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## Recent trends in hazing and alternatives for student affairs professionals

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## Recent trends in hazing and alternatives for student affairs professionals

### Abstract

The growth of fraternity and sorority membership on many campuses and the increase in the number of reported hazing-related deaths and accidents has brought hazing under public and university scrutiny. What was once considered a harmless rite of passage is seen increasingly as causing psychological and physical harm to our young adults.

**Recent Trends in Hazing and  
Alternatives for Student Affairs Professionals**

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Presented to  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Joyce Morrow  
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The growth of fraternity and sorority membership on many campuses and the increase in the number of reported hazing-related deaths and accidents has brought hazing under public and university scrutiny. What was once considered a harmless rite of passage is seen increasingly as causing psychological and physical harm to our young adults.

Senseless hazing incidents have become the focus of legislative attention. In Iowa the general assembly enacted the following new section to Iowa House file 13, (1989):

1. a. A person commits an act of hazing when the person intentionally or recklessly engages in any act or acts involving forced activity which endanger the physical health or safety of a student for the purpose of initiation or admission into, or affiliation with any organization operating in connection with a school, college, or university. Prohibited acts include, but are not limited to, any brutality of a physical nature such as whipping, forced confinement, or any other forced activity which endangers the physical health or safety of the student.

b. For purposes of this section, 'forced activity' means any activity which is a condition of initiation or admission into, or affiliation with, an organization, regardless of a student's willingness to participate in the activity.

2. A person who commits an act of hazing is guilty of a simple misdemeanor.

3. A person who commits an act of hazing which causes serious bodily injury to another is guilty of a serious misdemeanor. (708.10)

In some states if a person is charged with hazing he or she could also be charged with homicide, murder, manslaughter, assault with intent to murder, or aggravated assault.

How did Iowa, as well as many other states, come to the point of legislative control to curb the acts of hazing in our colleges and universities? This paper discusses how hazing incidents originated, the problems that have resulted, and how institutions of higher education can manage this behavior.

#### **History of Hazing**

The practice of hazing has existed in college fraternities for over 100 years (Richmond, 1987; Baier & Williams, 1983). After the American Revolution, "hazing" originated as a new method of initiating and disciplining freshman on college campuses (Brubacker & Rudy, 1976). Hazing came to be institutionalized in the form of a "rush", and organized struggle between the freshman and sophomore classes. This struggle ranged from rough and tumble fighting to organized wrestling matches. If the freshman won, they had to be granted some privilege, such as the right to carry canes.

In the past 40 years, the incidence of hazing has declined only twice (Richmond, 1987): during the late 1940's and the 1960's. In the 1940's veterans returning to college after World War II were older and more mature than the members of the fraternities they sought to join, and they did not tolerate hazing. During the 1960's, student activism resulted in the Greek system being ignored. Fraternity membership dropped and a number of chapters closed. Those chapters that did not close eliminated hazing for fear of alienating prospective members.

Hirschorn (1988) states that fraternity behavior in the 1980's has been demonstrably different and worse than it was in the late 1960's. In the last decade, Greek membership has increased despite the decrease in students between the ages of 18 and 21 entering college full-time (Parrino & Gallup, 1988). Greek chapters are primarily at four-year institutions and their members are mainly the traditional age full-time students. Approximately 350,000 members belong to fraternities, nearly twice the number of 15 years ago, according to the National Interfraternity Conference (Collison, 1988). About 275,000 women belong to campus sororities, up from 195,000 a decade before (Hirschorn, 1988).

Malaney (1990) believes that the strong interest in Greek membership has made it difficult for administrators to monitor and control activities. Also, many fraternities and sororities recognized by colleges are now being housed in off-campus properties, so institutions have more limited control.

Hazing, and the human tragedies, administrative problems, and legal nightmares arising from it, continue to concern student affairs administrators. Since 1970, over 30 pledges have died as a result of hazing (Richmond, 1987). The circumstances surrounding some of these deaths are as bizarre as they are tragic. One pledge was hospitalized after an active member wearing spiked golf shoes walked on his bare feet (Witt, 1983). At New York University, a pledge was paralyzed after diving down a flight of stairs. Stair diving is a widespread hazing practice (Richmond, 1989). One pledge died as a result of kidney failure caused by paddling. Another pledge died when a sandy grave that he was forced to dig for himself collapsed. Still another pledge died from a gunshot wound, as a result of playing Russian roulette. At least nine of the deaths resulted in civil suits to recover damages and two, in criminal prosecution (Richmond, 1987).



Mental hazing has also taken its toll. Purely psychological methods of hazing, such as telling pledges that they have failed national examinations, have left pledges emotionally affected to the point that they developed speech impediments. Psychological methods tend to be predominant with sororities (Shaw & Morgan, 1990).

For example, Meyer (1986) sites an incident where at an Indiana sorority a puppy was purchased for the pledges. The pledges took care of the puppy for several weeks. At the end of the pledge's initiation, the new members were told to kill the animal. According to Collison (1990) the rituals in which sororities subject their pledges are simply silly or tedious. Pledges are often required to clean up sorority houses or run errands for sisters while others may be asked to carry rubber ducks around campus. But Greek advisors call even these acts hazing, and they worry that rituals may lead to more demanding and perhaps more dangerous activities. For example, at the University of Maine a 1988 sorority incident involved sisters using a metal stamp to brand 16 pledges with the group's letters (Collison, 1990). At another university, pledges in the women's sorority were forced to put their heads in

flushing toilets, and to drink until they became sick. Some of these pledging activities of the 1980's are carrying over into the 1990's.

### **Hazing Activities Today**

Activities that occur among sororities and fraternities that are considered hazing activities practices of today, were stated by Shaw & Morgan (1990): required signature lists, scavenger hunts, blindfolding, required singing, late/early initiation, running errands, encouraging/requiring drinking, made to wear ridiculous clothing, scaring about initiation, interrogation, deprivation of sleep, yelling at pledges, hitting pledges, and branding. Additional activities considered hazing include: calisthenics, nudity, paddle swats, kidnaps, road trips, walks, loud or repetitious music, pushing, shoving, tacking, dropping food into mouth, throwing substances at pledges, confining in an uncomfortable room, repeated disturbances of sleep, pranks against other groups, and misleading about initiation chances (Baier & Williams, 1983). Other behavior considered hazing by today's standards are using pledges for entertainment and for house duties. These activities are directly associated with fraternity and/or sorority pledging.

Eighteen states now have statues making hazing illegal; nine others are considering such legislation (Meyer, 1986 & Richmond, 1987). Unfortunately, most attempts to eliminate or significantly reduce hazing have been relatively unsuccessful on most college campuses (Baier & Williams, 1983). There are two reasons for this. First, active and alumni members of fraternities often believe that hazing is justified. Many think that hazing builds pledge-class unity (Collison, 1990), instills humility in pledges, and maintains respect for the chapter on campus. Some alumni also believe that hazing is required by chapter tradition, is a natural rite of passage, and even that pledges expect and enjoy it (Richmond, 1987).

Second, institutions have been unable to respond to allegations of hazing because of the lack of common definition of hazing (Richmond, 1987). There is no single commonly held view of what activities constitute hazing, (Buchanan, Shanley, Correnti, & Hammond, 1982) let alone an enforceable policy prohibiting it (Baier & Williams, 1983). Colleges and universities are left to define hazing and develop policies to limit this behavior.

### **Alternatives for Campus Administrators**

Drury G. Bagwell, president of Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity, believes the survival of the Greek system is at stake. He said, "If we can't eliminate pledging, colleges and universities will eliminate it for us" (Collison, 1988). Hank Nuwer, author of Broken Pledges: The Deadly Rite of Hazing (Collison, 1990) believes that if you end pledging, the student will not stop hazing. They will only take it underground, where it will be even more difficult to stop. Nuwer continues to state that college students continue to haze because they have already been exposed to it in high school; it is tradition (Collison, 1990). However, student affairs administrators at various universities and colleges are trying to change this tradition and eliminate hazing. Richmond (1987) gave four guidelines to control hazing on college campuses. These guidelines are to develop a common definition of hazing, provide education, supervise activities, and apply punishment when appropriate.

First, develop a common definition of hazing on your campus and adopt policies prohibiting it. The University of Northern Iowa's hazing policy is written in the Student Rights and Responsibilities (1989-90),

which states under Student Responsibilities, II.L., "hazing and pre-initiation activities, in any form, whether on or off campus, which are designed to produce mental or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule." Students are subject to disciplinary action for violation of university policy. Any policy adopted should be sufficiently broad to provide for appropriate control of sorority and fraternity pledge activities.

Some college officials say that only tough state laws will properly discourage hazing and punish its perpetrators. Often, they say, administrators ignore the incidents for fear of harming the reputation of their institutions (Meyer, 1986). As of 1988, 23 states have enacted statutes making hazing illegal (Richmond, 1989). Most anti-hazing statutes classify hazing as a misdemeanor, although some make it a felony, usually when serious injury or death results. Hazers may face criminal charges even if their states have not enacted specific anti-hazing statutes. Individual fraternity or sorority members may also incur civil liability for hazing injuries (Buchanan, Shanley, Correnti, Hammond, 1982) and in some cases, that liability might extend to the Greek chapter's

alumni governing board. Plus, a student injured as a result of hazing could file suit against the college or university.

Because of concern over fraternities, in recent years, three small colleges, Amherst, Colby, and Williams, banned fraternities and sororities from their campuses (Hirschorn, 1988). It is believed that at Amherst and Colby, at least a half-dozen underground fraternities reportedly defied the ban, operating more or less openly off the campuses. However, Colby, feels abolishing fraternities and sororities was clearly the right decision (Seitzinger, 1989). Colby is also convinced that the elimination of fraternities has helped make women feel more at home at Colby, and has broaden availability of the college's opportunities for leadership to all students and the experience of living in a small, self-governing and responsible community.

The second guideline for controlling hazing, given by Richmond (1987) was educating alumni, active members, and pledges regarding the harmful consequences of hazing. Many college administrators find it difficult to overcome the pro-hazing influence of alumni (Baier & Williams, 1983). Research shows that active and alumni fraternity members acknowledge that

certain activities constitute hazing, that they are aware of their chapter's participation in those activities, and that they believe that hazing is a problem both nationally and at their universities. However, few believe that hazing is a problem in their chapters (Richmond, 1987). The perception that hazing is "someone else's problem" has hindered attempts to reduce or eliminate it (Baier & Williams, 1983). Many actives and alumni believe hazing has a purpose. At the same time, research suggests that hazing is not what the majority of fraternity members want or believe to be purposeful, but what they think other fraternity members want. As a result, it may be possible to control hazing by changing the false peer-group perceptions of individual members.

Richmond's (1987) third guideline is to closely supervise pledge activities. This can be difficult to do since there are constant changes in the membership of fraternities and sororities (Meyer, 1986). New members incorrectly perceive hazing rituals as long-standing traditions. To encourage a change in attitude, national fraternity organizations are trying to promote positive alternatives to hazing. Many encourage their chapters to have pledges undertake

community-service projects, such as assisting elderly people or underprivileged youths (Meyers, 1986). Some universities and colleges feel that all pledge activities should have prior approval, as well as have chapter officers sign a statement signifying that they understand the school's definition of hazing and agree to all policies regarding hazing.

Richmond's (1987) last guideline was punishing those chapters and individual members who participate in hazing activities. In addition to punishing individuals who haze, colleges and universities should consider sanctions against entire chapters. These sanctions should be enacted especially when chapters repeatedly haze, or if hazing practices are unusually abusive or dangerous. Nationally, a number of fraternity chapters have had their charters revoked as a result of hazing practices.

#### **Summary**

Today's students, as suggested by Levine (1980) and Astin (1978), are more aware of and concerned with individual rights, freedoms, and personal welfare than older values such as tradition, conformity, and social conservatism. This awareness and concern gives hope for slowing down if not eliminating hazing in future



Greek chapters. Since sororities and fraternities are growing in membership, all student affairs administrators must recognize hazing as contrary to institutional missions. Colleges and universities must look beyond the legal consequences and work to represent students' best interests by eliminating hazing. By developing a commonly held view of what constitutes hazing, by closely supervising pledge activities, and by punishing those chapters and individuals who haze, institutions can reduce or eliminate hazing. Fraternity and sorority members as well as alumni must be convinced of the harmful consequences of hazing.

Student affairs administrators, who clearly recognize that hazing offends institutional values, must also recognize the legal implications of hazing. Those student affairs administrators who fail to appreciate and respond to those legal implications run the risk of leaving the futures of their students, and the reputations and finances of their institutions, in the hands of the courts. Education is still the key. Educate all parties--institutions, Greek members and organization's officials, alumni and parents--to the hazards of hazing. With proper education, policies and follow-up, hazing can be reduced if not eliminated.

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