

Collaborations with Headquarters

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Working in fraternity/sorority life has its challenges. There are times where you feel you are alone on an island or there is little support for you and the initiatives you are trying to create. However, you do not need to feel this sense of loneliness as there are plenty of people willing to provide support. Whether it is colleagues at other institutions, advisors, or even folks who work on your campus, all you need to do is ask for some help. One of the biggest untapped resources for many campuses is often headquarters staff.

I am a member of a local fraternity in which we had no headquarters to call in a pinch and our resources were outdated, if not non-existent. We were left to figure things out for ourselves with some occasional support from our alumni. Once I entered the field, learning about fraternity/sorority headquarters was an afterthought for me, so I never fully understood their value or purpose. Not making an introduction or building a relationship was a mistake I paid the price for in my first year as a professional. It was not until I reflected on my first year as a full-time professional that I realized I needed to put the work in to cultivate relationships with my counterparts at inter/national offices. The work I put in to build those relationships has created an excellent bridge from where the national organization ends and my university begins.

Building a relationship with an inter/national office is one that takes continued communication and transparency. Best practices suggest headquarters is contacted immediately after an incident has occurred with a chapter. However, without any kind of context or pre-existing connection, it is difficult for the headquarters staff to fully understand the situation at hand. A pre-existing relationship provides context and a historical narrative to either the productivity or previous behaviors of a chapter. The more the staff knows ahead of time and has been kept in the loop, the easier their job will be when you need answers.

After cultivating a relationship with headquarters staff, it is important to stress the value of headquarters to students and explain what they can provide to the members of the organization. I often hear from student leaders that their headquarters staff does not care about them, or they only care about the 'good' chapters. When these statements are made, it is important to advocate for those folks at the inter/national office. If we, as campus professionals, are not advocating for the services the inter/national staff are able to provide, we are ourselves perpetuating an unhealthy relationship between undergraduate members and headquarters staff.

The impact of building these relationships can be seen directly when evaluating the success of traveling field staff on campus. These folks are usually young, overworked, and underpaid. The only way they can be successful in their jobs is if we, as the campus professionals, support them, provide them with accurate and useful information, and provide them with inside information about what you are seeing and hearing on the ground. It is crucial to provide context of what the campus and the community has been like, initiatives your office has been working on, and some areas you have been working on with the chapter. A partnership with the traveling staff can be what helps or hurts a chapter's growth and development. Once the visit is completed, take it upon yourself to follow-up with the traveling staff member.

These recommendations can also be utilized by inter/national offices. It is crucial to provide consistent updates to universities and find ways to support the campus professionals that are working with the group on a daily basis. An area where inter/national office staff can support campus professionals is to provide action steps for the campus staff to work on with the group. Reports from field staff are often shared but lack the necessary steps for the campus professionals to work on with the group. That puts them at a disadvantage, especially if there are areas the chapter needs to work on as mandates from the inter/national office. Campus advisors can certainly support recommendations, but in order to be in alignment with what the inter/national organization is seeking, we all should be on the same page.

Above all else, both sides need to advocate for the other. Campus professionals need to be advocates for the initiatives and efforts of the inter/national organization to help build a stronger connection to the organization as a whole, so the chapter does not solely function on a local level. Concurrently, inter/national offices should be speaking to their members about the partnerships with campus staff and how they can build a bridge that can work for both parties. Both campus professionals and headquarters staff are more often than not saying the same thing, we are just saying them differently. It is incredibly challenging to function in this field without your allies and partners and those partnerships are easy to create. It simply takes initiative.

My experience in working with fraternity/sorority headquarters staff has been one that has varied widely. I started my professional life not fully understanding the true value of a healthy relationship with these organizations, to relying on them as a partner and as an advocate for the work that is being done. All of us, headquarters staff and campus professionals alike, should remember who is on the other end of the telephone or email thread. People are what drive our business and without our people, we would not function. We can challenge opinions and differ

on approach, but we should all remember we are fighting for the same thing: for our fraternities and sororities to be as successful as possible.

Tom serves as the Assistant Director for Fraternity & Sorority Life at UNC-Greensboro. He is a graduate of both SUNY Oswego and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Tom is a member of Delta Kappa Kappa Fraternity where he served as the President of the Alumni Association for three years. In his spare time, Tom enjoys spending time with his wife, Emily, and their two cats, Huey and Lewis.