In 2012, Dr. Gentry McCreary and I conducted a series of research studies to explore how brotherhood is conceptualized within the college fraternity. What resulted was the first quantitative scale to measure the construct of brotherhood. As we developed the scale, we began with questions about standards, expectations and values. To our surprise, the items worded to capture “values” did not load within our exploratory statistical procedure. By contrast, items aiming to capture standards and expectations did. This informed us that values are not an explicitly overt part of brotherhood. If we are to engage our men in the concept of brotherhood building, we should move away from the more nebulous conversation on values, and rather examine their standards and expectations.

Some might contend a chapter’s standards and expectations are rooted in values. At first glance, it is safe to support that, but let’s not be naïve in this assumption. How one conceptualizes values and which values are being considered are equally as important. Groups like the Franklin Square and Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors have challenged campus and headquarters professionals, as well as volunteers, to focus the conversation around values, or more specifically “shared values.” We fall short as a profession if we believe the “values conversation” to be the ultimate solution. If the values our students are connecting to are the expectations held by their peers, then a misalignment occurs. Here we find the rudimentary disconnect between our founders’ creation and daily operations at the chapter or member level.

I propose a re-conceptualization of values as (1) being both positive and negative, and (2) being the result of how we spend our time and our money. Maybe we should put down the ritual book and find alternative points of entry into the conversation.

Leadership author Stephen Covey once said, “I can tell everything I need to know about what you value by looking in two places: Your calendar and your checkbook.” Students, therefore have a difficult time conceptualizing the positive, esoteric shared values because they are being lost in translation. Sometimes that breakdown is a result of the way the transmission is occurring. I recall again the challenge given to participants at the NIC’s Undergraduate Interfraternity
“So, we as professionals could talk about ‘shared values’ until we are blue in the face, but behavior illuminates real shared values.”

Institute: “learn it, live it, teach it, expect it.” We all know what “it” is. But if we’re really going to start reformulating values back into the equation, perhaps we need to break “learn it” into understand it and practice it.

People and organizations have an interesting interchange. I once had a new member tell me he was frustrated the initiated members of the chapter teach new members about positive aspects, yet display behaviors completely contrary to those lessons. Holding oneself to a high standard, being a moral person of strong values and committing to the expectations of membership were preached but not inculcated. In this example, the chapter (or its members speaking ‘for’ the chapter) stated the values of the organization were, for example, honor, love and gentlemanly character. However, what they demonstrated was that the chapter actually valued drinking beer, womanizing and picking on each other. Here we see the disconnect from the perspective of the member. So, we as professionals could talk about “shared values” until we are blue in the face, but behavior illuminates real shared values. In many respects, to me, this is why brotherhood and sisterhood is not about values in a book or secrets. Values are delivered every day in the interactions, positive and negative, that members display between and among each other.

If your chapter was anything like mine, we said we valued scholarship, but the brethren often got drunk and slept through class. We said we valued leadership, but few if any brothers got involved on campus. We said we valued athletics, and guys would sign up for intramural sports and then blow them off to go smoke pot. We said we valued being a gentleman, and brothers would call women horrible things that embarrassed them just to get a good laugh. We valued convincing someone’s daughter that the bed in the room on the right was more comfortable than her own.

We valued these things because we did them, and few brothers, if any, tried to stop these actions. Return to my previous comments in the example of my student: words state, whereas actions demonstrate.

Now, we also valued loyalty and honor and friendship. I know this because we had a solidarity—a “one man is no man” attitude that was fervent and beyond reproach. We valued raising money for charities and walking the dogs at the local animal shelter. Two of the years I was in the chapter we won the award for most charitable donations, and once for significant hours of service to the local community. We valued the ceremonies and we valued bringing in new guys we liked (not just because they would clean the house). Ritual was probably the most attended programming we performed. My chapter was an interesting paradox of positive and negative behaviors. We were unique, in our minds, yet we shared so much of that in common with our contemporaries. While this experience might not be the norm, it is certainly not abnormal.

So how do we try to align values? We tend to impose them. We make things required—too many things. And why? Do we need all of our brothers there? For example, who is initiation for anyway: the new member, or the guys in the back of the room? Sure, there are some people who have to be there—they play a part—they are an actor on the stage. But does everyone? We force people to come to things that we place little time and care in. We wonder why their attitudes suck and why they cause disruptions.

I think we need to take a page from T.J. Sullivan’s book Motivating the Middle. It is time we considered what baseline expectations we need from people, and then hold them to those. These do not have to be rooted in values,
although they certainly might be. I think the power comes from when they connect to tangible things like the standards of the group or the expectations of being an active member. We must also be comfortable parting ways with those who cannot seem to do the minimum. At that point, those members have made the selfish choice to put themselves above the group, and the group should feel exonerated moving in a direction away from them.

We each joined our fraternity for a host of reasons. To that end, the reason we joined and the reason we stay connected and engaged might be altogether different. Brotherhood has become a word that permeates the fabric of our experience. But what is it? When I asked a few of my students these questions, each provided a different response. However different it might seem, in order to sustain an organization it must have some commonality shared by all members. Because we cannot seem to find alignment with nebulous things like "values," brotherhood coalesces around the tangible, the explicitly experienced. In short, brotherhood is about solidarity to the group, shared social experiences, a sense of belonging and accountability.

If you are building a house, it is advisable to start at the bottom and work your way up. We gauge our success on the structural soundness of the foundation. The foundation of brotherhood may not explicitly be shared values. I think we, as a profession, should come to terms with that. The foundation may well be the standards and expectations that our chapters place on their membership. Are they congruent with action? What values are they rooted in? Are they causing the top to check in, the bottom to check out, and the middle to become so stressed out that they do not know what to do? Perhaps values are the stone and clay that is used to make the concrete, rather than the actual base from which we build. Begin with expectations as those blocks, and work upward toward a house of commitment. We know standards and expectations are directly related to brotherhood. This resonates with fraternity men, and it is arguably the reconceptualization we should look toward for positive and lasting change.

Joshua Schutis is the Assistant Director of Institutional Effectiveness at University of West Florida and a brother of Pi Kappa Alpha. He is pursuing a Ph.D. in education with an emphasis in research, evaluation, statistics and assessment from The University of Southern Mississippi. His research interests include brotherhood and sisterhood as well as organizational behavior in higher education and student organizations.