**[The Daily Nebraskan]**

HEADLINE: Students reflect on Fall 2021 FIJI protests, ongoing challenges facing UNL

Sawyer Belair Oct. 13, 2022

It’s been a little over a year since heated protests engulfed the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s campus, but their effects are still rippling through the community.

After an [alleged sexual assault](https://www.dailynebraskan.com/news/campus/every-day-until-they-re-gone-protesters-surround-fiji-after-alleged-sexual-assault/article_41be5262-0567-11ec-bc20-d78db61ac0ea.html) in the first week of the Fall 2021 semester by a member of UNL’s Phi Gamma Delta fraternity, commonly known as FIJI, waves of protesters gathered outside of the Nebraska Union and the FIJI house for multiple nights, breaking headlines [around](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/nebraska/articles/2021-08-28/protests-continue-after-alleged-sexual-assault-at-frat-house) the country.

Jacob Drake, the current president of the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was right in the middle of it.

“It was intense, it was emotional,” Drake said. “It was so difficult to be in that space, sharing that experience with students, but it was also really impactful to see students in solidarity in a way I’ve never seen before.”

Drake was just one of hundreds of students who gathered in front of the union – and the FIJI house directly across from it – in the late nights of the first week of classes of the Fall 2021 semester to protest the alleged rape and battery of a 17-year-old female student by a member of the FIJI fraternity.

Nonetheless, according to a statement provided to The Daily Nebraskan by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Police Department, the case has been closed and no charges were ultimately filed. The department gave no additional comment.

Following the incident, the university temporarily suspended FIJI while the investigation was conducted, before officially suspending the fraternity through 2027 in October 2021 for having ”violated the Student Code of Conduct with alcohol-related and other violations” according to the Office of University Communications, who refused to comment further on the case or the specific terms of the suspension.

While the details behind why the unnamed young woman – who was allegedly one of multiple victims in sexual assault cases that occured within the fraternity, according to a [petition](https://www.change.org/p/university-of-nebraska-lincoln-ban-fiji-forever-unl) to “ban FIJI forever” which was signed by over 500,000 people as of Oct. 10 – decided not to go forward with charges remain unclear, some have speculated.

UNL alum Jenny Barrett, who worked as an advocate for the Center for Advocacy, Response and Education program that supports sexual assault survivors and survived sexual assault herself, offered insight.

“I know how traumatizing it is to have to talk to police officers, to have to tell your parents, to have to go through all those steps and relive that so many times,” Barrett said.

In addition to the hostile environment that accusers face, Barrett added that she also believes there are systems in place for fraternities to get away with predatory behaviors – and that the student-run Interfraternity Council is guilty of allowing such behavior to go unchecked for too long.

“So what can we do to end that cycle, to end those vulnerable populations and to make sure that men and fraternities understand that this isn’t just about having sex and partying?” Barrett said.

Then-president of IFC Erik Goodwin, who was involved with CARE, was one possible avenue, but Barrett said the CARE team was constantly frustrated by the lack of cooperation between the two organizations.

“We were like, ‘Okay, great, we have this great resource, [Goodwin] can talk to all of these people,’ and it still wasn’t being done,” Barrett said. “I was like, ‘Why are you in CARE if you’re not going to have us come to your IFC meetings?’”

The connection between CARE and the IFC is one thing the latter organization has specifically sought to strengthen this year, according to current IFC Director Of Strategy and Public Relations Mark Nusterer.

Starting last spring, the IFC began implementing CARE chairs – delegates to the program from each fraternity in the organization – to help educate members on the importance of victim advocacy and to establish a cultural shift within UNL’s male greek community.

“I’d be lying to you if I said this has been a smooth process,” Nusterer said. “I think you can imagine the reaction that these guys might get when going back to their houses, but this is certainly a step in the right direction, and we’re really putting awful weight behind making this successful.”

Nusterer, who was the vice president of IFC at the time of the FIJI incident, added that although the organization has retooled its approach around victim advocacy, they are also focused on “advocating for the facts” in light of a slew of unconfirmed rumors surrounding the incident that spread through word-of-mouth and on platforms such as Snapchat and Yik Yak.

One such rumor stated that the IFC can adjudicate on matters of sexual assault. According to Nusterer, that claim was blatantly false: only the University is in charge of such matters.

“I think more than anything, it was tough to get the facts right,” Nusterer said. “And, God forbid, anything like this happens again in the future, we can’t get swept up in the rumor mill that happened last August.”

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the case, Barrett said that the protests are indicative of a repeated pattern of behavior.

“It’s definitely kind of a build-up of, ‘I’ve already heard my friend got assaulted by someone in FIJI.’ All of us had that shared experience of being angry at this one entity that we were over it.” Barrett said. “It isn’t even just the one FIJI entity, it kind of is Greek life.”

Barrett said the institutional problems surrounding sexual violence on campus extend beyond its student-run organizations as well.

Following the incident, she recalled conversations with Chancellor Ronnie Green about her time working with the [Chancellor's Commission to Prevent Sexual Misconduct](https://sexualmisconduct.unl.edu/) as a freshman during the 2019-20 academic year, pressing him on what she said were insufficient actions taken by the university following the commission’s report.

The research by the Chancellor’s Commission, she said, pointed to a lack of funding and staffing for the school’s Title IX office, which often forced the responsibility of fielding hundreds of reports to fall to a single person, instead of dividing up the labor amongst a larger staff.

After the commission submitted its [recommendations](https://sexualmisconduct.unl.edu/docs/committee_report.pdf) in Fall 2020 – following a chaotic disruption due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of that year – Barrett said she was struck by the lack of action from the university.

“They kind of picked and chose things that they thought were easier to implement,” Barrett said.

According to a September 2022 [statement](https://news.unl.edu/newsrooms/today/article/university-continues-work-to-strengthen-sexual-misconduct-education-training/) from University Communication and Marketing, UNL has been working to address the commission’s recommendations by instituting annual sexual misconduct training for all incoming students and employees of the university, offering training for Title IX employees on trauma informed care and promoting confidential resources as well as the definition of affirmative consent.

Barrett said that a lack of new funding for both the CARE and Title IX offices from the university was the biggest issue. This also resulted in the CARE program ending up with a single new advocate in 2022 when it was promised funding for four by the university.

“It’s just a lot of promises that are open-ended, that never end up happening, usually based on money,” Barrett said. “After time and time of hearing ‘No,’ and ‘No,’ and ‘Yes,’ but then it doesn’t happen, you just kind of get burnt out and exhausted.”

The Office of the Chancellor did not respond to The Daily Nebraskan’s request for comment on the case.

In the months after the incident and before her graduation, Barrett also noticed a steep drop-off in notoriety around the August 2021 rape case and the systemic issues surrounding it, something she said the university could have helped to combat.

“They could have kept it in the news,” she said. “They have that authority.”

Drake said that he believes the approach to handling victim advocacy and sexual violence awareness has changed gears rather than lost focus.

“I think our efforts are continuing, students are still interested in making sure that the university is taking steps,” he said. “I don’t think it’s quite as reactionary or intense, I think it’s now very methodical and deliberate in how we respond, how we make positive change.”

To that end, he said that ASUN works alongside campus organizations such as the IFC and chancellor’s office to supplement their efforts to initiate positive changes in both the Greek life and broader campus community.

“I do like to think that the Greek community, and the greater student community and administrators, everyone’s kind of [working] behind the scenes,” he said.

Although the strong animus towards Greek life the incident triggered has been jarring to the IFC, Nusterer said it has given them plenty of motivation for ensuring predatory behavior is stamped out.

“It is challenging to come to terms with the fact that actions of a complete stranger, with whom you may have no association, really do seriously impact our entire community, for better or worse,” he said. “That puts a lot of pressure on us to hold ourselves and each other accountable.”

Nusterer said that ultimately the IFC is more concerned with fostering lasting results than quelling negative PR.

“We’re not as worried about the public image as we are about making real changes,” he said. “We don’t want to blow smoke up anyone’s ass, pardon my French.”

As the echoes of last year’s chaotic first week of classes fade further from memory, Drake said that what’s most important is maintaining the sense of unity it produced on campus and utilizing it to spread change far beyond UNL’s 873-acre city campus.

“We need to stop pointing fingers,” Drake said. “I think it’s important to move the conversation from that case to broader; ‘How is this affecting the entire community? How does this affect colleges across the United States, how do we lead that charge?’”

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