

A Crisis within the Crisis: How Responses to Risk Can Further Divide Fraternity/Sorority Communities

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Given the current climate in the fraternity/sorority community, a current theme we should consider has been how managing a crisis can further perpetuate previous divisions and leave residual effects. The debris of an event can underscore pre-existing dynamics and create new conflicts unless identified as larger than the singular incident. We hear countless stories of chapters at numerous institutions who have actively worked *against* the goal of creating safe and inclusive environments; no fraternity/sorority community has mastered sustainable inclusivity. Beyond the problematic theme parties and social media stories, there are unhealthy relationships between councils rooted in the very foundations of their organizations and undergirded by systemic racism. Many professionals have been attempting to counter these antagonistic relationships with social justice education, but we also need to do a better job at recognizing how we preserve inequities when managing crises.

Critical Race Theory (Hirald, 2010) dictates that risky behaviors with communal consequences emphasize the permanence of racism by highlighting the realities of historically white fraternities and sororities in a way that “others” culturally-based fraternities and sororities. Not only do large-scale critical incidents reinforce the privilege some students have – wealth, social capital, lack of regard for boundaries – but the way these events are managed, and the reverberations, underscore structural and institutional racism. We don’t consider the effects of sweeping conduct measures on culturally-based communities because many institutions don’t recognize them as “stakeholders” in the same way they do historically white organizations. This may be due to smaller chapter sizes and lack of institutional cultural awareness. We see this happen when National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and Multicultural Greek Council (MGC) students aren’t invited to discuss incidents as a foundation for planning communal culture change, and the impacts of the next steps on NPHC and MGC aren’t considered demanding. Also, since our offices are largely under-resourced, professionals end up needing to dedicate all their time and energy to managing these incidents, reinforcing the marginality of culturally-based fraternal organizations. We even see this happening when an institution is primarily focused on one council and isn’t considering community sanctions. The strength of incident management and conduct in an Interfraternity Council (IFC) or Panhellenic Council (Panhellenic) can leave NPHC and MGC – and the staff who work with them, many of whom are members of culturally-based fraternal organizations – feeling isolated and undervalued.

Some may argue we shouldn't bring MGC and NPHC students to the table, as a means for shielding them from the conversations about incidents that "aren't about them." However, excluding them is a reinforcement of power and privilege and directly contradicts the purpose of the conversation: culture change. All culture change conversations are "about them." The decisions will either directly or indirectly impact their realities – professionals need to adjust their mindset and language to recognize that. Critical Race Theory (Hirald, 2010) also informs us that the narrative of culture change needs to be balanced so a counter-story can emerge and challenge the dominant perspective. Surely, we could assess the health and safety of culturally based fraternal organizations and have this be part of the conversation, but many fraternity/sorority life offices don't have the capacity, the cultural competency, or the cultural capital to equitably facilitate that. Often students in NPHC and MGC will give us information indicating unproductive, underdeveloped, or unhealthy practices, but we don't qualify these stories as "detrimental" because the scale and context is different. As a result, the only narratives told, measured, and adjudicated are of the health and safety concerns for IFC and Panhellenic, even if the industry trend is indicating more campuses issuing full fraternity/sorority community sanctioning.

Even years after a crisis has passed, the students on campus are living with the lingering impacts. At many large, predominantly white institutions, similar to Michigan, we see a difference in age and retention amongst the councils. Our NPHC and MGC communities are primarily comprised of sophomore, junior, and senior students, while freshmen and sophomores make up the bulk of the active and engaged audiences within Panhellenic and IFC communities. This means the risk management nightmares of the past three or four years are still in the memories of many NPHC and MGC members, while Panhellenic and IFC students lack the context, as they weren't enrolled at the time. Students in culturally-based fraternal organizations will have already been exposed to unhealthy IFC and Panhellenic chapters, as well as recognize them as beneficiaries of privilege, before IFC and Panhellenic leaders become aware there are more councils outside of their own. Try building community with those odds!

When fraternity/sorority communities are in turmoil, it is important for professionals to be acutely aware of what all councils are experiencing. Education and advising are only effective when we have a pulse on the students' perspectives and how the contexts of their identities influence their realities. Often, the egregious acts of students in one council will impact multiple councils, but as a profession, we have not gotten to the point where we can communicate the needs of all councils in an equally substantial manner. Our inability to communicate the needs of our culturally-based communities means that the primary narrative of fraternity/sorority life is antiquated and reinforces racist practices. It is our job to take more progressive and

comprehensive measures when communicating with stakeholders, advising students, and engaging with colleagues around managing a crisis. By creating equitable and restorative environments for each council to learn from mistakes, and seriously weighing the impacts of sweeping communal conduct measures, we increase the chances of student learning and engagement.

References

Hiraldo, P. (2010). The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education. *The Vermont Connection, 31*, 53-59.