Zero Tolerance Policies
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Spending the better part of my career in roles that require a great deal of work related to accountability has been extremely rewarding. It has also come with countless moments of frustration and sheer confusion at the things we say and do. When I say “we,” I certainly do not mean everyone, I mean in the general sense of the fraternal world: students, advisors, campus professionals, and headquarters staff.

Serving in a role now that has no investigation or adjudication responsibilities has allowed me to take a step back and realize how often we (again, the royal we) hide behind policies.

Last fall, in a 1:1 advising meeting while discussing plans for an out-of-town formal, I posed the simple question, “How do you all plan to manage the alcohol use of members and guests?” The response was, “Oh, don’t worry, we have a zero tolerance policy against underage drinking.”

Well, sure, everyone has that policy, and it’s actually the law. But it does not answer the question of how one intends to manage the risk. I hear this similar language all the time, not just from students, but from my colleagues in the field. Someone assuring me nothing bad is happening due to a zero tolerance policy doesn’t fill me with confidence. What I hear more often than not when I’m told not to worry, is the groups aren’t doing much preventative work and planning.

This “don’t worry” response is all over the place, and frankly it is just lip service and an excuse. Going back to the student planning for formal, it is safe to assume there was little or no forethought put into managing the risk because obviously everyone would just follow the policy. I recently had a similar discussion in which a student told me it “was against national policy to have sober monitors.” Which, after a lot of digging, I learned this actually meant a chapter shouldn’t force the role onto the new members. That is a totally different conversation, but it was very concerning they had not been using any type of risk management at events because of a misinterpretation of a policy.

Policies get misinterpreted all the time, especially when there is little or no discussion about them and stamping “Zero Tolerance” on something does not leave much room for dialogue. We have to push this conversation with our student leaders. We must ask more questions, dive deeper, and offer better guidance. But that requires us to acknowledge the policies might be getting broken as we speak.
Try this experiment for me. Ask someone not in our field the following question, “If a campus has a zero-tolerance policy for hazing, and a group is found responsible for hazing, what should happen?” I will bet the answer isn’t that we should give them another chance, then another chance after that, then cross our fingers things will improve. Think about the message this sends to all the other organizations on campus. I imagine it sounds something like, “We’re zero tolerance for all these behaviors, but it’s actually okay if you do it.” The term “Zero Tolerance” feels like a scare tactic, but one that often is not followed through on in real life.

Seeing other groups go on probation for behavior one’s organization might also be doing does not tend to inspire them to stop. It inspires them to figure out how to hide it better, or flat out lie. Truth be told, I’m very tired of having to engage in hypothetical conversations because students are scared of getting in trouble.

The long-term problem many of us are facing is that we drew a hard line in the sand about hazing, sexual misconduct, alcohol, and other drugs by using the term “zero tolerance.” Put yourself in the shoes of a 20-year-old chapter president. You clearly see a problem emerging in your chapter with low-level hazing behavior. We’d all love to think the president would do the right thing and report their own chapter, but how likely and realistic is that? What happens if the behavior does not get addressed in the first year, while it’s still manageable? Look at that same chapter 5-6 years down the road with those unchecked behaviors and likely they would have snowballed into something much bigger.

To be perfectly clear, I am not saying close every organization for the smallest infraction. I am truly saying the opposite. I believe we need to reframe the way we talk about our expectations of our organizations. We need to make it clear that certain behaviors are unacceptable, and you will be held accountable if you choose to go down that path. More importantly, we need to make it clear that it is okay to ask for help.

Start small, with newly elected leaders. Give them space to talk openly about the places they might be falling short related to policies and find out how well they truly understand the policies that exist. Make sure they clearly understand the implications of not taking steps towards following policies, demystify your conduct process. And if nothing else, don’t take “don’t worry” for a response when it comes to the safety of our organizations.

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