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"A Hazing-Free University"

From Drum Major to Victim

November 21, 2011 began as an exciting night for Florida A&M University. At halftime, the "Marching 100" band took the field at the football game against their arch rivals, Bethune-Cookman. The band was led onto the field by drum major, Robert Champion. Hours later, Champion was murdered. He was the victim of a hazing incident. It was a band "tradition," where Champion walked from the front of a bus, to the back while being brutally punched and beaten. An autopsy revealed the injuries sustained from the hazing incident were the cause of death and the coroner ruled Champion's death a homicide. According to his mother, it was Champion's dream to become the drum major at FAMU and he aspired to be a professor of music. He was buried in full band uniform with his baton; Robert Champion was only 26 years old (Nies, Parise, and Keegan). Hazing among universities is a dangerous problem. Certain methods of hazing are not only morally degrading, but life threatening as well. Although Penn State University has an Anti-Hazing Policy in place, the act still occurs among organizations on campus. In order to abolish hazing, the university needs to establish an anonymous reporting telephone hotline. Also, it is necessary for students to be aware of the hazards and consequences associated with hazing. Therefore, the university should publish an informative video outlining the situation. Some argue that hazing is a rite of passage and aids the development of friendships, but the hazardous nature of hazing incidents makes it too harmful

and risky. Coupled support and affirmative action from the student body and the university can put an end to hazing.

Hazing and Its Negative Effects

Preventable deaths like those of Robert Champion have brought hazing into the spotlight. Hazing occurs in various places but most prevalently at universities and other institutions of higher learning. Penn State University's Anti-Hazing policy defines hazing as "any action that recklessly endangers the mental or physical health or safety of another student by forced action." Under Pennsylvania Law, hazing is punishable as a misdemeanor in the third degree ("Penn State University Panhellenic Council"). Even with a university and state law, hazing continues. According to a National Study of Student Hazing, five percent of all college students have been hazed. Another forty percent admit to knowing about hazing incidents ("Inside Hazing"). When that statistic is applied to Penn State demographics, it equals roughly 2,000 students at University Park alone. Furthermore, another forty percent report that a coach/advisor was aware of hazing. Even more shocking, twenty five percent of all college students report that a coach/advisor participated in hazing incidents ("Inside Hazing"). Statistics such as these are inexcusable. Hazing is not a rite of passage or a matter of hierarchy; it is physical and psychological damaging process.

The effects of hazing are widespread and vary from case to case. The traumatic effects of hazing on those involved can show immediately or be delayed for days, months, or even years ("Inside Hazing"). Those who have participated in hazing sometimes resort to psychological treatment to cope with problems associated with hazing. Dr. Jennifer J. Waldron notes that several side effects include self-doubting, depression, low self-esteem, and even

suicidal thoughts (Waldron). Incidents and side effects may cause the victim to want quit a sports team/organization as well. Most hazing incidents are not initially meant to be life-threatening or traumatic experiences. Nonetheless, recognizing the warning signs of dangerous hazing can save a life. Some of the most prevalent warning signs include an overly aggressive leader, feeling trapped or helpless, and a heightened sense of danger. Most importantly, if the actions contradict one's own personal morals or values it is pertinent to remove oneself from the situation immediately. Although it is important to take action against hazing, one should not go against a group alone. Unless one holds a position of power or influence, going against a group can lead to pain and suffering ("Inside Hazing"). The best defense is to report the incident immediately. Understandably, students do not want to be known as "informers." Therefore, the university needs to implement an anonymous reporting agency regarding hazing rituals.

A Remedy Through Awareness and Action

Despite Penn State's email reporting agency, another mode of disclosure is necessary. The Interfraternity Council and the Panhellenic Council have an email reporting page on their websites. This is a step forward towards a hazing-free university, but it does not make a large impact. Email can be unreliable; sometimes, messages are not sent properly. Furthermore, the response to email can take hours or even days. If a person is in need of immediate assistance, email is not the ideal form of contact. The university should implement an Anti-Hazing Hotline.

The Anti-Hazing Hotline would be a reliable, anonymous reporting agency for Penn State. Hours of operation would be from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM everyday during the academic year. The program would be handled by the Office of Student Conduct which deals with hazing and documenting other student actions. In order to be cost effective and educational, graduate

students in the field of psychology would operate the phones. Most importantly, the system would remain anonymous. One of the best features of the hotline is the instant contact. Email lacks the personal and fast communication of a telephone conversation. If the caller would need any sort of emergency assistance, such as an ambulance or the police, the operator would be able to get the caller in contact with appropriate responders. Quick contact could potentially save a life. It is pertinent for students to acknowledge the severity of hazing acts and notify the university. The students have the responsibility to report hazing incidents, but the university has obligations as well. To set a precedent and show that Penn State has a zero-tolerance for hazing, the university should thoroughly investigate all documented incidents. Those students and faculty found guilty of hazing crimes must be punished to the full extent of Penn State and Pennsylvania law. Working in unison, the students and officials can counter hazing at Penn State. Making a positive impact includes various methods of action and prevention. Another form of hazing awareness is the spread of information.

Knowledge is the key to understanding the ethical and legal consequences of hazing. Along with the Anti-Hazing Hotline, Penn State should create an informative video module outlining hazing. Said video would be mandatory and shown to all in-coming first year students. The video would follow the format of PSU SAFE and PSU AWARE: consisting of a few realistic student scenarios, factual statistics, and explicitly stating Penn State's policies. An emotionally driven hazing tragedy anecdote, such as that of Robert Champion, should be included. Compared to the SAFE and AWARE videos, the hazing film should focus on the consequences. Perhaps the scenarios would include a student being arrested; a student in the hospital or a parent's devastated and disappointed reaction. The acting need be convincing. Instead of

utilizing the average student as an actor, people with acting experience and training should be hired. The plot would reveal the dark side of hazing: where a harmless incident morphs into a sad disaster. Following the video, students would have to complete out a questionnaire and a short quiz where they must express adequate knowledge about hazing at Penn State. On FTCAP day, the students are given another briefing of university policy. These rules commonly cover the same information in SAFE and AWARE. Students should discuss the anti-hazing policy on FTCAP day as well. Constant reminders will show Penn State's commitment to ending hazing. Targeting specific groups linked to hazing will help stop hazing's expansion.

Greek life and athletics are the top two organizations associated with hazing. A study of fraternity and sorority members by Dr. Susan Lipkins showed that 31% of members believed that humiliation was a part of initiation. 50% of female Division I athletes report to being hazed at some point during their college career ("Inside Hazing"). Since these organizations have a reputation with hazing, the video would be viewed multiple times within Greek life and athletics. On the night of pinning in, the IFC and PHC would show the video to its members and pledges. All university sponsored sports teams would play the video prior to the first practice of the season. Advisors, coaches, and student leaders need to stress the importance of anti-hazing and set positive examples for students. Leaders should emphasize that hazing is not a part of college life and that it has no place at our institution. Many college students have a preconceived notion that hazing is an acceptable rite of passage.

Misconceptions and Pro-Hazing Opinions

Some students believe that hazing is a positive action and forms inseparable bonds and friendships. To certain people, hazing is a form of personal sacrifice: for what we want most the

highest price must be paid. What if this highest price is a human life? An anonymous writer argues that hazing is “an important element in human development and transition, as well as in cultural and organizational tradition... [and] carries abundant positive results, which far outweigh the potential negative or harmful results” (“Prohazing Email Comments”). Hazing does not stimulate character growth or maturity. What is more immature than recklessly endangering the wellbeing of another? The act cannot be compared to learning through experience or hard work. Daily striving for self improvement through studying, exercise, or other forms of training are not irresponsible or dangerous. Furthermore, friendship is not built on binge drinking, paddling, or scavenger hunts. Friendship is a mutual trust and respect between individuals. How can one feel a connection with a person saying derogatory, hurtful comments and causing physical harm? What true brother, sister, teammate, or friend would want to intentionally endanger the life of another? Hazing is not a necessary component of acceptance. This spring, I pledged the national co-ed service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega. From our initial pinning in ceremony, the members expressed their strict no hazing policy. The Penn State Alpha Beta chapter of Alpha Phi Omega takes hazing very seriously and prohibits any actions that could be interpreted as hazing. Now that I am an official brother, I can say that I have made many new friends and I was welcomed to the organization without hazing. The bottom line is that hazing is not a rite of passage; it does not promote friendship, or signify maturity. The inhumane nature of hazing and irresponsibility associated with the act cannot be justified.

A Call to Action

The time to act is now. Students and the university alike need to work together to make hazing at Penn State a notion of the past. Penn State has an existing Anti-Hazing policy in place, but incidents still continue. The anonymous hotline will encourage students to report acts without the fear of being considered an informer. Also, the quick contact with an operator could potentially save a life in an emergency situation. Another plan of action is the informative video. Watching tragic situations will compel students to act responsibly and restrain from hazing activities. Although some argue that hazing is a natural part of college life, that it develops maturity, and forms friendships, the reckless nature of hazing does not rationalize these claims. Hazing is risky and never appropriate. Usually hazing begins without cruel intentions, but can quickly turn threatening. No one knows the dark size of hazing more than Pam Champion, Robert Champion's mother. She urges for "somebody to step up, open door wide open, so you can see what's hidden behind it" (Nies, Parise, and Keegan). Penn State should strive to set a precedent for other universities and organizations and develop a strong anti-hazing reputation. By taking a stand and putting an end to hazing, we can save a life and prevent tragedies like that of Robert Champion.

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