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UAlbany clamps down on underground fraternities
School officials act to entice unauthorized groups back to legitimacy to head off potential disasters

By Marc Parry, Staff writer

ALBANY -- University at Albany is trying to regain its grip on a handful of underground fraternities that are suspected of recruiting members and hosting events like real frats -- but with no rules.

The school tried a new approach last semester with a project called "amnesty month." Officials promised not to punish rogue frats that came forward to reapply for the university recognition that each lost years ago.

None did. But administrators told the Times Union that, as a result of the effort, they're now working with national and regional representatives from two of the four suspected underground fraternities to "re-colonize" at UAlbany. That's frat-speak for setting up legitimate chapters that will, it is hoped, put the fake ones out of business.

SUNY Plattsburgh experienced the ultimate danger of these groups in 2003, when a freshman died of water intoxication while pledging Psi Epsilon Chi. The school had banned that frat because of alcohol violations.

"We haven't had a serious incident here with our unrecognized fraternities," said UAlbany Student Activities Director Michael Jaromin. "But we don't want to have one."

It's recruitment season for frats now, and students in lettered T-shirts are out courting members. But lately Greek life at UAlbany has shriveled. Only about 436 of UAlbany's 12,000 undergraduates belong to the school's 35 recognized fraternities and sororities, which do not have houses. Membership topped 1,000 less than a decade ago.

Legitimate Greeks must go through an anti-hazing program and follow strict rules. They can't accept first-semester freshmen, while banned frats do. They can only take members with a GPA higher than 2.25, while banned frats take anyone. They shell out big bucks on insurance and national dues, while banned frats might spend an equivalent amount on alcohol.

"It's not really the number -- it's the quality of the parties," said another official fraternity brother, Ryan Kinney of Tau Kappa Epsilon. "They just have excess funds, bigger bank rolls."

Why did they lose recognition? Officials listed a range of possible reasons: failure to pay dues, membership declines and violations like hazing. The Times Union reported in 1998 that one of the frats now suspected of operating underground, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, was sanctioned in a binge drinking incident that involved a sorority pledge.

Its "brothers" now occupy something like four off-campus houses, according to a legitimate fraternity brother, Chris Lee, who has a friend in the underground frat that calls itself Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

Freshmen find out about the underground frats from party-hopping downtown, Lee said. An illicit frat can grow "faster than recognized fraternities," he said.

The 20-year-old Pi Delta Psi brother backed the university's efforts to reign in illegal frats.

"If it's unrecognized, they don't have any qualms when it comes to being a lot more harsh with the pledging process," Lee said from behind a table piled with flyers.

"You just don't give a damn," said the frat brother sitting next to him, Mick Chen.

Every fraternity brother interviewed was familiar with the underground groups, which administrators believe do not include sororities. But hard facts about them are hard to come by.

Besides Sigma Alpha Epsilon, university officials have received reports or complaints that mention three other alleged underground fraternities -- Sigma Alpha Mu, Zeta Beta Tau and Pi Kappa Phi. Still, the frats don't openly wear letters or host events on campus.

"It's not a very easy task to find out who they are because their goal is to not have you find out," Jaromin said.

Albany Student Press editor in chief Nick Reisman recalled attending what he believed was an unrecognized fraternity party two years ago that was "absolutely crazy."

"At one point this rusting hunk of what used to be a car gets set on fire and they had to like cordon it off with danger tape," he said. "I've never seen anything like it since."

Lee had heard stories of pledges made to do pushups on broken glass and eat "nasty stuff," according to two of the tales circulating among students.

The school administrators worried about these frats engage in a little espionage to fight them. They troll social-networking Web sites like Facebook. They investigate tips, including one from a faculty member worried that a student had written a paper that seemed to describe hazing.

When they decided to try the amnesty offer, administrators distributed a letter as widely as possible within the legitimate Greek community on the assumption it would trickle back to the illegitimate frats.

It did, though none took up the offer. Jaromin said, "Our sources say a number of them were thinking of it."

Brandon Rivera, a junior in Tau Kappa Epsilon, wasn't surprised that none contacted UAlbany's Greek life coordinator, Nancy Lauricella.

If he were underground and got a letter like that, Rivera said, "I would be like, 'Nancy's trying to trick us.'"

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