

Post-Convening: Where do we go from here?

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I had the opportunity to attend the FSL Convening Meeting held in January. Meeting attendees included senior-level campus-based fraternity/sorority advisors, as well as their respective vice president of student affairs or designee. As we prepared for the meeting, many of us had the same question on our minds: “What can we accomplish in a day?” We heard from colleagues around the country who cited the many challenges we face in providing support and dedicating more resources to facilitate necessary change within our fraternity/sorority communities.

We spent time in round table discussions as campus-based advisors and as vice presidents of student affairs breaking down the issues from our respective points of view. We discussed the Core Competencies and shared the importance of utilizing our new resource to aid in the development of our staff members. Additionally, we saw a couple of examples of top-down leadership about reclaiming ownership of the fraternity/sorority experience unfolding on our campuses. At the end of the experience, after all the brainstorming and discussions, we were still left with the question, where do we go from here? I believe our next step is owning the reality that the challenges we are facing pertaining to fraternity/sorority life are complex, and we can no longer afford to underestimate what it will take to facilitate a much needed culture shift within this critical area of student life.

As shared by many attendees, those in senior level positions managing the day-to-day work of fraternity/sorority life, as well as our Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) tasked with making tough decisions regarding the allocation of resources, fraternity/sorority programs are often under-resourced. Our challenges range from entry-level professionals directly out of graduate school managing the day to day operations of a volatile community, to seasoned professionals facing the challenge of being undercompensated given their often rare longevity/vital experience within the field and battling the temptation to leave fraternity/sorority advising. Our SSAOs recognize these challenges.

While these challenges are top priority for FSL professionals, we must appreciate these challenges are no less of a priority than the many other challenges SSAOs face within the scope of their role. For example, SSAOs are also managing growing mental health needs and ever expanding wait lists of students in need of crisis support, shrinking budgets, and challenges associated with inclusivity/civility amidst our current political environment. While we continue to advocate for our needs, we also have to keep them in perspective and appreciate our SSAOs

see us, hear us, and are at the table with us, amidst other serious issues our campuses are facing.

The problem is not in the challenges we face on a day-to-day basis, but how we seek out support and collaboration within our respective communities and see the entirety of the challenges and opportunities afforded to us across our institutions. We heard two examples of senior leadership stepping in to let their campuses know that FSL is a priority and they are invested in the success of those experiences. Penn State University and Miami University are demonstrating a top-down leadership approach in investing their time and direct support of their respective fraternity/sorority communities. Their investment, visibility, and active engagement are providing a unique opportunity for fraternity/sorority life staff to work across their institutions.

Throughout my career, fraternity/sorority life has become a catch-all for a wide variety of issues ranging from facilitating recruitment processes to overseeing the development and implementation of institution wide hazing prevention protocols. As the scope of student development issues continue to grow, the capacity of fraternity/sorority staff to manage those issues decreases. Event management, alcohol responsibility, leadership development, council governance, sexual assault prevention, hazing prevention, diversity & inclusion, mental health, facility management, civic engagement, are regularly falling under the scope of today's fraternity/sorority staff. These issues don't change because a community has 5 chapters or 50, a staff of 1 or a staff of 15.

Our future success is reliant on our ability to effectively engage our colleagues, who are experts in these critical areas. The voice of the president, of the chancellor, of the provost, or the vice president of student affairs is crucial in moving our institutional colleagues to action. This is not an opportunity to monopolize resources though. This is our opportunity to demonstrate true collaboration and return on investment.

My overall take-away from the Convening, the answer to where we go from here, is to advocate for active engagement from our senior student affairs officers. As our leaders and colleagues invest in supporting the changes within our communities, we must assume responsibility for ensuring our communities are paying that investment forward in order to nurture senior level engagement.

At Indiana State University, we pay it forward through decreased alcohol transports across the institution because our fraternity/sorority leaders are utilizing their social capital to educate

peers on alcohol safety through social norming campaigns with our Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention staff. Multicultural Student Affairs believes in the progressive work our communities are engaging in because they are regularly invited to facilitate workshops during chapter meetings and, in return, they show support for campus programs on cultural awareness and social justice. Leadership offices have a great relationship with our chapters; they appreciate the utilization of their services to develop chapter officers, create innovative and constructive practices to contribute to new member development, and collaborate with other units and student organizations across the institution.

These examples may seem lofty, but they are realistic, if we can garner the momentum created by the engagement of our top university leaders. While we need to continue the conversation in addressing the many complexities of our work, we must appreciate the greater scope of the challenges our institutions face. We must embrace our role in fostering healthy relationships with our campus leadership, colleagues, and coaching up our students on how to pay this investment forward. We need to encourage more university leaders to embrace the need for change and invest in making those changes a priority. We can do this knowing it will result in an enhancement for the experience of students and community members throughout their institution.

Chris Jefferson was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Chris joined the Eta Gamma Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. 2003 at the University of Missouri. While at the University of Missouri, he earned a bachelor's degree in Philosophy in 2006 and a master's degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis in 2008. Chris is an active volunteer within the fraternal community serving as a Lead Facilitator for Phi Kappa Tau's National Leadership Academy, Facilitator for the North American Interfraternity Conference's Launch, Impact, and UIFI programs, as well as the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisor's Professional Development Committee and Membership Intake Resource Guide Work group. Chris is committed to helping students discover their passions, enhance their community, live their values, and realize their leadership potential through the fraternal experience.