

Start Conversations that End Hazing

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“That’s not hazing.”

“We don’t haze.”

“I can’t believe we are getting in trouble for that.”

It can be frustrating for professionals to have the same discussion—or often argument—about hazing; and unfortunately, most of these conversations happen after an incident has taken place. However, this is a conversation that will never go away, and we can begin to have it in a much more powerful and productive way. The best conversations are those that take place before a problem occurs and that happen regularly. HazingPrevention.Org offers an excellent resource to help with this. [The Crucial Conversations Guide](#) focuses on concerns and issues surrounding hazing which are more than the problem itself: respect, dignity, hidden harm, rites of passage, friendship, and more.

As a speaker, I share several rarely heard stories about the psychological impact of hazing from a variety of perspectives. In my sessions, I often invite students to talk about something related to hazing they have heard about, witnessed, or experienced that made them uncomfortable, and I end my program by sharing with students a list of things they can do to prevent hazing. First and foremost on the list is to **talk about it**. I suggest that rather than “dropping the H bomb,” as my friend Lorin Phillips would warn, and labeling everything hazing that they can instead begin conversations with the statement, “It makes me uncomfortable that...” This is a much more powerful and productive conversation for students to have with each other. Our hurling of hazing accusations only serves to put everyone on the defensive, and then we get distracted by the same old “is not v. is too” argument rather than focusing on the real problem.

The remainder of this article will lay out some of the best places, times, and formats for having successful conversations with students about hazing. If we truly want to engage them in being part of the solution, we cannot limit hazing education to one program a year, signing an anti-hazing policy, and the student conduct process. Students are the ones with the ability to have the biggest impact, so it is imperative we help them better understand the problem and challenge them to help find solutions.

Potential Conversation Settings

While these conversations can take place anywhere at any time, I will share just a few ways to think about on how to approach them.

Formal Conversations. These conversations are scheduled, and might have a loose agenda to follow. They take place at president, council or other officer meetings, educational programs for new members, chapter meetings, during amnesty periods, as part of a brown bag lunch for professionals, during National Hazing Prevention Week, and with advisors. They can be led by student affairs staff, graduate assistants, student leaders, visiting chapter consultants, advisors, local police, visiting professional speakers, counselors, etc. My suggestion is that you have many different shorter conversations throughout the year (never more than an hour – ideally 15-30 minutes) at the end of a meeting instead of one. Book discussions are a great way to facilitate a more formal discussion. Some books suggestions:

Goat, by Brad Land; *The Cowboys' Secret* by Ruth Harten (male focused); *Pledged* by Alexandra Robbins; and *Be My Sorority Sister – Under Pressure*, by Dorrie Williams-Wheeler (female focused).

Informal Conversations. These conversations may take place in the van driving to a conference, in one-on-one meetings with students, walking across campus to an event, in the moments before a meeting starts, or anytime that provides 10-15 minutes. Either small groups or one-on-one meetings work best for informal conversations because they create a less-threatening environment for students to talk about how they really feel and to discuss the issue candidly.

Conversations to Have

Hazing Definitions. Paramount to dealing with a problem is having a thorough understanding of it. What is and is not considered hazing will always be an important starting place. I called upon four main sources to provide the foundation for my thoughts in this section. These distinctions and implications can provide a starting point for many discussions about what is and is not hazing and provide far more context than any simple reading of a policy or legal definition could.

Hazing Distinctions to Consider:

- Physical vs. psychological
- Men vs. women
- School setting vs. corporate or military setting
- Organizations vs. athletics
- Housed organizations vs. un-housed organizations
- Legal perspectives vs. sociological or cultural perspectives
- Involvement that is easier to walk away from (clubs, orgs) vs. involvement that is more difficult to walk away from (military, teams)
- “Little h” hazing vs. “big H” hazing
- Hazing vs. pranks vs. “tradition”

Implications to Explore:

- Confusion between hazing and bullying
- Examples and lists of hazing activities in policies (i.e. scavenger hunts)
- Zero tolerance policies
- Disparity of consequences between institutions and organizations, regions, etc.
- Legal thresholds vs. campus policies vs. organizational oversight
- Research shows 55% of students have been hazed but 9 in 10 do not consider themselves to have been hazed (Allan & Madden, 2008). It is important to discuss this gap.
- Suggestion that anything new members have to do that initiated ones do not have to do is hazing
- Students who spend time worrying that separate meetings for new members, study hours and other harmless activities are prohibited and overlook the dangers of other potentially harmful practices
- Laws in 44 states that vary widely as to definitions, thresholds and penalties
- Context: the exact same activity could be hazing for one group and not another (example: calisthenics are okay for athletes and not for fraternities or sororities)
- The subjectivity of the investigator or conduct officer in each situation

- Personal perceptions of the myriad people involved—each unique perspective on hazing

Discussion Starters

- Ask students to share their definition of hazing in layman’s terms. This gives you an opportunity to correct any misperceptions or allow others to chime in with extensions of what is shared. Rather than being so focused on the “right” definition, this allows everyone to explore the complexities of the issue together and understand where these ideas came from, which can inform future educational efforts. This is simple and can be done in a short amount of time with little preparation.
- Ask students, “what is something you have experienced, seen, heard about (in the media or from someone else) along the lines of hazing that made you uncomfortable?” This leads to a lively discussion mostly of what other people are doing and gives some idea of your students’ threshold for hazing. What level does it have to reach for them to feel uncomfortable? What types of issues arise? Are they all physical? You can extend the conversation by asking them why it made them uncomfortable.
- Facilitate the Four Corners activity. This activity takes a little bit of prep and also works well in almost any size group, but make sure the room is appropriate to accommodate moving around easily. Put up signs in each corner that read: AGREE, STRONGLY AGREE, DISAGREE, STRONGLY DISAGREE. Share a variety of activities and ask participants to state their stance on each one by choosing a corner. Call on folks from each position to explain why they chose that corner. After a few rounds, ask them to choose the topic if they wish.

This conversation will never go away, so **talk about it**. Using the aforementioned places, times, and formats for having successful conversations with students about hazing, we can begin to move forward in a productive way, and stop limiting hazing education to one program a year, signing an anti-hazing policy, and the student conduct process. Again, students are the ones with the ability to have the biggest impact.

References

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