

Prevalent issues in fraternities and sororities



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Timothy Piazza was a sophomore studying at Penn State University when he died on February 4th, 2017 during a hazing ritual (Madani). After drinking copious amounts of alcohol on his first night pledging to the Beta Theta Pi chapter, he fell down several stairs, suffered egregious injuries, and passed away 11 hours later. His parents are suing the fraternity for failing to call for medical assistance and hiding any evidence of drinking. Since 1970, there has been one hazing-related death on college campuses each year. This statistic doesn't include sexual abuse either; Other hazing incidents involving sexual intimidation, nudity or stimulation, have been increasing in their frequency since 1995 (Allan). At one point, it was a prestigious honor to be a part of fraternity or sorority. Members would discuss the pressing issues of today and try to solve issues in their community. With over 9 million members nationwide, what is the basis for America's college Greek culture and how has it evolved into what it is today? Since the first fraternity began in 1750 and sorority in 1851, the culture surrounding Greek Life has changed significantly into what it is today. It has become the source for several controversies such as hazing, sexual violence, racism, sexism, and drug abuse, but still encourages original philosophies such as philanthropy and lifelong friendships.

The first general fraternity was organized in 1750 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. It was known as the " Flat Hat Club" (History). Members would meet in an upper room at the Raleigh Tavern, enjoy a bowl of punch, and laugh together. Many of America's greatest influencers were a part of this club including St. George Tucker, George Wythe, and interestingly enough Thomas Jefferson, author of the U. S.

Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States (History).

The first official Greek letter fraternity didn't begin until twenty-seven years later at the same University. A student had been refused admission into William and Mary's organization known as PDA. The PDA club was supposedly a literary society but had long lost those purposes (History). In response, he and four other young men organized the Phi Beta Kappa society. Their first meeting was held on December 5th, 1776 and was a secret. The faculty frowned upon discussing on the pressing issues of the day in fear of straying away from popular beliefs. To avoid getting shut down they created secret codes and signals. During the meeting they discussed "whether anything is more dangerous to civil liberty in a free state than a standing army in time of peace" and other controversial topics (History). After two years, Phi Beta Kappa felt that other campuses should share its good idea and other chapters were founded at several other American colleges. Today, Phi Beta Kappa is less social and more of a scholastic honorary society. However, the secret codes and rituals, the distinctive badge, the use of Greek letters —were all used by Phi Beta Kappa and were adopted by subsequent Greek letter fraternities and sororities.

Approximately seventy-five years later, the oldest Greek letter sorority was founded hundreds of miles away at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. This was the first college chartered to grant women degrees in the world. Eugenia Tucker was sixteen years old and had just left her family home in Laurens County when became a student at the university. Before the end of her first year she would establish the first sorority in the world—Alpha Delta
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Phi on May 15th, 1851. Today it has over 161 chapters across American and Canada. It also still supports the original philosophies of Eugenia Tucker such as “ the mental, moral, social, and domestic improvement of it’s members” and the “ sisterhood.”

Fraternities and sororities continued to evolve nearing the end of the 19th century during the 1870s because a movement called “ the clap” was sweeping college campuses nationwide. Willard Saulsbury, a University of Virginia student, wrote a letter to a friend that described drunken sprees and his interest in avoiding them (Bowerman). The alcohol-fueled escapades he described weren’t pretty; one of the instances almost resulting in the death of prostitute. It wasn’t until the temperance movement that people called for action to stop the amount of drinking. However, students were still undeterred. Carry Nation, poster child of the movement, visited campuses to encourage students to abstain from alcohol. At Yale, student “ pranksters” poked fun at her by pulling out drinking props for a photo taken on the campus (Bowerman). When the 18th amendment was passed in 1920, it still did nothing to stop them. As Prohibition continued, some university leaders, Princeton’s among them, began speaking out about the law. A longtime football coach, W. W. Roper, called Prohibition “ a lot of hooey” in the student newspaper and said it did nothing to stop drinking (Bowerman). It didn’t help that sororities and fraternities only escalated the problem by encouraging socialization and privately endorsing alcohol. Members were significantly more likely to drink than non-members even if their house was “ alcohol free.” This controversy would continue to grow into the twenty first century.

Leading into the 1950s other racism issues arose. The fraternities and sororities continued to grow each and every day, but the issue of who should be a member was questioned—specifically should certain races of cultural backgrounds join. African Americans tried and failed to create their own sorority and fraternity leading into the 1940s. It wasn't until the eight organizations which made up the National Pan-Hellenic Council until 1996 that formed the first Black Greek life. Black fraternities and sororities were based on existing fraternities and sororities but cultural additions were made including calls, open hand signs, and step shows; though social in nature, many African-American fraternal organizations were formed with an emphasis on public service and civil rights (Fetters).

After the Civil Rights movement during the 1970s, the film *Animal House* is released in 1978 and mocked the current state of Greek life. It told the story of a group of students at the fictional Faber University trying to keep their fraternity from getting kicked off campus. At this point in time, fraternities and sororities became an excuse to socialize and lost their original purposes (Fetters). They were no longer the esteemed literary societies of the 1700s. According to *Animal House*, there were two kinds of fraternities: the elitist kind that willingly aligned itself with the establishment, and the kind full of kooks who refused to be tamed. By casting the outsider oddballs of Delta House as heroes, *Animal House* made the radical declaration that the latter sort was the better sort (Fetters). Pop culture—and real college kids all over America—followed its lead. Caitlin Flanagan, the author of “The Dark Power of Fraternities,” criticized the movie saying “In this newly forming culture, the drugs and personal liberation of the '60s would be paired with the self-

serving materialism of the '80s, all of which made partying for its own sake.” The drinking issue that began during the early 1920s was reaching a whole new level than it had ever been seen before.

In part with the alcoholism of the 1970s, a new issue would appear towards the end of the twentieth century. Fraternity members were found frequently responsible for being involved in the sexual assault of women. However, despite this widespread knowledge, fraternities were rarely studied as organizations-that encourage the sexual coercion of women. For the foreseeable future, fraternities would face some of the biggest scrutiny for the correlation between affiliation and sexual abuse. Patricia Yancy Martin and Robert Hummer discuss this problem in the third volume of *Gender and Society* claiming: “ the norms and dynamics of the social construction of fraternity brotherhood reveals the highly masculinist features of fraternity structure and process.... a preoccupation with loyalty, protection of the group, and secrecy; the use of alcohol as a weapon against women’s sexual reluctance” (Martin). They concluded fraternities would continue to violate women sexually unless they changed in fundamental ways.

Today, fraternities and sororities continue this problem by assaulting people in other ways—hazing. hazing was defined as “ any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them regardless of a person’s willingness to participate.” A study was conducted in 2008 by the Stop Hazing organization collected over 11, 482 survey responses from undergraduate students enrolled at 53 colleges and universities and conducted more than 300 interviews. They found that approximately 55% of students involved in a

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club, team, or organization (such as a fraternity or sorority) would experience hazing at some point. However, they also found that of those cases 95% would not report the hazing to a university official or local authority. This is because nine out of ten students may not have known they were hazed to begin with. This lack of knowledge has resulted in the death of one student each year since 1970. As Greek life continues to evolve, many have questioned whether they should be abolished all together. While they stand true to their original philosophies of philanthropy and lifelong friendships, there seems to be more negatives than positives to their organization.

In conclusion, the culture surrounding Greek Life has changed significantly into what it is today. It had sophisticated beginnings and was a way for young men and women to discuss the pressing issues of the day. They would try to solve issues in their communities and build life long friendships with their peers. As time went on however, drinking problems began to escalate on college campuses nationwide. This continued to not change through the temperance movement and prohibition. During the Civil rights movement, fraternities and sororities slowly became more inclusive to other races besides white at the time. However, they still faced controversies moving into the twenty-first century with sexual abuse and hazing. Fraternities and sororities will have to change eventually in order to stay open as colleges as more sanctions are placed. While the evolution of Greek life is evident, it'll be interesting to see what it becomes in the future.

Timeline

1750: The first male general fraternity is established at the College of William and Mary.

1776: The first male Greek letter fraternity is established at the College of William and Mary and becomes a well-known honorary society.

1851: The first female Greek letter sorority is established by sixteen-year-old Eugenia Tucker at Wesleyan University.

1870s: The “clap” movement escalates college drinking across American campuses nationwide.

1900s: In response to drinking, the temperance movement begins to take action against student drinking.

1920: The 18th amendment is signed into law and the prohibition movement does nothing to stop alcoholism. Due to the socialization of Greek life culture, fraternity and sororities continue to drink regardless if it was illegal.

1940-1960: The controversy of drinking is side tracked by the issue of racism. Black fraternities and sororities are created in response.

1978: Following the release of Animal House and the social movements during 1970s leads members to substance abuse and a partying lifestyle. Some have coined it the “outbreak” of modern Greek life.

1980-1990s: Sexual abuse and fraternities become investigated. The correlation between sexual assault and affiliates is one of the biggest controversies facing Greek life in the end of the 1900s.

Modern Day: Hazing, sexual assault, drinking, and drug abuse question whether fraternities and sororities should be abolished all together.

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