

## Five Reasons We Are Failing to Move the Needle When It Comes to Hazing

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Are we moving the needle when it comes to preventing hazing in fraternities and sororities?

No. We are not.

There is no hard data or evidence to prove this opinion beyond my own observations (which is part of the problem). I have read every scholarly article written on the topic in the last 20 years. I have traveled all over the country talking to college students about the topic. Perhaps most importantly, I have conducted research of my own. If I had to summarize my research and observations succinctly into two sentences, this is what I would say:

*Fraternity members are far too accepting of dangerous levels of hazing, and the hazing taking place in our fraternities is becoming less and less about building unity or solidarity, but rather more and more about social dominance, power, and control. In other words, fraternity members haze their pledges simply because they can.*

The fact is, we know very little about the trends or trajectory related to hazing practices on our college campuses. I applaud those, like Elizabeth Allen at the University of Maine, who have studied the issue on a larger scale. Unfortunately, we know very little about hazing, which is, I think, one of the major reasons we have failed to move the needle related to its prevention. We continue to throw spaghetti against the wall, hoping and praying something will eventually stick.

I want to lay out five reasons why I think we are failing to move the hazing needle, and some thoughts on the things I think we can do better.

- 1. Traditional prevention models are not effective with hazing, because students who haze rarely see the behavior as problematic.** Most of the self-proclaimed prevention specialists in our field have borrowed a prevention framework from the worlds of violence and/or substance abuse prevention. These models rely heavily on education and policy changes – efforts designed to have an impact at the multiple levels of Bronfrenbrenners Social-Ecological Model.

Here is the problem with those models – they rely on the assumption that most people view the behavior as “bad.” A frequently cited statistic at these trainings are the decline in alcohol-related highway fatalities over the last twenty years. This decline has come about through better policy, better policing, and better education. The difference is this – almost everyone agrees drinking and driving is a bad thing. Even people who drink and drive on occasion think driving under the influence is bad.

Students who haze rarely see their behavior as problematic. To the contrary, they see it as a good and positive thing that builds brotherhood, teaches respect, and allows new

members to “earn their letters” while showing how committed they are to the organization. As a result, simply educating students on the dangers of hazing, or drafting stricter policies related to hazing, will have little if any impact.

The hazing prevention models we adopt must start with the basic assumption that we need to first convince students hazing does not accomplish all of the good things they like to attribute to it, then provide alternative strategies for accomplishing some of the noble objectives often associated with hazing (i.e. building unity, creating brotherhood, teaching respect, etc.). This, when coupled with strong mechanisms of self-accountability, should begin to produce results.

- 2. Bystander training aimed at preventing hazing ignores research about in-group bystander behavior.** In recent years, bystander training has become a popular fix-it prevention tool for professionals working with fraternities and sororities. Many well-intentioned professionals have invested heavily in these programs in the hopes they would be a silver bullet in not only the fight to prevent hazing but also a variety of other problematic behaviors.

Bystander training has shown some effectiveness in some areas, most specifically sexual assault prevention and in getting help for students with alcohol poisoning. Research has yet to find any correlative effect on bystander training and hazing prevention. There is a good reason for this. The research on bystander behavior is much more complex than is often presented in student programs. The issue of in-group bystander behavior is particularly problematic. Research has suggested that, when violent behavior is viewed as helpful to the well-being of a group, group members are highly unlikely to intervene in any way (Stott, Hutchison & Drury, 2001).

Here’s a helpful analogy from a historical reference everyone should be familiar with. Prior to World War II, the Nazi’s were quite effective at convincing the German public that the Jews posed a threat to the nation’s well-being. Once the “in-group” German public became convinced Jews were undesirable, the atrocities later committed by the Nazis became much easier to support. It is unlikely any level of bystander training would have influenced the behavior of the guards at Dachau or Auschwitz, because they saw their actions as benefiting their group (the German people) (Milgram, 1974).

Not to compare fraternities to Nazis, but the same principle applies. Fraternity members are indoctrinated into believing hazing is good for the fraternity (builds brotherhood, creates unity, fosters commitment), and their behavior is reflective of these beliefs. In fact, many fraternity members look back fondly on the hazing they endured as a new member, and are more likely to point out the positive aspects of that experience than the

negatives (Allan and Madden, 2008). Simply training them to not be bystanders is a highly ineffective prevention strategy, because in order for bystander training to be effective, individuals must first have a fundamental understanding of the issue being addressed. Thus, individual fraternity members must first be reprogrammed into understanding hazing does not, in fact, benefit the organization in the ways they have been taught to believe. Only then can any type of bystander training have an impact on hazing behaviors. We need to be smarter about the ways we educate our students about hazing.

- 3. We cannot have traditional pledging and not expect to have hazing.** In the early 1980s, an NIC commission released a recommendation that fraternities abolish traditional pledging models of new member induction. At the time, only two groups (Alpha Gamma Rho and Zeta Beta Tau) adopted the recommendation and moved to a no-pledging model. In the time since, Sigma Phi Epsilon and, most recently, Sigma Alpha Epsilon have taken similar steps. The remainder of fraternities nationally maintain traditional pledging processes that have remained unchanged for decades.

The most recent non-fraternity/sorority related hazing death was that of Robert Champion, the drum major in the Florida A&M “Marching 100” band. Prior to Champion, one has to go back another 10 years to the next non-fraternity/sorority hazing death. In 2001, University of Minnesota-Duluth rugby player Ken Christiansen was killed in an alcohol-infused hazing ritual. In the 10 years between Christiansen and Champion, there was an average of four fraternity members per year killed in hazing incidents across the United States.

The 2008 National Study of Student Hazing (Allan and Madden, 2008) revealed what those of us working in higher education have known for some time – fraternities are not the only organizations on college campuses that haze. Sports teams, bands, and a variety of other student organizations also fall culprit to hazing. But, fraternities are the only organizations killing their new members at a rate of four per year.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why that is? Why is hazing so much more severe in fraternities than in other organizations?

In every other type of organization commonly associated with hazing, there is an adult in charge. On a football team, the coach ultimately decides who plays and who doesn't. In an ROTC unit, there is a chain of command going all the way to the Commander in Chief. In a marching band, a team of instructors and directors make decisions influencing the group's activities. The senior football player hazing the freshman can only go so far because, at the end of the day, he has no real power over that freshman. The coach is in

charge, not the senior. Only in the college fraternity do we have 19, 20 and 21 year-old boys teaching 18 year-old boys what it means to be a man, with absolute power to carry out their activities. The person hazing the pledge also has the power to keep that pledge from being initiated.

That power imbalance is the reason hazing in fraternities is so severe and so problematic. We cannot have traditional pledging programs that give fraternity members absolute authority over the lives of their new members and not expect hazing will be a significant part of that new member program. Hazing is more severe in fraternities because of the power imbalance present in the organization – new members tolerate more from older members because older members have all of the power. In order to lower this tolerance, we must address the power imbalance inherent in traditional fraternity pledging programs. Until more fraternities do, we will continue to be plagued by the same problems.

- 4. Most campus administrators are not properly trained to conduct hazing investigations.** The most effective hazing prevention strategy that a campus can have is a strong investigation process that results in adjudication and sanctioning. Chapters are very good at weighing the odds in any given situation. If they feel the odds of getting caught low, then the chance they will engage in the behavior goes up proportionately.

In my conversations with campus-based fraternity/sorority advisors, I would guess corroborating evidence is discovered in around 20 percent of campus-led hazing investigations. That means 80 percent of the time hazing reports are received by a campus, there is not enough information uncovered in the investigation to result in adjudication and sanctioning. Students are well-aware of these odds, and they behave accordingly.

Hazing investigations are complex. They require skilled, disciplined investigators who know what they are doing. Very few campus administrators have received adequate training on conducting hazing investigations, and as a result, chapters roll the dice, continuing with the hazing activity under the assumption that their chances they will get caught are slim to none. We must get better at this. We CAN get better at this. There is a science to conducting hazing investigations – processes that have demonstrated high levels of effectiveness. The more campuses train their investigators and incorporate these best practices, the more likely they will be to have investigations resulting in adjudication and sanctioning.

- 5. We continue to treat hazing chapters as if they operate in a vacuum.** There is a cycle that plays out year after year on college campuses across the nation. A chapter is closed

for hazing. Three years later, the national organization recolonizes the chapter, often with a stellar group of young men or women. For the first few years, they are a model chapter. But, after a few years, they begin noticing the behaviors of the other chapters on campus, begin feeling the pressure to conform, and begin adopting many of the same behaviors that led to their closure in the first place. After a few years, they are right back where they started.

This cycle is one of our greatest challenges. Hazing happens within a campus culture – the culture on some campuses is worse than the culture on other campuses. Over times, there is a regression to the mean as outlier chapters become more and more like the campus norm. Despite this, we continue to treat hazing as an isolated, chapter-by-chapter issue. We address hazing at the chapter level if and when a chapter is caught hazing, but we do a poor job of addressing hazing at the broader campus level.

On my personal blog, I have argued for an alternative approach. What if, every year, the executive directors of all of the fraternities and sororities got together and held a secret ballot vote? The question put to them should be “what is the campus that gives you the most headaches.” Each executive director would get one vote. An independent arbiter would tally the votes and announce the 10 campuses who received the highest number of votes

If a campus makes the “Top 10” list, the campus administration would be notified and representatives from the national groups would make a trip to that campus to work on a plan of action on that campus. Each group represented on that campus would volunteer to undertake an exhaustive membership review, getting rid of every single bad apple in the barrel. They would institute models of shared governance. They would mandate alcohol free housing. They would get rid of antiquated pledging models.

In exchange for this cleanse, every campus selected should agree to increase its staffing and support of the fraternity/sorority advising office. Commit the necessary resources to hiring additional staff, to recruiting, training and providing support to additional chapter advisors and to investing in meaningful educational programming. Only a community-wide approach can address the hazing culture – it cannot be solved one chapter at a time.

I think there is great promise in our fight to prevent hazing. In just the last few years, we have become smarter about our work. We are finally beginning to engage in systems-level thinking, and are beginning to insist on evidence-based practices. I think these are important first steps. But in order to begin really moving the needle on hazing, we need to rethink our approaches even further. This list encapsulates just a few of the steps that need to be taken. Individually, none of them will make a big difference, but collectively, they could begin to make an impact. Some of the things on this list will call for drastic changes at both the campus and organizational

level. Every summer at fraternity and sorority leadership programs across the country, we call on our students to be brave and to lead drastic change. It is now time for us to do the same thing.

## References

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