Waving the Red Flag: Warning Signs of Hazing and How to Talk to Students About It

By Tracy Maxwell
Because *WE* have been learning about, talking about, examining and dissecting hazing for years, we think it is obvious. Let me assure you it is not.

Making students wrong and demonizing hazers ensures they will never feel comfortable talking to us about what is going on in their organizations.

I know that is a bold statement to make. And I believe it 100%. As a campus professional, I spent a great deal of time talking about how harmful hazing was (which I still think is a good tactic), but I also wondered who could be depraved enough to humiliate a fellow human being in that way. That’s where I now see the error of my ways. I believe everyone is doing the best they can with the information they have available to them. When we know better, we do better. If hazing has been sold as THE way to prove your worthiness to be in an organization, and your status is questioned if you don’t participate, how can we expect an 18-21 year-old student to stand up to that without some education? And how can they get that education if they don’t feel comfortable sharing what’s going on?

When I speak to college students I share my feelings about hazers: “They are people who were hazed. Period.” Sure there is a small percentage who are actual sociopaths, but it is a tiny segment of the population who enjoy seeing others in pain. Most are only repeating what was done to them, likely with some escalation here and there from year to year, but basically bringing people into the organization the way they were brought in. Most of us have heard of Stockholm Syndrome, in which hostages begin to identify with their captors. I believe the same principles apply with hazing. Of course students will identify strongly with the method by which they were brought in. They will see it as the “best way,” without even recognizing, much less questioning, that there might be anything wrong with it.

The red flags I want to address are not about how to recognize hazing in organizations. Those signs are out there in droves if you want to find them, and I’m sure any professional or student worth their salt knows by now how to tell if a group is hazing or not. Rather, I am going to share some red flags in your thinking that might keep you from having a meaningful dialogue with students about hazing. If you have had these thoughts, or said any of these things out loud, you are probably
not going to be the person they come
to when they are ready to make change
because you haven’t demonstrated that
you can see anything other than the black
and white of the issue. I advise, before you
read the list, that you take a deep breath
and forgive yourself in advance for making
these mistakes. We all have. When you
know better, you will do better too!

_Hazers are Evil. Depraved.
Monsters. Unfeeling. Uncaring._

Hazers are demonized by the press,
punished in the courts (more and more),
and hated by the loved ones of their
victims. It is easy to make ourselves believe
that a “few bad apples” have hurt someone
we care about, but really, these apples were
thrown into a barrel (the culture) that has
been operating this way for some time. To
expect them to see a way out on their own
at a time in their lives when going against
the grain is nearly impossible, is naïve. This
is the same judgment that hazers often
inflict on newcomers to the organization
– seeing them as “less than,” and treating
them with disdain. That viewpoint won’t win
their trust. Don’t misunderstand and think
that I don’t believe bad behavior deserves
punishment – especially when someone
is seriously injured. I just don’t believe
punishment will change the culture. Only
students can do that, and only when they
can seek our help in doing so, rather than
fear our wrath.

_How could they not know that was
hazing? That’s ridiculous!_

Because WE have been learning about,
talking about, examining and dissecting
hazing for years, we think it is obvious.

Let me assure you it is not. Even among
professionals and organizations, there
is a significant amount of dissention
about what exactly hazing is. Are study
hours hazing? Would you be surprised to
learn that many organizations have been
punished for those types of activities?
I advised a sorority once whose risk
management chair called the hazing hotline
of the international organization because
she had been called into standards for
drinking in the house and felt she were
being hazed by her punishment. Seem
ridiculous? Try putting on a student hat
for one minute. They don’t have student
development theory to call upon or even
fully developed pre-frontal cortexes yet.
When professionals, even experts, can’t
agree about what is and isn’t hazing, how
can we expect students to?

_We should shut them down and fire
whoever was in charge of them._

Yeah. That’s the ticket. The scapegoat
is always popular whether in politics or
Corporate life. We have relied upon it in
higher education as well. As the recently
dismissed band director of Ohio State’s
famed marching band, and the ousted head
of the Veteran’s Affairs Administration can
attest, heads will roll. Perhaps sometimes a
culture is so damaged and the leadership
so polluted that starting over is the only
way, but do we really expect significant
change from this simple action alone?
It may allow for some face-saving in the
media, but do you really believe new
leadership or starting over with a new
group of people put back into the existing
hazing culture will, on its own, change said
culture? To use the apple analogy again, it
is said that one bad one spoils the whole

(continued on the following page)
bunch. How can we expect one “good one” to remain so amid a culture of spoilage and hazing?

**I can’t trust students to do the right thing.**

I hate to break it to you, but students are the ONLY ones who can change a hazing culture. If we can’t trust them, we're sunk. The important question is how we can get them to trust us enough to share what is really going on, to ask us for help, and to listen to the guidance we provide. Making them wrong, thinking them ridiculous and dropping the hammer exclusively – as a prevention tactic will not do it. Prevention is a process, and while policy and enforcement may be one part of that process, it should not be the only one. There are many, many other risk and protective factors to be explored and tactics to be employed upstream from the student conduct process. If we’re not exploring them, and engaging students in this process, we are doomed from the start. We MUST trust them to learn alongside us and to help us find a better way.

Though hazing has been around for centuries, and exists in a number of contexts, we have to remember that our understanding of it, and even disdain for it, are fairly recent. Only in the past 100 years have we begun to question the practice, and only in the past 20-30 have we started to scratch the surface of the underlying social drivers of the problem. We are at the very beginning of the hazing prevention movement, and the good news is that we are gaining steam. When a hazing story hits the news now, fewer and fewer people defend it with such phrases as, “boys will be boys,” common even a decade ago. It is coming out of the shadows and into the light of day where we can examine it, understand it better, and hopefully talk about it more openly. I know I have said it a great deal already, but it bears repeating: students need to be a part of these conversations, and it is up to us to approach the issue in such a way that they feel comfortable, and not attacked or defensive, in doing so.

Tracy Maxwell is the founder of HazingPrevention.Org and has appeared in a number of media outlets as a hazing expert including CBS This Morning, The Katie Couric Show and ESPN’s Outside the Lines. She is also a speaker with CAMPUSPEAK, an author, consultant and coach. www.iamtracymaxwell.com