

The Case for *Recognized Unrecognized* Groups

Lorae V. Bonamy | University of Maryland

Michael A. Goodman | University of Maryland | @mi_good

In fraternity/sorority life, there is a continued dialogue regarding *unrecognized* fraternities and sororities. At times, this conversation extends to charters removed, suspended chapters, student conduct incidents, and underground operations. However, what happens when the operations are above ground? Moreover, what happens when the unrecognized groups are, in fact, recognized in some way?

Within these questions, there is a call for communication, collaboration, and effort between campus partners that might address some of the confusion brought on by unrecognized groups. While there are unrecognized groups operating in opposition to the values of fraternities and sororities, there are also those who are recognized in capacities outside of fraternity/sorority life, and are supported and deemed welcome by other departments at the institution. In this piece, we offer a renewed perspective for campus-based professionals to better engage with a multiplicity of *recognized unrecognized* groups.

Define “Recognized Unrecognized Group”

First, it is important to clarify how we define *recognized unrecognized* groups. Here, we understand there are some groups an institution as a whole has deemed unsafe, unfit, or in violation of university recognition status. These are not the organizations we are writing about. We are seeking to define the gray areas in between:

1. an organization that has not yet been recognized by a fraternity/sorority life office (and may, or will have the option to);
2. an organization that has chosen not to affiliate with a fraternity/sorority life office but has gone through student activities/involvement recognition processes;
3. groups that might be recognized by their inter/national organization, headquarters, or regional community only.

While these groups may not be vested within the fraternity/sorority life office, they are still, in fact, recognized in other capacities and campus contexts. Often, we communicate and understand *unrecognized* to solely mean suspended, without a charter, a threat to campus, or otherwise not supported by the institution, and groups are treated accordingly. Their belongings are collected, letters are scrubbed from websites, and the groups effectively disappear.

The danger with this logic and subsequent practice is it assumes *all* social fraternities and sororities not recognized by the fraternity/sorority life office are not recognized by other parts of campus. While this is true for many campuses and organizations, it is not true for all. Take note of the following circumstances where student groups meet this *recognized unrecognized* status that might provoke needed department and campus partnerships and collaboration:

- *Formerly recognized groups who continue to operate.* Among groups that are removed from the fraternity/sorority community as an act of accountability, some take the opportunity to organize under a different name and register as a student organization. Here, groups are able to access funding, book campus space, and function similar to the way they did when previously recognized.
- *Not-yet recognized groups that desire recognition.* Some of the groups that desire a council recognition are already recognized by their inter/national organization and registered as a student organization. Some are required to do this before even attempting to affiliate with the fraternity/sorority life office. These groups are able to wear letters, attend conventions, and engage with other chapters.
- *Unrecognized groups that do not want to be affiliated with the fraternity/sorority life office.* Some groups are unable or uninterested in affiliating with a fraternity/sorority life office due to rigid numbers standards, financial obligations, disinterest in a particular advising model, previous history, or a headquarters-supported decision. While campus/headquarters partnerships are key in fraternity/sorority life, they may not be as clear within student organizations/involvement offices in the same way.

Acknowledge Recognized Unrecognized Groups

For many fraternity/sorority life offices, resources are reserved for recognized groups — it is reasonable then, to assume *recognized unrecognized* groups are seeking support elsewhere on campus. For them, non-fraternity/sorority life spaces may provide an access point to the institution, as well as ways to engage the community through recruitment, tabling, and other means to generate visibility and membership.

Recently, the Department of Fraternity and Sorority Life (DFSL) at the University of Maryland has been intentional in engaging with *recognized unrecognized* groups. Acknowledging a *recognized unrecognized* status creates an opportunity for a strong partnership with offices that oversee student organizations, involvement, and/or activities and events. This informal status also facilitates trust, support, and cooperation between DFSL and leaders/members of *recognized unrecognized* groups at all levels. Take note of the following examples:

- *Communication.* Something that has worked effectively at the University of Maryland is a departmental commitment to be in constant engagement with the Student Organization Resource Center (SORC). Our discussions around history, policy, and practical solutions have led to increased collaboration between offices. One specific outcome of this partnership is that when a social fraternity or sorority is registering for student organization status, SORC corresponds with DFSL prior to approval.
- *Collaboration.* Transparency with campus partners that directly advise these *recognized unrecognized* groups has allowed for the swapping of advising strategies, as different student groups exist on a continuum of their status as a recognized unrecognized group. Knowing how students are being advised on all fronts allows our work to be specialized and complementary to the work of campus partners.

For example, working with students who are “not-yet-ours” inevitably takes time and resources away from students who are recognized by the fraternity/sorority life office. This is often the case when groups seek to expand to a campus. *Recognized unrecognized* groups are already on campus and prioritizing their needs can provide difficult for many campus-based professionals.

- *Effort.* It has been a benefit to DFSL to intentionally support these groups while they are seeking recognition, and the benefit of recognition is clear to parties beyond the university (e.g., the students, organization, councils). Some effective strategies have been to maintain communication with inter/national representatives, to include groups in pertinent community-wide conversations around policy and expectations; and most notably, to include the groups in the chapter advising rotation. Validating the experiences of these groups is not solely a priority for professional staff members. For example, the Multicultural Greek Council at the University of Maryland is working to establish a more flexible process for council recognition. This proposal would allow *recognized unrecognized* groups to have a more streamlined path toward fraternity/sorority life support and recognition.

While it may be preferred or easier to dismiss *recognized unrecognized* groups as not one’s problem, there is a calling here to reconsider how each department defines *unrecognized*. Furthermore, we must collaborate across departments to assist our colleagues working with student organizations more broadly. To say our resources are only for recognized groups is a disservice to not only the students on the periphery, but also to the campus colleagues who may engage with student groups in a multitude of ways. Ultimately, we should be challenged to reassess our policies and structures in order to remove barriers to support for *recognized unrecognized* groups.

Michael Anthony Goodman (he/him/his) is a doctoral candidate and the Assistant Director of Fraternity and Sorority Programming and Advising at the University of Maryland. His research interests include fraternity/sorority life, student government, phenomenology, and LGBTQ+ identity development. Michael has worked in fraternity/sorority life for several years, and has been a campus-based advisor, national volunteer, and facilitator. Michael is a member of Pi Kappa Alpha.

Lorae V. Bonamy (she/her/hers) serves as the Programming and Advising Coordinator for the Multicultural Greek Council and the National Pan-Hellenic Council at the University of Maryland. At the foundation of all of her work is the desire to increase in number the experiences of students of color feeling valued. Lorae is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated.