

**Fraternities in Decline:
Sagging membership, hazing incidents, alcohol abuse, and changing
student values challenge the Greek system**

By LEO REISBERG

After drinking from a keg of beer stashed in the basement of the Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity house at the University of Michigan last month, a group of pledges stripped to their boxer shorts and lined up, ready to endure their next torturous test of brotherhood.

As two other fraternity members looked on, a "pledge educator" pointed what he thought was an unloaded BB gun at the pledges' various body parts -- eyes, temples, groins, backs -- and pulled the trigger, discharging nothing but compressed air and a loud pop, according to police. He was simply trying to scare them.

When he approached the seventh student in line, the "educator" pointed the gun downward, two inches away from the pledge's penis, and fired. This time, a pellet shot out.

The 19-year-old shooting victim underwent surgery, Alpha Epsilon Pi suspended the chapter, and the university began an investigation into what it calls a "deplorable hazing incident." And college fraternities had to deal with yet another blow to their tainted public image.

A steady stream of headlines about fraternity antics gone awry suggests that Greek organizations have not changed much since the 1980's, when rowdy keg parties and sophomoric pranks actually helped them recruit fun-loving freshmen following a membership decline that had started during the Vietnam War era. But the *Animal House* antics have worn thin in the past decade.

After hitting a record of about 400,000 undergraduates in 1990, fraternity membership has plunged as much as 30 percent in the past decade, by some estimates. Many chapters have shut down because they've lost the bodies needed to financially support themselves.

"Some of the groups that closed due to low membership existed primarily as social clubs -- there was no real basis for brotherhood," says David L. Westol, executive director of the Theta Chi Fraternity.

Theta Chi initiated about 2,400 members last fall, down from 3,300 in 1989. In Alpha Tau Omega, the number of undergraduate members -- including both pledges and initiates -- plummeted by 31 percent, from

9,100 in 1989 to 6,300 in 1999. National officers at Phi Delta Theta say that their membership has dropped by 25 to 30 percent, primarily because the number of new members pledging the fraternity has fallen from 4,000 in 1989 to 3,100 last fall.

Fewer students now seem inclined to shell out hundreds of dollars in dues to be part of a system that has a reputation for physically abusing its pledges, engaging in offensive campus activities, and in some cases, endangering members' lives with excessive drinking.

Greek leaders say that image has been blown out of proportion by heightened press coverage of a few extreme incidents.

"There are certainly examples out there of fraternity chapters that serve as the antithesis of what we espouse and hope to be," says Bob Baney, executive director of Phi Gamma Delta. "My feeling is that they haven't necessarily escalated in number or frequency, but that society is a lot less tolerant of that type of behavior."

Fraternity executives acknowledge that alcohol has become a major part of Greek life, and it has hurt recruiting. Today's college students, they say, are more serious about studies and career goals than were students in the 1980's. And the grade-point averages of fraternity members are often lower than the averages for non-Greek male undergraduates.

Many students say they simply don't see any reason to join a fraternity.

"I've always pictured them as party animals, and that wasn't my thing," says Rob Kaczmarczyk, a junior at Michigan State University. "I don't need to pay to get friends and get into parties."

In trying to replenish their numbers, several national fraternities have devised programs with such idealistic names as "Balanced Man Project," "Men of Principle," and "Journeys" -- all of which emphasize academic development, leadership, and community service, while taking the focus off alcohol and hazing.

"We need to get back to what we once were -- a group of men brought together by values and ideals," says Mr. Westol. "I don't expect to see 27 guys coming out of their front door at 8 o'clock in the morning on their way to advanced chemistry, arms linked, wearing tuxedos, singing the fraternity song. But we do have standards and expectations. We do want to be a positive force on campus."

National officers are clashing with undergraduates over the efforts to transform fraternity culture. Many members resist any change that

threatens to spoil the fun (including the booze) that attracted them to Greek life in the first place. Why, some ask, would a freshman want to pay hundreds of dollars in dues just to study and do community service?

"All fraternities are about social life," says Ryan Fellman, a junior at Emory University and the treasurer of Kappa Alpha. "You make friendships and, as far as careers go, connections. Being in a fraternity is all about having a house to have parties and the social funds to do it right."

Other undergraduates who serve as chapter officers are re-evaluating the concept of fraternities and overhauling their organizations to improve recruitment, behavior, and especially reputation.

To deal with membership declines, some groups are aggressively recruiting students, especially those with solid grades and a commitment to community service. A few have even begun offering scholarships for recruits.

At Michigan State, Greek membership plummeted from about 6,000 a decade ago to 3,100 last fall. Now, a few chapters, including Beta Theta Pi, are seeing slight gains after years of decline.

Throughout the 1980's, the popularity of the Beta chapter soared as it developed a reputation for throwing the wildest beer bashes on the campus, says Andrew Romanosky, the chapter president. Membership peaked, at 130 men, in the late 1980's. By 1995, it was down to about 25. "They partied themselves into an oblivion," he says.

Alumni helped pay some bills, and the chapter took the rare step of renting out rooms in its house to nonmembers. In the past few years, Beta Theta Pi cut down on the "nonsense partying," stopped hazing, and began to recruit academically motivated men, says Mr. Romanosky, a junior. The chapter is now up to 75 members.

This year, it plans to offer three \$250 scholarships to incoming Michigan State students who have excelled in academics, athletics, and community service.

Mr. Romanosky admits that it's partly a public-relations gimmick: "It gives parents a chance to find out that fraternities are not the evil of college."

In 1998-99, Phi Gamma Delta rewarded 440 pledges nationwide who had earned 3.0 G.P.A.'s with \$250 scholarships -- enough to cover the costs of initiation and pledge fees for the year.

Phi Gamma Delta, Theta Chi, and Phi Delta Theta are among several groups that have imposed alcohol bans in all chapter houses by July.

"We're recruiting to the values of the fraternity, instead of saying, 'Come join us, because we've got the best parties and best-looking girls at our house,'" says Robert A. Biggs, executive director of Phi Delta Theta.

Some fraternity leaders say the renewed focus on core values is reducing some of the risks involved in their activities, resulting in lower liability costs.

Of the 140 Phi Delta Theta chapters with housing, 94 are supposedly alcohol free and the rest must ban booze by July 1. On average, the alcohol-free chapters have increased their membership by about 14 percent over the previous year, while those with booze have steady or declining rosters.

Each Phi Delta Theta member pays \$100 a year toward insurance, down from \$140 before the alcohol-free policy was announced.

But in many cases, the no-alcohol rules imposed by the national fraternities and many colleges have pushed the parties off campus, to unofficial fraternity houses rented out by upperclassmen. In other cases, the policy is ignored altogether.

And for all the talk of getting back to core values, it's obvious that many students are not getting the message.

In 1998, a student at the University of Michigan died when she fell out of her dormitory window after drinking alcohol that had been given to her at a party at Phi Delta Theta, supposedly an alcohol-free chapter. Still, some national-fraternity leaders say their efforts are beginning to pay off.

Jon C. Williamson, executive vice president of the National Interfraternity Conference, an umbrella body of 67 Greek groups, estimates that 350,000 undergraduates belong to fraternities. While that's down from 400,000 members in 1990, it represents a slight uptick from recent years, he says.

There's little hard data to substantiate his claim. While some national fraternities have been candid about their membership statistics, the N.I.C. and many fraternity executives keep their data as secret as their initiation rituals.

Data gleaned from the 1990 *Baird's Manual of the American College Fraternity* and several documents distributed internally among national-fraternity leaders show that the average chapter size has fallen, from 54

men in 1990 to 38 in 1998. That's not far from the low set during the Vietnam War era, when the average chapter had just 34 members.

While sororities on some campuses also have seen declines in membership, national data suggest that the women's groups are healthy, says Lissa L. Bradford, who was chairwoman last year of the National Panhellenic Conference, an umbrella group for sororities. The average chapter size of the 26 sororities that belong to the conference has risen from 46 two decades ago to 54 today, she says.

"We stand for scholarship and service and high values. We are very adamant about things like hazing," Ms. Bradford says. "I'm not being critical of the men, but we do try to deliver what we say."

To be fair, national-fraternity executives have made some tough choices in the last decade. From 1993 to 1995, Alpha Tau Omega shut down 40 chapters because of low membership or alcohol and hazing incidents. "It was a definite decision to go to a notolerance policy," says Wynn R. Smiley, the fraternity's executive director.

The move enraged some alumni and forced the national office to cut its budget, including some staff positions. Mr. Smiley estimates that the fraternity lost about \$200,000 in dues and pledging fees -- about 10 percent of its total budget. "We still get letters from alumni: 'I'll give money when you reopen my chapter,'" he says.

Some college officials say that the declining membership in Greek organizations is not entirely a backlash against their behavior, and suggest that other factors are coming into play.

* Student populations are increasingly diverse. Many campuses have seen major growth in multicultural fraternities and sororities.

* Students are working more than ever to pay the rising cost of attending college, and may be less inclined to spend money to belong to social clubs.

* Students have more organizations from which to choose than ever before.

"At one point, being Greek was very traditional and it was the thing to do," says Andy Robison, assistant dean of students at Purdue University, which has more than 600 student groups. "There are so many more organizations on campus now that the lure of the Greek system is not what it used to be."

At some small liberal-arts colleges, the Greek system is as strong as ever. At Washington and Lee University, the percentage of male students in fraternities has stayed at about 80 percent for the last 10 years, while the percentage of female students in sororities has jumped 20 points, to 72 percent.

Washington and Lee's experience is perhaps a function of the limited nightlife in small towns everywhere.

Some college administrators see the fraternities on their campuses as more trouble than they're worth. They have cut back institutional support for Greek-life staff members and programs, or -- in the cases of Bowdoin, Colby, Waynesburg, and Williams Colleges -- have ousted the groups from the campus. At Dartmouth College, where one fraternity inspired *Animal House*, officials have pushed in the past year to make fraternities and sororities go coeducational.

Several institutions, such as Southwest Texas State University and Miami University in Ohio, have developed accreditation programs for their Greek systems.

At Miami, the 48 fraternities and sororities approved a "relationship statement" with the university that establishes academic standards and a code of values.

Some college administrators are quick to defend fraternities.

"It can be the best thing for a student if they pick the right group, or it can be the worst thing if they pick the wrong group," says Purdue's Mr. Robison.

"A lot of students are mesmerized by the houses, impressed by the members, swept up in the social scene, and before you know it, they're flunking their midterms," he says. "On the other hand, you could get swept up in leadership and community service. I think that over the long haul, fraternities have been a good investment, mostly because of their contribution to the campus community, and the alumni loyalty that they foster."

At Bowling Green State University, the percentage of undergraduates who belong to fraternities has fallen from 19 percent a decade ago to about 12 percent today. In the last three years, the Ohio University has increased its Greek-life budget by \$100,000, or 20 percent. It has hired two full-time staff members to help plan fraternity programs, promoted a Greek adviser to associate director of residence life, and raised the salaries of graduate students who live in the fraternity and sorority houses and act as advisers.

"I've got two goals: One is to increase membership in fraternities and sororities, and the other is to add chapters," says Edward G. Whipple, vice president for student affairs at Bowling Green and a former international president of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity. "That's probably not what a lot of other vice presidents would say."

Greek life plays an instrumental role in retention because students who are involved in campus life are less likely to want to leave, Mr. Whipple says. And if a chapter shuts down, its members may decide to transfer to a different college. A closing may also affect how a former member "views the institution as an alumnus," he says.

Even administrators who support fraternities are frustrated that poor behavior and grades persist. They realize that any change to the firmly entrenched fraternity culture won't come easily.

But a few students have found that change isn't so bad, after all.

When word spread among students at Michigan State that Beta Theta Pi had stopped hazing, it started attracting pledges that were more interested in throwing Halloween parties for children than they were in drinking themselves into a stupor, says Mr. Romanosky, the chapter president.

The fraternity may have lost some of its edge with the hard-core partiers, he says, but it has become more popular with the sororities.

"Women like to see 65 guys sitting on the floor of their sorority house helping kids paint pumpkins," he says. ~ *Taken from the Chronicle of Higher Education (Jan. 7, 2000)*