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## COMMENTARY

# To Change Students' Dangerous Behavior, Understand Their Motives

By Noah Borton | SEPTEMBER 13, 2017

Anyone who works with fraternities eventually realizes how much their success depends on the decision making of undergraduates. When students make poor choices that lead to alcohol abuse or destructive hazing, there is pressure on us to take immediate action. Though well-intentioned, our rush to do *something* is often ineffective because it doesn't put students in a position to make better decisions, which is what we ultimately need.

Often after a hazing incident, we issue policies or directives. We put operational changes in place, like changing the time of year when fraternity rush occurs, or shortening the new-member period. These practices only serve to rearrange how or when problematic behaviors manifest. Other tactics that rely on guilt, shame, and fear — such as invoking the historical founders or showing examples of pledges who have gotten hurt — are unlikely to motivate changes in behavior. Interventions that assume we can influence student behavior without influencing student attitudes are bound to fail.

To promote healthier decision making among students, we must first have a clear understanding of their motivations. When it comes to hazing, students have a strong desire for rites of passage coupled with the need for meaningful interpersonal relationships made through an emotional connection. They also have an overarching need to seek social status and acceptance. This desire to fit in becomes a powerful influence as students take part in a social system that promotes — and even rewards — problematic behavior. Failing to see this from students' point of view creates a major gap in our ability to serve them.

## 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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Students typically lack the emotional and intellectual tools to appropriately satisfy those social needs. However, the solution is not as simple as dictating a new way of doing things via policies, programs, or other means logical to us. Imposing on the students alternative rites of passage and ways of developing relationships are likely to be rejected. Therefore, our role is to be student-centric educators who equip students with the best tools to effectively overcome complex and serious problems, by developing healthy alternative practices. Ultimately, success will require students to own the new practice.

At Delta Upsilon fraternity, we are seeing progress through an educational strategy. During the first year of our Associate Member Education Program, an eight-week program for new pledges, approval and tolerance of hazing declined among freshman members. This suggests to us that our members are experiencing less hazing. Additionally, our results indicate members are having healthier interpersonal relationships.

Our programming does not focus specifically on hazing prevention. Rather, we focus on activities and discussions that prompt students to better understand themselves, while helping them interact with each other in healthier ways. We use team-building and experiential activities to develop group dynamics, peer-mentor training for those serving in a "big brother" role, discussions around personal values based on personal experience,

and a final reflection on personal learning that can be applied in the future. There is a strong emphasis on developing skills in critical thinking, problem solving, clarifying values, and taking another person's perspective, all while facilitating meaningful interpersonal relationships.

In my professional experiences, I have found value in working collaboratively with students to stop problematic behaviors. It is important to acknowledge that most students are not hazers, and most are not strongly committed to it. We have occasionally experienced resistance to putting new programs in place in Delta Upsilon, and trying to understand the nature of that resistance has been helpful. More often than not, students are simply committed to an outcome that is misaligned with their means of achieving it. If I can help them understand why their desired activity is potentially harmful while identifying an alternative practice that accomplishes the same outcome, the student is usually happy to adopt a different approach.

We will only get the results we want when all of those invested in the success of fraternity members commit to a comprehensive, educational approach to deal with the history and the culture of hazing. This will require consistent application of fundamentally sound practices over an extended period of time. It will also require discipline and strategic effort applied at many points along the student experience by many players, including campus and fraternity staff, alumni, key community members, and student leaders.

Each group will have a role in shaping the student culture. We will all be well served if the tone of our organizational leadership emphasizes collaboration and shared interests.

Success will be hard earned, and there will be setbacks. When challenges arise, we can revert to quick-fix strategies, or we can respond with the humility that we don't readily have all the answers, and trust that we all want to create a better student experience.

I hope all those who work with fraternities will embrace their role as educators. We must let go of previously held notions of blame, and open ourselves up to collaborative and purposeful educational strategies that position students to make better decisions.

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