Andi Moritz is likely a name you’ve never heard. While a freshman at Bryn Mawr in 2016, she posted on a college ride-share board that she was seeking transportation to a political rally. She didn’t get the ride; instead, she was excoriated by her peers for wanting to attend the rally. As a student already struggling with anxiety and depression, she dropped out of school two days later, never returning. She was canceled.

Keziah Daum, a Utah high school student, decided on a vintage dress for her prom in 2018. She found a Chinese cheongsam. Posting pictures on Twitter that night, she set off a social media storm with one man’s tweet accusing her of cultural appropriation which was then shared and angrily responded to more than 42,000 times. She was canceled.

Or, consider this Facebook post I saw earlier this year: “I am Facebook friends with an acquaintance whose husband is racist. I’ve already unfriended him. Should I unfriend her too?” Canceling behavior.

So, what is “being canceled?” Being canceled is when someone or a group decides to stop supporting a person, place, or thing due to a negative event or action).

Cancel culture teaches one thing: if someone or something does something wrong, stop supporting. An apology? A behavior correction? It doesn’t matter; they should’ve known better. There is no doubt that some behaviors should be confronted: sexual assault and deviance, racism, discrimination, to name a few; however, the problem with outright “canceling” behavior is that it can be detrimental to mental health. It does not allow people to be human and make mistakes. It does not allow for second chances and forgiveness. It is toxic for the canceled, for those who fear being canceled, and/or the canceler.

You likely didn’t need me to introduce you to the concept of cancel culture; you’ve likely heard about it. Why do I feel the need to write about it? What does it have to do with the Abolish Greek Life (AGL) movement? I write because I work with people who work with college students and perpetuating cancel culture in our language, practices, and policies does not serve any of our students well. AGL is an offshoot of Cancel Culture. Rather than work toward reform, the swifter answer is to abolish. Our current generation of college students need our assistance and social science informs us what we can do about it.

Cancel culture emerged through the power of social media. At no other time in history can an individual, who does not normally have power, receive endorsement from 42,000 people, as in confronting Keziah Daum on her choice of prom dress. Social media allows those who have not historically had a microphone to have a platform from which to address critical issues. It can easily be argued that this is a good thing — a flattening of the curve, so to speak, as to who has the ability to share perspectives. But, it is important to remember: power itself is neutral. Power can be used justly and wisely. Power can also be used unjustly and unwisely for harmful purposes. Depending on the situation, the unjust and unwise use of power can be called a variety of things: intimidation, abuse, bullying, fraud, discrimination, tyranny, and canceling, to name a few.

Anxiety and depression among college students is at an all-time high (LeBlanc and Marques, 2019;
Seemiller and Grace, 2019; The Jed Foundation, 2020). Cancel culture plays into that as the act of being canceled is both isolating and lonely, feeling as if everyone might give up on you before you can even apologize or correct your mistakes.

For those doing the canceling? The same holds true. Canceling holds only temporary satisfaction as it corrects what is seen as an immediate wrong but does not normally change the mind of the individual (or concept or organization) that has been canceled — it only serves to silence and often that silence is only temporary. The overall goal is not achieved.

It is equally important not to become an enabler in such conversations. If responding with “statements,” for example, without tangible actions, enablers of cancelers will find that what they offer is ultimately not enough. In leading an organization, if you don’t agree with cancelers, then don’t say you agree. It results only in a short-term win. And then the “win” for the canceler is hollow — which is why “statements” so frequently backfire on organizations. Cancelers seek resolution to a perceived or real conflict and this requires engagement. Thus, no one is served by simple gestures or statements made by enablers. Such attempts do not change the minds of all stakeholders. Educators must manage conflict resolution, not enable.

Then, there are those who live in fear of being canceled — this too is an anxiety producing byproduct that stifles speech, healthy risk taking, and confidence.

So, for those facing demands at the threat of being canceled or abolished and, more importantly, those who lead campuses or organizations that are facing demands: What message are you providing your students if you immediately give in? Possibly,

- they cannot make a mistake or else, their life as they know it, may end;
- you must sometimes compromise what you believe because someone else doesn’t like it and they might make you “look bad;”
- someone who is louder has power over them;
- those who are doing the canceling that, if they yell loud enough, they will get their way;
- reinforcement for cancelers that debate, exchange of ideas, and differing points of view are unimportant; and
- contributing to the anxiety/depression cycle that is crippling today’s college students.

Now, let’s turn to a psychological theorist to understand a little more about what is happening in canceling behaviors and how to switch course.

William Perry, one of the early theorists of college student development, studied the cognitive and ethical development in undergraduate students. In “Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A scheme” and “Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning” Perry posits that college students go through four stages of mental and moral development: Dualism, Multiplicity, Relativism, and Commitment.

- **Stage One: Dualism.** Dualism is the belief that every problem is solvable; students are to learn the right answers. This is typically discussed for people who are very young.

- **Stage Two: Multiplicity.** This stage suggests there are two types of problems: solvable, and also problems for which the answer is not yet known.

- **Stage Three: Relativism.** During this stage, all solutions to problems must have reasons, and be viewed within a specific context. The basis for this stage is that every issue must be evaluated because everything is contextual.

- **Stage Four: Commitment.** This is the stage in which there is an acceptance of uncertainty as part of life. During this stage, students use the combination of personal experience and evidence learned from outside sources to arrive at conclusions.

AGL rests at the lowest level: dualism. Every situation has a right or wrong. Some situations do have a right or wrong. Others do not and are more complex. And that is the lesson we must teach students in our work if we’re practicing student development — whether in the classroom or through policy making.
I realize in writing this, I risk being canceled. I was even counseled by several friends and colleagues not to write. I cannot control others. I can attempt to control my very small sphere of the world ... and even that is misguided as anyone who has lost someone very close to them knows. I write because if what we’re talking about is endorsing “canceling” because of disagreement with a choice of clothing, or the friends with whom they associate, or their political affiliation or religion, or sexual orientation, or race, or the mission of their organization or college or university, then we are not doing our jobs as educators. It’s important in reading this to realize that in merely writing this I face a possible critique for relying on social science research and best practices to encourage conversation and dialogue among all stakeholders.

So, how do we confront AGL, as a form of cancel culture? Or, more importantly, how do we best support our students in their own development? As adapted from an article in Psychology Today:

- **Have Compassion.** Someone who is canceling others may have a legitimate claim; they are just going about it in an unhealthy way. Have compassion. The canceler may be acting partially out of fear of him/her/themself being canceled. Having compassion for someone or some group who is attempting to “cancel” is not approval. It simply says, “I hear you, and while I appreciate what you’re saying, I don’t necessarily agree with you,” or, “I hear you, but to effectively make change, we must take into account multiple perspectives; let’s work together.” If fortunate, this is where your work begins. But, if the canceler is unwilling to work with others, you have a responsibility to stand up to the canceler, so then ....

- **Name It.** Tell the truth and tell it to others. And, if appropriate or able, tell the truth to those who are attempting to cancel fraternity/sorority life and to those who are enabling those who are canceling. Those who are canceling may acquire institutional authority but not necessarily moral legitimacy. When attempting to abolish fraternity/sorority life, power is both unjust and fragile. The more uneasy they feel, the more they use their popularity to justify their position.

If there are lies, name them. If there is illegitimacy, name it. In your messaging, continually work back to compassion, encouraging conversation, and following processes to affect desired change.

- **Stand with Others.** Cancelers in the AGL movement target lone individuals or groups to prove their dominance and create fear. Gather allies who will stand with you. Together, stand with and for those who are being canceled. It may make no material difference; however, it always makes a moral and psychological difference to those who stand and to those they stand for. As educators, if what we hope to do is diminish anxiety among students, let us stand against those who may be canceling, stand for those who are being canceled, and stand for those who live in fear of being canceled.

- **Disincentivize the AGL Movement.** The act of canceling itself is rewarding even if there’s no concrete benefit. There must be a cost. Enablers also need to pay a price; otherwise, why stop? There are a variety of ways to disincentivize AGL, depending on the situation:
  - With moral confidence, name the canceling for what it is.
  - Dispute false claims of legitimacy.
  - Confront lies, including denial of harms they’re doing.
  - Build up sources of power to challenge those who cancel.
  - Confront enablers; they’re complicit in the canceling.
  - Engage the legal system.
  - Remove cancelers from positions of power.

- **See the Big Picture.** Canceling happens in a larger context of enabling and fueling conditions. A playing field may become unfairly tilted in a cancelers favor; tilt it back. Cancelers in the AGL movement draw
power from others’ grievances; address the grievances (go back to Step 1: Have Compassion) and reduce their power.

Those supporting the AGL movement seek attention, and, again, they may have an important message to share. In responding, always go back to Step 1: Have compassion, listen, and work to affect change through established processes. Relying on established processes creates buy-in for eventual change. Ignoring established processes that create buy-in continues to separate and divide. If the goal of the canceler is to simply cancel and not engage in productive change, then moving to the second step of naming the harmful behavior is important. Perpetuating canceling behavior focuses on division and, thus, does not encourage higher levels of human development.

Educators must assist others in creating environments that encourage the Principle of Charity which teaches us to believe what a person is actually saying rather than interpreting meaning that may not be present — it encourages listening for the good rather than assuming ill-intent. The Principle of Charity allows us to recognize that there is a larger world out there than only that of separation and division. As humans, we are more alike than different — if we choose to converse and find those points of same-ness. So much of life is working, is agreeable, is beautiful, and is honorable. Disengage from the outrage and fault-finding of others who say not enough is being done. Only then, in your position of leadership, can you break the anxiety-producing cycle of fear that creates depression — for the canceled, for the canceler, and for those who fear being canceled. Only then, in your position of leadership, are you actually leading. Merely giving in to the loud voices — without considering the many voices and positions — is not leadership. It is Kohlberg Stage 1. It is William Perry Level 1. It is your job to both protect the Andi Moritz’s on your campus and lead meaningful, inclusive conversations related to fraternity/sorority life on your campus.