

Campus violence

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/13/florida-hazing-victim-killed-conservatism-violent?INTCMP=SRCH>

Florida hazing victim was killed by conservatism in its most violent form

James Ammon's resignation was inevitable, as his institution was incapable of protecting those it should be responsible for



Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University president James Ammons failed to protect the young people under his charge. Photograph: Phil Coale/AP

James Ammons [had no choice but to step down](#). The now former president of [Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University \(FAMU\)](#), one of the nation's Historically Black College and Universities (HBCU) based in Tallahassee, resigned his post eight months after the death of Robert Champion, a drum major in the school's famous marching band who [died as a result of brutal hazing](#).

The 26-year-old was beaten in a sick ritual that consisted of the participant running down the center aisle of the band's charter bus while members on either side punched, kicked, and struck them with drumsticks and other objects en route to the back of the bus. Champion endured this, along with contusions on his chest, arms, back, and shoulders, leading him to fall ill, vomit, and collapse. His official cause of death was

"haemorrhagic shock caused by blunt-force trauma". His parents have filed a lawsuit, and though the band director found himself fired and several students arrested, Ammons refused for months to recede his position. "This is my university. Until the final bell rings I am going to remain president of Florida A&M," he said defiantly.

That same reasoning Ammons used to justify his resistance to resignation is exactly why resigning was the appropriate and responsible thing to do. It was his university, he was in the ultimate authority and in this instance he failed in his greatest responsibility of providing for the safety of the the young people under his charge. Though the details differ, it's not unlike [the dereliction of duty displayed in the Penn State child sexual abuse scandal](#), where an institution has turned a blind eye to the suffering of a vulnerable population in favor of protecting jobs and reputations. Ammons had no other recourse, as his neglect to enforce anti-hazing regulations resulted in the violent death of a student. There is no means by which he could right such a mistake.

Hazing has been a part of college campus culture since the advent of college campuses. A [New York Times article](#) cited a study conducted by the University of Maine in 2008 that concluded 55% of students who participate in fraternities, sororities, sports teams, or other student groups experience hazing. Its proponents will argue that the process forges bonds, builds character, and proves the participants worthiness of joining the organization from which they seek admittance. What character is required to endure a physical assault from a dozen people with paddles or to drink to the point of vomiting and possible alcohol poisoning? A strong back and resilient liver? And what of these bonds that are formed? How tenuous is a bond made through mutual torture? What about the willingness to endure such torment proves one's worth?

Hazing does not stand up to logic, but it persists because of the adherence to tradition and the strain of small-C conservatism that runs through our institutions. Even in the face of suspensions, anti-hazing regulations and legal action, those organizations that have built their membership and reputation through the process of hazing. They view members who do not participate as illegitimate, and do not extend the same respect as

they do toward their hazed brethren. As such, it continues to perpetuate itself, though all that would be required for this antiquated practice to stop is for those involved to simply stop.

The story at FAMU has shed light on hazing and focused the attention on HBCUs, where supposedly the practice is more pronounced. I attended an HBCU for my undergraduate studies and can attest to hazing being a part of the culture. But it is clearly not just an issue that affects black colleges and universities. You need look no further than the story of George Desdunes at Cornell University, who was kidnapped, blindfolded, and forced to drink shots of vodka until he vomited repeatedly by the brothers of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. He was loaded into the backseat of a car that belonged to one of the fraternity brothers, and when they couldn't get him into his room, they left him lying unconscious on a couch.

No, hazing isn't a solely black problem, but there is an insidious cruelty to the violent form it takes place on HBCU campuses, given the history of racial violence black people have endured in the [United States](#). A member of a Greek-letter organization once argued to me that hazing was tradition, and if one didn't experience it they wouldn't truly appreciate their membership in the organization. I replied that slavery had also been a tradition, but I had never needed to be beaten to appreciate my freedom.

A new way is possible, but it takes the will of those in authority or the voice of those not to decide that enough is enough. Hazing is a ruthless and dangerous practice, the benefits of which do not outweigh the brutal results. Ammons did the right thing by stepping down, but more people need to do the right thing by stepping in to put an end to hazing altogether.