

## Are We Moving the Needle in Risk Management and Harm Reduction

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The risk management needle is moving, indeed. Slowly. And not always left to right.

Of course, the irony is inescapable. We are discussing risk management and harm reduction at the end of what has been the worst semester for men's fraternities in our history with appropriate qualifications for social media and reporting in which Fact bows deeply to Speed and then nods to Innuendo and Generalization.

What is pushing the needle?

**“We get it.”** My observation is that more of our undergraduates understand the concept of risk management if not the practical aspects. The constant barrage of negative news, reports of deaths, the train wreck of spring semester 2015 among other forms of input have had an effect as well as the educational sessions, presentations, and discussions. Sometimes we forget that on any given weekend during the academic year there are hundreds of social events that do not include double-digit alcohol transports, fights, sexual assaults, and pitched battles with police.

In what might be termed an unintended consequence of good risk management, we have seen more incidents outside of social events. Our undergraduates are using guest lists and restricting entry which is resulting in other issues.

**Chapter leaders feel the heat**, especially in large (150+) member chapters. Our officers subscribe to *In Loco Chapterus Officio*—chapter leaders have all of the responsibility for all of the members—they are mom and dad. That often leads to chapter leaders who are elected by default rather than by a desire to lead.

**“National(s) (sic) won't protect us.”** Correct. Absent the plural, most inter/national organizations, by and through their liability insurance carriers, have tightened down on claims. What might have been acceptable in 2000 is scrutinized much more carefully in 2015. Parents are discovering their homeowner's insurance policy exists for more than the time Uncle Jeff slipped and fell on the deck.

**“Everyone is responsible but no one is accountable.” (A)** I see and hear this regularly during membership reviews. The combination of large chapters with pledge class unity, hazing, “families” evolving into fixed fortifications, homogenous memberships, and a one-dimensional interpretation of Ritual has brought us to the point at which members would rather see the chapter close than hold others accountable. *“Put the chapter on probation but don't ask us to identify the members who made bad choices”* or *“Everyone has potential.”*

**“Everyone is responsible but no one is accountable.” (B)** If criminal charges may result from a situation our undergraduates lawyer/parent up faster than light in a vacuum. Result: No matter how quickly the inter/national organization responds, it is not fast enough to obtain facts and to identify the “minority of bad actors” in a chapter. The standard press release language that chapter members are “cooperating” in an investigation is so 2014.

**Women are beginning to ask questions. Lots of questions.** Why do men feel entitled? Well, when you provide the venue, the liquor, and the entertainment, someone is going to feel entitled. We are seeing and hearing more questions regarding traditional protocols and in response to “that’s just how things work here.”

**Risk management issues have evolved.** In addition to the automatic recording of every action with immediate sharing on social media, we have the drinking to get drunk mixed with drugs philosophy, the Title IX/sexual assault focus, and the justification of, “Hey, we raised \$ \_\_\_K for charity—we can do this!” along with women’s formals gone bad and various emails that reveal an unsavory side of sorority and fraternity life. Question: How do you quiet down a room of fraternity men? Answer: Ask, “Do you guys have a ‘private’ FB page?”

**Hazing.** For most of the students I speak with, hazing is an expectation. Cross-hazing of women by men and vice versa has become much more common. The rationalizations and justifications have not changed much and many of our students come to us pre-hazed from high school sports and clubs. And for as many chapters as we install or reinstall each year populated with women and men who oppose hazing, campus culture acts like Novocain—give it three years.

**Multicultural and NPHC risk management issues are usually lower profile but remain a concern.** In addition to hazing, fundraisers at clubs and bars with the steadfast belief that the business absorbs all liability keep us awake at night.

**Apologies.** While many of these are attorney-friendly (“*We apologize to all who were offended*” which suggests not everyone was offended), some undergraduates have discovered our nation tends to “like” (pun intended) people who acknowledge responsibility, accept blame, and commit to becoming better. And a few chapters have discovered asking for forgiveness is not as difficult as it seems.

**Okay, Westol. What’s the good news? Needle in the green?**

Thanks for asking!

**Bystander behavior**...is a catchphrase. Many of our undergraduates appear to understand involvement in an unpleasant situation is more than holding a woman’s hair away from her face as she vomits, or “checking on the drunk dude in the room every 20 minutes.”

**Awareness** of the legal—criminal and civil—aspects of our actions or non-action is higher than in the past. I sometimes call this Consequence Perception—that there will be a speed bump at the end of the ramp. Most of our leaders understand there is only one system of justice and not two—one for everyone else and one for college students.

**Accountability.** Very difficult to measure or quantify but we see and hear more incidences of chapters following their protocols and holding members responsible.

**Risk management practices.** A number of our chapters do a good job of managing their events and looking for issues before those occur.

**Inter/national organizations.** As we often say, “Inter/national organizations don’t close chapters or revoke charters. The undergraduates make those decisions. Inter/national organizations just confirm the decision.”

Our undergraduates grasp the essential fact that membership is a privilege and not a right and that a chapter will continue to exist only if it remains within certain parameters.

We also know the needle will continue to move to the right because of the good work by campus professionals, staff members, and volunteers. Peer example, community example, and dialogue among undergraduates continue to be the most important tool in risk management. Consistency in education and accountability remains a priority for those of us who work with risk management and harm reduction.