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The Questionable Value of Fraternities

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Almost monthly, a college or university fraternity makes the national news because of an escapade of underage drinking or a hazing episode resulting in bodily injury or worse. In fact, so many incidents of this sort occur that at least one law firm specializes in fraternity-related lawsuits. Such incidents tarnish the image of fraternities as a locus of brotherhood.

The response from fraternity leaders to those events is predictable. With diverse memberships, they say, it is impossible for everyone to attain the high goals set by fraternities. Moreover, it's not just fraternity members who behave inappropriately, they note. Abuse of alcohol is all too common among many students, whether they belong to a fraternity or not. Besides, proponents of fraternities assert, few other student organizations provide such an impressive array of benefits for their members and the host institution, benefits that far outweigh the occasional problems.

For example, fraternity leaders say, the grade-point averages of fraternity members on a campus sometimes exceed those of undergraduate men generally, evidence that fraternities contribute to academic performance. And joining a fraternity helps newcomers adjust to college; without the experience of living in a close-knit, supportive group, many students would drop out. Fraternity life also helps give students a better understanding of people from different backgrounds, supporters say, and provides opportunities for leadership within the group that cannot be matched elsewhere on campus. As a result, they add, fraternity men and sorority women are disproportionately represented among community and professional leaders.

Unfortunately, many of these assertions are at odds with the results of recent research.

While the majority of college students drink, fraternity members are much more likely than non-members to abuse alcohol, according to a recent study by the Harvard University School of Public Health. In surveying more than 17,000 students at 140 randomly selected four-year colleges, the study found that 86 per cent of those who live in fraternity houses were binge drinkers, compared with 45 per cent of non-members.

Particularly chilling but rarely mentioned is the large number of sorority women who become binge drinkers. After they enter college, 80 per cent of the residents of sorority houses reported binge drinking, although only 35 per cent said they had binged in high school. Both fraternity and sorority members reported having more problems resulting from their drinking than non-members did. One example is unwanted sexual advances, reported by 43 per cent of sorority-house residents, compared with 23 per cent of non-members.

Alcohol abuse is only one area in which the performance of fraternity members falls far short of the espoused values and goals of fraternity life. Even though fraternities declare that academic performance is a high priority, during the orientation period new members' grades often fall well below the campus average. Many professors are convinced that the time-consuming, often inane activities required to pledge a fraternity are the primary cause; candid fraternity members agree.

Fraternity membership also has a negative influence on intellectual development. Data from the National Study of Student Learning, conducted at 18 four-year colleges by the National Center on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, show that -- even after controlling for initial differences in such factors as pre-college cognitive development, academic motivation, age, and selectivity of the college attended -- fraternity men are well behind their non-member counterparts in cognitive development after the first year of college. The biggest deficit is in the area of critical thinking. The pattern is similar for sorority women, though the differences are not as pronounced as for men.

Personal development is affected, too. Although many fraternities attract people with varied academic and avocational interests, students encounter a broader spectrum of human differences in residence halls to which they are assigned randomly. In terms of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, fraternities tend to be more homogeneous than

the student body in general. This is borne out by other data from the National Study of Student Learning. They show that, during the first year of college, fraternity and sorority members make significantly smaller gains than non-members do on measures of openness to diversity, which include valuing contact with people from different backgrounds and learning about people from different cultures.

The opportunity to develop leadership skills during fraternity life also may be overstated. Students gain competence in practical and interpersonal skills when they perform tasks requiring sustained effort and commitment, such as planning group and campuswide events. The majority of fraternity men do not hold positions, in their own group or elsewhere, that demand this kind of performance. Whether fraternity members are overrepresented among contemporary business and community leaders is not known. And even if this was true in the past, in the future the fraternity experience may not be considered an advantage in one's career in civic leadership, given the disappointing findings related to fraternity membership and appreciation for human differences.

Supporters of fraternities surely will criticize this description of their educational impact. We readily concede that some individuals are unaffected by the anti-intellectual influences common to many chapters. And in some fraternities, alcohol abuse is not the norm, and high levels of intellectual and academic achievement are common. Unfortunately, research suggests that those fraternities are in the minority.

Reforming fraternities clearly is difficult. Even when the national officials of fraternities work with campus administrators to carry out new programs for recruiting and initiating members -- programs that do not involve alcohol and hazing -- the reform efforts often fail. Drinking and hazing are too deeply embedded in the cultural system of many chapters, where they are part of a complicated system of rewards and sanctions that bond the individual member to the group.

What is to be done? Colleges and universities need to assess how fraternities affect their educational missions, and to evaluate the political consequences of trying to change the deeply entrenched fraternity system. Generally, alumni have only fond memories of their fraternity and think it played an important part in their development and subsequent success. Campus administrators too often ignore the misdeeds of fraternity members

because of the threat -- direct or implied -- that alumni will withhold their financial support. Therefore, before an institution undertakes any reforms, administrators must enlist the cooperation of all groups concerned and collect data related to the impact of fraternity membership on the educational development of students on that campus.

Most institutions would welcome assistance from the national offices of fraternities in designing reforms. But increasing the educational value of fraternities can be accomplished only campus by campus, using strategies specific to each institution. Campuses must delineate clear criteria that groups must meet for institutional recognition. Behavioral and educational standards must be set. Perhaps the best way to begin, after officials have assembled data showing the problems on their particular campus, is for the president to set up a blue-ribbon panel, headed by a top official such as the provost, to formulate strategies. The panel should include representatives of the faculty, student body, student-affairs staff, local fraternity leaders and members, and alumni. Trustee support must be solicited. Fraternities that fail to cooperate should be ineligible for any form of institutional recognition, including the use of campus space for group functions.

Any attempt to reform the present system without convincing all of the major players that change is necessary will surely fail. Even if reform succeeds -- as seems to be happening in a few cases, such as at Colgate University -- the most visible reformers can expect letters and public statements from fraternity alumni threatening to withdraw their financial support and challenging the reformers' loyalty to the institution. Such is the price of reclaiming the institution's educational integrity.

Because academic performance, intellectual development, and openness to diversity seem to be negatively related to fraternity membership in the first year of college, policies barring first-year students from joining fraternities are essential. This is especially important on campuses where first-year students now can live in fraternity houses before classes begin; those institutions have little chance to socialize the newcomers to academic values. Deferring membership until the sophomore year also may make fraternity houses less rowdy, since fraternities may have strong economic incentive to

make their houses more appealing to older members. Indeed, fraternity advisers report that many members now move out of the houses by their senior year, tired of the noise and drunken behavior of younger members.

Because many fraternities are indifferent to academic values and seem to shortchange the education of many members, we need a careful examination of the educational benefits that fraternities provide. Colleges and universities must insure that fraternity members live up to the standards expected of all students and the standards that fraternities themselves espouse. When groups or individuals fail to meet these goals, administrators and fraternity leaders must act decisively to stem further abuse and reaffirm the institution's overarching educational mission.

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