

Going Rogue: The Independent Fraternity Era

Matt Farrell | Phired Up Productions

As a broader fraternal community, we take pride in motivating our students to challenge the status quo and influence future change. But when did that turn into students abandoning ship?

What was once a far-fetched threat has become a major trend in fraternity this year: chapters (and councils) going rogue from their campus IFC.

The script is becoming too familiar — an incident or new policy threatens to disrupt a fraternity's rhythm, they realize their ability to disaffiliate, craft a smooth PR statement to show how they will still uphold their values and standards, and their campus or IFC responds denouncing the decision. The situations at the University of Nevada and West Virginia University are two examples of this playing out in full.

If you're able to look at the above without emotion (difficult, I know) it makes sense from the undergraduate male perspective. My work at Phired Up brought me to various IFCs across the country this fall, where our goal was to help students attract a higher quantity of high-quality men to their organizations. This of course brought me in front of the "average fraternity leader" quite a bit, and these men often stated confusion about how new policies may affect their freedom. While such policies are designed with student safety in mind, many students were intrigued about increasing their freedom since they are shouldering so much risk regardless.

Professionals working with these students have every reason to be annoyed and angry. Independent groups are suggesting they do not want the support of people who have tirelessly built their lives around advancing the fraternal industry. Sometimes, they even flaunt it. In an environment full of risk, major resources are being ignored by students. Doesn't this blindness towards mentorship go against what every fraternity stands for?

The answer, of course, is yes — unless mentorship turns to micromanaging. This was one of the biggest frustrations I have heard from students throughout the year. As more support has become rapidly and excessively available to them, many students have admitted to me they're feeling suffocated. Overlapping programs, safety measures, and resources are hard to differentiate and make adequate time for. Headquarters wants this, campus wants that, and alumni want some of both. Even representing a third party, I have realized how important it is to explain how our recruitment support supplements value students already receive. Otherwise it's not value at all.

Something to consider: while many of these decisions to go rogue come off as knee-jerk, the above issues are not new to 2018-2019. Rather, the past couple years have combined excessively busy students with a rapid increase in expectations. While leaving for the total unknown is dangerous for any fraternity chapter, the rising narrative I'm hearing is it beats being stuck in the pressure cooker.

So what can we do?

First, it is important to focus on additional ways we can influence as professionals even when students have self-governing power. This puts any advisor in better position to be viewed as a legitimate resource instead of a pure disciplinarian. Many groups go rogue out of spite, which makes it almost impossible for them to last. Those who genuinely want to better their experience will need to utilize the best resources around them. That will always be the case no matter what council you are (or aren't) a part of.

In addition, all stakeholders should emphasize partnering to minimize the volume and redundancy in what we ask of students. We can never fully control students' responses to the policies put in front of them, however we can control simplifying how we present them. Currently it can be difficult for many students to sort their support coming at them from all directions.

If we can heed the above, I believe students will realize they can get increased support and direction without feeling the need to go rogue. If not? Additional independent groups will be an ominous trend to watch for.

Matt Farrell is a brother of Phi Gamma Delta, two-time graduate of the University of Connecticut, and worked as FIJI's Director of Expansion before joining the Phired Up team. He has a passion for advancing the new member process in fraternity and sorority through harnessing undergraduate input. Matt enjoys college sports, political satire, and visiting national parks.