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## **2024 Fraternity/Sorority Life Program Review**

Prepared for Penn State University by RISE Partnerships



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# Executive Summary

## 2024 Penn State Fraternity/Sorority Life Program Review

### Background

Four team members of RISE Partnerships (RISE), an external consulting firm specializing in management of fraternity/sorority programs, reviewed the fraternity/sorority program and community at Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) to provide operational guidance and evaluate the impact of reforms made in 2017. This report outlines observations based on this research and provides several recommendations based on these findings.

### Findings

The 2017 fraternity/sorority life reforms have led to two noteworthy improvements:

- Social event management practices have reduced the prevalence of large, disruptive gatherings in fraternity/sorority neighborhoods
- The organization-level misconduct process is an improvement on the previous accountability system and brings Penn State in line with good practice

Besides these indicators of progress, the reforms have not meaningfully reduced risks or negative behaviors associated with fraternal organizations. Several issues remain and new challenges have emerged:

- Student safety and misconduct issues persist, especially related to high risk alcohol use and hazing
- Student agency, engagement, and capacity for self-governance have eroded
- Unrecognized organizations put fraternities and sororities at a competitive disadvantage
- Relationships with alumni advisors and other stakeholders range from limited to contentious
- There is limited positive or aspirational messaging about the fraternity/sorority experience to parents, alumni, and incoming students
- Panhellenic organizations have limited access to suitable meeting and programming space





These remaining issues and new challenges ultimately stem from the dramatic shift from a self-governance philosophy to a university-imposed redesign of the support system for fraternity/sorority life around a compliance approach. There is also no clear indication that simply reversing any or all of the reforms would reduce risks or negative behaviors. Instead, an alternate approach that accounts for the complex and overlapping governance structures in fraternity/sorority life is needed.

## Recommendations

Penn State should continue working to address the remaining issues and new challenges by embracing a shared leadership approach that leverages the distinct roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in strengthening the fraternity/sorority experience.

- Develop alignment and trust among stakeholders
- Adopt a strategic prevention approach to address risky behavior
- Amplify a positive vision for fraternity/sorority life at Penn State
- Align OFSL programming and coaching around a revised SOE
- Strengthen stakeholder engagement in organizational conduct and accountability processes
- Support the committee exploring Panhellenic residential and programming space
- Reexamine the credit hour requirement in the eligibility policy





## Project Summary

### 2024 Penn State Fraternity/Sorority Life Program Review

#### Background

Penn State University (Penn State) engaged RISE Partnerships (RISE), an external consulting firm specializing in management of fraternity/sorority programs, to examine the current climate of the fraternity/sorority community at the University Park campus and evaluate the impact of several reforms made in 2017, with a specific focus on programmatic and safety initiatives, eligibility requirements, and stakeholder relationships.

Four RISE team members led a research effort that included interviews and focus groups with a variety of stakeholders, reviewed institutionally-provided documents regarding the performance and management of Penn State's fraternity/sorority life program, enacted a benchmarking effort with comparable institutions, collaborated to interpret data, and developed recommendations based on their findings. This report outlines observations based on this research and provides several recommendations based on these findings.

#### Data Collection

##### Interviews

RISE conducted 30-minute virtual interviews with approximately 20 stakeholders including council presidents, staff in the Office of Fraternity/Sorority Life (OFSL), and administrators in relevant Penn State departments to collect information about their perspectives on the fraternity/sorority community and the project's questions.

##### Document Review

RISE reviewed approximately 275 background documents provided by Penn State with information about the fraternity/sorority community and the policies, systems, programs, and history of Penn State's fraternity/sorority life program.





## Benchmark Institutions

Penn State and RISE invited 11 peer institutions with comparable fraternity/sorority communities to contribute to a benchmarking assessment, and eight institutions participated. RISE collected input through interviews and a short survey regarding performance, policies, programs, and systems in place to support fraternity/sorority life at these institutions. Results are summarized in an appendix to the report and incorporated into the analysis where relevant throughout the document.

## Focus Group Sessions

RISE hosted 16 virtual focus group sessions to collect perspectives and input from relevant stakeholders. Approximately 60 stakeholders participated, including chapter and council leaders (2), alumni advisors and house corporation leaders (30), administrators in relevant departments (11), and inter/national organization staff and volunteers (15).

## Site Visit

RISE's lead consultant visited Penn State for three days to collect additional data from approximately 70 additional fraternity/sorority stakeholders. Sessions included additional in-person focus group sessions with council and chapter leaders (about 20 participants); hybrid feedback sessions on emerging findings (about 20 participants); a tour of fraternity/sorority spaces; and problem-analysis work sessions on health and safety issues, accountability systems, and conduct processes (about 30 participants).

## Analysis

RISE's consulting team examined the information generated for the project and met regularly to review findings and identify additional information needs. They completed follow-up calls with stakeholders to clarify, validate, and gather additional information.

## Reporting

RISE summarized findings of the report into an overview of the current state of the fraternity/sorority community and the fraternity/sorority program; detailed analysis of the impact of the reforms, specifically programmatic and safety initiatives, eligibility requirements, and stakeholder relationships; and recommendations.





## Ongoing support

RISE is available to provide ongoing support and consultation related to this project through 2025, especially through interpreting findings and implementing recommendations.





## Analysis

### 2024 Penn State Fraternity/Sorority Life Program Review

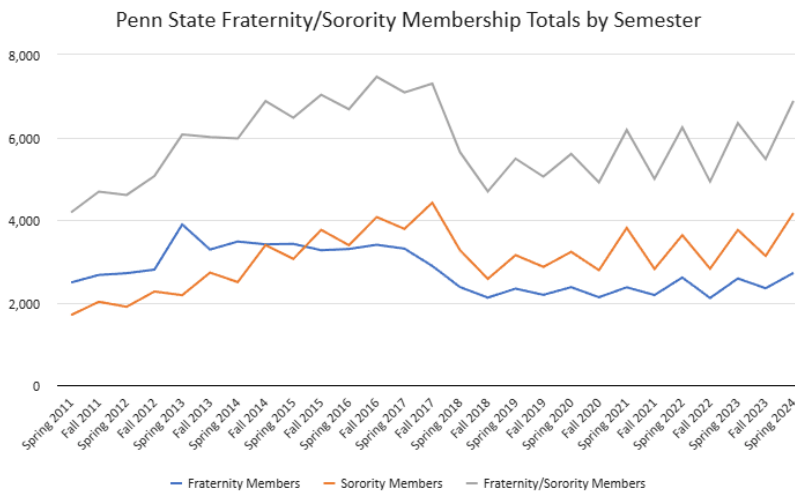
RISE organized its analyses into the current state of the fraternity/sorority community and member experience, a review of the fraternity/sorority program including OFSL, and an evaluation of the impacts of the 2017 fraternity/sorority reforms.

#### Current State of the Fraternity/Sorority Community

RISE examined the climate of fraternity/sorority life according to measures commonly used to evaluate fraternal organizations, such as membership, academic performance, civic engagement efforts, student safety and conduct, and the membership experience.

#### Membership

At the time of the review in fall 2024, there were 68 recognized fraternities and sororities with more than 6800 undergraduate members at Penn State. The total number of chapters has remained relatively stable across all councils since 2017.

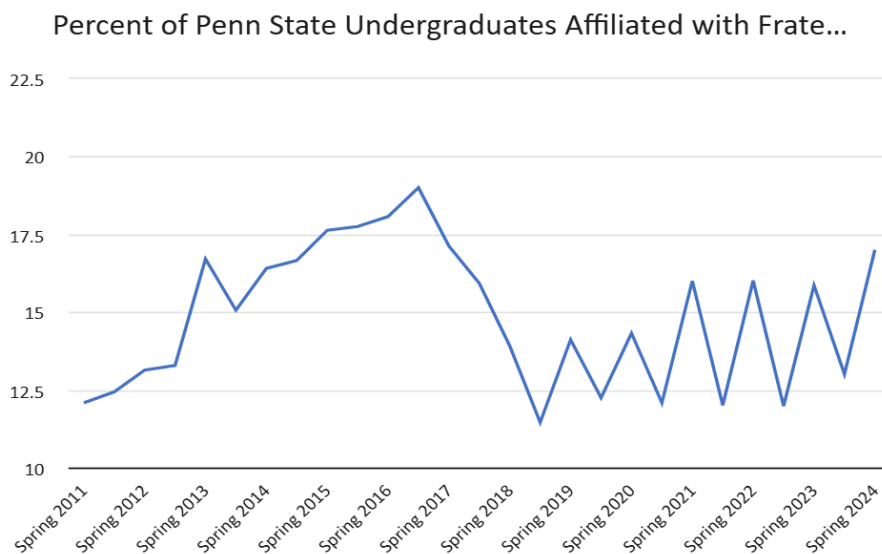


All sorority membership (including Panhellenic Council, Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), and National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) chapters) increased gradually from approximately 1700 in spring 2011 to 4400 in fall 2017, when membership peaked.





Membership dropped sharply in 2018 to a low of 2500, before beginning a steady rebound to above 4000 members in spring 2024. All fraternity membership (including Interfraternity Council (IFC), MGC, and NPHC chapters) increased by about 25% between 2011-2013, and then remained steady at approximately 3300 members through 2017. Similar to sororities, fraternity membership saw a significant drop in 2018, erasing gains of the previous 7 years. This reduction is likely due to a combination of factors including the loss of a semester of membership due to the eligibility policy, several chapters' choices to operate without university recognition, and public perception following the death of Timothy Piazza. Since this time, membership has remained stable, showing a mild increase in the two most recent terms.



Membership as a percentage of all undergraduate students follows a similar pattern. The proportion of affiliated students increased from 12% in spring 2011 to 19% in fall 2016 before dropping sharply to 11% over the next four terms. Since then, the percentage of affiliated students has increased gradually to 17% in spring 2024. This is comparable to Penn State's peer institutions included in the benchmark study, which range from 8% to 25% of students joining fraternal organizations.

NPHC membership declined gradually between 2011 and 2017 from approximately 50 to fewer than 10 members. Membership rebounded beginning spring 2018 to reach a total of 64 members across 6 chapters by spring 2024. MGC membership grew from 74

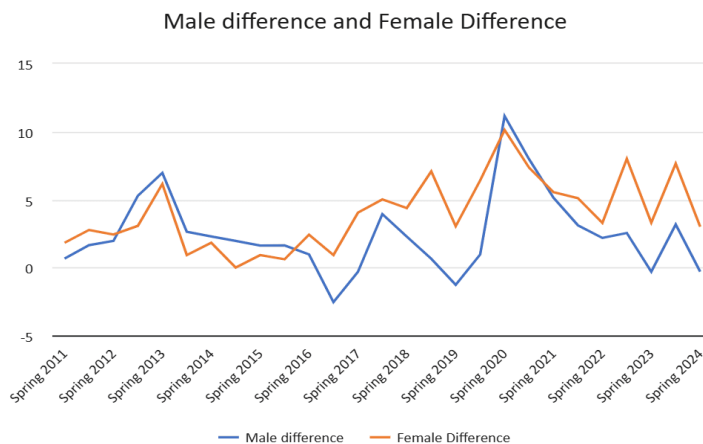
in 2011 to a high of 139 in fall 2015 before declining to an average of 84 members and approximately 8 chapters since.

As of fall 2024, approximately eleven organizations have been suspended for various reasons since the 2017 reforms, including eight IFC organizations, two MGC chapters, and one NPHC chapter. Approximately five fraternities (four formerly IFC and one formerly MGC organization) operate without university recognition and are considered "unrecognized" or "underground". It is estimated that 300 to 400 men are engaged across these organizations. In spring 2025, some of these groups formed an independently-operated fraternity council.

Approximately 600 fraternity/sorority members (9% of total membership) currently reside in a fraternity/sorority space, including approximately 30 who live in on-campus sorority floors and 580 who live in off-campus fraternity/sorority facilities.

## Student Outcomes

### Academic Achievement



Academic performance has improved in sororities. In comparing average sorority member grade point average (GPA) to average female student GPA, sorority members outperformed non-members in most semesters between 2011 and 2017 by approximately 2%, or 0.06 points. Since spring 2016, this gap has increased to 5.5% or 0.18 points.

Fraternity members' academic performance is more varied. In most semesters since

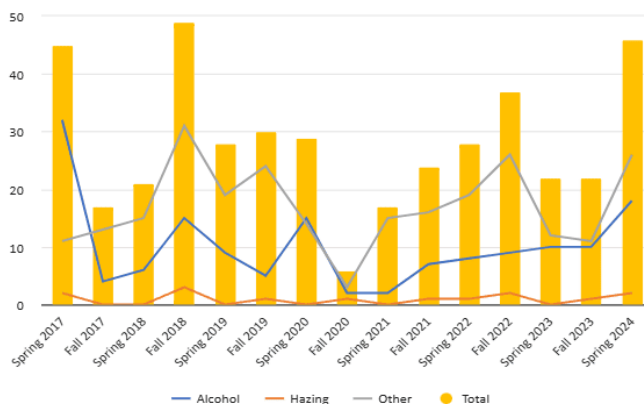
2011, average member GPA is up to 4% higher than non-member males, or up to 0.06 points. Fraternities saw spikes in performance during the 2012-13 academic year and 2020 calendar year, outpacing non-members by 5 to 11%. The most recent two years show a pattern of over-performance during the fall semester and under-performance in the spring. Because most IFC fraternity members join during spring semester, this pattern raises questions about new members' academic performance during their joining semester.

## Civic Engagement

Fraternity/sorority members actively participate in hands-on service and philanthropy, reporting more than 27,000 service hours and more than \$2.2 million in philanthropy in 2023. Much of this community engagement centers around participation in and fundraising for THON, an event created by the fraternity/sorority community. Members take pride in the event, and it serves as a powerful incentive for chapters to remain engaged with the university. However, some focus group participants indicated the appeal of THON can diminish some chapters' connection to their national philanthropy, and, as described in the safety and conduct section below, serves as an incentive for perpetuating health and safety concerns.

## Safety and Conduct

### Organization Misconduct



According to chapter scorecards since 2017, fraternal organizations have been found responsible for 457 misconduct violations for alcohol (168), hazing (19), and other behaviors (270). IFC organizations are responsible for more than 92% (N=421) of cases. The rate of violations has fluctuated over time, including an increase in fall 2018



following the reforms and a decrease during the pandemic. Since fall 2020, however, violations for alcohol and other behaviors have increased. In spring 2024, the number of total violations reached its highest since fall 2018, and at the time of the site visit, the number of fraternity-related reports had increased to 120 from 25 in the previous fall. Conduct officers indicate there are an increasing number of credible reports and more examples of physical assault, hazing, violent hazing, and hospitalizations and injuries resulting from alcohol overuse.

Some stakeholders dismissed the increase in misconduct cases, attributing them to an increasing frequency of intentionally false reports. Staff in the Office of Student Accountability & Conflict Response (OSACR) indicated that there has been an increase in false reporting, but most false reports are easily identified as such through routine investigation practices. These cases are not included in the data presented here, and even after accounting for false reports, misconduct cases have increased. This is discussed in more detail in the section below on accountability systems.

### Hazing

Several focus group participants indicated that hazing persists, describing new member activities in some IFC organizations centered around heavy alcohol use, physical violence, servitude, and new members feeling pressured to drink. Historically, some chapters have perpetrated co-hazing, inviting members of other groups to mistreat their new members, but it is unclear whether this practice persists. One student focus group participant described the new member process as, "anything you want, my pledge will do it for you," suggesting servitude is prevalent. Some student focus group participants recognized a pattern of violence, with poorly-treated new members becoming hazers once they are initiated, alumni reintroducing hazing practices to newly restarted chapters, and chapters repeating one another's unhealthy practices. Without noting specific examples, some students and advisors stated they do not see some hazing situations or behaviors as problematic.

### Fights

IFC fraternity members describe competition and conflict between chapters leading to physical fights. Focus group and interview participants indicated this is often associated with alcohol use. Perceptions vary about whether these incidents are occurring more or less frequently.





### Alcohol Use and Social Events

Penn State participates in the National Collegiate Health Assessment, which explores student health behaviors as they impact wellbeing and success. Results have historically indicated that fraternity/sorority members at Penn State demonstrate higher rates of alcohol consumption and face higher levels of negative consequences from alcohol compared to non members. Additional data regarding health behaviors from this study and others would provide a clearer picture of the negative impacts of alcohol and drug use, hazing, and other health behaviors associated with fraternity/sorority life.

IFC fraternity leaders see the role alcohol plays in recruitment as unsafe. They are concerned about the heavy use of alcohol, the use of hard alcohol, and that alcohol frames the identity of fraternity/sorority life as new students join. Panhellenic leaders described fraternity recruitment advertisements as, "just videos of parties."

Administrators indicated there are a high number of hospital transports for alcohol overuse associated with recruitment events, practices such as "a fifth and a friend," and tailgating where alcohol is provided to underage students.

Consistent with findings of the 2022 Focus Group Report, contributors to this project indicated better relationships between housed chapters and their neighbors and fewer incidents associated with public intoxication since implementation of the 2017 reforms and the 2022 adjustments. While there are signs to suggest that registered social events with alcohol are safer following the reforms, problematic alcohol use persists. Social event guidelines and safety practices do not seem to be followed at informal events or at activities associated with recruitment and new member education. As noted by one stakeholder, "they're still having the parties, still serving hard alcohol, and guests feel unsafe."

### Drug Use

There were few mentions of drug use in focus group sessions, but there are indications it impacts fraternities and sororities. One stakeholder indicated that third-party security officers hired by chapters to monitor social events observed an increase in drug use, and another stakeholder expressed concern about prescription drug misuse by members. Fraternity/sorority leaders' interest in training on first aid and NARCAN imply that they see drug overdose as a realistic scenario they expect to face.





### Sexual Misconduct

Few focus group participants mentioned sexual misconduct, yet students' interest in the topic through participation in the Greeks CARE program and administrators' observations that the rate of incidents has not changed suggest there is cause for concern. Some shared concerns about allegations of drugging drinks at social events. Administrators who facilitate programs for chapters on the topic indicated that it is difficult to promote programs through OFSL staff. They shared that fewer students are participating, some treat the program as compulsory, and some have taken a combative tone during sessions.

### **Chapter Performance**

OFSL monitors and supports chapter development through the Standards of Excellence program, which provides a rubric for evaluating chapter performance. The program recognizes fraternities and sororities that meet standards and designates those who exceed standards as Chapters of Excellence.

An increasing proportion of chapters across all councils are meeting standards. In spring 2024, the number of chapters achieving standards was double that of 2022 and triple that of 2020 and 2021. While the increase in chapter achievement is an important sign of progress, there is significant opportunity for improvement, as half of fraternity/sorority chapters still fail to meet standards, including as few as 25% of IFC chapters.

The number of chapters meeting or exceeding standards, including all councils, has increased across nearly every area except Health and Safety. The percentage of the community meeting standards for health and safety has decreased from 75% to approximately half, or 38%. This includes 24% of IFC chapters, 13% of MGC chapters, 40% of NPHC chapters, and 48% of PHC chapters. According to fraternity/sorority staff, violations of student organization misconduct are the primary reason groups fail to meet standards. Some MGC and NPHC chapters may fall short of standards because they choose not to attend required education and/or submit risk management plans, as members indicated seeing them as irrelevant to their organizations.





## **Membership Experience**

The following themes emerged from background research regarding the fraternity/sorority membership experience and the comments of interview and focus group participants.

### Events and Traditions

Students expressed interest in reviving old traditions and developing new signature events. They hope to create moments of pride to elevate the public profile of fraternity/sorority life, provide more fun and meaningful activities to their members, and build community and identity across chapters. Greek Sing took place shortly before the site visit, and many students indicated it was popular and successful. They described Greek Week and Homecoming as less prevalent, but they hope to make them more significant. Multiple stakeholders independently expressed interest in strengthening alumni engagement through partnerships with the Alumni Association and Foundation during Blue & White Weekend. They discussed networking, career development, and social programming as desired highlights. Investing in events like this can supplement improved marketing efforts discussed elsewhere in this report, and it may also increase the appeal of re-affiliating with the university among unrecognized groups.

### Leadership and Engagement

Focus group participants discussed members' lack of engagement and reluctance to take on leadership roles. Some indicated that sorority members are joining primarily for access to fraternity parties, and leaders find it difficult to engage them in other activities. Several fraternity/sorority leaders indicated that fewer students express interest in running for positions and more positions are held by younger leaders, which limits the capacity of chapters to address the challenges they face. They explained that fraternity/sorority members are hesitant to take on leadership positions due to the stress involved and a fear of consequences for their organization or themselves. Similarly, some fraternity/sorority leaders mentioned that fear of getting in trouble makes them reluctant to talk to new students during orientation, report individual members for misconduct, respond to OFSL staff, and participate in misconduct processes.

### Panhellenic Residential and Programming Space

Panhellenic student and alumnae members expressed frustration with the availability of residential and programming space.







Panhellenic sororities face difficulty finding programming space, as the average chapter size ranges from approximately 150 to 200 members, depending on the semester. There are few spaces on and around campus that can accommodate their entire membership, meaning they must meet in classrooms, rent conference space, or partner with fraternities to use their space. One member indicated, "We shouldn't be doing initiation in a classroom; it takes away from the history and tradition of sororities."

University-provided sorority housing has been a longstanding highlight of the Panhellenic experience at Penn State, but occupancy has dropped in recent years. There is currently only one remaining Panhellenic sorority that has exclusive use of a suite. While many sorority members live together in university housing, they do not have dedicated living or activity space.

A combination of several factors have contributed to declining occupancy in Panhellenic sorority residences. Similar to peer institutions, fraternity/sorority residences face increased competition in the local housing market due to the rapid increase in the volume of modern apartments with attractive amenities. These competitive pressures lead to fewer members interested in a residential sorority experience, especially for organizations with no internal residential requirements or deliberate planning process.

The eligibility policy introduced in 2017 amplified existing occupancy challenges. Prior to the policy, Panhellenic sororities invoked the option to break university housing contracts for new members so those students could move into vacancies created by upper class students who were leaving to study abroad during the spring semester. The introduction of the eligibility policy eliminated this as an option, leaving chapters unable to fill spring vacancies.

Additionally, local landlords have increased pressure on students to sign leases early in the fall semester, a trend which is not unique to Penn State. As a result, many students have already made housing choices for their second year before they join, eliminating the sorority housing option for many second-year students. Panhellenic and university leaders advise incoming students about their housing options and encourage them to wait until after recruitment to make housing choices. While transparency about the policy is important, this guidance puts students in a state of uncertainty about their







future housing status for months. It is likely their friends and roommates have already secured their plans, reducing their options for roommates if they choose not to join.

During the pandemic, social gathering restrictions meant students could not enjoy the space together, and stakeholders indicated the culture and appeal of living in the sorority suites never recovered.

The university made accommodations for low occupancy following the pandemic through the Return to Housing plan. This plan lowered the occupancy requirement for sororities to have an exclusive suite, and provided an annual, tiered increase in minimum occupancy to provide sororities an opportunity to rebound to previous levels gradually. However, interest in residential experiences continued to wane.

Member preferences and the local real estate market also add complexity to this challenge. Although members continue to express interest in the idea of a residential experience, most continue to choose other, more appealing options. Stakeholders indicated that the option of developing private sorority housing is limited by the cost of local real estate.

As a result of these challenges with programming and residential space, Panhellenic leaders describe feeling stuck, abandoned, and unwanted. They have formed a committee with representatives from chapters, the Panhellenic Council, OFSL, alumni advisors, and headquarters staff to explore options for both residential and programming spaces. This is an important step, as there is little clarity regarding what Panhellenic leaders envision and would value. Progress will come through dialogue among leaders and stakeholders, not from a university policy or decision.

#### Competition with Unrecognized Organizations

As noted above, there are approximately five former fraternal organizations with an estimated 300 to 400 members that continue to operate in State College without university recognition. Because they are not subject to university policies, including the eligibility requirement, they recruit and initiate first-semester students in the fall, putting recognized fraternal organizations at a disadvantage. Leaders of recognized chapters are left to decide between violating the eligibility policy to compete with unrecognized groups for members or complying with the policy while watching unrecognized groups





recruit. Some stakeholders described this as a punishment for groups who are attempting to comply with the university's expectations.

Focus group participants indicated there are recognized fraternities acting on this pressure by circumventing the eligibility policy through "ghost pledging." Some chapters actively recruit students during the fall semester, but wait until later semesters to submit their membership paperwork.

### Social Incentives

Some IFC/Panhellenic fraternity/sorority leaders described an experience centered around alcohol misuse and driven by a social hierarchy that undermines local and national guidelines. Sorority leaders explain that some members join to have a "fraternity plan," a calendar of social events hosted by fraternities. To cater to that interest, sororities rely on fraternities to host unregistered social events for sorority members. Fraternity leaders reported feeling pressure to host these events and provide alcohol for sorority members, as it could raise their chapter's social profile, which they believe will ultimately result in a desirable partner for THON. They described it as sororities "riding on the risks fraternities are taking." According to one focus group participant, "sorority members rove in packs to parties and use the fraternity houses for alcohol," while sorority leaders expressed frustration that they are unable to manage their members during events. One stakeholder explained, "no one is stepping up to take responsibility for creating a safe environment." The fraternity/sorority leaders who described this pattern expressed frustration with it and instead aspired to a healthier, more purpose- and values-driven membership experience.

### MGC and NPHC Experiences

MGC and NPHC chapters are heavily engaged, leading events that serve the local community, and making an impact on campus.

The structures, policies, and practices of MGC and NPHC fraternal organizations are distinct from those in IFC and Panhellenic, and therefore, their needs are different. However, as one member noted, "OFSL has a 'one size fits all approach' right now," citing the Standards of Excellence requirements and reforms. Council leaders prefer a more targeted approach that accounts for their organizations' unique structures, policies, and practices. "We are constantly worrying about and uplifting our communities





however we can, and could use assistance in that regard." In addition to working with OFSL, MGC and NPHC leaders also rely on support from the Paul Robeson Cultural Center.

Focus group participants indicated there has been friction among NPHC chapters and between NPHC and MGC chapters in the form of dis strolls and interpersonal conflict. Although situations were resolved, some focus group participants perceive there is still tension.

Some noted hazing may still be prevalent in MGC and NPHC organizations. Others indicated that, while their social event practices are different, the regulations still apply, and that there are groups who host events without registering or managing them properly.





## Fraternity/Sorority Program Review

RISE examined the design and function of OFSL in order to understand the office's primary operating approach and how it impacts personnel, services, and systems.

### OFSL Background

Penn State supports the fraternity/sorority community primarily through OFSL. Other university offices are also well-connected to and provide support for the community, including Student Leadership & Involvement, R-VOICE (formerly the Gender Equity Center), OSACR, and the Paul Robeson Cultural Center.

The work of OFSL primarily involves administration of processes and procedures, training and development efforts, chapter and council leadership coaching, stakeholder communication, support for major events, assessment and recognition activities, and risk monitoring for social events.

Before 2017, OFSL was staffed with a director, two assistant directors, two administrative support staff, and one graduate assistant. Their primary roles were to provide administration, advising, and training to fraternity/sorority leaders through a philosophy of supported self-governance.

The 2017 reforms included several changes to OFSL, which represented a shift from a philosophical approach of supported self-governance to one of compliance. This change added eight staff positions and established the Office of Fraternity & Sorority Compliance with new responsibilities for social event registration and monitoring. Through the reforms, OFSL also became responsible for administering a membership fee, a new member survey, expanded educational programming, and tracking chapter performance through the Greek Scorecard.

In 2022, Penn State conducted a series of focus group conversations to examine the impact of the reforms and made adjustments based on feedback from stakeholders. This resulted in discontinuation of the new member survey, adjustment to some social event limitations, and a more collaborative approach to social event monitoring. These steps have eased some tension regarding the reforms, but they do not address the issues alumni and student members find most challenging. Focus group participants





were most appreciative of the shift to a less intrusive and more collaborative effort in social event management.

## **OFSL Analysis**

The following themes emerged from RISE's review of the fraternity/sorority program.

### **Value of Educational Programming**

OFSL manages a suite of educational programming ranging from health and safety education through the online hazing prevention program and social event training, to leadership development through the Elevate and Emerge retreats, and other topic-specific programs through partnerships with other departments.

Most stakeholders indicated that the online hazing prevention training is not relevant or useful, as most students race through it to complete the requirement. Some advisors were frustrated by issues with access to the program and a short timeline to complete it. Although the program may fulfill the university's responsibility to advise students of safety issues they may face, it may do little to reduce the probability of hazing.

Several focus group participants praised Greeks CARE, a six-week intensive course addressing sexual violence through a partnership with R-VOICE. Administrators indicated that assessment results show it is effective in preventing sexual misconduct, and students who participated found it worthwhile. Similarly, Health Promotion and Wellness provides the BASICS program, a research-supported practice addressing alcohol behaviors, which many fraternity/sorority members complete.

Student leaders provided mixed reviews on Elevate, Emerge, and other leadership development programming. Some who attended these programs found it valuable to meet other fraternity/sorority leaders and learn about the community, while others described them as unhelpful in their leadership position and viewed it as an extra chore.

While being critical of current educational programming, some student leaders also expressed a desire for more training. They indicate that their members are not acting on lessons from the program or that the lessons are not relevant or applicable. Several fraternity/sorority leaders voiced interest in training that addresses more practical, real-life challenges such as operating practices and processes and less in broad leadership





development. They prioritize training on first aid, alcohol poisoning, and NARCAN use and indicate they rely on their inter-/national organization for transition and leadership development programs. It may be helpful for OFSL to review the content of its educational programs to ensure they address students' needs.

### **Standards of Excellence**

OFSL's Standards of Excellence (SOE) program recognizes chapters that meet standards and designates those who exceed standards as Chapters of Excellence. As noted above, more chapters are participating in the program, and chapters are showing improvement in almost every category. Fraternity/sorority leaders described the program as useful for chapters who participate, but confusing and difficult to complete. They indicated that preparing and submitting documentation involves an unexpectedly large amount of work, and the program is difficult to understand. There are no incentives or requirements to participate, so many leaders see it as an added chore and choose not to complete it. Fraternity/sorority advisors and student leaders also indicated SOE requires duplicative programming, in that many items require chapters to participate in educational programs hosted by OFSL and other university departments, despite having completed comparable activities through their national organization requirements or other internal chapter programs. SOE may find more support and engagement if the incentives were greater, if it were more user-friendly, and if it did not encourage students to repeat programs.

### **Highlighting the Fraternity/Sorority Experience**

Several focus group participants indicated there is limited communication from the university and OFSL about the fraternal organizations as an involvement option during the fall semester. There are several small activities that promote fraternity/sorority membership, including tabling during admitted students day, social media campaigns, parent and family programming, and training for orientation leaders on fraternity/sorority life. However, it is not a coordinated or deliberate effort, and stakeholders see it as insufficient. In focus group sessions, fraternity/sorority members expressed a hesitance to engage with first year students, feeling discouraged from promoting fraternity/sorority life for fear of getting in trouble. Some feel as if the community is deliberately hidden from incoming students.

New students are more often introduced to fraternity/sorority life through informal





recruitment efforts, meeting individual members by accident, attending fraternity social events (including unregistered events), and through high school or new friends on campus. Many of these interactions likely present a limited view of fraternity/sorority life as primarily centered around alcohol and parties.

Representatives of all stakeholder groups advocated for greater visibility of fraternity/sorority life during the fall semester. They envision a more proactive, holistic, and positive message about the fraternity/sorority experience. Administrators working in marketing and orientation areas expressed interest in improving messages about fraternity/sorority life, with one stating, "being able to have a sound byte that would highlight the benefits of joining a fraternal organization that isn't just, 'make friends and go to a party,' would be valuable."

Investing in communications and marketing can help shape potential members' expectations about what is acceptable, encourage them to consider all options, and empower them to make better decisions related to membership and safety. This may also increase the value organizations see in remaining affiliated with the institution, as this enables recognized groups to reach a larger pool of potential members, and unrecognized groups may prefer not to be identified as such among new students.

As noted in the benchmarking findings below, peer institutions have used larger and more sophisticated efforts to curb the influence of unrecognized organizations. They tend to have multilayered communication plans with targeted messages to students, parents and families, and community members about the facts and concerns associated with unrecognized organizations.

### **Engaging Fraternity/Sorority Leaders**

OFSL staff indicated they find it difficult to engage and support chapter and council leaders. They explained that many students do not monitor or respond to email, are not interested in the programs and support systems provided by OFSL, and that it is difficult to track down students to ensure they submit materials and meet administrative requirements. While staff prefer to resolve issues proactively, they often are left with no option but to freeze organizations' use of the OrgCentral platform. This forces students to respond, as it pauses their ability to host events, participate in recruitment, and continue operating.







Fraternity/sorority leaders and advisors offered several reasons for their reluctance to interact with staff and participate in OFSL programs and services. Many students find more value in seeking advice and guidance from their alumni advisors. Some indicated they do not feel OFSL staff has their best interests at heart and go to other stakeholders for support instead. As noted above, students provided mixed reviews of educational programs, and many do not consider them a productive use of time.

Focus group participants, including advisors, students, and staff in peer departments, discussed a lack of availability and responsiveness of OFSL staff. They describe low response rates and long response times when reaching out to OFSL staff with questions. One student indicated staff are unavailable outside normal business hours: "Staff only work 8 to 5, so it's frustrating to be in this leadership position when you're working with people who don't want to be here after 5." Most stakeholders immediately followed up their comments by acknowledging that they understand staff responsiveness is partly due to vacancies and workload, but their frustration remains. Staff members indicated that the location and space of the OFSL office may not be welcoming or appealing, meaning few students visit the office and many may not know where it is. Additionally, some students and alumni reported feeling a lack of connection or understanding based on the makeup of OFSL staff. At the beginning of the project, all staff in the office were members of Panhellenic sororities, meaning there was no representation in the office for members of NPHC, MGC, and IFC organizations. Finally, students expressed an interest in developing better forms of communication and stronger personal relationships with staff. "Most stakeholders communicate through email. They don't really talk face to face; it's hard to talk about when we only hear from them when things are going wrong. We don't get positive notes from advisors and staff. It's hard to develop the relationship when we're not even talking with one another." One focus group participant added that they wish OFSL staff had a greater presence at chapter and community events.

### **Support for MGC and NPHC Organizations**

MGC and NPHC leaders echoed the concerns of other fraternity/sorority leaders that the relationship with OFSL is transactional and do not see themselves represented in a staff made up of Panhellenic alumnae. As a result, MGC and NPHC members feel staff may not understand or appreciate the unique design of their organizations, requiring







students to do more work to educate and advocate for themselves. They desire more equitable support from OFSL and Penn State.

The 2017 reforms addressed behavior largely associated with IFC chapters, yet the policies were applied to all fraternal organizations. MGC and NPHC leaders indicated that the reforms and other policies and programs are not relevant to them, and they would prefer a more tailored approach. When attending meetings and educational programs, they want to be included in the conversation and provide their perspectives on the challenges and issues in the community, but topics that are more relevant to IFC and Panhellenic dominate the conversation. Many IFC and Panhellenic leaders are unfamiliar with MGC and NPHC organizations, putting MGC and NPHC organizations in a situation where they have to educate others. Stakeholders describe the overemphasis on issues associated with IFC and Panhellenic as a distraction from support that could be provided to NPHC and MGC organizations.

NPHC and MGC leaders explained that their needs are related to funding and resources for larger events, opportunities for visibility on campus, and cultural opportunities for their members. In the words of one focus group participant, "We don't want to feel like we're out there existing on our own." At least one focus group participant mentioned an interest in housing for MGC and NPHC chapters. One NPHC organization has had university housing in the past, but it was never revived after a period of renovation.

### **Staff Vacancies and Turnover**

At the time of the review, seven positions in OFSL were filled and one professional joined staff, leaving six positions vacant. Focus group participants, including OFSL staff, indicated that staff vacancies are recurring and persistent due to high staff turnover. While this is reflective of a larger national trend for fraternity/sorority life positions, it seems more pronounced at Penn State. Focus group participants hypothesized that this may also stem from the geographic location of the university and the complicated history and context of fraternity/sorority life at Penn State.

### **Development and Coordination with Stakeholders**

Alumni advisors and housing corporation leaders report wanting to be more informed, supported, and utilized by the university. They want more information, training, access





to resources, and opportunities to gather with other advisors. OFSL occasionally hosted meetings and roundtable sessions to meet these needs for volunteer advisors, but few attended and interest in these sessions waned. Some advisors reported being unable to access educational programs or information about their organizations; unfortunately, technological constraints built into the software limited access to university employees. OFSL has changed platforms for some online educational programs, which will remove some barriers for advisors. Some advisors have found it difficult to adjust to the inconsistency caused by OFSL staff turnover and frequent coaching reassignments.





## Impact of the 2017 Reforms

In addition to a review of the fraternity/sorority community and program, Penn State asked RISE to provide analysis and recommendations regarding the 2017 reforms. RISE reviewed the reforms in four categories, specifically programmatic and safety initiatives, eligibility requirements, stakeholder relationships, and accountability processes.

### Programmatic and Safety Initiatives

In 2017, Penn State instituted several programmatic and safety initiatives intended to address problematic behaviors associated with fraternity/sorority life. These initiatives were designed to address problems with social events and hazing through new policies, transparency efforts, and educational programs. The impact of these initiatives is examined below.

#### Social Events

Some reform initiatives were geared towards curbing large, disruptive gatherings and increasing safety surrounding social events with alcohol. This included the reinstatement of the Neighborhood Enforcement Alcohol Team (NEAT), restrictions on the number and nature of social events with alcohol, and additional programming for students, staff, and parents. Specifically, organizations are restricted to 10 events per semester, may serve only beer and wine, and must use RAMP trained bartenders.

During the community tour, fraternity/sorority staff and a chapter leader responsible for event management demonstrated the layout of events, discussed changes they had made to improve guest safety based on troubleshooting with fraternity/sorority staff, and described good working relationships with their neighbors. While there are differences across chapters, the practices in place appear to improve social event management and prevent issues associated with poor planning. Focus group participants indicated that large, disruptive gatherings are rare, events are run more safely, and there are fewer intoxicated students roaming the neighborhoods around IFC fraternity houses.

Since the focus group report in 2022, OFSL staff have shifted their practices in event management from a focus on compliance towards a more developmental approach





involving coaching, prevention, and guided troubleshooting around risk associated with social events. OFSL staff explained that the event registration process has helped address potential issues pre-emptively and that this modified approach has allowed issues to be corrected in the moment rather than through a misconduct process. This has resulted in improved relationships with chapter leaders, fewer and less intrusive visits, and a greater ability for students to address issues on their own.

Based on findings of the benchmarking study, Penn State is more heavily involved in event management than its peer institutions. While most institutions require event registration, they defer management of the registration process and monitoring of events (where relevant) to council leaders.

Despite largely reducing the impact of social events on neighbors, several focus group participants expressed frustration with the changes. They feel the event management practices are intrusive and establish a combative relationship. Alumni advisors and undergraduate fraternity leaders suggested the current policies create a situation that encourages students to pre-game before attending fraternity events, resulting in guests who arrive intoxicated and create problems and a risk for the organization. Several stakeholders indicated that, while there may be increased safety at registered social events, unregistered or underground events do not follow the same processes and are significantly less safe.

Panhellenic members and alumnae explained that the lack of residential and programming space, in combination with social event policies, puts sororities at an unsafe disadvantage. In order to provide social event options for members, they rely on IFC fraternities to provide space to host events. Unless they co-sponsor and register the event, Panhellenic leaders have little control over safety measures and have limited authority to manage members' behavior. Members see these events as part of sustaining their social standing, putting leaders in the position of deciding whether to follow policy, keep their members safe, or opt out of social events entirely. While the policy may improve the overall safety of members and guests, it creates a perverse incentive structure for sorority leaders. Panhellenic sororities desire more agency and control in how events are run through restructuring social event policies and/or through greater access to suitable programming space.





The social event policy reforms were intended to address problems in IFC fraternities, but the policies apply to all fraternal organizations. MGC and NPHC tend not to host events in the same way as IFC, and so many elements of the policy are irrelevant to them. Some focus group participants indicated MGC and NPHC organizations host social events that they may not be registering, and their safety issues may be different and require specialized attention.

### **Hazing Prevention**

Some policy and safety initiatives were designed to prevent hazing, including limiting the new member education period to 6 weeks, conducting a new member survey, and accelerating the university's responsiveness to hazing violations.

There were no comments from focus group participants about the timing of new member education or the new member survey. The survey was discontinued in 2022 following a declining response rate and little useful information. It is unclear whether or how these changes influenced the prevalence of hazing.

As noted above, there have been 19 hazing violations since 2017. Several focus group participants noted specific examples they observed, suggesting hazing persists in fraternities and sororities. While each council has had a chapter found responsible for hazing, 14 (74%) cases were associated with IFC fraternities. Additionally, there have been allegations of hazing associated with unrecognized groups, which are not included in these totals.

While safety measures reduced the prevalence of large, disruptive gatherings, they fell short of addressing the role alcohol plays in recruitment and new member education for some IFC organizations. Many of the behaviors that the social event policies intended to address persist through unregistered social events, recruitment events, new member education practices, and informal activities.

The university developed a response protocol to address hazing allegations swiftly. Unfortunately, a dramatic increase in the volume of misconduct cases has limited the capacity of OSACR staff to respond quickly. Additionally, several focus group participants expressed concerns about the student organization conduct process, as explained in more detailed analysis in the accountability systems section below.





Penn State is part of the first cohort of the What Works Study through the Timothy J. Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research housed at the university. This program provides assessment, a community of practice, and coaching to universities on research-informed practices to reduce the prevalence of hazing. Administrators who are part of the project noted the opportunity for this program to guide the evolution of the university's hazing prevention practices. This program has been in place for a short time; any impact is likely to take effect over the coming years.

### **Transparency and Education**

The reforms also included other safety and programmatic initiatives designed to increase transparency and education among stakeholders. These included the informational Greek Scorecard and additional parent and member education, including a compulsory online hazing education module.

There were few comments about the Greek Scorecard; focus group participants seemed to find other reforms more deserving of attention. The extent to which the resource is viewed or used by potential members, parents, or other stakeholders is unclear. Additional assessment may be necessary to determine its influence.

The reforms included compulsory education on hazing prevention. Focus group participants shared concerns about the effectiveness and impact of the online hazing module, primarily due to the online format, and fraternity/sorority leaders expressed interest in alternate forms of education. Fraternity/sorority leaders reinforced this sentiment, indicating their members need more training but that leaders may not have the capacity to provide the type of training their members need.

OFSL has provided training and communication to parents about fraternity/sorority life, but as noted above, this takes the form of information on the website and educational sessions during orientation. Given the high proportion of parents who are fraternity/sorority members, an expanded effort to re-orient fraternity/sorority parents could strengthen other prevention and safety efforts.

Similar to social event policies, the required educational programs are designed primarily with IFC and Panhellenic organizations in mind. Due to the distinct policies and





practices of MGC and NPHC organizations, the topics and content are not as relevant for members of these organizations. Safety and risk concerns manifest differently in their organizations, and so content tailored to their organizations would be more worthwhile.

## Eligibility Requirements

As part of the 2017 reforms, Penn State instituted minimum joining requirements for students, specifically that they complete 14 credit hours, achieve a minimum 2.5 GPA, and have no history or open cases of misconduct at Penn State. Transfer students must meet similar standards, but with 27 completed credit hours. This policy of deferred joining means that most students may not join IFC and Panhellenic chapters until the second semester of their first year. Inter-/national policies of many NPHC and MGC organizations limit membership to students in their second year or above, so the eligibility policy does not directly impact these organizations.

According to the focus group report in 2022, Penn State relaxed the eligibility policy's behavioral standard. Previously, many forms of misconduct could disqualify students for membership. Now, however, only students who are on probation with a transcript notation or who have been expelled or suspended for misconduct are prohibited from membership. The policy was also amended to provide joiners an opportunity to secure on-campus housing for the following fall after participating in recruitment, presumably as one step to alleviate conflicts associated with the timing of housing decisions. Additionally, OFSL began entertaining exceptions to the credit requirement for rare circumstances.

Penn State's criterion requiring 14 completed credit hours is an outlier among peer institutions. Approximately half of the institutions included in the benchmarking process have an deferred joining eligibility policy, and in all cases they require students have a 2.5 GPA and 12 credit hours, with no separate distinction for transfer students. Fraternity/sorority leaders indicated that some potential members are not aware of the 14 credit hour criteria and may only take 12 or 13 credit hours in the fall. One student said, "I almost missed it because there was one email." Staff indicated the 14 credit hour requirement was chosen based on guidance from academic advising staff that this standard would keep students on the recommended path towards on-time graduation and based on the university's standard for determining academic progress by semester.





Since the adjustments in 2022, fraternity/sorority life staff have granted exceptions in some circumstances, but this practice is not formalized or widely known.

Additional data and analysis could provide insight about whether this standard remains appropriate. It is unclear how many additional students would become eligible under a 12 credit-hour standard and whether there is a meaningful difference in their experiences or outcomes. The extent to which 14 credit-hours is a true norm among first year students or simply a recommendation also remains unclear. Penn State should reexamine credit hour ranges and provide data and justification for the decision.

A few focus group participants echoed findings from the 2022 Focus Group Report, explaining that they appreciated the opportunity deferred joining gave them to explore options and become more informed. However, this view was overshadowed by trends in misconduct and safety data and by stakeholders who outlined several complications that have emerged, due in part to the policy.

As illustrated in other sections of this report, the eligibility policy amplified the decline in occupancy of Panhellenic housing. It also created a competitive advantage for unrecognized groups and incentivizes students to ignore university policy.

Aside from the findings in this report regarding the impact of eligibility policies at Penn State, consensus in the fraternity/sorority industry is that there is limited evidence or literature to indicate whether the time of joining has a meaningful impact on safety or student success.

## **Stakeholder Relationships**

### **Background**

Fraternity/sorority life at Penn State is supported by a variety of stakeholders who play different roles in sustaining the community. While the OFSL is the primary center of support from the university, staff in other departments such as OSACR, Student Involvement and Leadership, Health Promotion and Wellness, R-VOICE, and more also play a role. Students also receive support through their alumni and graduate advisors, leaders of fraternal house corporations, inter/national organization staff and volunteers, and industry trade associations. Fraternity/sorority life also impacts neighbors, businesses, and government agencies in the area. Each stakeholder group has a







distinct role, scope of authority, and interest in the success of fraternity/sorority members, chapters, councils, and the overall community.

Interviewees and focus group participants described the community before 2017 as largely driven by student leadership with support from local alumni and advisors, with OFSL playing a supportive role. The fraternity/sorority community was supported through a philosophy of self-governance, where councils maintained social event monitoring programs and adjudicated organization-level violations of council and university policy. OFSL included a staff of six, including three fraternity/sorority professionals, two administrative staff and one graduate student, with responsibility for education, advising, event support, and administrative support.

The 2017 reforms replaced an approach of self-governance with one of compliance as reflected in the expanded size and role of OFSL, creation of the Office of Fraternity/Sorority Life Compliance with added responsibilities for social event management, the redefined expectations of each stakeholder group through the relationship statement, and an added a layer of policies and programs. Based on focus group conversations, this shift in philosophy, policy, and practice disrupted relationships among stakeholders and created several sources of tension that inhibited collaborative work.

### **Chapter and Council Leaders**

Chapter and council leaders indicated that their current relationships with stakeholders leave them feeling dis-empowered, under-supported, and torn about how to lead through the challenges they face. As explained above, many see their relationship with OFSL staff as transactional and are reluctant to ask for support in dealing with challenging issues out of fear of punishment. Instead, chapter leaders primarily rely on their alumni advisors for guidance and support. However, some reported challenges working with their alumni advisors. As one student articulated, "You have grown-up chapter advisors yelling at you, and I'm literally just a kid!" Some focus group participants suggested students may receive conflicting advice from advisors and staff, leaving students torn about what to do. Some council and chapter leaders expressed reluctance to take on leadership roles due to the level of risk and inconsistent support. One fraternity/sorority leader described their experience: "They all want something different out of every situation that comes up. Alumni want the chapter to continue and





to fill the house. The school cares about making sure people are following the rules. Staff are handling things in coordination with the rules and managing the politics. Chapter and council leadership are trying not to make people hate us. Everyone wants something different. It's difficult to manage when something bad happens and there's an incident."

## **OFSL**

OFSL staff are committed to the principles and potential for fraternity/sorority life at Penn State. They recognize the challenging situation they face and share stakeholders' frustrations with the effects of turnover, vacancies, and a heavy workload. As explained above, OFSL find it difficult to engage students and provide the support they need. Their work is further complicated by the tension and conflict involved in interactions with some alumni advisors, and staff feel undermined when alumni advisors provide conflicting advice to chapter leaders. OFSL staff have relationships with inter-/national organizations and host regular meetings, but there is a desire for more substance in those meetings and updates by headquarters staff.

## **University Partners**

There are strong working relationships in place between some peer university departments such as R-VOICE, the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, and OSACR. There are also opportunities to enhance partnerships with other university functional areas impacted by fraternity/sorority life to the benefit of both the university and the community. One focus group participant noted that the current policies are likely discouraging some alumni from supporting the university, yet there are significant opportunities to coordinate efforts with Alumni Relations and the Foundation to support fraternity/sorority leaders through career development, leadership programming, and fundraising. Colleagues suggested expanding partnerships with Orientation and Marketing and Communications to help communicate appropriate expectations to future members and their parents.

## **Inter-/National Organizations**

Many Inter-/National Organization leaders report positive working relationships with university staff, especially those in OSACR. They appreciate the design of the student organization misconduct process, the level of communication with conduct administrators, and the opportunity to partner in joint adjudication. Despite their





appreciation for improvements to the misconduct processes, many noted the unintended and undesirable consequences of other reforms outlined throughout this report and would prefer a shift back towards a philosophy of supported self-governance.

### **Alumni Advisors and Housing Corporation Leaders**

As noted above, alumni advisors and housing corporation leaders want to be more informed, supported, and utilized by the university. They reported wanting more information, training, access to resources, and opportunities to gather with other advisors. Some have found it difficult to adjust to the inconsistency caused by OFSL staff turnover and frequent coaching reassignments. And ultimately, some advisors are uninterested in any form of university support or involvement, seeing any university interactions as an intrusion into their operations.

### **Sources of Conflict**

A small vocal group of IFC and PHC alumni advisors described a more antagonistic relationship with the university, especially OFSL and OSACR. They passionately articulated several dimensions of friction, including policy disagreements, a sense of procedural injustice, negative interactions with administrators, unintended impacts of the reforms, and missed opportunities as described below.

Some alumni disagree with the policy and program decisions included in the reforms. Some disagree with the content of the hazing policy, perceiving some hazing practices as acceptable. Some are frustrated with the duplicate work required by the Standards of Excellence program, and some are upset about the university's decisions regarding the Panhellenic housing.

Aside from the content of the policies, some alumni described a sense of procedural injustice in the way the changes were adopted, communicated, and enacted. They wanted to be engaged and consulted in the decision-making process about how the community would be governed. They are disappointed that the relationship statement has not been reviewed as promised, and they perceive attempts to hold students accountable through OSACR as invasive and deliberate attacks. They shared examples of how news of the reforms was shared, believing it did not follow reasonable channels of communication, and they expressed a desire for transparency about the Greek Fee.





Some tension between advisors and OFSL has arisen from negative interactions with staff in the form of slow responsiveness, miscommunication, turnover, and misunderstandings. This situation has incentivized bad faith actions by some stakeholders, such as leaders creating separate chat groups without their advisor, alumni advisors discouraging students from engaging with OFSL staff, and advisors interfering with the misconduct process.

Some advisors recognize the importance of the reforms, but expressed frustration about the negative impact they have created. PHC advisors, for example, reported feeling their organizations are being negatively impacted by policies intended to address behavior in IFC organizations.

### **Summary**

Ultimately, many fraternity/sorority stakeholders are working in silos with incomplete information and a limited view of the community. Many relationships are transactional and some are counter-productive and adversarial. Most stakeholders share common goals and aspirations, but the challenges of shared leadership prevent them from working together, leaving students under-supported. Despite the impact these relationships have on students, there is no clear effort to resolve tension.

The intent of the Relationship Statement was to define stakeholders' roles and responsibilities related to fraternity/sorority life under the assumption that doing so would strengthen the support system for fraternities and sororities. However, the document was developed without consultation among partners and is more accurately described as a statement of expectations for stakeholders.

A more constructive Relationship Statement would emerge from a collaborative process where stakeholders determine together how to navigate their overlapping responsibilities, authorities, contributions, and interests. Each stakeholder should acknowledge the narrow scope of their role in the larger support system for fraternity/sorority life and recognize the need to collaborate to sustain a healthy fraternity/sorority experience at Penn State. Stakeholder relationships need continued attention with opportunities to discuss shared goals, common approaches, addressing pain points, and develop strategies in partnership to help chapters provide a safe environment that facilitates student connection.





## Accountability Processes

Some of the 2017 reforms redesigned the university's response to fraternal organization misconduct by creating an organization-level misconduct process, absorbing responsibility for adjudicating organizational misconduct from council leaders, and implementing new systems for reporting and response.

Before the reforms, the university delegated responsibility for managing fraternal organization violations of council policy and the student code of conduct to councils. Staff in OSACR provided training and coaching to students on accountability and managing misconduct processes. Focus group participants celebrated this supported self-governance model, as fraternity/sorority leaders maintained a sense of ownership and agency over their community. However, in practice, council responses to misconduct were problematic and insufficient, especially among IFC organizations. Stakeholders described their misconduct strategy as trading and negotiating fines rather than correcting or deterring problematic behavior. There was no developmental component to sanctions, allowing problem behaviors to persist and escalate.

The 2017 reforms attempted to correct these inadequacies by shifting to a compliance model where the university took responsibility for organization misconduct and defined expectations for fraternal organizations. The establishment of an organization-level discipline process properly accounts for the fundamental differences in relationships between organizations versus individuals. The process is designed to be consistent with individual-level procedures in order to prevent confusion, maintain an appropriate burden of proof, and provide the same level of care when findings might mean separation from the university. There are opportunities to communicate with stakeholders during the process, including the option for headquarters partners to coordinate on investigations and findings. The changes included an anonymous reporting mechanism and protocols for filtering unfounded allegations. There is a dedicated staff person in OSACR that handles fraternal organization cases, and they have a strong working relationship with many inter-/national organization representatives. Each of these choices are reflective of good practice for universities in student organization accountability. Headquarters colleagues expressed their appreciation for the process and the working relationship with OSACR, even if they sometimes do not appreciate the outcomes.





Unfortunately, the high volume of credible cases mentioned above currently exceeds the capacity of OSACR staff. As a result, the processing time for cases is high and the progress is slow, creating additional frustration for council and alumni leaders. This can cause members and organizations to lose operating time, forfeit expenses, and feel there is no closure on cases. In some situations, chapter leaders are responding to misconduct that predated their leadership.

The university implemented changes in fall 2024 that allow for an alternative resolution process. The intent was to reduce the case load by streamlining the process for groups who are interested in accepting responsibility and correcting mistakes. However, this added variation and new procedures for how the university responds to misconduct, which seems to have created additional confusion and mistrust among some stakeholders.

The university provides advisory letters notifying groups of cases where no action was taken. While the intent is to provide transparency and share potential concerns with stakeholders, fraternity/sorority advisors and chapter leaders often perceive it as an attack.

There is an opportunity to improve communication and coordination between OSACR and OFSL. Some stakeholders indicated that sanctions may not be causing change, and that input and coordination with OFSL on corrective measures may help groups recover. All stakeholders seem to agree: staff in both offices expressed interest in greater coordination, and fraternity/sorority advisors and students shared concerns about receiving inconsistent information from different staff. The primary factor limiting the ability to coordinate is the large case load in OSACR and vacancies and workload in OFSL.

Some stakeholders' complaints reflect a misunderstanding of the distinctions between university misconduct processes and legal proceedings. Although some steps and standards are similar, there are fundamental differences in principle and practice. Additional training, coaching, and collaboration with alumni advisors on these distinctions may alleviate some barriers to accountability.





Lack of trust in the misconduct process and in university officials has led some alumni to interfere with proceedings. Stakeholders shared examples of alumni advising students not to respond or participate, attempting to respond on behalf of students, deflecting responsibility, and abusing the opportunity to attend hearings. These behaviors led OSACR to limit who is involved in the process, further reducing trust and transparency.

Some focus group participants alleged that the increase in cases is due to false reports filed through the anonymous reporting process. Staff in OSACR acknowledged that a high percentage of reports have no merit, but these are easily recognized and dismissed during investigation through credibility and plausibility assessments. They explained that, although the process allows for reporters to remain anonymous, many identify themselves to investigators knowing their identity will not be revealed.

The 2017 reforms, and specifically reassigning responsibility for responding to organization misconduct to the university, diminished the fraternity/sorority community's capacity for self-governance. As noted above, there is a notable lack of agency, engagement, and sense of ownership among many fraternity/sorority leaders, especially within IFC and Panhellenic organizations. IFC leaders do not feel they have the autonomy or authority to hold organizations responsible. There is a sense that this sentiment extends beyond accountability to a general stagnation of community leadership.

Throughout the project, stakeholders expressed interest in moving away from a compliance model towards a shared leadership approach by engaging fraternity/sorority leaders in governance of the community. Adjudication processes still exist in council bylaws, and fraternity/sorority leaders express a desire for more accountability. However, there has been reluctance to practice peer accountability among fraternity/sorority leaders, likely because the attitudes, systems, and habits that previously provided capacity for self-governance have since atrophied. Recognizing this, administrators expressed interest in providing training and support while exploring opportunities to engage fraternity/sorority leaders in taking responsibility for some low-level offenses.

## Summary of Findings

The 2017 reforms have led to noteworthy progress in two areas: social event







management and organization misconduct.

There is indication that social event management practices have reduced the prevalence of large, disruptive gatherings and improved the quality of life among residents neighboring fraternity/sorority residences. As noted above, registered social events are run more safely and potential issues are addressed pre-emptively, and there are fewer intoxicated students roaming the neighborhoods around IFC fraternity houses.

The university's development of an organization-level misconduct process brings it in line with good practice, as illustrated above. While there are opportunities to improve communication, educate stakeholders, and increase capacity for higher case loads, this change significantly improved the quality and integrity of misconduct proceedings and should be sustained. Additionally, there is a shared vision among OSACR, OFSL, alumni advisors, inter-/national organization leaders, and members for re-engaging students in accountability processes.

While there has been clear progress in select areas, several indicators suggest the reforms have not meaningfully reduced risks or negative behaviors associated with fraternal organizations. First, as noted above, misconduct cases are increasing, and there is evidence to support ongoing concerns about dangerous alcohol use and hazing, including the significant role alcohol plays in recruitment and member education. Second, results from the Standards of Excellence program over the past three years show fewer chapters meeting standards related to health and safety. Additionally, the recent pattern of lower academic performance of IFC men during the spring semester raises questions about whether the new member education period is a factor. Fourth, educational initiatives have not shown impact and are seen as a barrier, leading fraternity/sorority leaders to ask for more relevant and helpful training. Finally, and most significantly, the reforms have damaged relationships among stakeholders and positioned them in opposition to one another, with few avenues for resolving conflict.

The combined result of the reforms is gridlock, where OFSL staff and stakeholders are working in siloes, disconnected from the problems students are facing, with little agency to adjust strategies and practices that might resolve problems, and an incentive system that makes desired behaviors more difficult.







The policies included in the reforms are not unique to Penn State; peer institutions use university-run organization level conduct processes, deferred recruitment, event management regulations, compulsory online training for new members, new member education restrictions, relationship statements, and more. What is distinct at Penn State is the sudden shift from a student self-governance approach to a university-imposed redesign of the support system for fraternity/sorority life. This shift in philosophy towards a compliance model policy fails to account for the complex and overlapping governance structures in fraternity/sorority life and does not influence student decision-making as intended.

While there is little indication that the reforms have mitigated risks and negative behaviors associated with fraternal organizations, there is also no clear indication that simply reversing any or all of the reforms would reduce risks or negative behaviors. Stakeholders of the Penn State fraternity/sorority community are faced with a new set of challenges. Current conditions in the fraternity/sorority community are comparable to the membership experience before 2017, with added complexity resulting from the reforms. Stakeholder relationships range from limited to contentious; the community's capacity for self-governance is diminished; new incentives and norms shape student behavior; and the reforms have created new undesired and unintended consequences.

Senior administrators, OFSL staff, alumni advisors, peer departments, and fraternity/sorority leaders must engage in a collective, collaborative effort to develop strategies that measurably increase safety and reduce risks and to build a support system that allows fraternity/sorority leaders an opportunity to work through the challenges they face. These efforts should be centered around delivering better outcomes for potential members, fraternity/sorority members, and the Penn State community. Success of any policy or program changes should be monitored through metrics that track these outcomes: rates of alcohol use and secondary consequences among fraternity/sorority members and potential members; hospitalizations associated with fraternal organizations, academic performance of members and new members, misconduct patterns, students experiences with hazing based on climate studies and conduct cases, chapter performance in SOE, the volume and quality of interactions among stakeholders, and more specifically, healthy and constructive engagement from alumni volunteers.





## Recommendations

### 2024 Penn State Fraternity/Sorority Life Program Review

#### Introduction

The recommendations in this report are based on the results of this analysis and are organized into broad strategies with specific activities that align and reinforce each one. Recommendations were generated by RISE staff, but most draw from examples and ideas provided by stakeholders during the process.

#### Implementation Guidance

Implementing recommendations involves systematically aligning personnel, programs and services, and systems to improve performance. RISE advises clients to implement recommendations through a continuous improvement cycle. This involves routinely revisiting this report, logging completed action steps, considering new opportunities and challenges, evaluating and prioritizing the remaining recommendations, and developing short- and mid-term action plans.

#### Recommendations

Penn State administrators, and OFSL should prioritize their efforts around building an infrastructure for shared leadership of FSL through the following recommendation areas. Rationale, important specifications, and examples of action items are provided below for each recommendation.

- Develop alignment and trust among stakeholders
- Adopt a strategic prevention approach to address risky behavior
- Amplify a positive vision for fraternity/sorority life at Penn State
- Align OFSL programming and coaching around a revised SOE
- Strengthen stakeholder engagement in organizational conduct and accountability processes
- Support the committee exploring Panhellenic residential and programming space
- Reexamine the credit hour requirement in the eligibility policy





## **Develop a system that fosters trust and alignment among stakeholders**

Penn State should strengthen the capacity of stakeholders to serve as the network of support for fraternity/sorority leaders by increasing training and communication, engaging them as partners in decision-making, and rebuilding trust. As noted in the report, minimal and sometimes tense interactions with stakeholders is the primary limiting factor for fraternity/sorority life at Penn State. This approach can improve staff morale and capacity (could therefore reduce turnover), reduce the extent to which students receive conflicting advice, bring more expertise and resources to bear on community challenges, and more. Improving trust and working relationships would make it possible to work through some of the pain points alumni advisors noted, such as deferred recruitment problems and the attention to mitigating life safety issues through the conduct process. Without stronger relationships, these issues are unlikely to subside. Penn State and OFSL should consider the following steps:

- Enhance support for alumni advisors and housing corporation leaders by engaging them as colleagues in the fraternity/sorority support system. This includes providing communication, training, coordination, and connection opportunities that equip them to support students through their leadership.
  - Improve communication about information relevant to their role through newsletters, shared documentation of policies and practices, copying relevant advisors in communications about their chapter, assessing and addressing their needs, and proactive outreach when there are concerns.
  - Revive advisor training and development efforts through a training series, roundtable sessions, networking sessions, and/or other meetings. Specific attention should be given to training on OFSL and community operational processes, student organization misconduct processes, available university resources, and coaching skills.
  - Celebrate their contributions to the community through special gatherings during parents' weekend, homecoming, and end-of-year events that provide recognition and appreciation.
  - Enlisting their participation in work groups to address the challenges and concerns facing the community (see the second strategic recommendation below).





- Explore relationships with other university departments to enhance the support provided to the fraternity/sorority community. Partnerships that reinforce other recommended strategies should be prioritized.
  - Develop partnerships with Marketing and Communications to create and implement an external communication plan that highlights a positive vision for fraternity/sorority life among incoming students and parents, while providing transparency about the membership experience.
  - Strengthen partnerships with Orientation to expand education for incoming students and parents on recognized fraternities and sororities, provide an initial connection to the office, and communicate the vision for fraternity/sorority life.
  - Partner with Parent and Family Programs to continue and expand communication with parents about their and their students' fraternity/sorority experience. Specific attention should be given to creating events, platforms, and communications that engage, inform, and re-orient parents who are Penn State fraternity/sorority alumni to the modern fraternity/sorority experience.
  - More advanced versions of this effort may involve adapting and expanding the training, communication, and celebratory efforts recommended above for advisors to the role parents can play in advancing the community.
  - Partnering with Alumni relations and the Foundation to communicate about the modern fraternity/sorority experience, provide networking and programming for fraternity/sorority leaders, cultivate special events that celebrate their achievements, and strengthen their support for the university and fraternity/sorority community.
- Convene an interdisciplinary team of stakeholders to redevelop the relationship statement in the spirit of shared leadership. This effort should recognize the overlapping responsibilities and authorities of each stakeholder, and develop protocols for addressing situations that honor each group's unique role and interests and encourage collaboration. While this could take the form of a comprehensive overhaul, it may be more productive to adopt a pragmatic approach of convening a series of smaller work groups to address the most significant areas of tension (e.g., misconduct response, Panhellenic housing, etc.). Over time, this may reveal principles that could be applied more universally.
- Consider developing a fraternity/sorority advisory board made up of





interdisciplinary stakeholders responsible for providing guidance, deliberating on challenges, and amplifying Penn State's work to strengthen the fraternity/sorority community. This group should foster deliberation and dialogue to produce useful guidance to fraternity/sorority stakeholders while recognizing the autonomy of each stakeholder to set their own policies.

- Increase staff capacity for supporting NPHC and MGC organizations by prioritizing this area of expertise in hiring and by providing continuous training and development of OFSL staff and university stakeholders.

### **Adopt a strategic prevention approach to address risky behavior**

OFSL should develop a strategic prevention approach to addressing student safety and risky behavior. Prevention models, such as the Strategic Prevention Framework from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) or the Hazing Prevention Framework from StopHazing.Org, take a systematic, data-driven approach to reducing problematic behavior. They involve a continuous process of identifying and addressing underlying causes and contributors to health and safety issues.

As noted above, Penn State has many examples of good practice and policy that were implemented without regard for how they would impact student leaders and interact with other local conditions. It is important to enlist students and advisors in addressing the problems to create agency, ownership, and improved relationships. These approaches direct the attention of students and stakeholders on a specific shared goal to improve a specific aspect of safety, giving them an opportunity to identify what steps can be taken at each level of the fraternity/sorority community to improve results.

- When addressing shared problems related to community performance, and especially student safety and wellbeing, Penn State should follow a problem-solving approach that identifies and prioritizes specific problems, sets targets for improvement, engages stakeholders in developing solutions, and systematically monitors progress and makes improvements.
  - Use climate data on student experiences and behaviors to identify problems and track progress over time. This would incorporate fraternity/sorority-specific data from instruments like the National Collegiate Health Assessment, the Fraternity/Sorority Experience Survey,





and other climate studies in place at the university. Specific focus should be given to the outcomes listed in the summary analysis above:

- Rates of alcohol use and secondary consequences among fraternity/sorority members and potential members
  - Hospitalizations associated with fraternal organizations
  - Academic performance of members and new members
  - Misconduct patterns
  - Students' experiences with hazing based on climate studies and conduct cases
- Re-examine existing prevention efforts to determine the extent to which they contribute to these goals and adjust accordingly.
  - Convene interdisciplinary teams of stakeholders, including students and advisors, to address specific problems identified. The groups should be responsible for diagnosing contributing factors, identifying changes that may improve results, and working with stakeholders to implement and evaluate those changes.
- Penn State should continue its partnership with the Piazza Center through the What Works Project, which follows a similar approach to implementing and studying the impact of research-informed hazing prevention efforts.
  - OFSL should reallocate a staff position to take responsibility for leading strategic prevention efforts. This position should be designed to equip staff with the support needed to carry out prevention projects, rather than serving as the only staff person responsible for prevention. Exceptional candidates would have expertise in public health prevention models and demonstrated experience leading interdisciplinary groups through change processes. This position should be responsible for facilitating prevention projects, providing technical assistance to colleagues, conducting problem analyses, using data to identify specific problems and assess impact, and coaching colleagues in implementing a strategic prevention approach.
  - Provide training and development to increase the capacity of OFSL staff and stakeholders to carry out public health and strategic prevention approaches. This should include a focus on the principles and processes of prevention, working with interdisciplinary teams, and subject matter expertise on specific topics. The recommended staff position responsible for prevention should be responsible for OFSL training and development in this area.





- Penn State should continue its partnership with the Piazza Center through the What Works Project, which follows a similar approach to implementing and studying the impact of research-informed hazing prevention efforts.

### **Amplify a positive vision for fraternity/sorority life at Penn State**

OFSL should engage stakeholders in developing and promoting their vision for Penn State's fraternity/sorority community through external communication efforts and signature events.

Many focus group participants noted there is minimal communication about the fraternity/sorority experience to new students during the fall semester, giving unrecognized groups an advantage and missing an opportunity to set positive expectations for fraternity/sorority involvement. Members expressed a desire for more signature events in order to improve the member experience, raise the profile of the community, and create positive traditions that build community. MGC and NPHC leaders specifically mentioned the need for visibility of their programs and organizations. Additionally, some stakeholders described the lack of a strategy or clear message that highlights the university's vision for fraternity/sorority life.

This presents an opportunity to disrupt the current gridlock by engaging stakeholders in working towards shared goals. Promoting a vision for fraternity/sorority life can speak to students' interests while setting expectations among members, potential members, and parents about what they should expect from fraternity/sorority life. This strategy could generate engagement in chapter and council leaders, provide a more fulfilling fraternity/sorority experience, and create additional incentives for chapters to remain affiliated with the university.

- Penn State should engage stakeholders in developing a marketing and communications plan to promote the fraternity/sorority experience.
  - Convene OFSL staff, council and chapter leaders, advisors, and other relevant stakeholders to develop a shared message about the vision for fraternity/sorority life.
  - Partner with colleagues in Marketing and Communication to develop and implement a joint communication plan involving the university, councils, and chapters to highlight the fraternity/sorority experience for potential







- members, parents, and the general community.
- Develop a communication plan to specifically highlight NPHC and MGC organizations, and ensure these organizations are equitably represented in the the joint communication plan.
- Explore opportunities to partner with Parent and Family programs to highlight the vision for fraternity/sorority life among their constituents and highlight fraternal accomplishments in their communications.
- Explore opportunities to partner with Alumni Affairs to highlight the vision for fraternity/sorority life among their constituents and highlight fraternal accomplishments in their communications.
- Evaluate and enhance communications about unrecognized fraternities, their impact, and the value of university affiliation. Specific attention should be paid to reaching first year students and their families.
- Support council leaders in developing and strengthening signature fraternity/sorority events that could become positive traditions at Penn State. These initiatives should be driven by student leadership with input from alumni advisors and coordination with relevant departments on campus. OFSL should provide support to these student-led events in the form of advocacy, clear parameters, connections with other departments, and advising. These events should communicate and reinforce the vision for fraternity/sorority life.
  - Guide councils in identifying opportunities to make Greek Sing and Greek Week more significant events.
  - Convene council leaders, alumni advisors, and colleagues in Alumni Relations, the Foundation, and other relevant areas to enhance Homecoming events. OFSL should use these opportunities to communicate the vision for fraternity/sorority life among alumni and re-enlist their support.
  - Convene council leaders, alumni advisors, and colleagues in Alumni Relations, the Foundation, and other relevant areas to explore opportunities to develop a signature fraternity/sorority event associated with Blue & White Weekend.
  - Convene NPHC and MGC leaders and advisors to develop strategies for ensuring they are represented in signature events, to further highlight their most significant events, and to explore other signature events that could elevate these organizations specifically.







## Align OFSL programming and coaching around a revised SOE

Penn State should make adjustments to the Standards of Excellence program to simplify the process, eliminate duplicate programming requirements, and make it more valuable and useful to student leaders. While engagement with the program has increased, stakeholders noted the amount of work required and lack of clarity as barriers to participation. Some requirements mean students must attend university programs that cover educational content they already received through inter-/national or internal chapter programs. Additionally, students reported there are no consequences for failure to achieve standards and they do not see any incentive or value in the program. Making adjustments to address these barriers could make the program more useful to chapter leaders.

- OFSL should create a rubric that defines parameters for allowing chapters who complete programs provided by Inter-/National Organizations to count towards SOE programming requirements.
- OFSL should work with council leaders to identify significant and appropriate incentives that would make achievement in the program more appealing to chapter leaders. This could involve special recognition opportunities or experiences for members of high-achieving groups.
- OFSL should include alumni advisors and house corporation leaders in coaching related to SOE. OFSL staff indicated the coaching program is designed around helping chapters achieve through SOE, but they primarily work with chapter presidents and chapter advisors may have little knowledge of the program. Including alumni advisors and house corporation leaders in coaching can strengthen relationships among stakeholders, create coordination in how advisors and staff support students, and provide more transparency and education to advisors. This effort also supports the strategy for engaging stakeholders above.
- Examine SOE for additional opportunities to improve the user experience for chapter leaders. This might involve reevaluating communication plans, creating tutorials, revising materials on the website, adjusting forms and processes used to collect data, and creating job-aids such as checklists or timelines to simplify the process for chapter leaders.
- This should include evaluating the extent to which SOE standards and required





programs are relevant to NPHC and MGC organizations. OFSL should work with council leaders to determine what criteria and resources would best support these organizations' ability to thrive.

## **Strengthen stakeholder engagement in organizational conduct and accountability processes**

Penn State should work to reengage stakeholders in the misconduct process by improving communication and transparency and by exploring opportunities to strengthen students' ability to respond to misconduct in their community.

As illustrated above, the student organization misconduct process is consistent with peer institutions and good practice, however some stakeholders shared confusion, misunderstanding, and perceived attacks in the current communication plan. The recent increase in misconduct cases has delayed response time due to limits in staff capacity, and several stakeholders, including administrators, expressed interest in reengaging students in the process of responding to misconduct. Engaging fraternity/sorority leaders and advisors in developing better communication systems around the conduct process could reduce confusion, strengthen engagement, and increase trust in the process. Providing training, structure, and opportunities to respond to misconduct could regenerate the capacity for supported self-governance while alleviating the pressure of high-volume cases on OSACR.

- Provide orientation and training to alumni advisors and house corporation leaders on the philosophy, processes, and practices of student organization misconduct. This should include sessions through the training and development recommendations above, and content should include a transparent discussion of internal procedures for investigation, evaluating the credibility of reports, and the goals and strategies behind sanctions.
- Similar to the collaborative processes discussed in other recommendations, convene alumni advisors, chapter leaders, OSACR, OFSL staff, and inter-/national organization representatives to identify opportunities to reduce processing times and the volume of cases in accountability process.
  - Evaluate and revise the communication systems regarding reports, allegations, and cases. The group should explore what communication





methods and content are useful and desired, how information is used, and which stakeholders are included and when.

- Share information about high-frequency and high-effort cases with chapter leaders and alumni advisors and develop proactive prevention strategies for preventing situations from escalating to misconduct.
- Explore opportunities to involve council leaders in the response to fraternity/sorority misconduct. This could include routine meetings with OSACR staff to review emerging problems, including council officers responsible for misconduct in investigations, determinations, and sanction development.
- As capacity develops, OSACR, OFSL, and council leaders could consider providing councils the opportunity to manage low-intensity cases. This might require developing protocols for how cases are routed, providing training to student accountability officers, and adapting council bylaws and operational processes accordingly.

### **Support the committee exploring Panhellenic residential and programming space**

Penn State should provide support to the committee on Panhellenic spaces. As described above, there are few desirable spaces on campus large enough accommodate events for Panhellenic sororities based on their membership size. Additionally, occupancy in Panhellenic housing has dwindled due to a combination of changing preferences, the local housing market, the pandemic, and the eligibility policy. This has created several unintended consequences for Panhellenic sororities to navigate and left members feeling unsupported. Members expressed interest in Panhellenic housing during focus group conversations, but that has not translated into increased occupancy, leaving no clear direction about what housing options would resonate with members enough to be sustainable.

It is appropriate that Panhellenic leaders formed a committee to explore the issue, as chapter, council, and alumnae leaders will need to determine which options are most appealing. Similar to the recommendations above, Penn State should provide support to this group in the form of providing space, advocacy, resources, information, expertise, assistance, and connections to other departments. This effort could demonstrate their





support for the experience, provide agency and self-determination for groups, and address an area of acute interest to the Panhellenic community. Penn State should also engage national Panhellenic leaders and the NPC Area Advisor in this conversation.

### **Reexamine the credit hour requirement in the eligibility policy.**

Penn State should reexamine its choice of 14 credit hours as a standard for eligibility to join fraternities and sororities. This is inconsistent with peer institutions' standard of 12, which raised questions about which is more appropriate. Administrators indicated this was based on the advised course load for incoming students, but it is unclear whether this is simply guidance or a true campus norm. Penn State should examine data regarding the proportion of first-year students who are eligible under the current policy and those who would become eligible at a 12 credit hour standard. Pending the findings of this analysis, the university should consider lowering the requirement to the industry standard.





## **Appendix: Peer Institution Benchmark**

### **2024 Penn State University**

### **Fraternity/Sorority Life Program Review**

#### **Background**

Penn State University (Penn State) engaged RISE Partnerships (RISE), an external consulting firm specializing in management of fraternity/sorority programs, to examine the current climate of the fraternity/sorority community and evaluate the impact of several reforms made in 2017. As part of the project, RISE conducted a benchmark analysis of fraternity/sorority life programs at comparable peer institutions. RISE surveyed and interviewed fraternity/sorority professionals at these institutions to learn about their experiences and practices related to the focus of the review, specifically safety, member eligibility, the influence of unrecognized organizations, and member and organization accountability. Results and implications of the benchmark analysis are summarized in this report.

#### **Project**

##### **Peer Institutions**

RISE developed a list of Penn State's 17 athletic conference peer institutions and 13 Research 1 institutions with similar geographic or demographic makeup, and consulted with Penn State to select 11 institutions for the study. Representatives from the 11 institutions were contacted by email with a request to complete a phone interview and a short survey. Eight institutions responded, and their contributions informed the findings of this project.

##### **Data Collection**

RISE interviewed fraternity/sorority professionals at the eight peer institutions to collect information about their experiences and practices related to fraternity/sorority life. Interviewees also completed a short survey following the meeting to share institutional characteristics. Interview questions explored the institution's policies and practices related to the focus areas of the 2024 Penn State FSL Program Review, specifically student safety; membership eligibility standards and their impact; the presence of



unrecognized organizations; stakeholder relationships; and accountability policies and practices. Interviewers asked follow-up questions as time allowed and where relevant to the project, and gained additional insights on relevant topics such as housing and event spaces.

## Analysis

### Peer Institution Summary

Eight institutions participated in the benchmark process. All eight are public institutions; their demographic characteristics are outlined in the chart below:

	Undergraduates	Athletic Conference	Membership	Chapters	Percent FSL Membership
Penn State	42,223 (2023)	Big Ten	6847	70	17%
A	>30,000	Big Ten	2269	65	8%
B	>30,000	SEC	8698	59	25%
C	>30,000	Big Ten	9055	70	25%
D	>50,000	Big Ten	6226	64	14%
E	>30,000	Big Ten	6052	65	17%
F	>30,000	Big Ten	3511	53	11%
G	>20,000	ACC	2214	40	10%
H	>50,000	Big Ten	5913	57	18%

### Findings

Peer campuses described a primarily educational approach to student safety, supplemented by event monitoring, select policies, accountability systems, and an emphasis on a culture of care. Their practices are summarized in the chart below.

	First Year Safety Training	New Member Training	New Member Period	Chapter Leader Risk Training	Event Registration	Event Monitoring
Penn State	Yes	Yes	6 week	Yes	University	University
A	Yes	Yes	6 weeks	Yes	None	
B	Yes	Yes	6 weeks	Yes	University Police	
C	Yes		6 weeks	Yes	University	Council
D		Yes	None		Council	Council
E					Council	Council



F	Yes		6 weeks	Yes	University	Council
G	Yes	Yes	8 weeks	Yes	University	
H				Yes	Council	Council

All eight peer institutions require all fraternity/sorority members to complete some form of education about student safety and wellbeing. In some cases, this is delivered through university-wide new student programming, and others require fraternity/sorority-specific training when students join. Some institutions offer supplemental training on student safety to chapter and council leaders, including training for event monitors, risk managers, and/or chapter presidents; monthly roundtable dialogs; chapter-level programming; and topic- or issue-specific programs. Some institutions provide training directly through or by their FSL office. Others provide a framework requiring chapter-level education on safety topics and rely on partnerships with other offices on campus to provide training. Most of the peer campuses partner with another office on campus for any sexual violence training.

Seven of eight peer campuses require some type of event registration process, either as a university policy (four institutions) or as a council policy (three institutions). For five of these institutions, councils are responsible for event monitoring. Of the remaining two, one follows a party permitting process managed by university police, and another has no monitoring function.

In most cases, event registration serves the purposes of notification, planning, and record-keeping and does not indicate approval or disapproval of the event. Registration requirements tend to include training for event hosts (e.g., online training, TIPS, etc.) and a social policy review meeting each semester. Peers with university-owned fraternity housing tended to exhibit more university oversight for events compared to those with privately-owned houses. These institutions also include policy review meetings before the event, communication with resident directors, support from university police, and event-management training as part of their requirements.

Five of the eight peer institutions restrict the length of the new member process, with most limiting it to six weeks.

Colleagues described a variety of additional efforts to enhance student safety, such as





individual- and organization-level amnesty policies to encourage reporting and interdisciplinary coalitions that systematically study and address safety problems. One of the peer institutions also has an open dialogue with students and advisors regarding annex houses and the role they play in chapter events. Many colleagues described their efforts as centered in understanding the student experience, working in partnership with all relevant stakeholders, and equipping students with knowledge, skills, resources, and policies that help them navigate their choices.

### **Eligibility**

RISE examined peer institution's policies regarding which students are eligible for fraternity/sorority membership. For all institutions in this study, eligibility requirements primarily impact IFC and Panhellenic organizations, as MGC and NPHC organizations do not consider first-year, first-semester students for membership.







Institution	Eligibility Requirement	Recruitment Timing
Penn State	2.5 GPA, 14 credits 2.5 GPA, 27 credits (transfer students)	Spring
A	2.5 GPA, 12 credits	Spring
B		Fall
C		Fall (IFC) Spring (CPH)
D	2.5 GPA, 12 credits	Spring
E		Fall
F	2.5 GPA, 12 credits	Spring
G	2.5 GPA, 12 credits	Spring
H		Fall (IFC) Spring (CPH)

Four of the eight peer institutions require a 2.5 minimum GPA and 12 completed credit hours to join, meaning most students become eligible for membership during the second semester of their first year. These standards apply to all students, including those who transfer in to the university. Some institutions also require students to be in good behavioral standing with the student conduct office. Most deferred recruitment policies have been in place for approximately 25 years. One of the deferred campuses is reevaluating its eligibility requirements and may consider returning to fall semester recruitment.

The remaining institutions have no requirement for joining, including one that recently eliminated the credit hour requirement of its eligibility policy (2.5 GPA, 12 credit hours, and good behavioral standing) four years after it was enacted. For two of these institutions, IFC conducts recruitment in the fall semester and Panhellenic waits until the spring. Colleagues cited student preferences, competition with the athletic schedule, and academic priorities as reasons for a spring Panhellenic recruitment.

Nearly all peer campuses mandate some form of education for all new members before initiation as part of their eligibility policy, with topics including orientation to fraternity/sorority life, alcohol, hazing, sexual misconduct, and leadership development.

### Unrecognized Organizations

Five of the eight peer campuses interviewed indicated that unrecognized groups are



present on campus. These situations arose primarily due to disagreements between the inter-/national organization and the institution about student organization misconduct. Two of these institutions are working with organization leaders to reinstate some unrecognized organizations.

Institution	Unrecognized Organizations
Penn State	approximately 5
A	approximately 6
B	0
C	0
D	potentially 1
E	3*
F	0
G	0
H	4*

\*working to reinstate some organizations

Peer campuses with unrecognized groups reported actively communicating about the presence and implications of unrecognized groups among their stakeholders. They publish information about unrecognized groups on the fraternity/sorority web site, during new student orientation presentations, in mailers to first year students, and through parent and family newsletters.

One peer institution indicated that they work cooperatively with their contacts at fraternity/sorority headquarters and respective trade associations regarding unrecognized groups to share information, communicate about issues, and help each other navigate challenges. They shared that this open communication aided them in ensuring the university was benefiting the recognized groups more fully. In one case, FSL staff chose to keep advisors of unrecognized groups included on the community email distribution list despite not being recognized in order to maintain working communications.

## Accountability

	Primary Responsibility	Student Role	Headquarters Involvement
Penn State	Student Conduct		Yes
A	Student Conduct	Fraternity/Sorority Conduct Board	Encouraged
B	Student Conduct		
C	Student Conduct	Council Adjudication	Yes
D	Student Conduct		Yes
E	Student Conduct		
F	Student Conduct	Council Adjudication	Yes
G	Student Conduct		Yes
H	Student Conduct	Fraternity/Sorority Conduct Board	

The involvement of stakeholders in the organizational accountability process varies across peer institutions. All eight institutions reported that the office of student conduct is the primary mechanism for fraternal organization accountability. Additionally, four institutions involve fraternity/sorority leaders in the adjudication process, either by referring lower-level cases to a fraternity/sorority conduct board or by encouraging councils to take responsibility for adjudicating violations of their own policies. One campus indicated they have a strong system of self-governance both internally to chapters and within councils, while still addressing some incidents through university conduct processes.

Two campuses indicated their fraternity/sorority staff is not involved in the misconduct



process, relying only on student conduct to address issues, however fraternity/sorority staff at one of these campuses meet weekly with conduct staff to address issues as they arise. There was consensus among peer institutions that involving fraternity/sorority staff in misconduct processes allows the university to draw upon their expertise and to maintain communication among stakeholders. However, vesting responsibility for management and decision-making in a student conduct office allows fraternity/sorority staff to maintain relationships, support organizations in fulfilling any sanctions, and work proactively to reduce misconduct incidents.

Seven of the eight peers indicated there was some communication and coordination with national headquarters staff during the conduct process, while the remaining campus is working towards this practice.

### **Stakeholder Relationships**

Peer institutions varied in the range of support and communication with fraternity/sorority volunteers. Campuses said they work to support chapter advisors and house corporation leaders through regular newsletters, training sessions, routine meetings (in person and/or virtual monthly, semesterly, or annually), an annual policy review meeting, including advisors in coaching meetings with chapter leaders, and copying them on emails to chapters. One campus also does a meeting for faculty advisors each semester. Fraternity/sorority staff at one institution attend meetings of a self-organized group of house directors and house corporation leaders.

### **Implications**

The following distinctions emerged when comparing Penn State's fraternity/sorority life program with peer institutions.

- Penn State is more heavily involved in event-management than its peer institutions. While most institutions require registration, they defer management of the registration process and monitoring of events (where relevant) to council leaders.
- Penn State has the most stringent eligibility requirement among its peers. Most institutions that have an eligibility standard require that students complete 12 credit hours before joining, while Penn State's standard requires 14 credit hours. Additionally, Penn State places higher requirements for transfer students (27





credit hours) where peer institutions have no special requirement.

- Penn State is not alone in the emergence of unrecognized organizations, and many contributing factors to this are associated with disagreements about the findings of a misconduct process. However, Penn State has the strongest presence of unrecognized groups, and the reasons extend beyond disagreements about misconduct to disagreement with the reforms, poor relationships among fraternity/sorority stakeholders, and few barriers to continued operations.
- Compared to other institutions, Penn State has taken minimal steps to curb the influence of unrecognized organizations. Although Penn State shares information through its website, in orientation programs, and in public messages, its peer institutions employ a multilayered communication plan to inform constituents, including students, parents/families, and community members, of the lack of recognition and potential challenges.

