Partnering Across Campus to Address Hazing
Tad Derrick | University of South Carolina
Maureen Grewe | University of South Carolina
Jarod Holt | University of South Carolina

The handling of large-scale organizational conduct issues can put a great deal of strain on university offices when working on sensitive situations that need to be addressed quickly and consistently. These situations can lead to tension and scope of control issues between offices. In a true partnership model, conduct officers and fraternity/sorority professionals can be each other’s greatest advocates on campus while creating an environment of accountability and fairness. In order to enhance collaboration efforts in addressing organizational conduct matters, the University of South Carolina developed a process called the Critical Incident Investigation Team or CIIT. The purpose of this investigation team is to gather information and report detailed facts in connection with an allegation of a violation of the student code of conduct by registered student organization in an unbiased and fair manner.

Often hazing prevention, education, and investigations fall solely to singular offices on our campuses. Rather than shutting down one office’s ability to perform its core functions in order to manage a campus contingency, expanding the network of campus professionals involved has enhanced the hazing investigation and adjudication process for everyone involved. The team was first created in the response to a growing need to investigate critical organization matters that didn’t result in one singular office closing all core operations during the course of the investigation. Multiple incidents had occurred that essentially closed both offices for a period of several days to conduct investigations. It was determined a new method would be needed for the future and an investigation concept was borrowed from Texas A&M University.

The investigation team has grown over the years and is now overseen in partnership by the director of student conduct and the assistant director of harm reduction and compliance from the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life. The collaborative team is engaged for organizational hazing concerns of all registered student organizations (sports clubs, business fraternities, and sororities, etc.) with the main use being the investigation of a large group of students in just one day. Additional uses have included investigations into organizational culture issues and risk management concerns from social events. Both offices collaborate on training and time; therefore, there is not a monetary cost to having a team.

Over the last 18 months the team has conducted 22 investigations with over 600 students interviewed. This priority for student safety would not have been sustainable without the CIIT. The investigation team is made up of fifty staff members from different units across the
university, including members of campus recreation staff, academic advisors, and student life staff. This investigation team provides a professional development opportunity for other campus partners to learn questioning and interviewing techniques, as well as report writing skills that will help them advance professionally. Staff are recruited based on their interest and expertise. A background with fraternity/sorority and student organizations is considered a great bonus but not mandatory. Investigation team members are provided annual training by both offices. Following training they are paired with returning investigation team members during the course of initial investigations. As team members become more comfortable and gain more time in interviews, they will take a more active role in questioning. Staff members remain in communication with team members during investigations to help develop their skills, knowledge, and provide any necessary contextual information.

This process is a key benefit to the collaboration efforts between the Office of Student Conduct and the Office of Fraternity & Sorority Life, but there are a few key items to consider in developing a lasting and effective partnership. First and foremost, communication from the time a concern is received until a case is closed is critical. It is important to make sure the flow of communication and information is constant, and there is a predetermined process and protocol in place. One process we spend a great deal of communication on is the use of a cease and desist or interim suspension. The determination of this action must be measured but also aligned in partnership between all offices and the national headquarters. Knowing the role each office will play is another crucial piece to success. The assistant director of harm reduction and compliance investigates initial concerns that are address to our unit; however, the Office of Student Conduct manages findings, outcomes, and sanctions after the CIIT has completed its investigation.

Student safety is an important priority for every institution, and it is crucial that units are evaluating was to be more efficient, fair, and effective in maintaining campus safety. Teaming up to be more effective in the way we approach large scale organizational cases was an important part in achieving this goal. Through open communication, effective systems, clearly defined roles, and information sharing offices can come together quickly address large scale campus incidents.

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_Tad Derrick serves as the assistant director of harm reduction and compliance in the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life at the University of South Carolina. He received his bachelor’s degree from Washington College and master’s degree from the University of Virginia. He is a member of Phi Delta Theta._
Maureen Grewe serves as the director of student conduct in the Dean of Students Office at the University of South Carolina. She received her bachelor’s degree from Elon University and master’s degree from the University of South Carolina. She is a member of Alpha Chi Omega.

Jarod Holt serves as the director of fraternity and sorority life in the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life at the University of South Carolina. He received his bachelor’s degree from the University of South Carolina and master’s degree from the University of South Carolina. He is a member of Lambda Chi Alpha.