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All Hazing is Not Equal: Understand the “Why” Before Determining the “What”

Despite a renewed focus on prevention in recent years, hazing has continued to plague high school and college campuses across the country. The National Study of Student Hazing (<http://umaine.edu/hazingresearch/>) reported that 70 percent of college students involved in campus sports teams or organizations experienced hazing in those groups, and that 47 percent of college students reported experiencing some form of hazing in high school. High-profile hazing deaths have increased the public’s awareness of the issue, and as more media attention is focused on hazing, we face more pressure than ever before to demonstrate effective hazing prevention practices.

Because of this increased pressure, prevention educators must be on the front lines of hazing prevention. Historically, hazing prevention work has been left to those who work directly with the student populations commonly associated with hazing: fraternity/sorority advisors, coaches, band directors, etc. The challenge to this model is obvious; those people, however well-intentioned, are often ill-equipped and uninformed when it comes to prevention work. Prevention educators should not wait to be asked to get involved in campus hazing prevention efforts; we should take it upon ourselves to reach out to those working in hazing prevention and offer our expertise and support.

In doing so, it is important to understand the fundamental nature of hazing. Three overarching theories have emerged in the literature related to why groups haze. First, groups haze newcomers in order to build unity and solidarity among new members. Secondly, groups haze new members in order to weed out those who are not committed to the group. Finally, groups haze in order to instill and perpetuate the social dominance of veteran group members.

Others have studied the psychology and motivation of hazers. Cimino (2011) has suggested that hazing is an evolved response to prevent the exploitation of automatic group benefits. His study found that support of hazing increased within groups as the automatic benefits of membership increased. This finding is especially salient for those of us in the prevention business. When we think of group benefits of the groups typically involved in hazing on campus, the first thing that should come to mind is social status. Fraternities, sports teams, many bands and other student organizations all enjoy high social status on their campuses. Cimino’s study tells us that these groups are more prone to severe hazing; it is as if to say “we have something you really want and we are going to make you go through hell to get it.”

Some Tips for Hazing Prevention:

- Find out who are the high status groups on your campus. Is it a sports team? Fraternities? The band? Knowing who is the most prone to serious hazing will help you be more intentional and targeted with your approaches to prevention.
- Before addressing hazing within a group, first ask yourself “Why?” A lacrosse team may be hazing in order to build commitment and loyalty to the group, or they may be hazing in order to reinforce the social hierarchy of upper-class students over first years. It is likely that the hazing taking place will vary greatly depending on the rationale for the hazing. How can we prevent what we don’t understand? Understand the “why” before trying to fix the “what.”

- Research suggests that students perceive hazing to be worse in other organizations than in their own, and that hazing behaviors decrease when students feel that their friends do not approve of hazing activities. This implies that social norming would be a great way to change attitudes about hazing on campus. Work with the high risk groups on your campus on a social norms campaign related to hazing. We know social norming works with alcohol and other drug prevention; let's give it a try with hazing prevention!

Cimino, A. (2011). The evolution of hazing: Motivational mechanisms and the abuse of newcomers. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 11 (1), 241-267.

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