

Alfred University trustees vote to eliminate fraternities and sororities

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The Alfred University Board of Trustees has voted to eliminate fraternities and sororities, ending their nearly-100-year presence on this campus. The vote came after a special Trustee Task Force on Greek Life delivered a report sharply critical of the University's Greek system, and recommended its elimination. The trustees directed President Charles M. Edmondson and his staff to draft a plan to implement their decision and authorized the Executive Committee of the Board to review and approve the administration's plan on behalf of the full board. While the board's action was taken at its meeting late on Friday, the announcement was delayed until today to permit Gerald Brody, vice president of Student Affairs, to notify presidents of fraternities and sororities of the board's decision. "We wanted to extend that courtesy to our students," said President Edmondson. "The Board of Trustees is convinced that the Greek system is beyond repair," said Robert McComsey, chairman of the Board. "The vote was virtually unanimous - 25 trustees voted in favor and one abstained. We must ensure that Alfred University provides an environment conducive to learning and one that assures the safety and well-being of all students. From this report, it became clear to all of us that our Greek system simply does not contribute to the type of learning environment we want at Alfred University." The report was the culmination of more than three months' work by the Task Force, headed by Board Chairman Emeritus Dr. Gene M. Bernstein. The 1969 alumnus was president of his fraternity while at AU. The majority of the eight-member task force were Greek affiliates, as are 82 percent of the Board of Trustees who are AU alumni. The Board appointed the special task force in February after the death of Benjamin Klein, 21, a junior business major from Putney, VT. Klein had allegedly been beaten by two of his fraternity brothers before his death, although a medical examiner's report said the injuries Klein sustained did not cause his death. "The Task Force concluded that while many students who belong to Greek organizations are outstanding young people, some of these organizations and the Greek system they comprise have become dysfunctional," said Bernstein. "I want to emphasize that during the course of our investigation, the Task Force members met many members of fraternities and sororities who are ideal students. We also recognized the tremendous achievements and contributions of our more than 6,000 Greek alumni." Bernstein said the Task Force evaluated three different options: 1) to continue the Greek system as it is; 2) to drastically reform the system; or 3) to eliminate fraternities and sororities. "As we began reviewing reports and documents it became abundantly clear that the first alternative was neither viable nor responsible," Bernstein said. "We examined what has happened at 20 other Northeastern colleges and universities, including some of the most prestigious institutions in the country, such as Amherst, Williams, Colby, Middlebury, Dartmouth and Bucknell; all have either undertaken major reforms of their Greek systems or eliminated them entirely. Those who did away with fraternities and sororities found it had a positive impact on academic quality and ability to recruit students and faculty." At Alfred University, the Task Force found membership has declined from 45 percent of the student body 40 years ago to 10 percent today. Among entering freshmen last year, only 4 percent expressed an interest in joining a fraternity or sorority, raising questions of their long-term viability, a concern heightened by the fact that fewer than half the members currently live in the chapter houses. Additionally, "Greek membership does not reflect the changing campus population in terms of women, minorities or international students, all of which have an important future at Alfred University," Bernstein said. The Task Force also learned that students in Greek houses tend to drink more and more often than their peers at Alfred University, and that while there are some excellent students who are members of fraternities and sororities, the overall grade-point averages of students with Greek affiliations tend to be lower than the campus average, and lower than the students' SAT scores and high school ranking would have predicted. There are also growing numbers of violations of University policy. This spring, six of the 12 Greek organizations (eight fraternities and four sororities) were under sanction for violations. The Task Force also rejected the second alternative - drastic reform of the system. "The University tightened its guidelines for fraternities and sororities, beginning in 1992. It also hired additional staff to work with the Greek organizations, offering a number of educational programs from leadership development to how to host a party responsibly," said Bernstein. "The University has repeatedly encouraged fraternities and sororities to set higher academic standards for themselves and to police their own behavior, but overall, they still do not meet our expectations." Furthermore, the task force noted, the University has offered financial assistance to the Greek houses, including establishing a revolving loan fund to help them with repairs to their houses. "Ten years of determined efforts to reform the system have failed to produce satisfactory results, as evidenced by the continued decline in membership," said Bernstein. "In the end, the Task Force concluded the most responsible alternative is to eliminate these

organizations." "This action requires us to decide very soon what to do with approximately 100 students who planned to live in those houses next fall," said Edmondson. "We must determine whether they may stay there and, if so, what special conditions should be required. Parents must also decide, in light of the Task Force's findings, where they want their children to live." He expects to resolve this question within a few weeks and to notify parents and students of their housing options as soon as possible, so that they can make alternative living arrangements if necessary.

"Whatever the decision we reach in this matter, every student will have a place to live this fall," he said. Along with its recommendation that the Greek system be eliminated, the Trustee Task Force urged that the University act boldly to enhance the quality of life on campus. Edmondson said that in all likelihood major changes - and major investments in programs and facilities for students - lie ahead. "This decision by the Board of Trustees will allow the University to reallocate resources now directed at the 10 percent of students who have Greek affiliations to improving the quality of life for all students," said Brody, who will be among those drafting the implementation plan. "We will be able to explore ways of enhancing residential life options for all students, perhaps by integrating housing and academics with more special interest housing units." The University already has a Language House, an Honors Program House, Hillel House, and the Environmental Studies House, where students with a common interest live together in a semi-independent unit. "As we implement the board's decision, we must remember our ultimate goal: to improve the living and learning environment for all students on this campus," said Edmondson.