

## You Can't Impeach Vision

Timothy Ford Bryson, University of South Carolina

**In November 2014, I was the first African-American and member of NPHC to be elected President of Fraternity Council at the University of South Carolina.** As Fraternity Council President, I had the unique opportunity to lead 27 fraternities representing three unique councils: Interfraternity Council (IFC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), and Multicultural Greek Board (MGB). During my election speech, I spoke about how we should begin to value our diversity, become more engaged with the greater Columbia community, and initiate a culture rooted in accountability and self-governance.

**The first step to getting help is admitting we have a problem.** One council discussion after another, IFC presidents were hesitant and sometimes adamant about identifying alcohol/drug abuse, sexual misconduct, and recruitment problems within our community. In March 2015, a freshmen student and member of Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity died as a result of a toxic blood alcohol level four times the legal driving limit. One president's response to this death, "people die every day." How do you work to build a better community with chapter presidents whose values are echoed with "people die every day?"

I have never been a part of a community that did not value the holistic well-being of its members. From alcohol-related hospitalizations and deaths to prescription drug abuse, IFC fraternities continue to support a culture that is contradictory to their values. A culture that is perpetuated – not by the media – but through placing blame on others and the inability to hold their members accountable for their actions. How many hospital visits and funerals must we attend before we acknowledge that there is a systemic problem within our university and fraternity community that needs to be addressed?

**There have been lingering concerns about abuses of risk management, recruitment, and intake policies.** Although there is a council-wide Greek Conduct Board, university administrators would recommend sanctions for violations that would include but not be limited to suspension. Chapters from IFC, NPHC, and MGB alike would complain. "The university hates us." "The university doesn't want us to be here." And my favorite, "fraternities have always done this, why are they (university administrators) trying to stop us now?" These comments highlight deficient beliefs and values that have plagued fraternity and sorority communities around the country; as chapters have lost their inter/national charters, been suspended indefinitely, and in most severe cases, ended after causing student deaths. Conversations with my advisors always stimulated the same action-plan; if chapters do not want the university to step in, then fraternities need to self-govern.

**What does it mean to self-govern?** According to TheFreeDictionary.com, self-governance is "exercising control or rule over oneself or itself; autonomous." Universities, like the University of Virginia, define self-governance as "students having significant freedom to develop their talents and make decisions that matter to University life. With that freedom



comes high expectations of responsibility.” Both definitions highlight fraternities’ independence and liberation from universities to do what they want as long as they are responsible. Well, what happens when students are not responsible? To me, self-governance is enforcing the values-congruent policies and procedures that safeguard the reputation, health, and safety of your organization or community.

**You did the right thing, but you did not follow the rules.** On August 27, the IFC advisor called a mandatory “emergency meeting” with all IFC chapter presidents to inform chapters that the university is aware of alcohol-based recruitment events that had happened. Additionally, he stated that during the first four days of classes, there were three potential new members who had been hospitalized due to excessive alcohol consumption at fraternity recruitment events. Our advisor strongly recommended all chapters cancel any and all alcohol-based recruitment events planned for the weekend as the events did not align with their recruitment plans as outlined by their inter/national organization nor Fraternity Council’s By-Laws.

On August 31, Fraternity Council made the executive decision to halt formal recruitment for 13 IFC chapters to protect the health and safety of our potential new members. To me, this was an easy decision. University faculty and staff and chapter advisors of organizations whose recruitment had been halted agreed stating that I did the right thing. In particular, one email from a parent of a potential new member going through recruitment stated, “I commend you all for taking this very seriously.” However, IFC chapter presidents were displeased. Three weeks later, I was impeached from my position as Fraternity Council President because I did not follow the Council’s By-Laws, which state we should fine each chapter for having alcohol present at their recruitment events. My response, “I refuse to send chapter’s invoices for sending kids to the hospital.” I did the right thing, but I did not follow the rules.

**There are a lot of “what ifs.”** During this process, many things could have been done differently. What if the university suspended fraternity life in March 2015, after the death of Charles Terreni, Jr.? What if Fraternity Council leadership had done nothing? What if IFC fraternities’ inter/national headquarters held their chapters more accountable for their misaligned actions?

**Somebody has to say something.** Though students decided to self-govern, it was not without the advisement of our university advisor and graduate assistant. For hours, we discussed the situation and potential implications that would result if we placed a hold on formal recruitment. In the wake of the decision, resignation of the Vice President of Conduct, and my impeachment, university administrators were silent. After his resignation, the former Vice President of Conduct, Jonathan Withrow stated, “I was very dissatisfied by the lack of support even public comment by anybody in administration. I felt like I was left out to flap in the wind and take all of the heat while the university stayed completely untouched.”



As an aspiring student affairs professional, I am sure there are political influences that intimidate university administrators from taking a public stance on student-driven decisions. However, as a student leader, it is frustrating and discouraging to not have the support or protection from administrators you trust, especially when making tough decisions. University-wide task forces comprised of students, faculty, and staff have been active for years trying to solve hot topic issues, such as alcohol/drug abuse, that have plagued our campus community. Innovative educational tools were created to better educate students on how to drink responsibly, to curb binge-drinking culture.

The decision to halt recruitment was the perfect time for university administrators to publicly voice their support for a decision that aligns with the very work we do to eliminate detrimental behavior. Instead, this was a moment in which students were advised to self-govern and yet once the decision was made, everyone became silent. It is important for university leadership to remain consistent during times of both celebration and controversy. They may not always agree or disagree with the student-driven resolution, but somebody has to say something.

**Values Congruent Leadership.** Throughout this journey, I have learned a lot about leadership. No longer President of Fraternity Council, I am forever committed to addressing the health and safety concerns of our community. This act of self-governance generated national attention, not because fraternities were caught drinking but because students held students accountable. Often times, students who self-govern use it to their advantage to work around the issue rather than addressing it head on. I believe this will be a landmark decision that will set precedent for many fraternity communities across the country. Many IFCs will revisit their Constitution and By-Laws to ensure the documents are congruent with their community's shared values.

As former President, I had a vision to create a more diverse, inclusive community supporting the mind, body, and spirit of its members – free from risk, harm, and danger. Finding harmony in controversy is not easy. However, change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We should embrace this circumstance; this could be one of our realest moments where the truth will set us free. Though I was removed from my position, you cannot impeach vision.

