

Op-Ed: Student-led change is essential to progress on campus

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Unsafe alcohol use has long been an elephant in the room in regards to fraternity and sorority events not only at UC Berkeley, but nationwide. Throughout the past few semesters, we've seen national headlines about fraternities across the country involved in a variety of serious trouble — much of it involving alcohol.

The university, fraternity and sorority headquarters, and their respective councils have long had policies regarding alcohol consumption including the prohibition of the purchase of “hard alcohol,” i.e. beverages over 13 percent alcohol, for events and the banning of hard alcohol from common areas. Despite these policies, alcohol incidents and hospital emergencies remain an issue.

Recently, Berkeley's Interfraternity Council, or IFC, made an impactful change in how it ensured compliance with policies regarding alcohol. Supported by other members of the CalGreeks community, the IFC came together to find student-driven solutions to help change Greek drinking culture. In fall 2014, the IFC voted to impose escalating financial penalties on its members who break alcohol rules.

While there is clearly room for improvement, this culture change has made a meaningful impact; in the two weeks following the change, the number of alcohol-related incidents resulting in hospital transports plummeted by almost 60 percent, to seven incidents and five transports — an average of 3.5 incidents and 2.5 transports per week).

The trend continued last spring with a total of 39 transports during the 17 weeks of the semester — an average of 3 incidents and 2.3 transports per week — which was a decrease of nearly 28 percent from the previous semester.

Certainly, not all drinking-related incidents can be tied to the Greek system, yet the change in policy is having a ripple-effect across campus. The initial results are a promising start, and we're hoping to build on this student-led change to create a healthier and safer Berkeley community. We hope that this positive trend will continue in the opening weeks of the fall semester.



This change only scratches the surface of the vital ways fraternities and sororities ensure student safety at Berkeley. The IFC, for example, has worked to create a position specifically to deal with wellness issues. It has worked with the ASUC student government on safety issues and helps Greeks Advocating the Mature Management of Alcohol, or GAMMA, to provide snacks and water for all registered fraternity events.

The Panhellenic Council, or PHC, and Multicultural Greek Council, MCGC, both created new positions to help with wellness related issues about the same time as the IFC. The PHC has also implemented new policies around attending social events that are in line with the IFC's policies.

Now, some will argue that all fraternities and sororities should have been following university protocols regarding hard alcohol and common area use to begin with. This is true, and we believe that most recognized fraternities and sororities made a good faith effort in these areas. Student leadership is now strengthening efforts to create a culture of alcohol responsibility by arming its policies with “teeth” to hold violators accountable. The IFC has been examining its constitution and has created an IFC-wide Standards/Judicial Committee. This council comprises elected students charged with ensuring individual and organizational compliance with council regulations.

There is clearly more work to accomplish on all levels at UC Berkeley, yet we're creating a path of collaboration in which fraternities and sororities, supported by university staff, can continue to improve the UC Berkeley student experience, while also being part of the solution to reduce unsafe alcohol use.

As campus leaders, we have a responsibility to lead on alcohol safety and other pressing concerns that, with a concerted effort, we can proactively address. Beyond unsafe alcohol use, our campus has no tolerance for behaviors like hazing and biased harm and violence, including sexual assault. In addition, we can be more proactive about helping students address mental health needs. We would also like to acknowledge all of the student activists who raise awareness of these critical issues and push for change from both the university and their fellow students.



One looming challenge we face is how to address the issue of unrecognized groups — former chapters that are not a part of our current CalGreeks community. These groups, not currently recognized by the university, do not receive important trainings and advisement, nor are their events registered — which provides accountability in following policies and safety regulations. Groups that potentially put students at risk for alcohol incidents or in other unsafe situations tarnish the reputation of all fraternities and sororities. We will be working on ways to reach out to these students to encourage them to adopt policies that will bring them back into compliance and continue to reduce incidents.

Student-driven leadership is the key here — change can't be directed by university mandates alone in order to be meaningful and sustainable. We're hopeful this recent progress by the IFC can serve as a model for change as we look to continue solving pressing issues involving student safety.

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