

Picture It

Vance Pierce | University of Illinois at Chicago | @VanPQuad06

Picture it – It's Friday evening in the student center, music is blaring, and you are working the door. You have never heard this Selena Gomez song featuring Chief Keef. If nothing else, student affairs has given you a chance to appreciate time away from friends and family on many nights and weekends. Fraternity and sorority life gives you the chance to learn that Justin Bieber and Nick Jonas make good music. No, really they do. The host organization, a culturally based co-ed fraternity brought you their certificate of insurance. Right? You reviewed the student center's late night policies with them so they know what to do. Right?

A fight between two "townies" breaks out near the end of the party. Somehow, a plasma screen is bumped. It won't turn back on. The Monday morning meeting to recap the weekend will be worth the triple mocha latte from Starbucks, so don't forget the cinnamon and extra foam.

The fraternity and sorority community prides itself on producing well-rounded leaders who are great citizens in the community, amazing people on-campus, and good students in the classroom. Culturally based fraternities and sororities also have embraced a mission to enhance the campus community by hosting social programs ranging from step shows and stroll competitions, to pageants and lectures, to large parties that invite the surrounding community and other campuses to our doors. Colleges and universities, in a climate where financial resources to support student organizations can be stretched, have started to ask questions about how to support the social events held by culturally based groups, manage the costs of security, and at the same time create a safe environment.

This work began months before the event. Some decisions were made before you were hired. It is a series of intentional actions to create awareness and promote action. The remainder of this article will establish the value of these events, acknowledge risks associated for the hosts and their home institution, and finally propose some proactive steps to support these groups.

The history of culturally based fraternities and sororities has roots in exclusion from some groups, a desire to create a sense of community, or to give voice to local or national issues impacting people with similar backgrounds. One of those early groups, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, united African American men in Ithaca, New York around retention and matriculation. Student activities offices are charged with serving the entire campus. Culturally based fraternities and sororities complement that mission and can enhance the overall campus climate. A strong community of culturally based groups can serve as a barometer for the larger community. Their events can also serve as major attractions to recruit students to campus or bring alumni back to campus, thus enhancing affinity for the college.

So why might this article need to be shared?

It's a complicated concept that is not so complicated. Underrepresented groups want to be around more people who look, talk, act, and feel like they do. Underrepresented groups often hold events and attract others to the campus to have that, sometimes, elusive fun. These non-students force a campus out of its comfort zone and outside of its code of conduct as well.

At this point, we can introduce perceived "dangers" when culturally based groups host social events, which complicate advising these groups. Fights, intoxication, weapons, and unruly behavior don't know race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. When managing the events of culturally based groups, there are some key areas to consider and think about. The Fraternal Information & Programming Group (FIPG) has given some direction and suggestions, but for culturally based groups, there are nuances to consider. Universities have begun to require guest lists as opposed to open door policies. Guests' names must be submitted prior to the event for guest lists. A challenge for guest lists is securing contact information from off-campus potential attendees who are not be sure they will attend. An open door policy is just that; those who come can attend.

Managing those off-campus guests once they are in the door presents some legal questions. How much care does their status afford them? If something goes wrong, are these attendees considered guests or trespassers who can be told to leave? Are they social invitees or business invitees who have additional benefits based upon their legal status? If so, we have another visit to legal counsel to schedule. There is so much uncertainty, and a university can begin to ask groups to shoulder the costs for security, which is no small expense. Groups seeking to avoid policies and costs have begun to go off-campus. Venues can be cheaper, less restrictive, and offer the chance to have alcohol.

As a fraternity/sorority life professional, what can you do?

Take a deep breath and be prepared to do some homework. Don't all of these groups use FIPG? No, that would make your life SUPER easy. The following are some steps to consider before a group hosts an event.

- R** Review policies of the institution, venue, and organization on your own and WITH the student leaders. The best advice can come when you are aware of what your institution is looking to maintain or prevent. Knowing the players and their past will often shape how you can work with, or around, or be stopped by a policy.

- I** Involve the group with addressing challenging pieces of the program or event using the governing documents of the organization or institution. INVOLVEMENT can lead to INVESTMENT. Challenge the group to solve problems and support their learning. Life lessons are great but some can have tragic consequences for guests or the group hosting.
- S** Support the organization in its engagement with the university or venue. Allow their voice to be heard. This is their event. Give them a chance to articulate their goals and ideas to university administrators or venue managers.
- K** Develop a KNOWLEDGE of issues relative to the operation of the chapter or organization. “It” might not have happened YET, but it doesn’t mean it can’t! There is no greater resource than being aware of what can happen on any given day and feeling confident that you’ve already worked through those scenarios with your staff and student leaders.

These steps, when coupled with a working knowledge of the history of culturally based groups, and the different challenges involved with hosting events with non-students, can help you to better support the missions of both the organization and your institution. We, as fraternity and sorority professionals, can serve our campus and our students equally – picture it.