

Solutions Are at Hand: We Can Curb Hazing

By Hank Nuwer

My new book, "Hazing: Destroying Young Lives," is an anthology largely written by campus professionals on the front lines who deal with hazing issues regularly.



The collection of 27 essays is meant to be a guide to the best practices that these distinguished pros have adopted or devised to destroy the very roots of hazing. I am hoping that the book will be a staple at orientation programs for first-year students—the group most at risk of suffering the abuses of hazing.

One solution-based essay is by longtime advocate and speaker Tracy Maxwell. She argues that feminine leadership qualities in both male and female Greek leaders may be the key to truly reforming fraternity and sorority life.

If no way can be found to end the scourges of hazing, sexual assault and substance abuse, the grim prophesy of hazing activist Gary Hipps seems destined to become reality. "If you weigh all the good of these organizations combined against the weight of suffering at the senseless loss of one child they are found lacking," said Hipps, father of a pledge killed at Clemson University and co-founder of PUSH (Parents Uniting to Stop Hazing). "It's time for them to change or go extinct."

Both Maxwell and Hipps stress that the change needed is as simple a solution as embracing the core values every fraternity and sorority espouses in ritual. "I say that sorority woman at the local level have the power to change the face of a fraternity and sorority community **by standing up for their values, by refusing to participate in events or activities that**

are mean-spirited, dangerous, or demeaning to women and/or men, and by exercising their leadership."

NPC: Call for Critical Change

I was reminded of Maxwell's essay while attending a National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) think tank in Indianapolis. The discussion with university and fraternal leaders from across the country was designed to get a firm handle of the current climate on campuses Nationwide—particularly at a time when record numbers of chapters are closed or on probation and some universities have suspended the activities of entire Greek communities.

In addition to a unanimous agreement that **Greek organizations need to return to values and adjust the moral compasses of members**, the NPC group members agreed on some other recommendations (which follow).

--That **too large fraternal chapters have created risk and safety concerns. The group suggested that chapters not be allowed to over-extend themselves and to focus on quality instead of quantity.** Particularly as more sophomores are thrust into officer roles due to many upper-class members committed to internships and study abroad, there is a concern that large chapters have proven unmanageable.

--That too many recent alums have set bad examples for undergrads with regard to pressuring them to retain "traditions" such as hazing. An essay by longtime Greek adviser and former HPO president Allison Swick-Duttine in the "Hazing" book exposes alumni who baited, ridiculed and resisted all attempts of sorority undergraduates at Plattsburgh State to scrub their chapter clean of ingrained hazing practices that had gone on for many years. **Better alum communication about what is unacceptable, and quality advisor recruitment and training is needed.**

--That **young women today need encouragement from alums and advisers to know they possess**

the power to step into the fray to eradicate hazing. The NPC, however, expressed concern over the amount of alcohol today's female undergraduates appear to be consuming, with some studies showing it is on par with the men.

The Advantages of Dry Houses

A common thread in many of the chapters in the new "Hazing" anthology is that alcohol and other substance abuse clearly contributes to issues such as hazing, sexual assault, fights, deadly roof falls, and property damage that have drawn extensive media coverage in recent decades.

An important contribution to the book is a chapter co-written by Phi Delta Theta authors Bob Biggs and Edward G. Whipple titled "A Fraternity Model: Addressing Campus Alcohol Misuse and Abuse."

Biggs and Whipple wrote that the General Council's decision to adopt alcohol-free housing in 1997 was motivated by the Council's determination "to return the fraternity to its core principles."

While acknowledging that many chapters have resisted change to alcohol-free housing and rival fraternities deride and dismiss dry houses as "Milk and cookies chapters," the authors stress that they have concrete evidence that the Council's decision was correct.

"The resistance issue has and will take time to solve," noted Biggs and Whipple. Nonetheless, there is no going back. ***"Since introducing alcohol-free housing, Phi Delta Theta has experienced an unprecedented increase in alumni support," the authors wrote. "Financial contributions have increased and alumni are donating more time to chapter support, at the same time as insurance claims have decreased significantly."***

Biggs and Whipple stressed that a sober environment reduces risk and helps the student members "become the greatest version of themselves."

Eliminating Rogue Chapters

Yet, sadly and tragically, one of the four pledges who

died in 2017 was Phi Delta Theta's Max Gruver who police say was force-fed 190-proof alcohol as a punishment for wrongly answering inane questions put to him by members of a now-expelled Louisiana State University chapter.

Likewise, the death of Beta Theta Pi pledge Tim Piazza occurred in a chapter that not only was an elite "Men of Principle" group but also, according to Penn State Vice President for Student Affairs Damon Sims, speaking at the NPC think tank, a chapter that was in line to receive a prestigious award for "overall excellence."

What gets hammered home with emphasis in many of the chapters I personally have written for the "Hazing" anthology is that ***universities and fraternal groups alike need to declare all-out war on the aptly named rogue or renegade chapters that make up a significant number of the fraternal deaths that occurred 1961-2017*** according to my research.

Simply stated, there are two kinds of groups that meet the description of rogue chapters. The first would be local groups that a host university regards as pests and often finds it hard to dissuade first-year males from joining. (Rogue sororities exist but compared to men's rogue chapters occur in insignificant numbers). These deadly chapters have carried out hazing and substance abuse tantamount to torture that resulted in the killings of Walter Dean Jennings at Plattsburgh State and Matt Carrington at Chico State—both from destroying their body chemistry swilling gallons upon gallons of water.

Then there are the chapters once recognized by national fraternities that have had their charters taken away for previous policy violations yet continue to function and to pledge members illicitly. These are often hard-core hazing chapters that indulge in alcohol and other substance abuse. A classic example is the death of Brian Gillis – allegedly slipped the drug GHB in Gatorade – at a shuttered but still operating Sigma Chi chapter at Cal Poly that put out a recruiting table on campus according to activist mother Patty Gillis in a March 2018 phone call with me.

What needs to happen, notes PUSH co-founder Debbie Smith, the mother of Matt Carrington, is ***a united front of school officials, recognized fraternities,***

concerned parents and current undergraduates who are determined to identify and expel both types of illicit fraternal chapters.

Characteristics of Hazing Chapters

In the current “Hazing” book, I have contributed investigative journalism on a number of ill-fated pledge deaths. Forty years ago, in a seminal article for “Human Behavior” magazine, I had written that pledging could still be a part of fraternal new member education. The best science of our time and overwhelming anecdotal evidence demonstrates that all too often the undergraduate chapter models see pledging *as* hazing. ***In the interest of preserving lives but also preserving the lifelong satisfactions associated with Greek membership, I have concluded that all groups need to phase out pledging and induct new members one to ten days after a bid is offered.***

As I wrote in a chapter for “Hazing” on the death of the first fraternity pledge from hazing at Cornell in 1873, there were unmistakable circumstances present in the well over 200 hazing deaths since then. As with most hazing incidents, when a death occurs, both reckless disregard and the absence of common sense are to blame.

Worse, the 1873 death of Mortimer Leggett in a Kappa Alpha Society walkabout in the dark without torches in gorge country was repeated exactly in 1899 when the same chapter conducted a similar “traditional” drop-off in the country that led to the drowning death of a disoriented pledge named Edward Fairchild Berkeley.

In both cases, a coroner’s jury of Ithaca, New York male business leaders made up of many with Cornell connections ended up calling both KAS deaths accidental—resulting in strong media criticism of “rigged” results at the time. Without ***real consequences for hazing including member and chapter expulsions, criminal convictions (when warranted) and public disclosure of hazing case outcomes (so the community knows it was taken seriously)***, students will continue to believe that what

they are doing is not really a problem when even serious injuries and deaths can be written off as “accidents.”

My conclusion is exactly the same as a recommendation from NPC following its summit. ***“Shutting down and starting over fresh can be more efficient and effective than trying to change culture with bad behaviors continuing all around,”*** the NPC panel concluded. Unfortunately, some nationals drag their heels when it becomes clear a chartered chapter must be axed.

“Universities feel they have to take control if no one else is willing,” the panel noted. “The risky behaviors are always part of the university’s reputational risk. Some universities are asking, ‘Are fraternities/sororities a value to the institution?’ ”

The Need for Transparency

Significantly, one of the more powerful chapters in my anthology is a scathing piece by attorney Douglas Fierberg titled “A Need for Transparency: Parents and Students Must make Informed Decisions About Greek-Life Risks.”

Fierberg begins by stating that too many colleges have guides to Greek Life directed at potential members and their parents that in his judgment border on fraudulent with their claims.

“The confirmed dangers of fraternities are a pervasive, nationwide problem that universities and colleges have purportedly spent years trying to address,” wrote Fierberg. “Yet, despite the growing public cognizance of the horrors of fraternity life, universities rarely, if ever, disclose the truth behind their own Greek systems, choosing instead to shamelessly promote an infrastructure that has caused decades of harm to their students.”

Among Fierberg’s recommendations are ***urging schools to disclose all hazing, alcohol violations and sexual assault and harassment cases on university web pages.*** He wants parent and

recruiting materials to expose the possible dangers associated with chapters.

Additional Anti-Hazing Measures

In my book "Hazing," there are other chapters by professionals recommending specific actions and reforms that can improve Greek Life and safety.

--One longtime Greek professional has a chapter noting how to **organize a meaningful hazing-prevention task force**.

--Author James F. Keenan, S.J., suggests that **faculty have abdicated their responsibility toward student groups and need to get involved once again**.

--Nationally known school law attorney Peter F. Lake proposes his theory that colleges historically facilitated and operationalized hazing, and suggests that awareness and a reordering of student life priorities is needed to change that paradigm. "It's going to take some real hard business work to get us to flip the polarities nationally to get us more focused on prevention and less on reaction," he says.

--Band expert Malinda Matney **recommends ways and means to eliminate hazing in bands and choral groups**.

--Greek professionals Gina Lee-Olukoya and Ashley Stone contribute hard-hitting essays based on interviews with hazers and the hazed alike in African-American fraternities and sororities. Both conclude that Greek life has a place to make minority students feel more at home on campuses, and that there is a need for much more dialog to get students to accept membership devoid of physical abuse.

--Attorneys Brian Crow, Susan P. Stuart, Colleen McGlone and university dean Norm Pollard provide **a primer into the best information on state and proposed federal hazing legislation**.

Finally, Tracy Maxwell and University of Maine educator Elizabeth J. Allan provide thoughtful, informative essays on the connections of gender to hazing.

Concludes Maxwell: "**Using a leadership style that is more traditionally feminine will bring multiple collaborators together to effect positive change**.

In particular, women on our campuses have to embrace their ability to influence others to make choices that are community-enhancing instead of community-destroying. Every individual should be safe and free to learn.

Empowering and supporting through our collective energy toward a stronger community will make for real, lasting, and positive change.

That change can and will defeat the practice of hazing."

Hank Nuwer is professor of journalism at Franklin College in Indiana. He was a member of the first HazingPrevention.Org Board of Directors. He started the Hazing Collection for scholars at Buffalo State College's Butler Library and compiles the only online database of hazing deaths. He has published four books about hazing.

