

Op-Ed

Beyond the Letters: The Importance of University-Wide Hazing Prevention Efforts

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TW: description of hazing behaviors

According to the National Survey of Student Hazing, 55% of all students involved in any student organization experience hazing. Hazing has been defined by Stop Hazing as, any activity that is expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers them, regardless of a person's willingness to participate. For decades, the dialogues surrounding hazing behaviors have been focused on sorority and fraternity membership- and for good reason. With the National Survey of Student Hazing reporting that 73% of students in social Greek organizations are hazed and the rise of tragic fraternity hazing deaths in the last decade, hazing prevention initiatives for these organizations have been a critical part of any sorority and fraternity professional's role. However beyond the Greek letters, hazing prevention must be prioritized in all areas of student life. It is vital that campuses adopt a university-wide hazing prevention programming model to assure all students, faculty and staff members are able to identify and stop harmful behaviors in their corners of campus.

From the first moment students arrive on campus, they are shown the endless opportunities to get involved, find community and make their way during their undergrad. But without knowing it, many students bring with them experiences with hazing from high school. Nearly half of all incoming first year students were hazed at some point during high school, providing a dangerous blueprint for what it means to belong to a group. With the knowledge that out of all the students who have experienced hazing behaviors, 9 out of 10 didn't consider themselves to have been hazed, the discrepancy between the frequency of hazing and awareness of hazing behaviors is clear. This is likely connected to the sheer range of behaviors that are considered hazing. Egregious behaviors such as forced consumption of alcohol or physical violence, are far easier to identify as hazing than silence periods, being called demeaning names, roasts or schedule modification. Although less obvious, these behaviors are capable of causing harm beyond the physical. If the individuals who are experiencing these behaviors cannot recognize them as hazing, the likelihood of them being reported or stopped for the future is unlikely.

Without a doubt, hazing has the capacity to touch all areas of campus life. According to the National Survey of Student Hazing, the students who are most likely to experience hazing on a college campus are college athletes, with 74% of them experiencing at least one behavior during their undergraduate career. Under the guise of team building, these behaviors not only statistically lower rates of group cohesion, they also endanger the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of the individuals involved. Beyond the locker room or the fraternity house, hazing happens in performing arts organizations (56%), service fraternities (50%), recreation clubs (42%), honor societies (20%) and more. These statistics show that wherever groups may gather, traditions are made and systems of power exist, hazing has the ability to make its mark.

Knowing that students in any organization could encounter hazing behaviors, it is critical that universities provide hazing awareness and prevention programming to every student and the

professionals who support these students. This could be delivered in multiple parts. First, preliminary education about how to spot hazing behaviors could be integrated into first year seminars, orientation programming and other first year spaces to assure early awareness. Providing this education for students as they begin joining student organizations, attending recruitment for a sorority or fraternity or developing a social network could help them identify hazing behaviors before they escalate. If not already provided, student athletes and sorority/fraternity students should attend a hazing awareness workshop as they join their teams or organizations, with the knowledge that they are high risk communities for hazing.

Hazing prevention cannot simply rely on spotting hazing behaviors. It has to also empower the students who perpetrate hazing behaviors, knowingly or unknowingly, to make changes in their organizations and alter their ingrained behaviors. With this in mind, student involvement centers on campuses should provide all student leaders with bystander intervention and hazing prevention training as they take on leadership positions in their organizations. This training can help them unpack the psychology behind hazing, examine their current traditions, use the time/place/manner model to adjust unhealthy patterns and hold each other accountable for creating a meaningful sense of belonging. Sorority and fraternity offices should adapt this training to address their unique challenges with hazing issues for Greek leaders. With training such as this, student leaders will hopefully be able to break the cycle of hazing behaviors.

The final element of a campus-wide hazing prevention initiative is education for all the student-facing advisors, coaches and staff members on campus. In 25% of all hazing incidents, an advisor or staff member was present. In another 25%, alumni of the organization or group participated in hazing behaviors, some of which were now in a support role for the students. If university staff or advisors are unknowingly perpetuating hazing behaviors, it is clear that education for this group needs to be prioritized. This could be addressed in a number of ways. First, sharing what qualifies as a hazing behavior, next pulling in some of the “change-making” education the organization leaders may be experiencing and finally, offering some resources for these advisors to report or make changes.

It has been said that hazing prevention should be treated by universities as a public health issue due to how pervasive and damaging it can be. With a university-wide hazing prevention and awareness education model, campuses will equip their students and professionals with the knowledge to attempt to stop hazing before it begins. Universities must challenge the systems of power behind the façade of tradition to create safer spaces for students to find community and belonging.