

# ESSENTIALS

E - PUBLICATION

## 15 Ways to Connect the Big Three: SFL Advisor, Inter/National Representative, and Conduct Administrator

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It never fails. Whether I am with an inter/national organization representative, sorority and fraternity advisor (SFL), or a conduct administrator, someone says, "But Christina, what about the bad experiences?" We have all had them. A sorority and fraternity advisor who made things a little messy, a conduct administrator who clearly does not understand their jurisdiction of a sorority or fraternity chapter, or an inter/national representative who seems to be unable to effectively navigate a challenging alum member. The work of navigating a misconduct incident of a sorority or fraternity chapter sometimes feels like the hardest Rubik's Cube ever (as if Rubik's Cubes aren't already hard – right?). It feels like if one little thing gets missed or a conversation goes left, we lose all opportunity to create a positive and behavior-changing experience for the students. Addressing student behavior effectively is one of the most important roles we all have but is not always something we are doing day-in-and-day-out.

So, how do we do this well? There is no perfect answer, because the unfortunate truth is – yes, some inter/national organizations do have to think about their donors before they make a decision (institutions, too!), some sorority and fraternity campus-based advisors are underprepared to navigate misconduct, and some conduct administrators have absolutely no idea what they are doing when it comes to sororities and fraternities. Well, I have been in the position of all three. In every single role, I have navigated misconduct.



In every single role, I have built relationships with the other two groups. Have I always done it well? Absolutely not. Have I been *wildly* frustrated? Absolutely. Have I shared with those partners that their actions are a part of the problem? Yes, and not always in the nicest way. So, here is what I have learned, observed, taught to others, and experienced success in connecting the big three when navigating misconduct. Let's start with the preventive opportunities to build relationships prior to an incident occurring.

- 1. Learn the Lingo:** There is no world in which you know every word for every group or office, but please take some time to

learn the lingo of each other's work. Some examples might be working to not use the language "guilty" or "not guilty" when in the conduct process. Maybe you are a conduct administrator who uses the term "nationals." There are also changes that need to be made when interacting and engaging with cultural-based organizations. Recruitment, bid day, and PNMs are not *always* the right terms. Our words matter, and we communicate our understanding and respect through those words, so this is an early preventive action we can all engage in to create stronger relationships.

## 2. Learn the Organization, Not Just Your Standards:

Every sorority and fraternity is, in fact, not the same. Yes, some things work for everyone, but the conduct process is not one of the places we should be generalizing. Every chapter has different policies and standards, requirements for membership, time prior to initiation, language, and the students they attract. For example, I worked for a non-pledging organization and when a conduct administrator or SFL advisor would tell me the chapter submitted a 6-week new member process, I would immediately notice we were on two different pages.

On the other side, it is important for inter/national representatives and SFL folks to know conduct administrators must follow the institution's policies. There is a time and place to provide feedback (more on that later) but gaining an understanding of the processes prior to an incident will be a great benefit to your ability to support chapter leaders and volunteers. For inter/national representatives, this process may seem daunting but a simple list of what type of conduct is handled at the Council vs. the institutional level, who is the point of contact at the institution, if there is a student organization-specific code and/or process, and if the inter/national organization is able to participate, is helpful.

## 3. Use the Beginning of the Term to Reconnect & Meet Regularly:

People change, we forget who each other are, and we mostly only rely on connecting when something has gone wrong. Take the time at the beginning of a new term, to make a connection with the other two groups.

For inter/national staff/volunteers who manage conduct incidents, this could be a simple email to the SFL advisor and conduct administrator introducing yourself, providing any updates, asking for updates on the chapter from a

risk perspective, and offering to meet should there be a need.

For conduct administrators and SFL advisors, this may be an opportunity to recalibrate and prepare for the term. It is also a productive practice for these two groups to meet at least monthly. The cadence should be determined based on how regularly the sororities and fraternities on your respective campus are represented in the conduct process.

For SFL advisors, many times, when working with an IFC or Panhellenic member group, your main point of contact is a consultant or entry-level professional. Those individuals are instrumental in the inter/national structure, but if you have a chapter that is high-risk, creating a relationship with the risk/conduct/accountability staff member at the national office is not a bad idea. While for culturally-based groups, there may be a volunteer tasked with addressing chapter misconduct at the state or regional level. Be sure you know the structure and systems for the organizations within the community.

For conduct administrators, this is an opportunity to hold monthly or quarterly inter/national representative meetings - potentially by council - to review the community's areas of improvement, the extent of misconduct in the prior year, and create space for dialogue and constructive feedback. There should be clarity regarding who the organizations can invite (e.g., volunteers, alums, etc.). For a great example, check out our friends at the University of Tennessee Knoxville and their HQ Retreat!

## 4. Brush Up on Your FERPA

**Understanding:** Many higher education professionals – including a lot of our supervisors – believe the Family Educational

Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) applies to student organizations. The quick and dirty is it *does not*. Yes, if someone's name is documented in the allegations or final report, redacting that is appropriate. However, stating that you cannot partner or share findings because of FERPA is inappropriate. On the flip side, all entities must respect that conduct administrators must adhere to FERPA, and the protection of individual students is of utmost importance. There is a conversation to be had here about FERPA waivers, but that is a different article.

Now, some might wonder if FERPA is applied to the reporting party or the students interviewed in the investigation process, and it does not. However, most institutions are committed to protecting the identity of a reporting party and those interviewed in an investigation process. Ultimately, neither of those groups are impacted by FERPA as they are not being held responsible for a policy violation, which would constitute their "educational record."

Here is your one "anytime strategy" to work towards everyone singing from the same sheet of music.

## 5. Utilize the CC or BCC Feature:

SFL advisors, if you have a problematic alum or volunteer, or maybe you have heard rumors of misconduct but do not have enough information to move forward, CC or BCC the appropriate staff and volunteers. Inter/national organization representatives can navigate those situations in different, more significant ways sometimes. Not sharing rumored information can be problematic should more information become available, or it becomes patterned behavior. Conduct administrators, CC or BCC the other partners when you are communicating information to the chapter or advisors regarding a report,

the process, or completed/overdue sanctions. Inter/national representatives, the CC or BCC feature becomes important when you are communicating information regarding the status of the chapter or information you need that an SFL advisor could be helpful in reminding them of. You get the gist here; keep each other in the loop!

Now, for the part where things tend to go awry. These are some strategies to use post allegations.

**6. Start at the Beginning:** Call each other when something happens (inter/national representatives and conduct) and include the SFL advisor as able. I know, we have all had bad experiences. But call and say, "Hi [insert name]! We recently received an allegation regarding the [insert chapter]. At this time, we would like to discuss the allegations and how we can partner in this process. Are you open to that? [Wait for a response]. Great [assuming the answer was "yes"]! Before we go into the allegations, we would like to discuss what we expect in relation to sharing information [insert other expectations here]." Then do check-ins along the way and be honest when you believe the other has done something that is outside the bounds of what was initially discussed.

**7. Match Each Other's Energy:** I know this one is not always easy, but if there is a need for interim action, please be consistent. Nothing is more confusing or clearly articulating dissension than mismatched interim actions. If the inter/national organization does not have the authority to place an interim action or do so quickly, a simple agreement and reinforcement of the campus interim action is helpful.

I am going to take this time to say that a blanket full-blown interim suspension is not always the answer. It is sometimes, but if we can be specific and address the alleged behavior with our

interim measures, that is best. If a full interim suspension is warranted (e.g., severe hazing, severe injury, patterned behavior, etc.), there should be an opportunity to appeal or request that some events or meetings still be allowed to proceed potentially with inter/national, local, or SFL advisor oversight. Inter/national representatives and campus staff should request full details before approving any event(s).

## 8. Honor & Right-Size

**Expectations:** There are way more examples here than we have time for, but I will highlight three. First, share your expectations with each other in a constructive and mindful way. Second, an example of honoring each other's expectations might be if a conduct administrator asks the SFL advisor and inter/national representative to not share the allegations with the chapter, volunteers, alums, etc., *do not* do that. Honestly, it does not matter that this chapter is your National President's chapter or the biggest institutional donor's chapter (I mean I know it does *and...*); this behavior compromises the integrity of the investigation. And, if we are *truly* committed to figuring out what is going on AND addressing the behavior, we cannot ignore these types of expectations. Lastly, right-size expectations of each other. Maybe you work or volunteer for an organization where you do not have jurisdiction over the individual memberships (most do not without Board approval), share that. Does your National Board have to meet to make a final decision? Share that and the timeline. If you are a conduct administrator and the final decision does not rest with you, share that. Maybe you – conduct administrator – believe the incident rises to the level of loss of recognition, share that ASAP.

## 9. Acknowledge and Honor the Jurisdiction of the Campus & the Inter/National Organization:

This one is simple and frustrating. As mentioned above, most inter/national staff do not have sole jurisdiction over individual membership, placement of advisors, or even chapter officers. Conduct folk, National/international organizations are the only ones with jurisdiction to "close" a chapter; you may absolutely sanction loss of recognition, though. Lastly, sanctioning recruitment and membership reviews is sometimes a cop-out. I would encourage anyone thinking of these sanctions to conduct a root cause analysis before deciding on these type of outcomes. Now, I do understand why these may sometimes need to be outcomes. But, if you truly think a chapter should not be recruiting, it is probably time to think about loss of recognition, and membership reviews are less of a student sanction and instead are work for the inter/national staff and volunteers. So, make sure there is agreement and capacity for a membership review.

**10. Don't Make the SFL Advisor the Middle Person:** To be clear, SFL advisors should be in the loop when an incident happens within the community. They should also be a part of the sanctioning process, because to some extent, they know the chapters the best. However, they should not be conducting investigations as this blurs the lines of their purpose. It is not their role to investigate and adjudicate misconduct.

Additionally, we must stop relying on SFL advisors to be the go-between when an incident occurs. It should not be that the conduct administrator talks to the SFL advisor and then the advisor relays the message to the inter/national partner. SFL advisors *should* be a part of the conversation to provide perspective, but it never fails, the inter/national partner will have questions the advisor

does not know the answer to or cannot speak to. In my HQ experience, I often went directly to the conduct staff because they likely have the answers I am seeking (e.g., how to partner, next action items, etc.).

### 11. Joint Investigation & Outcome

**Planning:** This one is *extremely* simple. Do it together (inter/national organization and conduct). It makes it easier on everyone, but most importantly the students. Doing a joint investigation and determining outcomes together also sends a message to the students, alum, and volunteers that the two entities are unified. Additionally, this allows both parties to receive the information first-hand rather than relying on a filtered version. Collaborating on sanctioning and involving the SFL advisor also allows each entity to fill the gaps with the resources and systems they have access to. Too often, an outcome is too heavily focused on what the inter/national partner can do or the campus can do; there should be a balance.

### 12. Is it Individual or Organization

**Misconduct?:** Make room to consider this question. The more we hold individuals *and* organizations accountable, the larger dent we will make in curbing harmful behaviors. When we do not address individual behavior, we decrease the sense of personal responsibility.

### 13. Thinking Innovatively:

How can we do sanctioning differently? Is a 2-3+ year probation period actually changing behavior? Is a membership review with zero follow-up or education beneficial? Is a 6+ month-long social probation with no follow-up on how to run an event after that time helping or hurting our groups? Let's think outside of the box. Find below a list of creative or less utilized sanctioning ideas:

- a. Review of the outcome

with the entire chapter with representation from SFL, inter/national organization, and conduct

- b. Assistance in calendar planning if there will be significant restrictions
- c. Full re-education program (organizational and institutional) on policies, positions, rituals, risk, new member/member education, etc.
- d. Decision-making workshop
- e. Traditions-related programming (how to replace unhealthy traditions with new or modified ones)
- f. Removal of officers/advisors
- g. Restrictions until other items are completed
- h. Mock social event/prep meeting
- i. Allowed to have two social events; one without alcohol and one with, and if there are no incidents, the chapter can regain this privilege
- j. Require events to happen on campus or a third-party venue (consider financial implications)
- k. Encourage/require inter/national involvement in determining new officers (consider jurisdiction)
- l. Individual officer education from the inter/national organization and institution

Long stints of social restrictions without any support from a training or planning perspective and membership reviews where there is no focus on changing the culture and how to remove former members from the experience are typically unsuccessful. Additionally, let's talk apology letters and reflection papers. First and foremost, it can be extremely harmful to force someone to apologize who is not remorseful. But even more so, both outcomes typically rest solely on the president, *maybe* the larger executive board gets involved. So,

are you sanctioning the group or a handful of individuals? These types of sanctions can be meaningless and simply frustrating for those who the burden lands on.

### 14. Closure/Loss of Recognition:

Any way you view it, closing a chapter is messy, whether it is the students, the alums, or the staff; someone is making it challenging. So, again, how do we communicate that this may be an outcome upfront or when we begin to believe it might be? Additionally, I believe we must exhaust all options and consider a few items:

- a. Student organizations evolve over time, and the players change. How long has it been since the last incident, and who of the current group is still involved?
- b. Is it individual or organizational behavior? If we are only associating individual behavior with the organization and removing recognition as a result, it is likely the behavior will continue elsewhere.
- c. Was there a pattern of similar misbehavior?

Closing a chapter or removing recognition should be thoughtful of who needs to know, how they need to receive the information and from who, as well as create space for an opportunity to return later. Removing recognition is reasonable if the behavior was egregious or patterned. And, if a chapter is going to lose recognition, be mindful about the return plan; is it going to be a thoughtful plan to ensure behavior is eradicated or a sanction list for an entirely new group of students? Lastly, short suspensions are *tough*. What is the purpose and if the chapter is going to be suspended for less than four (4) years, what is the plan? Because typically, every misstep is used to push back the timeline of lost recognition.

Many times, when a chapter loses recognition, the members are still students on campus. What work are we doing with them to unlearn the harmful behaviors they have been participating in, and once a chapter has lost recognition and the organization has also closed them, remember, the inter/national organization's jurisdiction and ability to intervene does significantly diminish.

**15. Be Open to Feedback:** This one can be challenging because sometimes none of the players can actually change the process, or it cannot be changed quickly. Be kind to each other, share what is not working for you and the students in a constructive manner, and be mindful of how you discuss your frustrations with students and alums/volunteers.

I recognize these 15 points may not be easily implemented per your current policies and procedures, and we must start somewhere. I strongly encourage we all take this opportunity to review our processes and explore how we might be able to make the shift because we have got to figure this out. For the sake of our students and the future of our industry. We have been under great scrutiny over the past five-ish (arguably more) years. And if I am being honest, it has been for good reason even if people's reasons do not always adequately recognize all pieces of the puzzle. Digging in our heels and refusing to share information, not working together, or simply disregarding each other's decisions is not working. When we do this, we are not role-modeling productive communication skills for our students, we are not teaching collaboration skills, and most importantly we are not setting an example of positive conflict management and resolution skills for our students. *These* are the skills our students need. The ones we get so frustrated that they do not have. Well, how are we contributing to that? As always, if you need support, help, or

further education in this area, do not hesitate to reach out. ■

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