

## What if I am actually the problem? Why students don't self-govern.

Michael A. McRee, Ph.D. | North-American Interfraternity Conference | @mikemcree

I've been reflecting lately on my own journey as an undergraduate student leader – what my experiences were, what shaped me, and in what sequence critical events occurred. My new role at the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) and our [2.0 efforts](#) has prompted this reflection, as I have been thrust back into thinking about, and working with, undergraduates on a regular basis.

My undergraduate leadership experience at Kansas State University was unique for two reasons. First, because my fraternity/sorority advisor led an interfraternal association – a predecessor to the Association of Fraternal Leadership & Values (AFLV) – I was on the conference staff that ran the event now known as AFLV Central. At that time, this conference provided leadership opportunities to 1,400 students from across the Midwest each year.

Serving as IFC President was the second unique experience. While this role isn't distinct in its own right, my duties were. Our council served as both the executive and judicial branches of the fraternity community. This meant as IFC President, I was the chief executive and chief judicial officer, and my executive board heard all fraternity judicial cases. Additionally, as IFC President, I was tasked with overseeing the personnel of our Greek Life office. This included the capability to hire/fire our fraternity/sorority advisor; I conducted her performance evaluation and forwarded it on to the Vice President of Student Affairs/Dean of Students, as well as renegotiated her contract.

Both of these experiences were pivotal in my growth as a student leader. In each, I knew the stakes were high and others were watching; I knew I had to perform.

What is fascinating to me is that as a professional, I worked to *remove* these types of experiences from both Kansas State and AFLV.

As Assistant Executive Director of the Mid-American Greek Council Association (MGCA)/AFLV for 10 years, I supported and voted to remove undergraduate student positions from the board of MGCA when we created AFLV in 2012. I didn't feel students were focused on true board responsibilities and that they didn't serve as a true check and balance to the board. As a staff member, it was easy to convince students of "what they should do" vs "what they wanted to do." I thought most were interested in surface-level opportunities, like being seen on stage in front of their peers or deciding the next year's conference theme. They seemed less interested in and equipped for important board responsibilities, like budgeting and staff performance evaluations.

Additionally, I co-chaired the Kansas State University Greek Life Task Force in 2003, which resulted in a reduction of student power and influence. I felt after my fraternity/sorority life advisor retired, most new professionals would not want to be employed by students. I thought we would have a hard time recruiting a strong candidate if they knew they could be removed

from their job if students didn't like a decision they made. While I helped secure \$300,000 from the university to help fund the office, it ultimately disempowered students and their decision making.

If I look at how we are supporting students now as an industry, I don't think I'm alone in my actions. We have collectively outsourced responsibilities that used to lie in students' hands, responsibility for their own actions and for their communities.

As a chapter president, if a member was late on their dues/bills, I had to confront them myself. Now we outsource this to a bill collection company. If a member was acting out of line at a social event, I had to confront their behavior. Now we outsource this to a security company. If the chapter's recruitment efforts were not up to par, I had to confront the officers. Now we outsource this to a vendor who holds members accountable for their performance of recruiting new members. These are just a few examples.

This happens on the community-level as well. We see campuses take judicial processes off student hands because administrators want to see accountability happen at a certain level. Entire university fraternity/sorority communities have been put on probation/suspension for the actions of a few.

If self-governance experiences were pivotal in my own undergraduate leadership development, then why did I work to actively remove them for others? As much as I want to jump on the bandwagon scolding helicopter parents doing things for students they can do on their own, it feels hypocritical because I have done the same. It begs the question, am I actually part of the problem of why students struggle with self-governance now?

Almost always, I know chapters collect more money, confront more negative behaviors, and have greater recruitment success when they employ a company to provide expertise in these areas. Further, with the pressures on campuses and organizations, swift action is often seen as necessary. However, the challenge is students now believe these initiatives are not their responsibility. Consequently, if self-governance was a muscle, it has become atrophied because students have not needed to exercise it. They no longer know how to hold their peers – individually and within the community – accountable because they have not had to. In many cases, someone else will do it for them.

To make headway in sculpting the self-governance muscle, we need to help students know they have a critical role in accountability: from confronting the member who owes money to confronting the chapter you know is hazing. The coaching and tools our partners and vendors provide is incredibly positive. How can we both use resources and processes that make chapters and communities more efficient and effective without compromising peer-to-peer leadership? It's both/AND, not either/OR thinking.

What would have driven *you* to change your behavior as an undergraduate – the law, the policy, the university, your national organization, or your peers? To move the needle, we must

empower self-governance and peer accountability. This comes with recognizing the role we have played in *removing* self-governance opportunities from students.

My own choices leave me sleeping in the bed I made, but I have realized I can best support students' leadership development by giving them real responsibility to make significant decisions that allow them to hold their own future in their own hands.

I can't do it for them. I have to empower them and teach them to do it on their own.