

# SHIRDONNA LAWRENCE

Director, Fraternity and Sorority Life  
Michigan State University

*Candidate, AFA Board of Directors*



**The fraternity and sorority profession (and higher education in general) is a complex, interdisciplinary space with many key stakeholders. What do you see as the greatest opportunities to build stakeholder alignment and consensus over the next five years? How would you effectively lead the association through this exercise in alignment?**

The interdisciplinary nature of fraternity and sorority life positions our field well to address the myriad of needs facing university and college students. Budgetary concerns related to declining numbers of students applying to college, addressing educational gaps for marginalized and minoritized student populations, risk management concerns related to increased mass shootings and other illegal activity on college campuses, and navigating academic and co-curricular spaces in the face of divisive and challenging legislative tactics are some of the challenges faced by university administration. Aligning our field of campus-based professionals, headquarters staff and thirdparty consultation services to aid in addressing these challenges is how we draw in the support of varied stakeholders. Weaved into fulfillment of my job responsibilities has been a commitment to advancing student success initiatives. I accomplished this by working with colleagues and students to create affirming and empowering cultures, structures, and experiences. Informed by my work as an educator, I have advanced a research agenda that investigates deficit thinking regarding diversity, and how higher education policies perpetuate disparities, and how to create effective and sustainable student success strategies to improve students' curricular and co-curricular experiences. It is this approach that I would use to support the goal of stakeholder engagement and alignment.

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**Describe your understanding of the role of the board of directors (BOD). What strengths or characteristics do you possess that would make you an effective BOD member? How, specifically, have you demonstrated this?**

The BOD supports the efforts of the AFA executive team and serve as ambassadors of the goals and vision of the Association through support of fundraising efforts, advocating for the fraternal and sororal experiences, navigating crisis situations and creating a strong strategic infrastructure that would guide our field toward achieving shared goals. Securing funding resources to grow the operating budget to support programs for marginalized student organizations, creating education and training to better develop student leaders and advisors, and leading cross-departmental and town and gown collaborations outline my efforts to create co-curricular experiences that would provide students an equitable collegiate experience. I have led the implementation of multiple strategic plans. The plans addressed risk management, peer accountability and transparency, improvement and assessment of programs and initiatives, recruitment and membership processes, relationship building with regional and inter/national organization leadership, and house director training and support. Additionally, I have led teams in creating education and training curricula for leadership development, Title IX and harm reduction information, healthy chapter behaviors; more notably, the curriculum tied together social, educational, and training experiences so that students and stakeholders could better understand impact of the fraternal and sororal experience.

**Describe any salient identities you hold, both professionally and personally, and how they may frame your perspective as a member of the board of directors.**

My identity as a Black woman inform how I must show in professional spaces. My identity as a Christian frame how I understand the world and my overall value system. My identity as a practitioner and scholar, through empirical research, informs the work in which I am invested. These identities are most salient to me because they position why and how I advocate. Finding routes to make space for systemically silenced voices through collaboration, constructive conversation and care sum up my ethos. Multicultural belonging is the approach from which I operate when seeking to create an environment conducive for fostering belonging and leadership development for a diverse population of students and stakeholders. Using multicultural belonging as a guiding approach to student and staff engagement expands opportunities for me to rethink the ways diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism are considered when creating experiences. It is this perspective that I would bring to the Board of Directors. Considering policy changes, operations, and processes, how to be more inclusive of varied ideas and identities requires hyper focus on advocacy and a constant awareness of the ever-evolving landscape of curricular and co-curricular spaces. This is what I believe is needed to move our Association forward.

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**AFA at its core is a professional development association, and has continued to invest in and enhance our professional core competencies. How can AFA best facilitate the development of necessary knowledge and skills for those doing the work of the fraternity/sorority profession, and how do you see that work needing to evolve?**

Multidisciplinary Work: To support professional development and invest in our membership, I think it is crucial that we provide education and training regarding financial aid, housing and residential life, career and alumni services, academic and organizational advising, and the list goes on. Additionally, the Association could support FSAs by providing information to university administration and divisional leadership on how fraternity and sorority life sits at the intersection of most institutional functional areas; therefore, providing a breadth of support via staff and other resources is essential for us to achieve success. Strategic Planning and Implementation: Substantial work has been done to both define the work of fraternity and sorority life and outline best practice support matrices, evident in work such as the Recommendations for Excellence in Fraternity and Sorority Life by NASPA and AFA. The next step is creating implementation pathways for the support matrices that have been researched. Successful strategic planning includes clear implementation steps and commensurate assessment strategies that could be across varied institutional types and national organizations. Crisis Management and Coordinated Support: The COVID-19 Pandemic, safety and risk management concerns, and the impact of gun violence detail issues I have navigated. I believe there is need to develop outlines or support matrices for how to support fraternal organizations through crisis situations.

**One of the main responsibilities of board members is to maintain financial accountability of the organization. Board members act as trustees of the organization's assets and must exercise due diligence to oversee that the organization is well-managed and that its financial situation remains sound. Please describe a time when you have had to make difficult financial and/or resource allocation decisions and how would you use that experience as you serve on the board.**

As we construct the foundations of the fraternity and sorority office at Michigan State University, we are, daily, faced with limitations in staffing and monetary support. Therefore, I have had to make the decision to reorganize our unit structure to increase efficiency of work. The impact is that our staff will not be able attend as many after hour student events or meetings. However, with this shift in staff responsibilities, we are better able to focus on building unit processes and procedures. Additionally, we are better able to empirically support our reasoning for needing more staff, increased monetary support from the institution, etc. While for next year, we may have to decrease some of our student engagement responsibilities, in the long run this will pay off in that we will be able to amplify our overall student support. When considering resource allocation, there is sometimes the thought that it is necessary to continue to push or overextend. I believe that greater benefit is attained when there is thoughtful consideration on current resources, reduce output if needed, then strategically outline a plan to garner more resources to achieve intended outcomes or goals.

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**AFA's strategic plan, 'Forward to 50', will be the 'north star' for the Association's efforts over the 2025 and 2026 years. Discuss how you typically approach prioritization and allocation of strategic planning efforts, and what you see as the Board of Directors' role in strategic plan execution.**

I have served on multiple interdisciplinary strategic planning committees as well as led the creation and implementation of strategic plans for the units I have led. The key to addressing strategic plans is staying focused on the specified goals through achievable strategies. This is done by creating an accountability structure within the implementation process to decrease opportunity for plan straying. As an example, if we want to focus on Developing Professional Competency, it is imperative that we place colleagues, who have a passion for this work, in leadership to see that the goals are achieved. Moreover, we task those colleagues and industry experts with creating tools for assessment to ensure we are meeting what we set out to achieve. Specifically, the Board ensures effective organizational planning and resource allocation; protects and enhances the Association's public image; and creates committees and workgroups to advance Association projects. It would be important for the Board to assist in selecting colleagues who lead and support the address of our strategic plan. Additionally, the Board would need to make sure resourcing (time, money, technology, etc.) is provided to support these efforts, and appropriately compensate those who give their time.