventionally, to offer a nationally recognized leadership development program, a campus would be required to host their own students and provide scholarships for students to attend. Thus, the Coalition explored the alternative option of regionally hosting a program to develop relationships among students through a shared experience. This option would also allow for shared costs. Then, the Coalition discussed the possibility of hosting a homegrown leadership program for students within their region that would be affordable to campus officers and would not compete with other nationally or regionally recognized programs. The Coalition even evaluated sharing travel across the region to attend conferences so no one school would be burdened with the cost of travel.

The benefits of the Coalition extend beyond the students to the professional staff as well. This group provides networking opportunities, presentation experiences, opportunities to explore new topics for research, and support all around the region. The Coalition has also developed an outlet for sharing resources using different technologies that has been useful to all involved. These resources have included "Lightning Talks," assessment program templates, and templates for common letters sent to students or chapters.

The Central Illinois Fraternity and Sorority Advisor Coalition serves as an example for future collaborative efforts which can help institutions respond in the wake of diminishing state aid. Transparency with how dollars are spent, finding ways to reduce or eliminate duplicate programs, and including many stakeholders in these efforts will help to ensure success in new collaborative endeavors. As a result, rather than attempting to do more with less as resources are reduced, advisors and campus communities will have the opportunity to do less with less through greater efficiency in campus programming. There are a number of means whereby this can be accomplished. Professionals just have to explore opportunities that exist on their campuses, communities, and regions. When change is forced, for whatever reason it, is difficult to adapt. Due to this, professionals and students, alike, need to be resilient in the face of change, rather than resistant to it.

References:

Rhodes, D. (2017, March). Illinois regional universities toil through state budget standoff. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-budget-crisis-regional-universities-20170316-story.html>

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