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STUDENTS

Fraternities as Charitable Powerhouses? One University's Numbers Suggest Otherwise

By Sarah Brown | FEBRUARY 02, 2018



AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar

The death of Timothy Piazza at Pennsylvania State U.'s Beta Theta Pi fraternity house prompted a wave of reforms at the university. One was the publication of "scorecards" for fraternities and sororities that, among other things, chart their charitable activity and grades.

than two volunteer hours per member.

In terms of philanthropy, a handful of fraternities raised an average of \$0 per member. (The data exclude money raised as part of Penn State's Dance Marathon, a large student-run fund-raising event that benefits children and families affected by childhood cancer; it takes place in the spring.)

The Penn State numbers challenge the argument that fraternity advocates often make: that despite the negative attention surrounding alcohol abuse, hazing, and sexual assault

Updated (2/2/2018, 4:44 p.m.) with comment from a Penn State spokeswoman.

Many of Pennsylvania State University's fraternities logged barely any community-service hours and raised little money in philanthropy in 2017.

Fifteen of the 39 active chapters that are part of the Interfraternity Council, the umbrella under which most social fraternities fall, tallied fewer than one community-service hour per member over the entire calendar year. Five other fraternities tallied fewer

involving fraternity chapters, they are largely focused on service and philanthropy.

The data appeared in Penn State's new "scorecards" for its fraternities and sororities, which include information on grade-point averages, conduct violations, volunteer work, and philanthropy.

The scorecards were among the many reforms that university officials announced after Timothy Piazza, a Penn State student and fraternity pledge, died. Sunday marks the first anniversary of his death.

Piazza became intoxicated during an initiation ritual for the Beta Theta Pi fraternity and fell down a flight of stairs. Fraternity members neglected to call 911 for hours, despite Piazza's worsening condition. Eighteen of them were criminally charged, and Beta Theta Pi lost university recognition indefinitely.

More Service by Sororities

Eric J. Barron, Penn State's president, wrote a letter to the campus on Thursday that reiterated the changes his administration had put in place to try to make Greek life safer. "Our Greek-letter community needs to embrace the need for change and rededicate yourselves to a mission of service and community," Barron wrote.

A Penn State spokeswoman wrote in an email: "Penn State Office of Fraternity & Sorority Life strongly encourages all chapters to engage in philanthropic initiatives or activities as they are integral to the missions of fraternal organizations and help students engage in a larger impact on their local, national, and global communities."

She added that each fraternity and sorority chapter "has their own standards around service and philanthropy/charitable giving."

One of the more significant shifts Barron announced last year was that university administrators would take control of the disciplinary process for chapters alleged to have committed conduct violations, like hazing or serving alcohol to minors. The proceedings had traditionally been overseen by fraternity and sorority members themselves.

Making Fraternities Safer

Bringing problems out into the open and promoting confidential reporting have helped lift the veil of secrecy that perpetuates abusive behavior.

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A few Penn State fraternities bucked the trend of low service and philanthropy numbers. Delta Theta Sigma's members logged an average of 25 community-service hours and raised more than \$800 per member last year. Lambda Chi Alpha raised nearly \$1,400 per member, though the chapter's members also logged just 0.1 hours, on average, of volunteer work.

Those fraternities were the exceptions and not the rule: 20 of the 39 active fraternity chapters raised less than \$25 per member, and 32 of the 39 logged fewer than six hours per member of community service. (Eleven fraternities have either been suspended temporarily or lost university recognition for a period of time.)

The sororities that are part of Penn State's Panhellenic Council logged significantly higher levels of volunteer work. Just one sorority chapter fell below two volunteer hours per member; seven of the 22 chapters logged more than 10. No sorority raised \$0 per member, though half of the chapters raised less than \$25 per member.

A Good First Step

Several other colleges, including the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, also have started publishing data on service, philanthropy, grades, and policy violations by Greek organizations, amid increasing scrutiny of fraternity misconduct. Institutions in the

Southeastern Conference are developing a model report card for Greek life that should be rolled out within the next year, said Gentry McCreary, a consultant with the Ncherm Group, which advises colleges on risk management.

“Transparency is a great disinfectant,” McCreary said. If prospective students and their parents can see that particular fraternities report lower grades and volunteer at a much lower rate, they’ll be able to make more-informed decisions about which chapters to consider joining, he said.

It’s possible that some of Penn State’s fraternities simply didn’t do a good job of keeping records and reporting service hours, McCreary said. But when he has worked with colleges, he has often seen that the hard numbers don’t back up fraternities’ claims about their commitment to volunteer work and philanthropy.

There are wide variations. Some chapters are passionate about community service and fund raising, and it shows, he said. “Others do a cursory job — they throw one fund raiser a year and pat themselves on the back.”

Publishing such data is a good first step, McCreary said, but “this in and of itself is not going to change the culture.” It’s easy to measure things like grade-point averages and volunteer hours, he said, while it’s harder to assess, for instance, the beliefs and attitudes of fraternity members.

Sarah Brown writes about a range of higher-education topics, including sexual assault, race on campus, and Greek life. Follow her on Twitter @Brown_e_Points, or email her at sarah.brown@chronicle.com.

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