

## “Interim Suspension of Activities” vs. “Suspension of Activities”

Angela Guillory | Louisiana State University

Words matter. In a time when the words “suspension” and “activities” have been more frequently associated with a fraternity/sorority community, there is an opportunity to learn from one another. There is no perfect or standard method of addressing the death of a fraternity or sorority member or a concentration of risk incident reports, but getting everyone’s attention by issuing a suspension of activities seems to be the route universities/colleges are taking when this occurs. On September 14, 2017, Maxwell Gruver, a new member of Phi Delta Theta fraternity died as a result of hazing and alcohol on the Louisiana State University campus – our campus. His death was the first of three fraternity hazing related deaths across the country this past fall. Other universities also issued a suspension of activities of some sort after reports and policy violations rose to a high level of concern.

The goal of most campuses, when issuing a suspension, is to simply have everything come to a stop. Whereas this grabs everyone’s attention, taking the following steps are equally important:

- Review your university/college’s policy and procedure regarding the ability to establish a suspension of activities. This should include staff from fraternity/sorority life, dean of students, conduct office, vice president, legal counsel, and communications office. Institute a policy or procedure if one doesn’t exist.
- Consider using the term interim. “Interim” denotes the timeframe, i.e., not permanent. Students, advisors, alumni, and all other constituents understand the interim status denotes the ability to return to a different status after time is devoted to reviewing the details of the event/incident/activity. That status might include resuming back to fully functioning with or without restrictions, with or without additional requirements, or a different status allowed in the policy or no changes in status. This is all determined in the participation of the process as outlined in the policy. It also allows the university/college to respond to media requests in a positive and appropriate manner. “Interim Suspension of Activities” suggests all parties are in the process of determining the details and communicating to working toward a “non-interim” status.
- Policy-anchored processes and procedures give institutions the ability to educate and hold organizations/members accountable. Example language might include the following: “... sole discretion of the University/college, an allegation against a student organization(s) gives reasonable cause to believe that the organization(s) represents a threat to the safety, security or welfare of the University/campus community and/or an obstruction, ... immediate action may be warranted. ... the authority to temporarily suspend all or some activities.”
- “Suspension of Activities” sends a different message and causes alarm, fear, insecurity and oftentimes a negative connotation for whom the status is aimed. Inter/national organizations and parents are more likely to understand and accept an interim status versus a status where no end is in sight. The emotion behind issuing a university/college

suspension is typically strong and anchored in feelings of trying to do the “right thing.” The institution typically has a body of information that is usually not appropriate to share publically. Constituents typically only know what they have heard or read. Justifying the decision as well as next steps for returning back to activities can and will require a tremendous amount of time. Using “interim” sends the message in the original communication it is not permanent and the institution is committed to resuming activities.

- Making the decision for a fraternity/sorority community affects several layers of internal and external processes. The decision should be made by the institution with input and support from as many constituents as possible.
  - Where a governing council - IFC, NPHC, Panhellenic, MGC - may be willing to make the decision, gaining the support of the administration could be beneficial. Councils are most commonly advised by fraternity/sorority life staff members who work to support students, the same students who would choose to impose a suspension of their peers. Buy-in from chapter leaders, advisors, and national representatives can make the decision easier to implement, but there may not be time to gain consensus. A student decision is obviously easier for the community of peers.
  - When the university administration makes the decision, the input and support of the staff who work closely with the fraternity/sorority community is helpful. The staff can provide details that are beneficial in navigating details on events, timing in the semester, and community dynamics, to name a few. These details can provide answers to questions as a result of the communication, which can reduce the amount of time spent fielding questions.
- Timing, communication, and rationale are critical. LSU first considered the appropriate response as an Interim Suspension of Activities after Maxwell’s death. Three days later, the community was charged with using the first week as a time of reflection in support of and in memory of Max, his family, and his friends. The specifics of the week of reflection outlined behavior expectations of the fraternity/sorority community. That week, the Greek Life staff met individually with every chapter at a special chapter gathering to discuss the significance of his death, the purpose of the week, the interim suspension of activities, and fielded questions and concerns. Personal dialogue was critical in being able to help guide a community of more than 5800 students, chapter by chapter. The personal meetings affirmed the relationship between the university and the community and drastically reduced the telephone calls and emails.
  - In the weeks following, the Greek Life staff worked closely with the administration in identifying areas of concern and offered ideas upon which the community could begin meeting to discuss chapter business and interaction with new members. Compliance by chapters allowed more privileges. It was the responsibility of the Greek Life staff to guide administrators on ideas and strategies.

- Identify someone in the NIC and NPC you can include on all communication to the community requesting they share with their respective constituents. NPHC and MGC chapter advisors or regional volunteers should receive direct communication due to structure. This style of communication once again reduces the email and communication traffic. Communicate often and clearly.

Suspending the activities of a fraternity/sorority community is a major undertaking. Revenue is lost on social events and other programs, new members are typically separated during a time in which they need the most support, councils involved in Intake are greatly affected depending on the timing of the suspension, and the media requests and interest can become overwhelming as everyone chooses a side.

Resuming activities based on the university/college's requirements will most likely reveal deficiencies in chapter operations. In addition, don't assume activities actually stopped. Be prepared to continue receiving reports of inappropriate behavior, as defiance is always an option as a response. Weeks and months following the suspension should be devoted to regrouping, healing, educating, and dialogue. It's important to understand how the community dealt with the status as activities begin again or the status is lifted.

Most often, the staff member responsible for the fraternity/sorority community is the person to whom everyone looks to during a crisis in the community. The pressure can be overwhelming and difficult. Having a plan that has been reviewed by parties that would be involved is a good use of time as well as an opportunity to determine communication protocols, education, and training. Some university/colleges run table-top exercises or practice drills to ensure everyone is aware of their role should something tragic occur – this is something to consider doing in case you ever have to face a similar situation.

Unfortunately, we are in an industry where injury and death are a possibility despite our efforts to educate and hold students and chapters accountable. Should a death or injury occur, having defined and communicated protocols will allow you to lead and manage the community that relies on you to navigate both short term as well as long term actions. The difference in the two statuses matters to them.