

Revisiting Hazing and Rites of Passage: When & How Students Become Adult

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For many of us working in hazing prevention, this has been a remarkable period of time. In the past ten years there's been repeated media coverage exploring the dynamics of hazing, specific training on how to detect, investigate, prevent hazing and legislation/policies specific to the topic of hazing. Even so, we cannot claim victory or minimize our passion about this important topic. Quite the opposite. We must redouble our efforts to deliberate the poignant question posed by Hank Nuwer, "What compels young men and women to accept degrading and dangerous rituals in order to belong to a social club, sport team, sorority, or fraternity?" As clearly articulated in this publication, we are going beyond Hank's initial question about "why" individuals haze, to "how" to develop effective prevention strategies to change hazing behaviors amongst young adults.

Over fifteen years ago my university had its own incident when veteran football team players were caught hazing the rookie players. Why would a group of freshman athletes allow themselves to be bound together and consume alcohol until they vomited, especially since they were trying to become part of the very group that was forcing them to engage in this dangerous and possibly deadly hazing act? It was not a matter of "boys will be boys," but a desperate desire to be part of a rite of passage initiation - to prove their worthiness to become part of the group - **to belong.**

If we take away the stupidity and dangerousness of their action, there were some "positive" aspects of the event. These athletes, who are stereotypically seen as the most macho and psychologically distant group on campus, were engaging in a cohesive bonding process. Without encouragement or supervision, they attempted to develop a rite of initiation where the new members of the group could prove their worthiness to be part of the team. Their process was misguided, but the intent was noble.

Very few adolescents have secure feelings about becoming an adult. They do not know what it means or entails since few have been taught or mentored. The only modeling many have had is the popular media. In our culture the athlete is seen as the icon of adulthood, a hero. Children equate being an athlete with being an adult, and their "rite of passage" toward adulthood is being involved in team sports.

For Alfred University, this event was especially troubling. We had the horrible hazing death of Chuck Stenzel in 1978, as chronicled in Hank Nuwer's seminal book, "Broken Pledges". As an institution, we were determined to respond to this incident more effectively than what was done previously. Part of that effort was an attempt to measure the scope of the problem. At that time there was very little research about hazing – much less about hazing associated with athletics.

In response to our athletic hazing incident, Alfred University conducted the first national survey on initiation rites and athletics. Student athletes, coaches, deans and athletic directors responded to a survey about their knowledge of initiation rites on their campuses. Based on a national random sample, the survey estimates that 80% of NCAA athletes were subjected to hazing activities. Very few athletes were willing to categorize the activities they took part in as hazing. Hazing was uniform throughout the NCAA divisions, but there were significant differences in the type of activities based on gender and sport. Student athletes reported that they would not report hazing if they knew about it, and administrators did not think otherwise. Students and administrators alike agreed that the best prevention strategies include taking strong disciplinary action against incidents of hazing, having high athletic, behavioral and academic standards for recruitment and providing alternative bonding and recognition events for athletes.

Even with those defined prevention strategies, the allure of hazing can be extremely seductive and appealing. As stated in a recent article by Susan Stuart, "the sport ethic, or tradition, has four distinct values: making sacrifices for the game, striving for distinction,

playing through pain, and refusing to accept limitation in pursuit of winning." For a young athlete just joining a team, those "values" can be easily manipulated and misrepresented by older players to become the motivation for hazing.

To illustrate that point, every athlete respondent reported that they had been involved in at least one initiation activity. Ninety-six percent of athlete respondents reported that they were involved in at least one acceptable initiation activity, 65% said they were involved in at least one questionable activity, 51% said that they were involved in at least one alcohol-related activity and 21% reported that they were involved in at least one unacceptable event. In addition, 42% reported that they had consumed alcohol on a recruitment visit.

An interesting aspect of the phenomenon is that only a few were acknowledging its existence - not even the students who were exposed to it. A mere 12% of student athlete respondents reported being hazed to join an athletic team. However, a full 80% reported participating in one of the activities that are considered hazing activities. The discrepancy between these two figures suggests that students do not really know what constitutes hazing, despite being presented with a straightforward definition. It also indicated a general lack of concern about hazing practices. Students knew that the term hazing is negative, that it is a bad thing. Therefore, to label their experiences as hazing implies that they have done something wrong. So it is no surprise that so few were willing to report that they've been hazed. Those that do acknowledge hazing practices defend them strongly, claiming that they build "team chemistry" and are "traditional". As one

student wrote on his survey, "If no one is hurt to the point where they need medical attention, just leave it alone." They have very little concept of how harmful hazing can be, or how easily it can get out of their control.

Another reason students are so reluctant to see the harmful aspect of hazing is that it is very much a part of their life. Not only has hazing been going on so long in the university atmosphere that it is considered tradition and has even been glorified in movies about college life, it is also present at the high school level. Of the athletes who reported being hazed, 42% of them reported being first hazed in high school. Another 5% said that they were hazed first in middle school. If hazing is something that they have been exposed to from the beginning of their athletic career, it is understandable that students think it is acceptable. As substantiated in Alfred University's follow-up study of high school hazing, students are coming to college campuses from a culture of hazing.

As mentioned previously, very few of our college students have secure feelings about becoming an adult. They do not know what it means or entails, since few have been taught or mentored. The only modeling many have had is the popular media. In our culture the athlete is seen as an icon - a hero. Children equate being an athlete with being an adult, and their "rite of passage" toward adulthood is being involved in team sports.

Almost every culture has a defined process for adolescents to pass into adulthood, but our culture has few opportunities for our youth to participate in a process of initiation, but that does not mean they don't yearn for the opportunity. As a prevention strategy to

hazing, if a college does not provide a rite of passage program, adolescents will attempt to make their own, through fraternities, clubs, gangs and teams that will go beyond their intended mission and include an initiation process.

Initiation rites are frequently used to create feelings of cohesiveness among group members. These rites can be harmless, but if they involve behavior that is humiliating, dangerous or illegal they are considered hazing. Hazing has been recognized as a problem on university campuses for a number of years. However, most people are under the misconception that it is a phenomenon limited to fraternities and sororities. In reality, the scope of hazing is nowhere near that narrow. Because of Alfred University's surveys and the comprehensive national survey by Drs. Elizabeth Allen and Mary Madden, this misconception has been definitively corrected.

Initiation, or rite of passage, is a coming of age process. It has typically been the central form of education and guidance for adolescents in their ascension into adulthood. It is a ritualistic process that clarifies and affirms their new status or role in the adult community. The process is an intentional one. The elders, or those initiating the new members, have specific goals. The goals usually are not evident or understood by the new member. Their knowledge and comprehension come gradually. Usually they do not know what is happening to them or what it means. The initiation process establishes a hierarchy between those with power versus those without power (rookies vs. the team).

Our society has abdicated its responsibility for initiating the young. In previous generations, families would work side by side in the fields, eat every meal together and sometimes build adjacent homes next to their parents. As our culture progressed from an agrarian to industrial to informational, it seems there are few "elders" in our society willing to teach the values and knowledge adolescents need to become adult members of our society. Rather than seeking knowledge and direction from adults/mentors, adolescents are garnering knowledge through Google and Wikipedia. It's not the fault of parents, teachers or society; it is the lack of confidence of our culture to teach values. Our society has "evolved" to value tangible developed cognitive abilities and skills, rather than intangible cultural values and norms.

By asking each generation to participate in a process of initiation, traditional rites reappear and the entire community is reinvigorated. To know that every generation of one's culture (team or fraternity) went through the exact same process creates a "connectedness" to something greater than the individual. Participants feel part of the community and the community knows it has been renewed. The process of is profoundly personal and communal. The larger group has helped the individual to become an adult and full participant in the group.

It's important to recognize that the student will grow up to become an adult with or without a rite of passage. The question becomes what type of adult does society want? As a college student emerges into their adulthood they strive for inclusion and belonging. They will find something; it's up to us (society, parents, coaches, teachers, etc.) to give them a healthy and powerful option.

The question that remains is: what can be done about it? Fortunately, we are at a better place than we were ten years ago. Rather than solely relying on outside speakers to come and present for an hour on the horrors of hazing, we have viable prevention strategies readily accessible. Through the tireless work of a collective group of individuals, anyone wishing to develop a comprehensive prevention strategy can do so. The prevention template is right here in this publication, on HPO's website and through the collective wisdom of a network of professionals. No one needs to face this issue alone.

In closing, I'd like to nudge along the next compelling question. Since we now know the scope of the problem and we have a viable – research based – prevention strategy, can we figure out "how do we develop effective rites of passages that are compelling enough to replace hazing?"