

The Independent Perspective on Interfraternity Councils

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In the last year, there have been multiple instances of fraternity chapters voluntarily relinquishing formal recognition with a college or university, while maintaining affiliation with their national organization. Circumstances at University of Nevada-Reno, University of Michigan, and West Virginia University all garnered public attention which spurred much discussion and questions from collegians, alumni, and campus professionals. In this article, we offer additional perspective to help interested parties better understand the position of national organizations that have chosen to recognize one or more fraternity chapters independent of college/university recognition.

It is important to note we do not support what has been traditionally viewed as “rogue chapters” or groups of students who have chosen to continue to operate despite support being withdrawn from a national fraternity and campus. Our focus is on the instance in which circumstances no longer permit a formal relationship between a college/university.

Relinquishing campus recognition is a last resort for our organizations.

The overwhelming percentage of our chapters operate with recognition from the college/university. We believe our chapters and members benefit greatly when campus and headquarters staffs work together towards shared goals. The term “partnership” is often utilized to describe such cooperative relationships within our field. In a true partnership, both parties place equal value on the other’s ideals, policies, and associational rights.

For our organizations, respect for the associational rights of student members and chapters is critical to productive partnership. In the instances in which our groups have forgone recognition, this step is only taken after serious breaches of student/organizational rights have occurred.

In the case of University of Nevada-Reno, multiple fraternities had their recognition summarily terminated after declining to sign a university-promulgated agreement that would undermine the internal conduct proceedings of fraternity chapters. This agreement contained a clause that mandated the reporting of individual cases considered by chapters’ internal peer conduct processes. There is significant concern that such mandated reporting would have a chilling effect on usage of the internal chapter conduct processes. If our common goal is education and reporting of instances of concern, then encouraging peer-to-peer accountability is consistent

with student development theory. Moreover, this principle of encouraging reporting is consistent with best practices similarly to medical amnesty policies in place at many colleges and universities. Simply said, like colleges and universities, we want to teach and encourage best practices of student development.

A plan to implement deferred recruitment led multiple fraternity chapters to consider the value of a continued formal relationship with University of Michigan. Deferring recruitment is not only an infringement of student and organizational rights, *there is no evidence it addresses the challenges it purports to solve*. The concern escalated further when an Ann Arbor city council ordinance was enacted that would threaten the property rights of organizations that chose to forego campus recognition to protect itself from the negative effects of deferred recruitment.

At West Virginia University, a series of campus-wide suspensions of fraternities coupled with the implementation of deferred recruitment called the formal relationship with the institution into question. In connection with the most recent system-wide action (which was implemented without charges or hearing), multiple chapters faced double jeopardy in what many considered invented and arbitrary proceedings. In fact, one campus administrator stated in a meeting of fraternity/sorority leaders, “student organizations do not have due process rights” (WVU Chapter Presidents Meeting, 2018). These comments were captured on audio recording.

Student organizations clearly have rights of fundamental fairness and this was so concerning that Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) got involved to advocate for student rights and a fundamentally fair conduct process. Unfortunately, in the audiotape, students could be heard acquiescing to what were widely perceived as threats to them by an university employee. There is no consistency between this statement and student development theory. All professionals who work with college students (headquarters and campus-based) should remember Nevitt Sanford’s call to meet students where they are (support) while challenging their development. That was lacking in this instance (Sanford, 1962). The repeated disregard for student and organizational rights led multiple fraternities to disassociate with WVU.

The decision to forego recognition was not arrived at quickly in any of these cases. The termination of the formal relationship with the institution came after months and, in some cases, years of negotiation and discussion. In each circumstance, recognition was only withdrawn if the students, chapters, their advisors, and national organizations fully understood and were supportive of the action.

Operating a chapter without institutional recognition does not mean abandoning support or accountability for organizational policies.

Prior to relinquishing recognition, many honest conversations are facilitated with the student members to ensure all key stakeholders understand the implications of operating independently. It is made clear that our members and the chapter will be held accountable for adhering to all organizational policies and promoting our fraternities' ideals within the community. Advisors are asked to make a greater commitment of involvement within the chapter and additional visits from headquarters staff are scheduled.

Our organizations do not and will not defend bad behavior. Our members and chapters should expect to be held accountable if they are not living up to our expectations. We continue to teach and stress peer-to-peer accountability and strong leadership. We also expect, however, colleges and universities, to respect the rights of students and organizations.

There is tremendous opportunity for Independent Chapters to have greater ownership of their fraternity community.

While we are never particularly eager to operate outside of the recognition of an institution, there are opportunities for greater self-governance that come with operating independently. Our experience thus far has been that students in our chapters that are not recognized by the university have a greater sense of ownership in their chapter operations and the community. This includes holding themselves and others accountable to health and safety policies.

Will Schab, the newly elected President of the Independent Interfraternity Council of Reno reflected on his experience:

Since starting the Independent Interfraternity Council here in Reno, we have not only had a greater sense of morale and camaraderie, but a new passion for Greek unity among our council and appreciating our community more than ever. We are more encouraged and excited to contribute more than just the minimum because of our self-governance capability.

An Independent Interfraternity Council is typically formed when multiple fraternities relinquish recognition as a means of establishing governance and peer accountability. While well-meaning institutions have often assumed responsibility for adjudicating matters of chapter discipline within recognized IFCs, an unintended consequence of such a posture is student abdication of peer-to-peer governance to campus administrators. There is a moment of realization during the

formation of an Independent IFC that collegiate chapters truly are the first line of defense in maintaining accountability for the independent fraternity system.

Connor Wischmann, President of the Independent Interfraternity Council of Morgantown, West Virginia explained, “We have found [since forming the independent IFC] that policing ourselves has become much more effective than it was with university involvement.”

Consistent with student development theory, college student autonomy is and remains an important developmental goal (Boyer, 1987; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, autonomy is a primary learning outcome reported by students from their experiences outside the classroom (Kuh, 1993). One should consider whether the proliferation of staff to manage student conduct has delayed maturation and may be the *cause* of problems rather than the solution. In fact, scholarly arguments have been made to support the perspective that with too much oversight, individuals are unable to learn from consequences of their actions and additional services cannot shield individuals from reality (Breuning, 2014). Perhaps by re-visiting the origins of student development theory, we can begin to find answers to concerns.

While operating fraternity chapters without campus recognition is never the first choice of our organizations — the first choice is always partnership in the interest of students — it becomes necessary when both campus administrators and national organizations are unable to establish and maintain a productive partnership. Too often, the formal relationship between fraternity and campus institution is taken for granted. Hopefully, the recent developments at University of Nevada-Reno, University of Michigan, and West Virginia University will inspire campus administrators and headquarters staff members to consider the potential consequences of implementing policies that infringe on student and organizational rights, and thus the even more important concept of student development. We hope greater consideration will lead to truer partnerships in the field which work to the benefit collegiate members and chapters.

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