



SCOPE Tip of the Week Member Newsletter

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Hazing's Perfect Storm - The American College Fraternity *The Problem of Absolute Power*

I regularly talk to groups about hazing and hazing prevention. In the last year, I have taken to asking this question every time I speak: "Can you name another social institution, besides the college fraternity, in which 19, 20 and 21 year-old young men have absolute power and authority over the lives of 17 and 18 year-old young men?"

I have asked this question dozens of times to hundreds of people. I have yet to receive an answer.

With a sports team, you have a coach who ultimately makes the major decisions affecting the team. With an ROTC unit, you have a chain of command. With a marching band, there is a crew of adult band directors. At the end of the day, with every other type of college group associated with hazing, you have responsible adults who are a key component of the power structure and decision-making within the group. The same cannot be said for the college fraternity. While there is a national structure and chapter advisors, these entities play no formal role in the day-to-day decision-making of the chapter. Most importantly, they have no voice in two important decisions – who gets a bid, and who gets initiated. Chapter members alone decide who gets a bid, they carry out the new member program and they alone decide the fate of new members, often in anonymous and antiquated voting procedures.

The absolute power that fraternity members have over their pledges, and the antiquated membership models that support these practices, is the number one risk factor associated with fraternity hazing. It is the reason that there were 31 fraternity-related hazing deaths between the last two non-fraternity hazing deaths. Much like the guards in the [Stanford Prison Experiment](#), fraternity actives have absolute power over the lives of their new members. As the old adage goes, "power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely." If you buy that argument, then you have to buy the suggestion that the most important thing we can do to prevent hazing is to infuse responsible adults into positions of power within fraternal organizations. But how can we do that?

Here's an idea: The best way to prevent dangerous hazing is to lower the level of hazing that new members would tolerate. If you think of hazing along a continuum, with lower levels (i.e. errand running) and high levels (i.e. physical abuse) of hazing, then we can think about prevention as moving the line of acceptable behavior within an organization from higher levels to lower levels. By curbing the absolute power that actives have over pledges, we may be able to do just that.

Imagine – a fraternity new member process where, at the end of that process, new members go before a chapter "Board of Directors" consisting evenly of undergraduate and alumni members. The BOD questions the new member to ensure that he has learned all of the information needed to become initiated. Any chapter member who feels this new member should not be initiated has an opportunity to address the BOD regarding his reasoning. The BOD takes all of this information in, and determines whether or not the new member should be initiated. How might such a system prevent hazing? If a fraternity new member knows that, at the

end of his new member period, the guy who is hazing him does not have the authority to anonymously remove him from the chapter, might he be willing to tolerate less from that member? If a new member knew that responsible adults would be part of the decision regarding his initiation, might he be less willing to subject himself to degrading and dangerous activities? I argue that he would. Such a model would not end hazing in a chapter, but I think it has the potential to drastically lower the level of severity of hazing within a chapter.

Some will be critical of this idea, asserting that the NPHC has already attempted to involve responsible adults in the pledging process, without success. I would argue that the critical mistake made by the NPHC was in attempting to circumvent the undergraduate chapters altogether. Instead of partnering, these groups have replaced undergraduate decision-making with alumni-decision making. In the meantime, chapters have continued their pledging/hazing activities underground. Accountability can only come through alumni working in conjunction with undergraduate members – a model that has not, to my knowledge, been fully implemented.

Conclusion

This Tip is not meant to beat up on fraternities. I am a proud fraternity member, and believe strongly in the power of the college fraternity to be a force for good. But I can no longer look at the brutal facts of fraternity hazing and continue to insist that hazing is a student problem that can be fixed by better educating fraternity members about hazing. We have to start by acknowledging that hazing is worse in fraternities than in any other organization. Then, we must ask ourselves why? I'm suggesting that the unique combination of conformity, social status and absolute power is a recipe for disaster, and that confluence of factors is unique to the college fraternity. Once we acknowledge this and begin actively addressing it, we will begin to see progress in our fight to prevent hazing.

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