

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 deprived 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

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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

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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.



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