Partnerships with a Purpose
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Navigating partnerships between fraternity/sorority life and student conduct is always a hot topic when we think about partnerships in our field. The relationship can make or break the accountability process for chapters, not to mention the impact on relationships between universities and inter/national organizations. The University of Kentucky Fraternity and Sorority Life Office (FSL) and the Office of Student Conduct (OSC) have worked hard to become true partners — cousin offices if you will — recognizing our individual success relies on our collaboration.

The Office of Student Conduct was beginning to develop an identity and philosophy after being established as a new department in 2014. The office knew our goal was to develop learning through the process and settled on a method that promoted a socially just process, using restorative justice philosophy as a framework for the adjudicative process. Employing restorative justice philosophy meant adhering to a community approach to student conduct, allowing community members to voice the harm caused by the offender. In the fraternity/sorority conduct system, this means including local, national, and university advisors in the process, joining us to discuss the chapters’ behavior and helping the student leadership to be an active participant in the process.

The role of fraternity/sorority life in the conduct process was murky prior to 2014. The previous code of student conduct gave council judicial boards the authority to hear cases involving violations of the code in addition to their own bylaws. FSL staff advised these judicial boards, occasionally consulted on other cases heard by the Dean of Students Office, but other times were excluded. The inconsistency in the role FSL played created confusion for students and staff and limited the opportunities for developing a more robust partnership with OSC.

The creation of the Office of Student Conduct provided a window for fraternity/sorority life to redefine their involvement with groups participating in the process. Staff from both departments agreed from the start that it was important for FSL to be involved, but their role should be one of support for accountability and not adjudication of conduct issues. The restorative justice philosophy of OSC carved a path for us to be key partners for the office and the groups participating in the process.
Creating a partnership was essential to the success of this new philosophy for fraternities and sororities in the conduct process. Building trust as both departments and individual staff members was key for the success of this new partnership. As with any relationship, our backgrounds provided specific advantages for building trust and a more collaborative relationship. Dominick came into his role in the Office of Student Conduct with a background in fraternity/sorority advising from graduate school. His background gave him credibility with students and staff as someone who understands fraternities and sororities from firsthand experience. It also provided a foundation to support the ability of these organizations as partners in accountability and not just recipients of it. Emily specialized in risk reduction for groups including in her professional role and in volunteer roles with other organizations. Her desire to learn more about the best practices in conduct and engage with the philosophy of OSC laid a foundation for a more nuanced approach to the partnership between offices.

We became the designated liaisons for our departments and brought to the table an intentional effort to collaborate. Instead of worrying about being right, we were able to focus on how we were both experts in our roles and how that expertise could be leveraged to increase the success of the conduct process and the outcomes for the organizations. Weekly meetings evolved from basic updates about ongoing cases to discussions about working proactively on education, opportunities for new types of collaboration, and a space to talk about broader university issues.

Working together means finding common ground, and for us, it was how we believed fairness plays out for the student organization process. In our conversations, we found through the student conduct process and advising, we needed to support the autonomy of each organization, giving them space to self-govern and get it right. We believed the safety and health of our students came first. Organizations that were functioning in dangerous ways and acting against the community interest required intervention. When health and safety was not the primary concern, our goal was to find a way to educate the chapter, guide them with a steady hand, and find a way for all stakeholder interests to play a role in this chapter development. We both fundamentally believe the fair thing is to help chapters who are willing to grow and develop, making accountability a fundamental tool to guide change towards a more successful and safer group.

Student conduct processes and the way student organizations interact with these processes are never perfect. The best choreographed process can quickly run into issues, or need a different response, requiring flexibility and constant communication. We work constantly on establishing tasks, clarifying roles around the process, analyzing the needs of campus partners and stakeholders, using the nuance of any given event to guide who engages the outreach, who
explains the process, and when is it time to change who is taking the lead. There are clear areas where it is time for each of us to step in, for OSC this may be answering specific process questions about the student conduct process, for FSL this more like talking through scenarios of outcomes and how a chapter might manage their internal response. It is not without saying, sometimes we step on each other’s toes amid managing these high stress moments. Having established a strong relationship prior allows us to come back later, admit the mistake, and move forward without a rift between us. These missteps reveal opportunities to improve communication or approach, but the trust we have protects us from assuming ill intent.

Maintaining a strong partnership requires constant work. We have found focusing on personal relationships as colleagues, and ultimately friends, has been the key to long term success. Our weekly meetings have allowed us to invest in each other’s growth. We can give each other new perspectives on trends on campus and in higher education because our interests are different. For example, Dominick’s focus on men and masculine identity development provided Emily with a different perspective when creating a hazing prevention pilot program. Emily’s strong analytical abilities have helped Dominick in the development of complicated restorative actions for student organizations. We both contribute to the larger dean of students’ areas success by pursuing programming efforts together, such as training development, policy creation, and constant review of our process, standards, and materials.

All of this work does not substitute for the basic components of just building a strong relationship. Sometimes you can do all of this work and not find the result of a steady and strong partnership. We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that as the people in roles change over time, we have found new difficulties working together as offices. When we worked together as individuals, we found consistent success in the outcome of our case management. As new people have filled these roles for our offices, we have found more instability in the case management, in large part because the relationships are new and different. Teaching our colleagues the value of the time spent building those relationships to ease the transition of the process has been our most puzzling challenge, recognizing the time we spent was our largest advantage.

As the Office of Student Conduct grew, Dominick transitioned into the director role and a new staff member became the designated person for organizational conduct. Early on in this transition, there were a few missteps which revealed how critical the work to build a personal relationship was to overall success. It was in our informal conversations about what was going on in each department or the new thing we had read about men’s development where we discovered something new. It is not just idle chit chat about Panhellenic recruitment — it is an opportunity to connect an increase in individual reports in the residence halls to the influx of new
members in social organizations. Each of us now look at partnerships across the board as an opportunity to make a friend. This mentality chips away at the walls we put up or desire to defend our decisions because a friend provides you feedback from a place of care, not criticism or ego.

Extending beyond cases, finding ways to support each other in the larger environment is important to ensure our work continues successfully. Our personal connection also allows us to extend credibility to the other in new environments. We can stick our necks out and know that we are not putting ourselves at risk. We do this by supporting each other’s agenda within the university. When one of us is in a meeting to discuss a major university program and the meeting clearly veers towards the other’s agenda, we step up and make sure that agenda is heard. Whether it is Dominick supporting the autonomy for chapters and councils to make their own decisions or emily working to share the expectations of the Code of Student Conduct, we are constantly ensuring the stability of our areas as we work with other campus partners. Finding this consistency benefits the university in the end because we are able to provide straightforward, non-conflicting answers. We are on the same page, creating consistent responses from either of our areas.

Our partnership’s impact on our work has helped us to be more inclusive of fraternities and sororities. They have participated deeply in the student conduct process to find impressive solutions to the issues the university and chapter leadership face on a daily basis. Our FSL community, as a result of this openness, has found it easier to take responsibility and own their behavior. Before FSL and OSC began this work, chapters rarely would concede any responsibility for an incident. Now, groups understand taking responsibility for a mistake or a bad decision gives them more power in the resolution process, not less. We have been able to partner better with our chapter leadership because of the partnership we have as colleagues.

Our partnership has also changed the way we work with national headquarters. These processes are not always easy. We must manage the tension of supporting chapters while simultaneously holding them accountable to for behavior. We are looking for solutions where all stakeholders have a say because we recognize that gives us the best outcomes possible. FSL’s work to establish partnerships with inter/national organizations has allowed us to increase our transparency and collaboration because they understand our process and values in the conduct process. This has allowed us to bring in national headquarters on investigations and allow them to participate in the informal meeting. This would not be possible without the understanding between the OSC and FSL to be inclusive in our processes and flexible to each organization’s needs.
There is simply no substitute for building a relationship and making a professional friend. Spending time together, learning the nuance of each other’s fields, and serving our students in the best way we can find has been a worthy and fulfilling professional venture. We look forward to helping our future colleagues to work towards similar professional relationships to continue to advance our impact on student learning.

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