More Than Campus Accountability: Accessible & Authentic Partnerships
Between Fraternity/Sorority Life & Student Conduct
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Campus partnerships are wide-reaching and necessary to the work of many practitioners in fraternity/sorority life (FSL). At times, such partnerships involve major connections between FSL and the campus office of student conduct (OSC). At the University of Maryland, the FSL and OSC departments are constantly interrogating practices that could be considered outdated by students and stakeholders. As a result, the partnership between FSL and OSC positions these departments as deeply intertwined. Both departments operate with the mindset that we need each other to best do this work. In student affairs divisions across the nation, we believe FSL and OSC entities should operate under this same mindset.

In order to be fueled by purpose, and to become more purposeful, FSL and OSC should develop and/or continue to nurture working relationships to be authentic, accessible, and creative. Furthermore, partnerships should be wide-reaching, and considerate of additional stakeholders who might be involved at the intersection of work involving FSL and OSC (e.g., headquarters staff, regional representatives, chapter advisors, students’ parents/family/guardians). Approaching the work with these points in mind may allow FSL and OSC entities to better uphold institutional processes, thoroughly support the students themselves, and help create more ethical and socially engaged members of society.

Authentic Partnerships
To maximize our work and our reach, it has been essential our offices authentically view each other as partners in the student development process. At times, working in student affairs can illuminate an “us against them” mentality, one that positions students to be either “mine” or “yours.” To maximize the partnership between FSL and OSC, students must be “ours.” As such, we have worked to educate each department on the other’s campus functionality. This includes a familiarity between multiple staff members, and an awareness of the nuances associated with each department (e.g., chapter president or chapter climate information from FSL to OSC, or process and protocol information from OSC to FSL). Removing the “us” against “them” mindset can help reinforce the “ours” mindset necessary to this work. Here, trust can truly be built, and is helpful in order to partner in ways that go beyond the conduct process itself (e.g., assisting with a hazing investigation, training student judicial boards, teaching new member seminars, or reviewing documents for relevant language). Importantly, transparency is part of this authenticity and can help both departments feel valued through information and communication.
Accessible Partnerships
Open communication is essential to making time and space for FSL and OSC partnerships. With strong relationships between each department as a foundation, it is important for each department to be transparent about goals and needs in varying situations. There are moments when each department may have seemingly incompatible priorities, but communicating these forces is key to moving forward in a way that keeps “our” students at the forefront. In many ways, this includes time spent with one another, even outside of campus accountability. For example, participating in departmental search committees (either as a campus partner or committee member), inviting one another to campus community building programs (e.g., ice cream social or happy hour), or informal lunches and meetups. By taking these actions, departments are setting an example to staff and other campus partners on how to prioritize these relationships.

Creative Partnerships
Partnerships must also be creative. Issues such as alcohol abuse and misuse, or hazing, may call for a campus to enlist an, it’s how we’ve always done it, response mindset. However, as an example of thinking creatively, OSC is hosting a “Trivia Happy Hour” for Integrity Week on campus. The aim is to attract students who would not typically attend similar departmental programs. As part of the outreach, OSC has enlisted the assistance of some FSL councils to host a social media campaign about what integrity means in their organizations. While this is a small example of a passive partnership, it illuminates the reality that there are different ways of reaching independent and shared goals. It also affirms FSL need not be gatekeepers between campus partners and students/councils.

Wide-Reaching Partnerships
FSL should be liaisons between OSC and inter/national headquarters and regional representatives. Specifically, FSL has a responsibility to advocate for OSC as a valued campus partner. At the University of Maryland, we share the belief that both departments can have relationships and interactions with headquarters and regional representatives, and FSL or OSC must not always be positioned as a middle-entity between the others. It is vital to eliminate a for/against dynamic between OSC and headquarters/representatives, as well as FSL and headquarters/representatives. In FSL, we have embraced the reality that OSC is an equal campus partner, and they engage with headquarters and representatives in very relevant ways. This awareness can also demystify the conduct process for students and campus stakeholders, one that often leaves FSL practitioners with a, “that’s their jurisdiction, not ours,” mindset. For example, OSC has intentionally worked to be positioned alongside FSL, not against it. By OSC and FSL partnering, both entities are able to advocate together for the good of the FSL community, and the values students espouse to live by.
When this is actualized, interactions with students in the conduct process can be much more meaningful and productive.

While some of this work involves adjudicating code violations and campus behavior issues, there are great opportunities to center student learning within the work, and to be on the same page (e.g., they are our students, together). In this way, we can be more congruent with our own industry philosophies. Our values and goals are meaningless unless they are acted on. Therefore, while it is important to appear as a unified front to our students and stakeholders, it is more important to actually be a unified front. This might also allow for professional development opportunities that may not have been otherwise possible. Training on difficult conversations and other topics can be a relevant way for OSC to partner with FSL. FSL staff can develop in their conflict/mediation skills through the lens of OSC practitioners. As FSL organizations are guided by their values, staff can assist OSC to develop an approach to student conversations that enlists values-inclusive conversations. This may serve as a way to position students or student leaders going through an organizational process to be more open and honest about their personal or organizational behavior.

While there is always additional work to be done in the area of partnerships, we believe authenticity, accessibility, and creativity are initial priorities that can lend to fruitful results. As some maintain the “us” and “them” mindset, we are calling for practitioners to challenge preconceived or campus-actualized silos between these departments. Ultimately, this moves FSL and OSC’s partnership beyond a focus of discipline and accountability and toward student learning and development.

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