

Sunday Review | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Their Pledges Die. So Should Fraternities.

Frank Bruni NOV. 17, 2017

Following a night of heavy drinking at a fraternity at Texas State University, a 20-year-old was found dead. Another 20-year-old died at Florida State University in nearly identical circumstances.

At Penn State University, the victim was 19. Security cameras and text messages documented the fumbling attempts by fraternity members to revive him and then to cover up the link between his unconscious condition and the 18 or so drinks that they forced on him in a roughly 90-minute span. As he moaned and thrashed and blood from a lacerated spleen filled his abdomen, they waited about 12 hours to summon medical help, by which point it was too late.

At Louisiana State University, the victim was 18, with a blood alcohol content of .496 percent. That's more than six times the legal limit for driving and about two and a half times the amount of alcohol that can cause someone to black out.

All of these incidents occurred this year — the Texas and Florida ones in the last two weeks — and yet 2017 isn't some nadir. At least six young men died in connection with fraternity hazing rituals in 2014, according to Hank Nuwer's Hazing Clearinghouse, a website with a ghastly, heartbreaking tally. Two years before that, seven died.

Across decades, the toll of deaths related to fraternity revelry and recklessness is surely in the hundreds. And while physical stress plays a role in some fatalities, most reflect the kind of extreme drinking that's in the DNA of so-called Greek life.

Do we need any cause beyond all of that dying to do away with fraternities wherever possible and to diminish their prominence at schools where various circumstances, including the housing that fraternities provide, prevent them from being shuttered?

I don't think so, but there are additional reasons nonetheless. On a range of fronts, fraternities — and sororities — contradict our stated values and undercut our supposed goals for higher education, putting our inconsistencies and hypocrisies under a magnifying glass.

And the recent attention to scattered schools that have eradicated or curtailed Greek life has been misleading. Against all wisdom, fraternities thrive; in the new book "True Gentlemen: The Broken Pledge of America's Fraternities," **John Hechinger** estimates that at least 380,000 male undergraduates belong to Greek organizations, which he says represents a 50 percent increase over the last decade. "I think they're more popular than ever," he told me recently. He doesn't call for outlawing them, partly because he doesn't consider that feasible, given First Amendment freedom-of-assembly protections. But he hardly considers Greek life ideal.

"If we could create higher education from scratch, would we have organizations that divide people by race, class and gender at institutions that are supposed to be encouraging diversity?" he asked. His answer was immediate and emphatic: "No."

Obviously, that's not all that fraternities and sororities do. Many are vigorously engaged in charitable work and community service. They provide a social mooring that students find helpful. There's some evidence that students in fraternities maintain higher-than-average grades, and the Gallup-Purdue Index, a far-reaching survey of American college graduates, found that those who belonged to fraternities and sororities reported more career and life satisfaction later on than those who didn't.

But, as Hechinger noted, fraternities segregate. They discriminate. They concentrate and enshrine privilege at a time when we're ostensibly trying to be more mindful of that. In so doing they reveal the hollowness of many of our vows.

We profess outrage about sexual assault and abuse, the dimensions of which have been rendered even clearer by the galling revelations of the last month and a half. Still we indulge fraternities, which abet that behavior. Persuasive research — along with common sense — tells us that members of all-male fraternities are more likely to have a warped view of permissible sexual contact and that women who frequent fraternity parties are more likely to be assaulted. Additionally, the binge drinking so prevalent at fraternities is the enemy of informed consent.

“We need to be cautious about broad-brush generalizations,” Alexander McCormick, an Indiana University professor who is the director of the National Survey of Student Engagement, said to me in an email. But, he conceded, some fraternities are guilty of “encouraging and rewarding sexual conquest that condones or normalizes sexual assault.”

We profess alarm over how partisan American politics is, how fractured our culture has become, and how viciously tribal our interactions can be. In light of that, we resolve to assemble more heterogeneous campuses. But then we blithely watch and even celebrate the retreat of students into fraternities and sororities, which are in many cases largely homogeneous enclaves antithetical to the broadening of perspective and challenging of ingrained assumptions that higher education should be all about.

We say that we'll press fraternities to be responsible, and they in turn promise to obey. But there's spotty follow-through. Penn State in 2004 trumpeted a program called Greek Pride: A Return to Glory. Beta Theta Pi, where the pledge with the lacerated spleen languished, was described as a model fraternity at the school, with strict rules governing alcohol consumption. I'm sure that's enormous consolation to the grieving parents of that pledge, Timothy Piazza.

“These fraternities have drink, danger and debauchery in their blood — right alongside secrecy and self-protection,” Lisa Wade, an Occidental College sociology professor and the author of “American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on

Campus,” wrote in a Time magazine essay that called for an end to fraternities. “They *cannot* reform.”

Shy of abolishing them, colleges could at least stop promoting and even romanticizing them. Hechinger said that campus websites and tours have presented gauzy propaganda extolling Greek life. Why not provide detailed information about individual fraternities’ disciplinary records instead? And why not put more energy into nurturing other groups and living arrangements that might siphon students away from fraternities?

Wade began her Time essay by observing that 150 years ago, fraternities were regarded with enormous suspicion by many college presidents, who described them as “un-American,” a “plague” and a force for “greater unkindness and ill feeling than almost anything else in college.”

And college presidents today? When I spoke with Wade, she told me that they might not be champions of fraternities if they weren’t already stuck with them.

“Imagine a world,” she said, “in which everything was the same about higher education except there have never been Greek organizations. An 18-year-old waltzes into a dean’s office and says, ‘I want to start an exclusive club on campus that doesn’t allow women and serves mostly white and privileged students and we’re going to throw parties all the time that are illegal, and at these parties, all the bad stuff that happens on campus is going to happen disproportionately. What do you think?’ ”

Wade’s hypothetical 18-year-old leaves out the part where undertakers cart the casualties away. Even so I think the dean turns his proposal down.

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