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A Long History of Reining In Fraternities at Cornell Has Come Up Short

The Ivy League university's bid to tame fraternities in the wake of gang-rape allegations is the latest of many attempts

By Joshua Chaffin, Douglas Belkin and Shradha Dinesh
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It was May 2023, and Martha Pollack, president of Cornell University, was talking to reporters from its student newspaper, the Daily Sun, about her administration's progress on a range of issues—from fundraising to affordability and international expansion.

When the subject turned to reining in Greek life at Cornell, Pollack struck a futile tone. A few months earlier, the campus had been shaken by reports of drinks spiked with Rohypnol, the so-called "date rape drug," at one fraternity house, and a sexual assault at another.

"Honestly, we are kind of out of recommendations," Pollack said. "If this stuff keeps happening, I don't know."

This week, Cornell's current president, Michael Kotlikoff, announced that fraternity parties would be suspended for the remainder of the academic year as the Ivy League school deals with mounting outrage over the "Cornell 7" case, in which a former student alleged she was gang-raped during a drug-fueled episode at a fraternity party two years ago.

Cornell has hired former Acting Attorney General Sally Yates to lead a review of how the university responds to sexual assault cases as it attempts to draw a line under the scandal.

Kotlikoff, meanwhile, is pleading to keep his job, telling restive faculty members at a hearing on Wednesday: "If this university believes they will solve this problem by replacing the president, that itself is not good for Cornell's reputation."

Yet, as Pollack's past comments attest, her successor's gambit this week is but the latest chapter in a yearslong effort by Cornell to tame fraternities that are both a disproportionate source of trouble and a fixture of campus life. Often, those efforts have been prompted by an allegation, such as the one made by Jane Doe, that garnered national headlines. Often, say critics, the response has fallen short.

"I am tired of hearing that the solution is another policy, another task force, another training," Lali Tobin, a public administration student, wrote in the Daily Sun this week.



Cornell students participate in a rally earlier this month. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

Cornell itself admitted failings in a task force report released in March. "Despite a long history of actions to address sexual assault, culminating in Cornell's Sexual Violence Framework…rates of sexual assault remain persistently high," its authors state.

Douglas Fierberg, an attorney who represented the family of George Desdunes, a Cornell student who died in a hazing incident in 2011, said the training, seminars and task forces give the appearance of action but have little effect. Cornell, like most schools, has no real interest in disrupting fraternity culture because it serves them well, he said.

"There's been no substantive reform, despite all the kids dying, despite all the women being raped for decades," he said.

Cornell says this time is different.

"It is clear from our recent student and faculty conversations, and campus protests, that we must do better: that the time for meaningful and lasting change at Cornell, and at campuses across the country, is now," a university spokeswoman said. She said the

school's decision to suspend fraternity parties for the rest of the academic year, along with other steps, goes further than prior efforts.

Frustration has boiled over into periodic calls to end fraternities at Cornell altogether. Yet those calls have also run into a stark reality: Greek alumni donate to their alma maters at five times the rate of other students, according to a 2021 Gallup survey. At many schools, sororities and fraternities provide much-needed housing and anchor social activity on campuses that may have few other options.

At Cornell, Greek life is a way, say proponents, to make its size more manageable for students. About a third of its 16,000 undergraduates are in fraternities or sororities.

Their gatherings can be an antidote to the bleak upstate New York winters in a town where few nearby bars cater to students. The boozy culture is so ingrained that one of Cornell's main fight songs, "Give My Regards To Davy," features an expelled student and heavy drinking.

"There's this constant tension between high school kids wanting to go to a school with Greek life and schools wanting to promote a healthy Greek life," said Andrew Miltenberg, a lawyer with extensive experience in Title IX cases who is now representing one of the so-called "Cornell 7."

Banning fraternities or pushing them off campus would only re-create the same problems elsewhere, Miltenberg argued. "What happens inside a fraternity party is really just a microcosm of what happens elsewhere on campus," he said, insisting fraternities were "not a portal to Sodom and Gomorrah."

One of the signal tragedies in recent Cornell history to shape the debate around Greek life was the hazing death of Desdunes in February 2011. Then 19, Desdunes, a sophomore, was a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

David Skorton, then-president of Cornell, vowed "to end pledging as we know it," blaming fraternities' and sororities' recruitment process for perpetuating hazing rituals.

"The Greek system is part of our university's history and culture and we should maintain it because at its best, it can foster friendship, community service and leadership," Skorton wrote in a New York Times op-ed. But, he added: "There is a pressing need for

better ways to bring students together in socially productive, enjoyable and memorable ways."

Remedies Cornell eventually introduced included banning freshmen from attending Greek parties during their first semester and shortening the pledging period from eight weeks to four to reduce opportunities for hazing.

Still, the following year, Chi Phi, the fraternity implicated in the Jane Doe case, was among a half-dozen at Cornell found responsible for hazing. (Among other tests, pledges were forced to drink a mixture of beer and pickle juice they were led to believe was urine).



The Chi Phi Fraternity building at Cornell. BEN CLEETON FOR WSJ

In 2025, the university's annual safety report noted 29 hazing reports on campus, at frats as well as other student groups, with Cornell meting out violations to 11 organizations.

A common failing in those cases, Fierberg argued, is that the Greek chapters operate with little or no adult supervision. Until that changes, he saw little use in remedies like the one announced this week.

"The university comes in and kicks them off campus, and then they come back unchanged," Fierberg said.

A few years after the Desdunes case, the focus shifted from hazing to sexual assault after a Cornell fraternity president was accused by a fellow student in 2016.

Pollack, a computer scientist and top artificial intelligence researcher, was named president the next year, just as the #MeToo movement was raising awareness of sexual assault, and soon had her own Greek life crises thrust upon her.

In 2018, members of the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity were accused of holding a contest in which members were awarded points for sleeping with women, according to a Cornell report. Another fraternity, Sigma Nu, had its recognition revoked for three years after multiple complaints of hazing.

Pollack previewed her own reforms in a letter to students in which she described fraternity behavior as "extremely coercive, demeaning, sexually inappropriate and physically dangerous." Among other measures, hard alcohol was banned from fraternity houses. A new website would include a record of their judicial infractions and members' average GPAs. They were also supposed to draft new member education plans with Cornell's vice president of student life, and employ live-in advisers.

Before Cornell could implement many of those changes, the campus would be rocked again in October 2019. Antonio Tsialas, a freshman, attended an unregistered rush party at Phi Kappa Psi where freshmen were required to drink large amounts of alcohol in a short period, said his mother, Flavia Tomasello. His parents became alarmed when he didn't turn up to meet them the next day. His body was found a day later at the bottom of the Fall Creek Gorge.



A view from the bridge at the Fall Creek Gorge. Antonio Tsialas's body was found there in 2019. BEN CLEETON FOR WSJ

Phi Kappa Psi was kicked off campus. Cornell, meanwhile, set up a scholarship under Tsialas' name and named Hazing Prevention Week in his honor. "They made some changes but things still remain the same," Tomasello said.

Tsialas' death prompted some Greek students to try to change the system from within. Maya Cutforth, a sorority member and then-president of the Panhellenic Council, proposed a freeze on all "mixers" with fraternities unless they would commit to measures to make their parties safer, such as inviting in trained sobriety monitors and providing transportation for partygoers.

In order for the plan to work, all sororities would have to abide by it, Cutforth reckoned, and so the vote would have to be unanimous. In the end, only about half supported it.

Cutforth, who was a Tri-Delta—the same sorority as Jane Doe—recalled all the steps young women would take to try to keep safe when she was at Cornell: never leaving their drink, designating a "sober sister," texting friends to make sure they'd made it home. "In my experience, every three to five years at Cornell there's either a major assault or tragedy that hits the news," she said. "But in between there are so many assaults or harassments or incidents of hazing that don't get reported."

Now 27, she despairs when hearing another Cornell president talk about reforming the Greek system. "They should have shut it down when I was there. They should have shut it down 10 years before," Cutforth said.

Soon after her failed initiative, Cutforth graduated and moved on. But one of Cornell's Greek houses was preparing for its return to campus. In 2022, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, George Desdunes' fraternity, was reinstated at Cornell after an 11-year hiatus.

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