

# Involved Alumni: Their Impact on Chapter Culture

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In my line of work, I have seen my share of hazing allegations and cases. Students have sat across the table from me and completely lied to my face, while others completely opened up about their organization's new member process. In fraternity/sorority life, as campus-based professionals, we are taught to remove as much emotion from the hazing conversations as possible; these are the results of a student's actions, and there are consequences for those actions, but what happens when it's the chapter that you came from, the one you were initiated into, at your alma mater?

I have the privilege of acting as the "utility hitter" for my chapter's alumni board. Whenever there is a higher-level issue with our chapter, I am asked to provide insight, offer solutions, and sometimes asked to speak with our undergraduate brothers. I made the trip to my Upstate New York Alma Mater in December to speak to our members about an interesting predicament they found themselves in this past fall. We talked about our organization's values, what had transpired, and how to recruit better members throughout the year. As I was headed to my car, it hit me: they thought what they did was acceptable, something that all groups do, and having someone like me challenge them on their actions was ludicrous. How can I, a founding father, relate to these men? How did the vision and direction of our organization change dramatically over the past ten years?

Acts of hazing, among other practices within Greek-lettered organization, are products of an organization's culture and behavior. Many factors can influence whether an organization hazes or not, including new member programs focused on developing active chapter members, high levels of support from University officials, and values-driven recruitment. Another major factor which can positively, or negatively, influence a chapter? Alumni.

When speaking with our chapter, I heard comments like, "well, the Alumni hate us," "The Alumni are just here to get us in trouble," and, "I can't trust them because they will just tell Nationals." As a previous traveling consultant for my organization, "nationals" makes me cringe.

This experience reminded me how important involved alumni are in shaping a positive culture and environment within Greek-lettered organizations. When done right, their presence and wisdom will be absorbed by undergraduate members like sponges. When done right. In some cases, chapters have the wrong alumni involved. These are individuals who believe(d) that mistreating new members, abusing alcohol and other drugs, and the “frat” stereotype were/are acceptable. These alumni, who were usually the one’s who weren’t as involved in chapter leadership or led the party crew every weekend, should be asked to step back, for the good of the organization.

Alumni who care can support the development of a healthy chapter environment by:

**Showing up: your brothers/sisters want to know you.** When I visited my chapter, this was the first time many of them had met a founding father. Most of them were visibly excited to learn more about the past. Providing them context to the chapter may help challenge their current negative environment.

**Telling their story: members want to know more about you.** Where are you from? Why did you join? What was it like being a member back then? What were your challenges? How did you define success? How did the organization help you find a job? Build relationships on campus? Succeed in the classroom? Telling them your story can emotionally grab active members; you might have more in common with them than you think.

**Stepping up:** this does not always include taking an alumni board leadership role. I found one of the best questions to ask undergraduates is, “how does this relate back to the values of our organization?” Ask the hard questions and get members to think bigger.

**Developing relationships with all members:**

Ultimately, all the steps above require trust. If able, look to invest time in person, via text, or video chat to develop that trust. Once it is gained, your ability to positively influence chapter members exponentially increases.

Alumni have the ability to instill major positive change through their authentic story, involvement, and relationships. When trust is developed between the undergraduates and involved alumni members, a healthy environment within the organization is created.