

Substance-Free Housing: A Solution to the Binge Drinking Problem in Today's College Fraternity

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Substance-free programs, sponsored in part by the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC), have been received well by media, university administrators, parents, and some students. Aside from lowering the levels of binge drinking by social fraternity members, substance-free housing, when successful, has been shown to: increase an organization's cumulative grade point average, increase the rate of freshman retention, improve the quality of chapter facilities, and help create an environment which promotes behavior consistent with fraternal ideals, goals, and standards. Examining the issue of substance-free housing for the college fraternity, this article addresses significant barriers faced by administrators and national officers throughout the duration of program implementation.

In the wake of the deaths of young fraternity men from Louisiana State University in 1997 (Haworth, 1998), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1997 "MIT Student," 1997), and most recently the California State University at Chico in 2000 (Bulwa, 2000), university officials have placed increased emphasis on decreasing binge drinking among members of Greek-letter societies. The stigma associated with the film *Animal House* (1978) has negatively branded fraternities since its release. Unfortunately, this stereotype depicting a keg-throwing, panty-raiding party animal has often been replicated at college or university fraternity houses. Despite stringent efforts by the national organizations of many chapters, binge drinkers occupy an alarmingly high percentage of fraternity houses (Weschler, 1996). The Harvard School of Public Health (1993) defined binge drinking as consuming five or more drinks in one sitting at least once in a two-week period (as cited in Weschler, 1996). Substance-free housing has been the proposed solution at some universities and national fraternal organizations. This article examines the issues of alcohol and other drugs facing fraternities and the recent development of substance-free solutions.

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Student affairs professionals have dealt with alcohol abuse in fraternities for many years and the time has come to address possible solutions to this potentially fatal problem. As the millennium begins a new era for higher education, it is vital that every effort be made to help fraternities meet the standards all members pledge to uphold at their initiation. These efforts must be made in order to preserve the support fraternities provide by complementing a valuable university experience. Fraternities, as referred to in this article, are all-male Greek letter organizations. Each of the twenty-six all-female member sororities that constitute the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) have maintained substance-free housing policies since their respective inception. Despite the historical presence of these policies, there is an ever-growing problem with binge drinking among sorority women as well. The authors do not wish to exclude any student from information regarding this dangerous trend by focusing solely on male organizations.

To assist in the examination of the problem of binge drinking among fraternity members, three components of the dilemma are delineated: (a) the group dynamics within fraternities and the impact of these relationships on individual members, especially new initiates; (b) the presence of alcohol in fraternity houses and the high frequency of binge drinking among members; and finally (c) the implications of any correlation between a fraternity's group dynamics and its members' responses to alcohol and other drugs, specifically binge drinking.

FRATERNITY GROUP DYNAMICS AND ALCOHOL

The relationship between a fraternity and its members has long been a subject of study for organizational psychologists. A fraternity house is a breeding ground for peer pressure. Leavy (1979) called the social situation in fraternities a strange form of education where the members are students, the subject is drinking, and the classroom is the fraternity house. The relationship between fraternities and alcohol has been an important dynamic of university life studied more frequently due to the increase in binge drinking among college students in recent years. Clearly, alcohol abuse is causing tremendous problems in Greek letter organizations (Riordan, & Dana, 1998).

A large amount of research has been conducted to better understand the impact of group dynamics on individuals. Moos and Gerst (as cited in Schrage, 1986) performed a landmark inventory, as they developed, tested, and standardized the University Residence Environment Scale (URES). The URES investigates the social climate of a group as characterized by the "members' perceptions of the attitudes, values, and behaviors that are characteristic of the group" (p. 266).

Simply put, the URES attempts to identify the influences a group has on its individual members. Schragger's (1986) study compared the relationship between a living group's social climate and academic performance among first year students in 36 fraternity groups and 18 male residence hall groups.

The dynamics of fraternity life are such that prospective new members or pledges subject themselves to the influence of active members due to perceptions of complete trust. Pledges are called upon to study the fraternity's history and traditions, which, as told by the active members, may or may not be accurate. For example, if John is a pledge, and the active members inform him of a tradition that all new members shave their heads upon initiation, he has limited resources available to determine if the information is accurate. Active members, to demonstrate some values of the fraternity, often create traditions. "Long viewed as 'tradition' and a 'rite of passage,' the misuse of alcohol plagued the fraternity system in this decade, setting the stage for the next ten years" (Phi Gamma Delta, 2000). In a study of over 2,000 fraternity and sorority members and their experiences with alcohol, Goodwin (1989) identified some of the innate causes of denial that have allowed alcohol abuse to remain a problem. "Members of both high-drinking subgroups tend to underestimate the extent of their drinking and share a rejection of the idea of any external control over drinking, whether by the university or by the interfraternity or panhellenic organizations" (p. 457).

Pledges find difficulty in maintaining a sense of individuality. As Schragger (1986) states, "this press toward involvement, social support, and conforming behavior is consistent with the aims of social fraternities...They tend to foster a collective orientation, while inhibiting independent behavior that deviates from group norms" (p. 274). It is important to understand that fraternities were originally formed to provide opportunities for individuals to express themselves and were designed as forums for original thought that members created to escape an overly oppressive educational system (Whipple & Sullivan, 1998). This dynamic has changed over time, bringing a pressure of conformity to the forefront of fraternity life.

THE PROBLEM: FRATERNITY LIFE AND ALCOHOL ABUSE

How the transition from scholarly social groups to an "animal house" mentality occurred is not clear. Today's social fraternities place a large emphasis on the social portion of their classifications. According to Kuh, Pascarella, and Weschler (1996), fraternities and alcohol go hand in hand. Most researchers identify alcohol as the key component in the creation of the animal house mentality. In a 1993 study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health of

over 17,000 students at 140 four-year colleges in 40 states, researchers found that 86 percent of students who lived in fraternity houses were binge drinkers compared to 50 percent of non-members (Riordan & Dana, 1998). What role does alcohol play in fraternity life?

Social interaction is a defining component of Greek life. Fraternities are designed to increase campus involvement, academic achievement, and community service, and to also function as a social outlet in typically chaotic campus environments. Parker and Gade (1981) examined the perceptions fraternity and sorority members have of their living environment. Using the URES, they concluded that members of fraternities and sororities perceive a “high need for social dependency” (p. 361). This dependency is seen in many group living environments. “We live together, and we party together,” as the saying among fraternity members commonly goes. Alcohol has become a focus in the social lives of many fraternity men. One example of this centralization concerns a fraternity’s relationship with various sororities. Due to national policies prohibiting alcohol consumption in their houses, sorority women have traditionally sought social opportunities at fraternity houses (until this most recent semester, Fall 2000, when the NPC collectively put an end to sororities engaging in any alcohol related events hosted on any fraternity property). Interaction between men and women is an integral feature of college life, and alcohol is a common source of ‘courage’ to initiate these interactions. Without alcohol, many fraternity men believe life would be dull. As Goodwin (1989) pointed out, “reasons for drinking continue to emphasize sociability and release of tension” (p. 449).

IMPLICATIONS

Understanding the relationship between fraternity dynamics and alcohol is an important aspect of the binge drinking problem on college campuses today. The emphasis placed on alcohol is disturbingly strong in many fraternal relationships. Membership in a fraternity greatly increases the likelihood that an individual will abuse alcohol. “Virtually every study of drinking in college shows that fraternity members tend to drink more heavily and more frequently and to have more alcohol-related problems than their fellow students” (Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996, p. 261).

The rationalization that accompanies alcohol abuse in fraternities is an important focal point of this problem. “When used in combination with hazing episodes, alcohol becomes interwoven into a complicated system of rewards and sanctions to which newcomers must conform...and learn to become loyal to the group in resisting external threats, including institutional sanctions” (Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996, p.275). Wechsler, et al. described groups like fraternities and

sororities as “powerful conformist cultures” that socialize their new members through the use of alcohol (p. 275).

SUBSTANCE-FREE HOUSING

Recognizing the impact of alcohol on the fraternity experience, the challenge to student affairs professionals is clear: something must be done to change Greek culture to ensure a positive college experience for all members without the negative implications of alcohol abuse. The discussion of substance-free housing has recently become an increasing prevalent topic regarding Greek life.

Substance-free housing is a comprehensive effort to remove the emphasis on alcohol from the daily lives of residential fraternity members. Alcohol can still be served at functions on third-party premises with licensed vendors, who are responsible for controlling the distribution of alcohol in a legal and appropriate manner. The option of substance-free housing has become practical for many chapters on many campuses in light of the following issues addressed by the North-American Interfraternity Conference’s (NIC) (1998, April) monthly publication *Campus Commentary*:

1. The negative effect that alcohol has been shown to have on members' scholastic achievement, health, and well being;
2. The dilapidated condition of many chapter homes resulting from years of large, uncontrolled parties;
3. The spiraling costs of liability insurance for members fueled by the increasing number of claims and injuries related to the abuse and illegal use of alcohol;
4. The recent decline in the number of new men joining fraternities coupled with the changing needs and desires of today's college men.
5. Incoming students are increasingly shying away from entities that emphasize alcohol, partying, etc.
6. The option for substance-free residence halls is being offered on a growing number of college campuses.

The NIC's monthly publication identified deterioration to chapter facilities as perhaps the most significant reason to institute substance-free housing (1998, April). The millions of dollars spent on repairs, due to damage caused directly or indirectly by alcohol use and abuse, are constant reminders that a problem exists. When a chapter cannot make renovations to upgrade the quality of life in a fraternity house because funds have been allocated to repair damages from years of alcoholic wear and tear, it is difficult to remove the emphasis on alcohol from the members' lives.

Aside from the property issues regarding substance-free housing, it is important to recognize the health benefits substance-free housing can provide. NIC (1998, April) has indicated the following statistics in regards to fraternity-related insurance claims that involved alcohol: ninety-five percent of falls from high places (roofs), ninety-four percent of fights, ninety-three percent of sexual abuse allegations, eighty-eight percent of fatalities, eighty-seven percent of automobile accidents, eighty-one percent of paralysis cases, seventy-eight percent of psychological injuries, sixty-seven percent of slips and falls, sixty-six percent of serious physical injuries, forty-nine percent of hazing incidents, and fifty-six percent of minor injuries. In recent years, the national headquarters of Sigma Nu, Phi Delta Theta, and Delta Sigma Phi, among others, have made commitments to make all of their chapter facilities substance-free. It seems ironic that on many campuses, including Colorado State University, one or more of these chapters has continued to have alcohol related problems. This is due in part to the Greek culture.

It is difficult to change traditions in the middle of an organization's tenure. A bulletin published by Phi Gamma Delta (2000) identified specific concerns of current undergraduates regarding substance-free housing. One student stated, "The biggest challenge our chapter will face is enforcing the fact that members who live in the house who are 21 years old are not allowed to drink, even in private in their rooms" (p. 4). Another student commented, "...while this policy may be beneficial for many chapters, it could be suicidal for others...Eliminating alcohol from the chapter house will almost certainly deter all seniors from living there and providing the under classmen with a responsible voice of leadership" (p. 4).

The aforementioned group dynamics in fraternities is an important focal point for considering substance-free housing. The proposed initiatives must be a two-tiered approach. The first needs to convince older members of its value without spawning a backlash, while the second will focus heavily on the individuals who will carry the chapter in future years: new members. It is important to directly combat the peer pressure that causes many of the problems relating to alcohol and other drugs in the first place. In a bulletin published by the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, Enos and Pittayathikhun (1996) state that the primary problem in initiating successful substance-free programs "is not that chapters do not want to try going substance free but that they do not feel they can enforce a substance-free policy" (p.11). Support must be abundant in order for these programs to work. National headquarters, specific campuses, as well as alumni and parents' associations must make a consolidated effort to aid these young men as they attempt to change their traditions. Mo Littlefield, past Executive Director of Sigma Nu, one of the first fraternities to make a commitment to be substance-free nationally, contributed to the Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention

bulletin noting that, “the purpose of this [substance-free] initiative is about protecting property, protecting people, and addressing why we are in the [fraternity] business in the first place. We must deal directly with the thing that causes so much grief on college campuses – alcohol” (Enos & Pittayathikhun, 1996, p. 11).

The national trend toward substance-free housing continues to grow. Currently twelve fraternities have adopted substance-free policies, which are or will be in effect by 2005 (Phi Gamma Delta, 2000). Fraternity chapters with substance-free housing have shown increases in cumulative chapter grade point averages; stronger recruiting and membership; improved chapter facilities and house maintenance; and lowered insurance costs (Phi Delta Theta, 1998; Phi Gamma Delta, 2000). In 1998, all twenty-six NPC sororities passed a resolution that pledges support for substance-free fraternities and included policies and protocol for substance-free social events and activities (Phi Gamma Delta, 2000).

Parents also favor an environment that is substance free. In their recent study, Phi Gamma Delta (2000) found that 78.5% of parents said that they support this movement. Only 23.4% felt that Greek Life provided a “highly positive” perception, as it currently exists on college campuses (Phi Gamma Delta, 2000).

A lingering question continues to be “Does substance-free housing work?” Early data gathered by Phi Delta Theta (2000) indicate that substance-free housing does work. In 1999, the average number of new members increased for chapters with alcohol-free housing (17.67 to 17.73) and for chapters without property (11.19 to 12.39). The average number of new members decreased in the last year for chapters without substance-free housing (17 to 15.24). Several chapters that have adopted the policy report increases of more than 0.5 points in the chapter's average GPA. In addition, overall insurance premiums for substance-free chapters of that fraternity have reduced by 33% (Phi Delta Theta, 2000).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should investigate the possible long-term effects of substance-free housing on fraternities. The idea of removing alcohol from all fraternity houses is a relatively new one, surfacing only within the past ten years. Fraternities can benefit from a return to ritual, which has been corrupted by alcohol for many years. Kuh, Pascarella, and Wechsler (1996) questioned the value of fraternities, “Almost monthly, a college or university fraternity makes the national news because of an escapade of underage drinking or a hazing episode resulting in bodily injury or worse...Such incidents tarnish the image of fraternities as a locus of brotherhood” (p. A68). Although negative media

coverage may alter their perceptions, student affairs professionals must have faith in the Greek system which has positively influenced the lives of its members.

CONCLUSION

In an ever-changing world, the impact of the college experience is a vital component of a student's growth. Greek life can be a defining part of the undergraduate experience. Unfortunately, for some fraternity members, alcohol plays a substantial role in the development of their fraternal values. Binge drinking appears to be at an alarmingly high level, with 86% of fraternity members included in a continual growth of college students considered to be binge drinkers (Riordan & Dana, 1998). As the relationship between fraternities and alcohol becomes better understood, student affairs professionals must continue to work within the goals of substance-free housing and with students in providing a solution to the challenges associated with alcohol.

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