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The State of Fraternity and Sorority Life in Higher Education

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There are many benefits to being involved in Greek life. Becoming a part of a fraternity or sorority provides one with opportunities to get involved in community service and develop into global citizens. However, recent negative media attention has focused on hazing-related deaths, alcohol abuse, and sexual assaults in connection with Greek life. This narrative has perpetuated a false generalization of Greek life. The purpose of this paper is to review some of the current issues that are impacting the Greek community and to provide recommendations how student affairs professionals can assist in improving the image and improving the practices of Greek life.

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Greek-letter organizations, also referred to as fraternities and sororities, have a 200-year history on college campuses in the United States (Johansen & Slantecheva-Durst, 2018). Greek-letter organizations are instrumental in engaging and involving students on campus and have become a familiar symbolism of institutions in the United States. However, fraternity and sorority life has faced numerous challenges and changes over the last decade. Various media outlets have reported multiple incidences connecting Greek life to hazing, sexual assault, drug abuse, and death. Many of these incidences have gained national attention causing institutions to observe the actions of fraternities and sororities more closely. Some institutions have banned and suspended fraternities and sororities. These corrective measures by institutions have caused members of Greek life as well as student affairs professionals to nationally reflect on the state of fraternity and sorority life in higher education. By reviewing the events of the current climate of Greek life, a better understanding can develop regarding the state of fraternities and sororities. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore some of the current issues that are impacting the Greek community and to provide recommendations how student affairs professionals can assist in improving the image and improving the

practices of Greek life. A brief history of fraternities and sororities, hazing incidents, anti-hazing policies, racial discrimination in Greek Life, and implications for student affairs professionals will be discussed.

History of Fraternities and Sororities

Prior to the Civil War, literary societies were one of the major extracurricular activities at institutions of higher education (Joyce, 2018). However, in the late 1700s, student fraternities began to emerge, and nearly a century after their emergence, fraternity and sorority councils began to form (Joyce, 2018). Fraternities and sororities tend to have chapters of larger national organizations (Hughey & Hunter, 2013). National organizations and their national associations are an important aspect of fraternity and sorority life. The four national associations that will be discussed are: National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC), National Panhellenic Council (NPHC), and National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC).

It was not until 1891 that there was a “call of the women’s sorority of Kappa Kappa Gamma for a conference amongst seven women’s sororities” (Johansen & Slantecheva-Durst, 2018, p. 5). Nine years after this initial meeting, the first interfraternal association, the Inter- Sorority Conference

(later to be known as the National Panhellenic Conference, NPC) was formed. Following the establishment of the National Panhellenic Conference, two additional interfraternal associations were formed (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018). The North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) emerged in 1910 as the umbrella organization for fraternities (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018). During this time, racial segregation was prevalent and therefore the NIC did not invite African Americans or any non-White and non-Christian organizations to join. At Howard University in May of 1930, the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was established as the umbrella organization for the historically black fraternities and sororities also uniquely known as the "Divine Nine" (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018). With the increase of diversity on college campuses, additional national umbrella organizations were formed in order to address the needs of multicultural fraternities and sororities. The National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC), and the National Asian Pacific Islander American Panhellenic Association (NAPA) were established 1997 (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018).

These interfraternal associations influence Greek life on college campuses across the nation. Councils were established

as a response for collaboration and resources (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018). Institutions of higher education have implemented regulations in regard to national associations and an organizations affiliation. For many college campuses, it is mandated that an organization must be nationally affiliated in order to be recognized on campus (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018). The primary reason behind the desire institutions have for national affiliations is due to the fact that "it comes with its own set of rules, resources from national headquarters supervision from national consultants, and professional staff members to guide chapters" (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018, p. 6). Fraternity and sorority councils play a critical role in regulating institutions involving the issues facing Greek life.

Hazing Epidemic

According to Bruckner (2018), hazing has been around for centuries with origins in Ancient Greece and Rome. Schools supported and encouraged hazing behavior because it was viewed as a way to teach obedience. Hazing related deaths have been occurring since 1970 (Bruckner, 2018). Hazing practices include: binge drinking, ridicule, isolation, sleep deprivation, paddling, beating, physical exhaustion, and much more (Joyce, 2018). Timothy Piazza's death is an example of one of the several horrific incidents that

have occurred involving hazing in this country (Simon, 2018). After Timothy Piazza suffered an injury from a hazy related ritual, his fraternity brothers failed to contact emergency assistance until after more than 12 hours which resulted in his death (Simon 2018).

When stories involving hazing occur, institutions tend to become very scrutinous of the actions of Greek life. According to Bruckner (2018) hazing occurs because some students believe that it provides a sense of belonging. The hazing cycle becomes a tradition that repeats and has some significance to the group. The hazing cycle becomes normalized when a person believes “if they can do it, so can I,” (Joyce, 2018). Hazing is an issue that is known globally and is not unique to fraternities or sororities. It is thought of as a process to “solicit individual commitment to an organization and exert dominance over those seeking to become members” (Chambers, Crumb, Hill, Hoover-Plonk, and Tingley, 2018, p.48). Not all students view hazing as a problem and have a viewpoint that hazing is a positive instead of a negative consequence. According to Chambers, Crumb, Hill, Hoover-Plonk, and Tingley (2018) a study was conducted to establish the prevalence of hazing and found that 9 out of 10 students who experience hazing did not consider the actions to be hazing. Students also

identified hazing as being a part of the campus culture.

Anti-Hazing Policies

Rosenberg and Mosca (2016) identified strategies for managing risk involving hazing and drinking for fraternity and sorority life professionals. For example, safe ride programs can be shared when having discussions around the risk of drinking at social events. Monitoring membership intake processes/initiation activities can assist in managing the risk of hazing.

Colleges and universities must continue to treat hazing as a serious crime. Several institutions have made efforts on being transparent regarding judicial actions by “[releasing] a monthly update with aggregate data on judicial actions taken on hazing cases and report all hazing incidents according to state and federal entities” (Boettcher et al., 2018, p. 43). Currently, some anti-hazing institutional policies and state laws are broad and have unclear definitions, which leave loopholes for what hazing is and what the penalties for participating should be.

Campus and university administrators, national associations, and national organizations need to remain aware of the potential for harm within student organizations. Stakeholders of fraternities and sororities can include fraternity/sorority advisors, un-

dergraduate members, student affairs professionals, and alumni. These stakeholders in addition to campus administration and national organizations need to remain active in the conversation about preserving the history of these organizations. Many alumni and donors of fraternities and sororities not only support their organizations in annual giving but to their institutions as well. When alumni and donors have historical connection with an institution, they feel more inclined to support the campus. Fraternity and sorority life has an educational value and social influence that can be impactful on the student experience at institutions across the nation.

Racial Discrimination in Greek Life

It is important to first acknowledge and recognize that the Greek system was not created to benefit students of color in any shape, form, or fashion. In fact, it distinctly left out students of color. Several displays of unwelcoming behaviors have been presented and demonstrated by many white fraternities and sororities. For instance, Halloween parties with black-face costumes, ritual songs and chants using the "n-word," and Confederate flag parties are a few examples of how racial discrimination is promoted in some white fraternities and sororities.

At the University of Georgia, Tau Kappa Epsilon was suspended after a video of some of its members using racial slurs and

mocking slavery went viral on social media (Abusaid, 2019). While this does not describe Greek life at all institutions, it shows how sororities and fraternities are capable of harming students of color in more profound ways than simply excluding them. Although only 2 percent of the United States' population is a part of Greek life, 76 percent of U.S. Senators, 80 percent of Fortune 500 executives, and all except 2 presidents are members of a fraternity (Chang, 2014). It is evident that Greek life has a strong influence on politics and vice-versa.

A major challenge that higher education faces in rebuilding its relationship with Greek life is fixing the perception that Greek excludes students of color from joining their organizations. Institutions across the nation should be proactive in encouraging fraternities and sororities to be not only diverse but inclusive. However, Greek life is becoming more racially diverse and inclusive. Nearly 200 women of color accepted bids at the University of Alabama's historically white sororities (Joyce, 2018). According to Joyce (2018), fraternities and sororities are increasing their engagement of National Panhellenic Councils and Multicultural Greek Councils on their campuses and participating in programming related to diversity and inclusion education.

Blechsmidt, Martin, Parker, and Pascarella (2015) suggest that membership

in a Greek-letter organization does have a significant impact on a student's intercultural competence development during their tenure on a college campus. Like a college education, it is important to emphasize educational experiences outside of the classroom such as fraternity and sorority life. These experiences can focus on "cross-racial interactions, multicultural training, and cross-cultural communication" (Blechsmidt et al., 2015, p. 71). An institution and national organization need to remain aware and find tactics such as diversity training as a form of being proactive instead of being reactive.

Implications for Student Affairs

Professionals

There are several ways in which student affairs professionals can be proactive in improving the practices and perceptions of Greek life. The initiation process or new member intake process would be greatly improved by implementing diversity and inclusivity education. Each fraternity and sorority must confront and address racial discrimination directly from the start of members entering the organization.

It is imperative that student affairs professionals stay abreast of policies and anti-hazing state and federal laws. Updates and changes to laws can provide guidance and strategy on how to best educate and as-

sist fraternities and sororities on the consequences of hazing. In order to avoid misinterpretation, establishing clear definitions of what hazing is and what constitutes hazing can help the campus community understand hazing practices. Collaborating with staff members from the institution's legal affairs department can be beneficial in educating the campus community on policies and laws regarding hazing.

Building a strong relationship with the alumni chapters and national organizations of fraternities and sororities can also help support the mission of anti-hazing. It is sometimes necessary for the national organizations to make demands and/or apply pressure on their affiliated fraternity or sorority in which the institution cannot. By having a good relationship with the national organization, an open line of communication can be established in order to allow more candid conversations of what may be needed or expected of fraternity or sorority. National organizations are in better positions to make demands of their fraternities and sororities than institutions. As with all cultural changes, progress is not linear and when setbacks occur, members of these organizations should not be discouraged for their efforts.

Some institutions have developed research centers in order to improve the status of Greek Life. Pennsylvania State University has research center focused on addressing

hazing and dangerous behaviors in Greek life (Zalaznick, 2019). Florida State University has developed strategies such as scorecards to promote positive impact in Greek life on their campus (Zalaznick, 2019).

Developing responsible leaders is a key factor in improving the leadership of Greek life (Hevel, Martin, and Pascarella, 2014). Fostering a climate of social respon-

sibility within fraternity and sorority life is dependent on members and their aspirations for a sustainable future. Student affairs professionals need to engage in actively assisting students to shape these perceptions. It will take hard work and action and a collaborative effort to continue to change the perception of Greek life on college campuses and nationwide.

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