

Unrecognized Groups: You Can't Live With 'Em and You Can Live Without 'Em

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(Author note: This article was developed prior to the recent proliferation of men's fraternity chapters choosing to become unrecognized while continuing to be active chapters within their respective national organizations. There are significant differences between a national organization closing a chapter, with some members continuing to operate as an unrecognized group, and a chapter continuing to operate with national recognition and support but without institutional recognition. This will be a good topic for another article. And, while there are unrecognized women's groups continuing to exist, this article focuses upon men's groups.)

This used to be simpler.

A chapter would exhibit negative behavior. At first we'd say, "Gee, we thought good old Alpha Delta chapter was better than that." Then, the negative quotient increased and the "frat" mentality kicked in. As a [handout](#) from the North American Interfraternity Conference describes it, a chapter would traverse in a negative direction from Glory, doing many things well and with values and ideals firmly in place — to Slippery Slope, the many small compromises eventually becoming part of the culture — to Lord of the Flies, an anarchy dominated by "frat" guys.

Interventions were employed — probation, conditions, a "gotta do" list of significant proportion. The clarion call to alums and others for help would be sent out. But, no measurable change in the culture of the chapter occurred. Finally, with no other options and chapter members continuing to violate policies and rules, the operative question would surface: to close the chapter. Perhaps a show cause hearing would be held; perhaps the national board of directors simply voted on the facts. Regardless, with sadness, but resolve, the charter would be revoked.

Then, a national representative may travel to campus. After meeting with administrators, the representative would meet with members of the chapter. They would exhibit various levels of sullen resentment, bitterness, apathy, weary acceptance, surrealistic curiosity, and disbelief, with an occasional flash of anger. But it was over. Done. Kaput. Fraternal property would be collected and shipped; composites and scrapbooks were gathered by anxious alums; arrangements were made for the chapter house (if there was one) to be leased to another organization; and we would start thinking about four years in the future when a recolonization effort would occur.

And the undergraduates? They might flounder along for a semester or two on post-closure defiance momentum but graduation, transfers, and the loss of the chapter house would bring about the fragmentation of the chapter into small, informal groups of friends. The group would quietly dissipate.

That was then.

In today's world, unrecognized groups — please don't call them "underground fraternities" — have increased exponentially in number and influence for several reasons, in the opinion of your author.

1. The option to close appears to be used more often by national organizations. This does not come as a surprise. There are more chapters; there is less tolerance for misbehavior; scrutiny is at a high point; and there are higher expectations.
2. By your author's observations, there is a stronger loyalty to the group as opposed to "fraternity." One of the signs a chapter is slipping is the use of the chapter designation versus the formal fraternity name. The prevailing philosophy: everyone is responsible but no one is accountable. The corporate "we" has become a norm.
3. The concept of pledge class unity has never been stronger. Chapters are divided into at least four horizontal segments and each has its own loyalties and forces of cohesion, along with rituals and traditions. Those do not vanish when the charter is revoked.
4. Social media has emasculated the concept of "suspension" or closure. Communication is instantaneous and continuous. Who needs clandestine meetings at an off-campus location or secret gatherings at midnight?
5. Troubled chapters are may be led by sophomores, including the president. If you are looking for responsible leadership when a chapter is closed, you're still going to be looking.
6. Finally, loss of formal or official recognition from the national organization and the university is perceived as a benefit. Members will quickly seize upon no longer paying large sums of money to a faceless and distant monolithic entity; no longer following rules, policies, or procedures; and enjoying all the benefits of frat life without any of the complications.

What can we do with an unrecognized group or groups?

With thanks to Allison Swick-Duttine (SUNY Plattsburgh), Wendi Kinney (SUNY Geneseo), and David Stollman (CAMPUSPEAK) for their thoughts over the years, as we have presented on this topic as a team (most recently at the 2018 AFA Annual Meeting), I provide you with the following:

- Start by playing hardball. Translation: Use every available means to confront the group and individual members of the group. For university administrators and campus professionals, this will mean taking a philosophical approach that runs counter to student affairs outcomes. "Every available means" includes publicizing the name(s) of the unrecognized groups (U/Gs); making certain parents and incoming students are

alerted to the existence of U/Gs during orientation; and communicating in direct language regarding the issues involved with U/Gs.

- Deprive the U/Gs of opportunities to utilize college or university resources. Review intramural team names and members each semester, and don't allow a team with more than three U/G members to participate in a sport. Review student organization names each semester, checking for new ones or those lacking a clearly defined purpose. U/Gs will use a contrived RSO name to gain access to university facilities for meetings and other events.
- Enlist the recognized women's groups in terms of not socializing with UGs. In our experience, not all of the women in a given chapter will be willing to support a no-interaction stance, but some will, and the cumulative effect along, with the National Panhellenic Conference position regarding U/Gs, will help.
- Communicate with stakeholders. We recommend "stakeholders" include parents of U/G members, but also university employees and the faculty. Engage campus and local police and municipal services, such as the housing inspectors. These are the hard-working folks who keep our campuses clean and perform other services. Work with RAs and other people in residence life. Let them know which organizations are recognized and which are not and encourage the reporting of information, anonymously or otherwise.
- National organizations are limited in what they may do after closure. Threatening to expel U/G members who persist in operating as a chapter usually has little effect. If the U/G is engaging in copyright or trademark infringement, then the national can litigate this aspect and university officials may be able to assist with documentation.
- Some advice to national organizations: Make the closing of the chapter clear and transparent. Outline responsibilities and include information regarding the cutoff day/date/time of the liability insurance program. In other words, use the "bright line" popular with courts to reflect the clear division between an active chapter and an inactive chapter.
 - To reduce the possibility of an U/G emerging from a closed chapter, a national organization must take action on the front end of the process with stakeholders. Get to the alumni — especially those who are influential — early in the process.

Outline the reasons for the decision in objective terms — let the reader do the deductive reasoning. Ask them for help in preparing for a return to campus and to ignore any attempts to establish an U/G. Remember most alumni are far more concerned with the house than the chapter. If a house is involved, our advice is to move quickly and assume the worst.

- Provide all organizations on campus and your own chapters in the area with the facts. Your communications do not need to include painful details nor should those include editorializing or demeaning comments. Stick to the facts.
- Make sure your volunteers at all levels can speak to the issues.
- For university administrators: Emphasize the positive aspects of being a recognized chapter on your campus with the recognized organizations. In addition to awards and recognition, the simple facts of university recognition — having access to facilities; having advisors from the “U;” being able to meet on campus — are important.
 - Remain vigilant and committed to the elimination of U/Gs. If something goes wrong at a U/G — the general heading of health and safety includes sexual assault, hazing, and related issues — people from outside of our communities don’t stop and say, “Oh, that was an unrecognized group.” They say, “Yep. Another fraternity.”

A letter from a public institution was sent recently to its stakeholders reflecting the philosophy we recommend. The letter illustrates working with unrecognized groups isn’t pleasant or enjoyable, but it clearly states the role of the university in the process:

“... our university has continued in recent years to confront serious misconduct by both recognized and unrecognized fraternities and sororities that poses a direct threat to the health, safety, and well-being of our community. I am writing you today to re-state in the clearest and strongest terms possible that this kind of misconduct will not be tolerated and will be met with the most serious disciplinary sanctions available to the university, up to and including dismissal/expulsion.”

As David Stollman often says, unrecognized groups are bad for business. It is a given in our industry that U/Gs will continue to form and create issues. It is our preparation for the possible development of these groups before the decision is made to close a chapter, and our response following the decision, that are open for change.

David Westol is an alumnus of Michigan State University and The Detroit College of Law. He is a recovering attorney who spends some of his time working the dark side of the fraternal moon with investigations and membership reviews. He truly enjoys talking motivation, leadership, and history while the Detroit Lions demonstrate that anyone can have a bad century.