

UCF's Halt: Paving the Way Forward Through Common Threads

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In February 2013, the University of Central Florida (UCF) stopped all activity, with the exception of philanthropic and service efforts, within the fraternity and sorority community due to several reported cases of alcohol misuse/abuse and hazing allegations. This pause in activities has thus been referred to as “the halt.” During the three academic years prior to the halt, 25 out of 47 organizations (53%) had received conduct violations from the Office of Student Conduct. There was a visible and continuous lack of peer accountability and turning a “blind eye” to inappropriate behavior occurring within every council on campus. The final setback occurred at the 2013 annual Greek Leadership Challenge where the community’s leaders failed to address significant issues related to the alcohol misuse and hazing concerns that were brought forward. The decision to halt the community was not made in haste! The intent was to utilize this time as an opportunity to initiate a difficult, but necessary, conversation with key stakeholders to help facilitate and engage in dialogue concerning safety, risk reduction, risk prevention education, retention, and values-based recruitment.

By May 2013, all chapters were reinstated with full operational rights; however, the next step in the process led to questions of “What’s next?” and “How will we initiate a transformational culture shift?” With the expertise and assistance of Keeling & Associates, LLC (K&A), the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) staff was able to work with student leaders, fraternal organizations, and community partners to develop a strategy for strengthening the fraternity and sorority community at UCF. In April, K&A staff members met separately with key student leaders and university staff members to conduct an analysis of the climate of the fraternity and sorority community at UCF. Numerous conversations were had and many themes began to emerge about a new “way forward” for fraternity and sorority life. In July, when K&A returned to campus, students and staff met together and reached a consensus on a set of “common threads,” or characteristics for the ideal UCF fraternity/sorority community.

The common threads for the fraternity and sorority community have become the impetus for a renewed commitment to registered fraternal organizations and constituents. The focus areas that emerged and now serve as the six primary objectives are:

- Safety
- Leadership & Moral Development
- Accountability
- Advising
- Transparency
- Excellence

Safety is the number one priority for FSL. The goal is to promote the health and safety of fraternity and sorority members through risk reduction and management training, prevention practices, and accountability measures. This was illustrated through the creation of a new Coordinator of Risk Prevention position in the summer of 2013. UCF’s FSL is proud to be at the forefront and development of this position and is pleased to see other institutions consider establishing a similar role.

Creating a new position and saying that FSL and UCF is committed to safety is a great start, but it means nothing without a strategic plan that involves input and feedback from students and staff. The Coordinator of Risk Prevention's main goal is to engage students, staff members, and community stakeholders. Their role is also to help facilitate and develop meaningful and intentional activities and educational workshops.

The coordinator's first priority was to prepare educational workshops and speakers for the members of the community. In spring of 2014, FSL partnered with UCF Cares and required 20% of all chapter members attend a workshop. UCF Cares is an initiative that strives to build a culture of care for students by students. The workshop discussed a number of scenarios that actually occurred at UCF and how students can be active bystanders in emergency situations. In addition to the workshop, FSL brought in Dave Westol to discuss the "Why of FIPG." Westol spoke with the Diversified Greek Council, Interfraternity Council, and Panhellenic Council at their individual meetings, and then spoke to 10% of the community that evening.

In the fall of 2014, with the help of Wellness and Health Promotion Services (WHPS), FSL provided TIPS training for all presidents, new member educators, risk managers, and social chairs. Later that same semester, FSL partnered with WHPS again to host an alcohol screening. The screening allowed students to learn whether their drinking habits were considered high risk. About 225 students participated in the program and the majority of those who participated (68%) were considered to have low risk drinking behaviors (abstaining from alcohol or drinking in a lower risk manner).

Beyond events and programming, the coordinator also sent a Weekly Safety Message to every chapter member. Topics for these weekly messages included Tinder and Grinder safety, safety in the sun, safety when sexting, Uber safety, the cost of a DUI, and many more. FSL made a serious effort to get creative and provide safety tips in areas the staff knows students need, even if they are not traditional safety concerns. Moreover, FSL created a new member education workshop every new member must attend. The workshop discusses alcohol refusal skills, the role of a big brother or sister, identifying hazing and how to report it, and campus resources.

Any time a chapter appeared to be hosting a "high risk" event, the leadership was required to meet with the coordinator to discuss the event and create a risk management plan. Together, they ensured the risk management plan was specific to the event and determined the best course of action for educating chapter members and guests on policies. Additionally, the Coordinator of Risk Prevention serves as a liaison between FSL and the Office of Student Conduct. In the event any of the chapters have to go through the conduct process, the coordinator assists them in preparing for their meetings and/or hearing, and attends all sessions with them as an additional form of support.

As a result of the halt, FSL has created and provides more educational opportunities for students but also recognizes the need to rebuild relationships. The halt affected students, advisors, parents, inter/national organizations, and governing councils; FSL knew it would take time and effort to rebuild trust and strengthen relationships with all of these partners. Gaining back their

trust means being more transparent with everyone connected to UCF's fraternity and sorority community.

The staff worked to form intentional partnerships at the council level. They worked with all five councils closely and served as a resource to these community leaders. FSL gave leaders options to consider and did not simply tell them how to oversee their chapters. Additionally, the FSL team worked with chapters to develop self-governance models, including a reorganized conduct system within IFC that aligns closely to UCF's conduct policies. FSL continues to improve relationships with leaders, chapters, inter/national organizations, and alumni by requesting feedback as it relates to policy development. A great example of this is the reaccreditation process, called Standards of Excellence (SOE). During the year following the halt, the Coordinator of Risk Prevention worked with a committee of students, comprised of representatives from every council, to create a more effective SOE process. The 2014-2015 school year served as a pilot year for the new SOE, and based on feedback from chapters and their advisors, changes still need to occur. After receiving constructive advisement from inter/national organizations, the team is working this summer to revise SOE and is looking forward to an even better Standards of Excellence process in the future.

While it has not been easy, these intentional efforts are producing results. The office partnered with inter/national organizations to provide chapters with the support they need to be successful on UCF's campus, and the office made an effort to communicate before any drastic measures were taken on either the university's side or the inter/national's side. Moreover, council and chapter leaders have been more willing to share problems they may be dealing with, regardless of the possible consequences. The FSL team experienced council and chapter leaders approaching us for advice on how to deal with members who are breaking policies. Students come into the office to seek guidance, do homework, work on council initiatives, or meet up with their friends. These activities did not occur before the halt, and are considered huge post-halt wins.

The work after the halt is not complete and the office has no intention of slowing down anytime soon. This fall the office will conduct TIPS training for all presidents and risk managers. Steve Collins, Director of Central Florida High Intensity Drug Trafficking Agency (HIDTA), is scheduled to speak with the students in September about current drug trends nationally and locally. FSL is currently writing a grant with UCF's Victim Services to provide bystander intervention programming. Another monumental effort is to improve off-campus safety for students who live in and visit off-campus fraternity houses. The office is collaborating with the Neighborhood and Safety Education Office to develop a neighborhood watch program that allows for more security on Off-Campus Greek Row.

Given timing and community problems, the halt is what worked for UCF's fraternal community. To campuses that are at a crossroads and are contemplating a halt, the biggest advice UCF can offer is to ensure trusted students are at the table when making big decisions that will impact the entire community. Engage these student leaders early in the process as you will need allies when you are rebuilding the community. Furthermore, bring alumni and inter/national headquarters to the table and gain their perspective. These players have ideas and suggestions that need to be

considered before instituting a halt. Communication is a must, so communicate as often and as much as you can!

The halt gave the office and students the opportunity to reevaluate the impact being made on the UCF campus and the Orlando community. Two years later, the chapters and FSL are proud to say that by paving the way forward the necessary changes are being made to better this community.