

Shaping Effective Hazing Prevention Practices Through Precedent, Education, & Dialogue

by Dr. Jason L. Meriwether



Hazing continues to be an ongoing phenomenon that puts the lives of college students at risk. Rituals associated with hazing have included mental abuse, financial extortion, severe violence, physical brutality, sleep-deprivation, binge

drinking, consumption of hazardous foods or concoctions, psychological battery, alcohol or drug abuse, sexual battery, unhealthy sexual behaviors, emotional torment, and blatant degradation. (Nuwer, 2001; Pace & McGrath, 2002; Jones, 2004; Jones, 2015, Allan & Madden, 2008; Meriwether, 2016; Parks 2012). As leaders at the university level, or for those serving in leadership roles in national sororities or fraternities, it is important to establish robust educative practices that teach students about the risks and dangers of hazing violence while meeting standards set by legal precedent.

Alton v. Texas A&M University (1999) involved a student drill team member who was tortured, hazed, physically abused, and beaten during drills, but did not report the acts of hazing to administrators at his university or to drill team instructors. After learning about the hazing from his sibling, Alton's parents contacted the university administrator with oversight of the Corps of Cadets, which resulted in an investigation. University representatives immediately suspended the nine students who violated their hazing policy, removing them from campus facilities. Alton filed a complaint in U.S. District Court against multiple members of the university and Corps of Cadets, as well

as their faculty advisor. In the initial complaint and subsequent appeal, university and Corps of Cadets officials were granted immunity from lawsuit based on having conducted reasonable education on the dangers of hazing, which included (a) dissemination of brochures and preventative materials, (b) meeting with students and parents to inform them of risks and dangers of hazing, and (c) having established procedures and grounds for reporting hazing concerns. The appellate court's ruling noted that "Supervisory officers, like the defendant officials, cannot be held liable under § 1983 for the actions of subordinates, like the cadets, on any theory of vicarious liability." (*Alton v. Texas A&M University*, 1999, para. 13). The court's ruling further explained that liability would only be the result of "deliberate indifference" by campus officials (*Alton v. Texas A&M University*, 1999, para. 14).

The intentional approach to publicly and clearly expressing the potential harm of participating in, or failing to report, issues of hazing is consistent with precedent established in *Lloyd v. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.* (2002) and *Alton v. Texas A&M University* (1999), where both universities were found not liable for hazing rituals that resulted in serious harm to their students because they had published and advertised the risks of hazing, in an educative manner, to students and families. Accordingly, Meriwether (2015) explains,

It is important not to rely on simply publishing policies that prohibit hazing as an effective education tool. We must be proactive and visible in our steps to educate students about those policies and the risks associated with participating in hazing rituals. (para. 5)

Beyond seeking to mitigate levels of culpability exists the need to educate students about the process through which they can report behavior that deviates from standards of policy, legality, ethics, and value for life. Educative measures can include publishing current university policies, organizational orders, and applicable state laws in an online forum, in student handbooks, and through other printed materials. Printing these guidelines must also include a direct intervention to review and acknowledge anti-hazing rules and regulations with organizational members

and aspirants. This discussion should include methods to report and explanation of how the university supports GLO members or aspiring members who report the unsafe behavior. In particular, it is important to succinctly express the potential harms from hazing rituals that may be perceived as harmless or low level and to clarify that all hazing, even if seemingly not severe, is still in violation of policy and has potential to harm the individuals who participate.

Effective Education Practices

Meriwether (2016) provides guidance for educative measures for aspiring members of GLOs prior to membership and for active members of organization seeking to initiate new members. These education tools consists of five levers, which include:

1. *New student and parent programs.* Facilitate open-campus and small-group sessions during orientation or welcome weeks to dialogue about hazing in GLOs. Sessions should include students and parents and facilitate direct conversation about risks of hazing. *Alton v. Texas A&M University* (1999) demonstrated the viability of robust engagement of parents and students during orientation.
2. *Communication between university leaders and local, regional, and national GLO officers.* University leaders must establish and sustain consistent contact and targeted engagement with leaders of sororities and fraternities. It is critical to establish rapport, clarity of policy education, and unified opposition to hazing. This includes joint participation in all preventative hazing measures for aspiring members.
3. *Advisor training and certification.* Facilitate training for all campus, graduate, and off-campus advisors to clarify roles and responsibilities, educate about risks and dangers of hazing and how to communicate with students, and certify knowledge of reporting structures. *Kenner v. Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity* (2002) demonstrated the consequences of inadequate advisor training.
4. *Educative policy and state law session prior to rush or membership intake.* Aspiring members of

GLOs should be given all state, university, and organizational policies in an educational setting that is overseen by university representatives, advisors, and national organizational representatives prior to any activities related to joining a sorority or fraternity. *Alton v. Texas A&M University* (1999) and *Lloyd v. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.* (1999) demonstrate the value of a robust education practice, while *Furek v. University of Delaware* (1991) provides an example of inadequate engagement.

5. *Implement Greek council and peer education model.* This student-led initiative can provide situational training on how to respond and report when hazing is observed. The student-led council is a public-facing group of GLO members tasked to combat hazing by supporting peer-intervention measures and publicly and privately oppose hazing. Allan and Madden's (2008) findings related to gender, racial, and ethnic demographics demonstrate the need for peer education. Peer education models by Berkowitz (2003, 2010) can be helpful tools to organize a local, campus-centric model.

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About the Author

*Dr. Jason L. Meriwether is the Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management & Student Affairs at Indiana University Southeast. In 2014, Jason was selected to [Louisville Business First's Top Forty under 40](#) and as one of [Business First's 20 People to Know in Education and Workforce Development](#). In 2014, Jason received the award of Outstanding Kentuckian and was commissioned to the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels. Jason was also named to the [Southern Indiana Business Source 20 under 40 Class of 2016](#) and is a 2017 American College Personnel Association Foundation Diamond Honoree. Jason is a financially active member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and has overseen numerous Interfraternity Council, National Pan-Hellenic Council, & National Panhellenic Conference chapters, as well as service, honors, and music fraternities & sororities. Jason's national presentations on legal issues related to hazing have been the subject of cover stories in the Student Affairs Today Newsletter and in College Athletics and the Law. During his career, Jason has organized community service initiatives that have provided over 15,000 documented hours of volunteering, service, and mentoring completed by Greek Letter Organizations. Jason earned the Ph.D. in Educational Administration at Indiana State University. His dissertation was titled, *The Impact of Hazing Rituals on the Intent to Report: Examining the Perceptions and Beliefs of Undergraduate Students in Greek Letter Organizations*. To learn more about Jason, please visit www.jasonlmeriwether.com.*