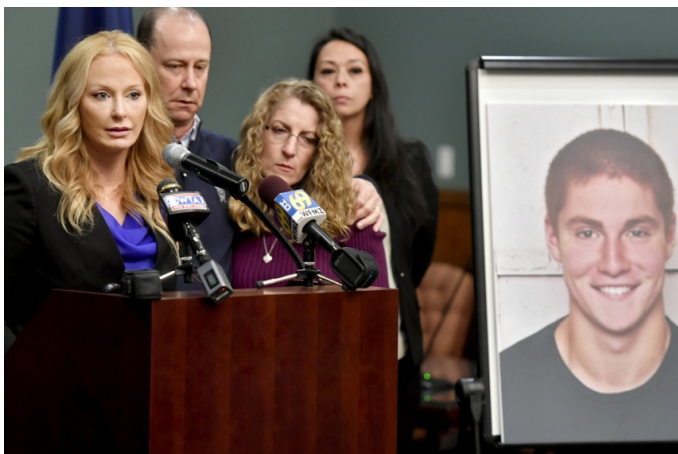


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## COMMENTARY

# Let's End Hazing Deaths Now

By Michele Tolela Myers | JANUARY 08, 2018



Abby Drey, Centre Daily Times via AP

Jim and Evelyn Piazza stand behind Stacy Parks Miller, district attorney of Centre County, Pa., as she announces the results of an investigation into the hazing death last February of their son, Timothy Piazza, a sophomore at Penn State U. When will college leaders decide that "enough is enough"?

In this new year, college presidents across the country will again face the question of what to do about fraternities. Most will wait until there is another tragedy, and when they do act, they will discipline only the guilty fraternity. On Monday, a state judge in Pennsylvania banned Pi Delta Psi from operating in the state for 10 years and fined the organization \$112,500 in the 2013 hazing death of Chun Hsien Deng, a pledge at Baruch College.

But this will not end the kind of behavior that can result in a student's death. Hazing will be in the news again when trials begin

for members of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity at Pennsylvania State University, where Timothy Piazza, a first-year student, died last February after a pledge event involving alcohol at the fraternity house. The president of the university called the events that led to Piazza's death "sickening and difficult to understand."

Sickening, yes. But not difficult to understand. Deaths resulting from hazing and alcohol abuse occur on or near college campuses almost every year. In 2017 alone, Matthew McKinley Ellis, a fraternity pledge at Texas State University, died after a night of partying; Andrew Coffey, a junior and fraternity pledge at Florida State University died after a

party; and 18-year-old Maxwell Gruver died during a fraternity hazing ritual at Louisiana State University. How many more young men will die before we understand that the problems are not local but systemic?

I was president of Denison University in the 1980s when we restructured the fraternity system, and I empathize with the dilemma college presidents face when they decide whether to make significant changes to the fraternity system or to abolish it altogether. There are housing questions, fund-raising issues, and alumni and trustees who will fight to keep the system flourishing because fraternity life was one of their most significant and positive experiences in college. It formed a basis for treasured lifelong friendships and connections.

Until now, I have resisted requests to speak publicly or write about fraternities — a system that in many cases abuses women, is steeped in secret rituals, and makes the alcohol problem that is common on most college campuses far more dangerous and intractable. I didn't wish to suggest that I had all the answers. I still don't.

The four young men's avoidable deaths in 2017 made me decide to write now because I am convinced that fraternities, in spite of their bonding and friendship-building positive features, remain dangerous, not only because of hazing issues, but also because their very existence exacerbates social divides on campuses that are already torn apart by all sorts of inclusion/exclusion issues: racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientations, socioeconomic, etc.

I want to make clear that I do not think fraternity men are bad people. It is the system that is pernicious. Pernicious because it is secretive and wields enormous social power over its members, who are held to underground rules that cannot be monitored. Hazing has been banned at many colleges, yet hazing happens over and over again. Covering up is what fraternity brothers do, and in some cases what colleges and universities do.

Fraternities have long histories on their campuses and strong support from their alumni. Changing the system or abolishing it altogether is not an easy decision to make. It requires full support from trustees, significant buy-in by alumni, and hard data about what really goes on in the houses and on their role and impact on campus social life and

culture. It can also have serious financial implications: Fund raising from alumni may go down, at least for a while; financial costs for housing students on campus in the absence of fraternities can be high; student-recruitment efforts might suffer.

It is difficult for young people who are eager to belong and terrified of being ostracized to resist the allure of fraternities, which promise good times, access to alcohol and drugs, available files of exams to consult before finals, and social and business connections after graduation. I know how difficult it is for colleges that depend on their alumni for a substantial percentage of their fund raising to wage war on fraternities when that risks alienating a major part of their base.

**A**t the same time, it is imperative for colleges that call for openness and inclusion (as they well should) to take on structures and organizations that actually perpetuate exclusivity. What is hazing if not a required rite of passage from exclusion to inclusion? It continues to be tolerated in spite of the tragedies that can result. Many national fraternities have put programs and policies in place to prevent hazing and to make fraternities safer. For example, Beta Theta Pi has been a leader with their Men of Principle program — the same Beta Theta Pi to which Timothy Piazza had pledged.

Dirty little secrets pollute the campus climate: the many ways that underage students procure alcohol and drugs, with local merchants closing their eyes and accepting fake IDs and upperclassmen willing to buy alcohol for their younger friends; underage students bingeing in their rooms before going to college-sponsored parties. The collision between privacy and safety is a high-stakes issue on campuses.

Colleges that consider freedom as necessary for learning and exploring are ill equipped to deal with students who expect to be both free and protected, and who join groups to which other students are not welcome — groups that encourage unsafe behavior, perpetuate unsafe environments, and too often encourage members to ignore university rules and laws about hazing. All of these issues occur on campuses that do not have fraternities, but they can lead to potentially more dangerous outcomes on those that do.

There are reasons to hope that college presidents who are willing to make serious changes to the status of fraternities will face less anger than their counterparts experienced in the mid- to late-20th century. We have many examples of first-rate colleges that either abolished fraternities, as Williams did in 1962 and Colby did 22 years later, or that significantly restructured them as Denison and Colgate Universities, and Hamilton College did in later decades. At these institutions, boards of trustees and presidents created alternative visions that could work on their campuses, engaged alumni in the change process, made hard calls, dealt with the pushback, and lived through the difficult times. Their colleges ultimately emerged healthier and stronger as a result.

Let us not wait for more deaths before we speak out honestly about the viability on any campus of a culture that epitomizes exclusivity, secrecy, misogyny, and excess. Enough is enough.

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