

Gen Z, Helicopter Parents, & Self-Governance

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The last five years have been an incredibly unsettling time in the fraternity/sorority industry. Communities have been rocked by high-profile hazing deaths, incidents involving over-consumption of alcohol, and allegations of rampant sexual assault. Colleges and universities are becoming less tolerant of this behavior, with at least 30 documented instances of temporary, system-wide shutdowns of campus fraternity/sorority communities during that time, and at least one campus (Harvard) announcing plans to punish individual students for being involved in fraternities and sororities.

While the challenges associated with fraternities and sororities are not new, they have become more acute in the last five years. Not coincidentally, students falling within Generation Z began coming to college five years ago (2013) and by 2017 (a tough year for fraternities and sororities nationally) made up the majority of traditional-aged college students and thus, a majority of our fraternity/sorority chapters.

So what does the presence of Gen Z on campus have to do with increased problems in fraternities and sororities? The answer may lie in how Gen Z members were raised.

Gray (2011) studied longitudinal trends related to children's play. With Gen Z, he has uncovered a disturbing trend. Relative to previous generations, children in Gen Z were offered much less unsupervised, unstructured playtime. Because of helicopter parenting, children's play has shifted from outdoor, unsupervised activities to activities under the watchful eye of parents or other adults. In addition, most of the "unsupervised play time" of Gen Z youth has not been spent outdoors with friends, but rather indoors, alone, with a computer, video game, or iPad.

Because of this lack of unsupervised, unstructured playtime, children in Gen Z received much less practice and experience resolving conflict. When children are constantly supervised by adults, conflict is often resolved by the adults stepping in and mediating arguments and disagreements. As noted by Horowitz (2015), denying children the opportunity to experience conflict and learn how to resolve that conflict leads to a situation in which young adults increasingly invoke third parties to resolve their conflicts rather than figuring out how to resolve those conflicts on their own. Horowitz goes on to note that this inability to resolve conflict is directly at odds with communities seeking systems of self-governance.

The dots here are not difficult to connect. After a childhood practically devoid of unstructured playtime, members of Gen Z come to college with a deficit in terms of their conflict resolution

skills. They join fraternities and sororities that have long relied upon systems of self-governance to regulate member behavior and enforce group standards and expectations. Unfortunately, those models of self-governance are no longer working as they should. Self-governance requires accountability, accountability requires confrontation, and members of Gen Z lack the conflict resolution skills and the self-efficacy required to successfully navigate those confrontations. Behavior that would have quickly been addressed ten years ago now goes unchallenged in many fraternity/sorority chapters because students lack the skills and the confidence necessary to hold one another accountable. This inability to engage in self-governance, inherent in Gen Z, is one of the greatest challenges facing the fraternity/sorority industry today.

Knowing this, how can fraternity/sorority professionals adapt and adjust to this new reality? What strategies might be effective at helping our students overcome their inability to resolve conflict and self-govern? While there are likely many answers to these questions, three practices show the most promise.

1. Teach new members healthy confrontation skills and provide opportunities for practice. As headquarters develop meaningful membership education programs, they would be wise to consider the development of curriculum designed to teach new members how to navigate conflict in a healthy, productive way and – more importantly – to provide them with opportunities to practice challenging and confronting one another in a safe, protected space.

2. Focus on meaningful, authentic relationships that will allow informal accountability to thrive. Research by McCreary, Cohen, Schutts and McCreedy (2018) found chapters with the highest levels of accountability within their brother/sisterhood focused more time and energy on their informal (i.e. peer-to-peer) systems of accountability rather than their formal systems (i.e. standards/judicial board). These chapters demonstrate a strong correlation between accountability and belonging, and attribute their ability to navigate peer-to-peer conflict to the deep, meaningful relationships they have with one another. By focusing the new member socialization process around the creation of deep, meaningful relationships, fraternity/sorority chapters will create an environment in which healthy conflict is more likely to occur.

3. Develop organizational misconduct systems that incentivize chapters to self-govern. Top-down systems of organizational misconduct that prioritize university investigations may be helpful at addressing misbehavior, but they are not helpful at providing chapters with incentives to self-govern. Adopting policies such as the “self-reporting policy” at the University of Alabama (in which chapters who report individual incidents of hazing

are supported in addressing individual behavior) or the “partnership model” at LSU (in which chapters are given an opportunity to self-investigate alleged wrong-doing before the university steps in) show great promise in helping chapters develop stronger mechanisms of self-governance by supporting and incentivizing self-governing behaviors.

By focusing energy in these three areas, fraternity/sorority professionals can address one of the greatest challenges facing our organizations and, in so doing, help fraternities and sororities better live out one of their basic missions: to mold and develop adolescents into successful, thriving, and competent young adults.

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