

## **Umbrella Organizations – The Cause and Challenge** **Mary Peterson, Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity**

The word “umbrella” describes a canopy designed to protect against the rain or sunlight. In the fraternal world its role is to protect the rights and responsibilities of those underneath it. The word “organization” describes a social entity that has a collective goal and is linked to an external environment. Interestingly enough, the word organization is derived from the Greek word *organon* which comes from the better known word *ergon*, which means organ – a compartment for a particular task.

In the fraternal world we have a variety of umbrella organizations that have formed over time to meet the needs of certain member organizations believed to have collective goals and needs. It is clear, whether we like it or not, that these organizations are truly compartments as they were formed originally to serve specific member organizations with specific populations. The more recently formed umbrella organizations have also followed that pattern. In some cases they are very careful to put restrictions on membership to preserve a cultural heritage among member organizations..

Umbrella organizations face a variety of challenges. One has been determining policy and procedure that does not infringe on the rights of the particular member organizations they serve, yet holding each organization accountable at the same time. Additionally, there is continued debate about whether an umbrella organization should be “a governing organization” or “a trade association providing services to its members.” That debate goes a step further in defining members the groups serve. Should the umbrella organization provide services and education for the member organizations’ boards or provide services to the undergraduates the member groups serve?

Another challenge is the role they play in maintaining a relationship with AFA and the universities and colleges where they are present. For many years an individual fraternal organization wanting to expand on a campus must have been associated with an umbrella organization. Institutions could assume that umbrella group members adhered to the standards of the umbrella group such as appropriate rules and regulations, an executive office, liability insurance, etc. The more recently formed umbrella organizations are working to ensure these expectations are met with their members as well. However, the long held desire or requirement by institutions that recognized organizations be part of an umbrella organization is changing. On many campuses, campus professionals feel assured by proof from the individual organization that the necessary components are in place. Thus, this is a call to action for umbrella groups to redefine themselves and their role..

Today there are bigger questions and dialogues needed regarding the role of umbrella organizations in our fraternal world:

1. Who gets to determine if an umbrella organization is credible in what it does or does not do in the eyes of our colleges and universities?
2. Should umbrella organizations exist to meet the needs of their members as determined by those members or meet the need of outside influences?
3. As an inter/national fraternal organization, do you need to belong to an umbrella organization to be recognized as a worthwhile and credible organization on the college campus?
4. In looking at the time, talent, and treasure put in by the different umbrella organizations, would it not be best to just have one unified organization supporting all fraternal organizations? What stops us from having this type of conversation?

5. What are we teaching our members when we have different councils on the college campus? How much additional time, talent, and treasure does it take for the fraternity/sorority affairs office? Do we not all hold similar values and purposes?

As fraternal organizations we challenge our chapters and individual members to grow and change and to realize that some traditions are not healthy for our organizations. How much are we doing that as leaders of our inter/national fraternal organizations and members of umbrella organizations? Are we stuck in a mindset of tradition and separation?