



MEMO

Date: September 23, 2015

To: Members of the Fraternity and Sorority Life Task Force

From: Eric Barron, President *EB*

Re: Task Force Charge

The fraternity and sorority system at Penn State, which is among the largest in the nation, enjoys a long and notable history. For decades, it has provided its members a sense of community, providing them places to live and study, to lead and serve, to discover and develop enduring relationships, and to engage in charitable causes, including the world's largest student run philanthropy—THON—which found its beginning there.

The individual organizations that comprise this community develop binding connections for their alumni, bridging members to one another and enhancing their deep and abiding connections to Penn State. The importance of this network of organizations cannot be overstated. We are proud of its rich history and many of the traditions it sustains. We are grateful for the tireless support of fraternity and sorority advisors, the oversight of national Greek-letter organizations, the contribution of the many housing corporations involved, and the partnership between town and gown that encourages the best outcomes for this highly visible part of our University community.

Most of all, we recognize and appreciate the central role played by our students themselves. Fraternities and sororities are private membership organizations, and no one contributes more to the success of these organizations than their undergraduate members, who live, study, and socialize within them. We acknowledge the many valuable contributions to the rewarding experience outside the classroom found at Penn State made by these students every day.

Even so, there also is cause for concern about the current state and direction of these organizations. Recent national news has included unflattering stories about the behavior of fraternities and sororities and their members, and some stories have been far worse than unflattering, illustrating deep inconsistencies between the expressed values of these groups and their actions. Profound questions about their relationship to alcohol, the scope of sexual misconduct among them, hazing, their racial and other biases, whether they encourage or discourage scholarship and personal development, and the town-gown tensions they sometimes foster have routinely surfaced. Although many of these concerns are far from new,

their enduring and perhaps deepening nature is cause for renewed attention, and the Penn State fraternity and sorority community has not been immune to many of these same unfortunate outcomes, as we know.

I am pleased that you have agreed to serve on a University-wide Task Force on Fraternity and Sorority Life, which will be chaired by Vice President for Student Affairs Damon Sims. It is my hope that this group will identify and describe the current state of Penn State's fraternity and sorority system—its strengths and weaknesses, challenges and opportunities—and define ways to build upon its successes and improve its outcomes. Your willingness to serve the University community in this way is deeply appreciated.

Our fraternity and sorority system is a complex, interconnected set of organizations that share certain features, but remain distinct from one another in meaningful ways. While it can be difficult to generalize about these groups, important generalizations remain both possible and useful. The Task Force should focus its attention to the broader aspects of this system and ways in which the University might influence the whole, rather than focusing on specific concerns about individual groups, even though you may find it necessary to illustrate your points with specific examples.

I do not mean to circumscribe your inquiry or limit the recommendations you may choose to put forward, but I ask that you include the following considerations among your recommendations:

- Offer a set of criteria that could be used by students, their parents, and others to evaluate the relative performance of individual fraternities and sororities. These criteria should enable accurate and useful comparisons among these organizations and the experiences they provide to their members, and should reflect the outcomes that we agree are most important for our students to achieve.
- Propose mechanisms for publishing and distributing the data about these organizations that are developed using these criteria. These mechanisms should encourage easy and timely access and be user-friendly. Students and others should be fully aware of the relative success of these organizations when making decisions about joining them.
- Suggest means by which these data and other insights might inform an early-warning system that would detect problems and offer the opportunity to effectively address them before they rise to a level that requires suspension or expulsion of a fraternity or a sorority.
- Examine the balance among the University, the local communities involved, the fraternity and sorority governing councils, alumni advisors and housing corporations, and the national Greek-letter organizations to determine whether that balance is properly calibrated or may require adjustments to meet the needs presented by a large and growing fraternity and sorority system.

- Seek student and broader opinion about the Greek-letter system using a survey, focus groups, or other means, and include opportunity for both students-at-large and undergraduate members of fraternities and sororities to suggest meaningful changes and improvements.

Each of you has been chosen for this task because you bring experience, insight, and good purpose to this critical discussion. We seek constructive suggestions about the best path forward, and the variety of your backgrounds and responsibilities should encourage the vigorous and purposeful consideration of these issues that is required. I am confident that your combined creativity and thoughtfulness will generate the range and depth of reflection and recommendations necessary if our fraternities and sororities are to succeed as they must. Although I hope to learn early next semester what results from your work, I would welcome additional conversation with you during your deliberations as you see fit. Thank you again, in advance, for this important work.

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