

Behind the Lines of the War of Frats: A Tragedy in Three Parts

Fraternities are a way of life at many colleges across the country. But with high profile problems with drinking, hazing and finances, what's next for this American institution?

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In February, 2005, fraternity brothers in the California State University, Chico chapter of Chi Tau marched Matthew Carrington and a fellow pledge down to the basement of their house, past a sign that read: "In the basement no one can hear you scream." Following an age-old hazing practice known as "water torture," fraternity members doused Carrington with cold water while 40-degree air was channeled in from the winter night. While fraternity brothers watched a movie and played cards upstairs, the pledges were forced to drink gallons upon gallons of water while performing calisthenics and made to ask permission to wet themselves. Carrington suffered from hypothermia and water intoxication—which diluted the sodium level of his blood—and collapsed at around 4 a.m. He was pronounced dead two hours later. Following his death, University President Paul Zingg banned alcohol in fraternity houses, raised academic requirements and postponed rush.



Today there are more Greek students than ever before, according to the North-American interfraternity Conference (NIC). But tragedies like the one at Chico State are changing the face of fraternity life on campus, as universities, state governments and national chapters attempt to crack down on hazing and binge drinking. A number of hazing-

related lawsuits in the 1980s brought the issue to the fore, and caused insurance premiums to skyrocket. In 1993, a now-famous Harvard School of Public Health Alcohol study found that 44 percent of college students—and an estimated 80 percent of fraternity members—were binge drinkers, raising alcohol-awareness on campuses across the country.



With this increased attention to the dangers of hazing and alcohol-abuse, fraternities are under increasing scrutiny. By 2002, 1,500 of the 5,300 fraternities in the NIC had gone dry, up from only 300 several years before. (While sororities also face hazing issues, most national sorority houses are dry, meaning that alcohol abuse and high insurance costs are less prevalent.) The majority of fraternity chapters continue to serve alcohol, but the rules of the game are beginning to change.

Current visited three schools—University of Florida, University of Colorado, Boulder and University of Oregon—to check the vital stats of Greek life. Each campus sheds light on a major challenge facing fraternities. As Matt Noble, president of Fraternity Management Group, which counsels fraternities, says, “This generation is being held accountable more than any generation before.”

PART ONE

Cruisin’ for Boozin’

By Robbie Brown

Two years ago, Gordie Bailey and 26 other pledges at Colorado’s Chi Psi fraternity marched into a secluded national forest and performed a grueling rite of passage: guzzling four handles of whiskey and six jugs of wine in 30 minutes. After stumbling back to his fraternity house, Bailey, a broad-shouldered lacrosse player from Texas, fell unconscious. In the morning, his brothers found his body—covered with racial epithets and phallic symbols that the brothers drew as a joke—and called the police. A coroner ruled the cause of death alcohol poisoning.

In response to this tragedy, then University of Colorado Chancellor Richard Byyny decided to confront the school’s drinking problem once and for all. But changing drinking habits at one of America’s top party schools proved far harder than he had anticipated. After weeks of failed negotiations, 16 fraternities severed ties with the university rather than accept the reforms. Administrators responded by mailing letters that discouraged

parents from letting their sons join the “unofficial” fraternities. “The conventional wisdom is that when you have a problem with your fraternities, you pull them in closer,” says Marc Stine, a consultant paid by Colorado’s Interfraternity Council to advise the brothers. “In Colorado, they’re doing the exact opposite: They’re pushing us away.”

Pushing away the fraternities could backfire, experts say, if fraternity drinking gets even more pronounced. “Without school supervision, these unregulated chapters are really no more than gangs,” says Hank Nuwer, a professor of journalism at Franklin College who has written four books about hazing and devotes a blog, stophazing.org, to the topic. They’re “a problem on all campuses that host them.” But the University says it will not recognize the fraternities until they hire live-in advisors and delay recruitment to the spring—a measure designed to reduce irresponsible drinking and allow freshmen to get acclimated on campus. The school’s sororities and several on-campus fraternities have already accepted these measures. “We have to walk a very fine line,” says Bob Maust, chair of the university’s Standing Committee on Substance Abuse. “As long as the fraternities won’t abide by the rules, we can’t do anything for them.”

Colorado is not alone in its efforts. Universities across the nation are trying to regulate fraternity drinking. Dozens of schools, including the University of Iowa and the University of Oregon, now prohibit fraternities from serving alcohol in their houses. Other colleges require students to pre-register fraternity parties with local police. In 2002, Alfred University in New York took the most confrontational stance of all by banning fraternities from campus entirely.

These tough-love (or, some say, no-love) policies are driving a wedge between many Greeks and the universities that host them. Fraternity leaders say they are committed to reducing binge drinking, but refuse to delay recruitment to accomplish the goal. While such squabbles have, on occasion, led fraternity chapters to sever ties with their university, Pete Smithhisler, a spokesman for the North-American Interfraternity Conference, says he can’t recall anything like the situation in Boulder, where virtually the entire fraternity system withdrew. “It’s a unique situation that really doesn’t exist anywhere else in America.”

Resisting Reforms

Bailey’s death helped reinforce Colorado’s reputation as America’s most out-of-control party school—a reputation that, administrators believe, has adversely affected the university’s rankings in critical college guides. In 2003, the year Bailey applied to college, The Princeton Review not only ranked Colorado the No. 1 place for parties, but also the

No. 1 school for students who “never study.” It didn’t matter that the Boulder school boasted two Nobel laureates in physics. Colorado meant one thing to prospective students: parties. And, of course, it meant the same thing to parents who were being asked to pay the freight. Determined to reform the school’s image, administrators pressured frats to shed their Animal House routines and to take the lead in the school’s anti-binge drinking efforts. Although fraternity and sorority members represented only seven percent of Colorado’s student body, they threw a disproportionate number of the campus parties. In 2005, the Harvard School of Public Health found that 80 percent of fraternity residents are binge drinkers—nearly twice the national average for college students. Colorado’s surveys indicate that 65 percent of its students binge drink and that the rates for fraternity members are even higher.

Facing these numbers in the wake of the Bailey tragedy—as well as another alcohol related death at a fraternity party at Colorado State University just two weeks earlier—Byyny made new demands on Boulder’s Greeks in 2004. In order to be recognized as official organizations by the university, fraternities would need to hire in-house advisors to monitor alcohol consumption and delay their rush processes until the spring semester of freshman year. “I think it is a good idea if the students don’t have to feel the pressure of rush during the first part of their college experience,” Byyny argued in a campus speech. But the former chancellor underestimated how vehemently the Greeks would object. Fraternities felt they had already been sufficiently punished for the drinking deaths. Bailey’s fraternity, Chi Psi, had closed its Boulder chapter and 12 brothers had pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of providing alcohol to minors. To fraternity leaders, the initiatives seemed like a ploy to scapegoat the brothers for the university’s problematic reputation.

Even Bailey’s mother, Leslie Lanahan, who started the Gordie Foundation in 2004 to promote safe drinking, says the University of Colorado faces a lose-lose situation: It’s faced with the choice of backing off its proposals or losing all control as the fraternities remain off campus where, experts like Nuwer believed, they are more likely to put students in jeopardy. “Am I thrilled with how the university has handled this situation? No. But do I know what else they could have done?” Lanahan asks. “Probably not.”

The stereotype of University of Colorado students’ frontier-sized drinking abilities existed long before Gordie Bailey set foot in Boulder. Until 1987, the state was one of the few in America to let 18-year-olds drink. Among the university’s greatest benefactors is the Coors family. And Liquor Mart, the largest liquor store in town, is owned by Dick Tharp, the school’s former athletic director. “Drinking happens everywhere on campus,” Stine

says. "Not just fraternities." In fact, Stine believes the frats may be the safest place to drink in Boulder. That's because they tightened the controls on alcohol distribution after Bailey's death, he says. "If a fraternity is having a party with alcohol, they have to register it 72 hours in advance and police come to observe the party. Fraternities are the only places at the university or in the city of Boulder that control alcohol that carefully," he says. "If all the fraternities closed tomorrow, binge drinking would increase, not decrease."

Stine believes the conflict is about freedom of choice, not alcohol. "If every single other campus organization can recruit new members in the fall, why not fraternities?" he asks. But that doesn't mean he's worried about recruitment. This year, the offcampus fraternities attracted 22 percent more new members than in 2005. "If the university's intention was to drive us out of business by forcing us off campus, that didn't work," he says.

Interfraternity Council Vice President Christopher Kline, a senior, believes Bailey's death forced Greeks to reevaluate their priorities. "We were the ones who killed somebody, so we were the ones who had to change," he says. Last year, he claims that police reports involving fraternities declined, though Boulder police do not keep separate records for fraternities, and could not confirm. "The entire tone has changed," insists Kline. "As a Greek community, we are safer than we were two years ago." But Maust, who chairs the Committee on Substance Abuse, says the University's binge-drinking rates haven't changed and that they're particularly high among fraternity members.

Bailey's mother says she is not "anti-Greek." Lanahan commends the many fraternity brothers who participate in the Gordie Foundation's Circle of Trust, a national student-run campaign for safe drinking. Still, she worries that they do not always understand the pressure they place on pledges to binge drink. "The hazing that happened that night—it was like loading a gun and passing it around at a cocktail party," she says. "Nobody realized how dangerous it was."

PART TWO

Hazed and Confused

By Claudia Adrien

In 2001, members of the Delta Chi fraternity at the University of Florida greeted their pledges—most of whom were freshmen—with some harsh words. They called them “maggots” and “homosexuals” and ordered them to scream, “I am a bitch!” over and over again. The pledges were then driven into Ocala National Forest, where members denied them water and ordered them to eat dog bones. With this ordeal, Delta Chi members welcomed their young hopefuls into the brotherhood.

Perverse as it may seem, hazing—defined as any emotionally or physically risky activity demanded of one joining a group—is an integral part of the formation of many fraternity brothers’ bonds, and has been for decades. Yet in recent years it has caused serious controversy nationwide. Across the country, universities are toughening their anti-hazing policies, and fraternities are being forced to adapt. In part, this is because name-calling is hardly the worst offense—given the heavy drinking pressure and dangerous behavior associated with hazing rituals, at least one pledge has died in the U.S. every year since 1970.

With a Greek population of 5000 students, divided between 63 fraternities and sororities, the University of Florida is just one of the schools which has had to face up to the problems posed by institutionalized humiliation. “There’s an internal recognition of reform that’s necessary on a variety of issues, which includes risk management, alcohol policy and hazing,” says Jared Hernandez, a Florida law student who served as the Interfraternity Council President while an undergraduate at Florida. Many colleges have responded to the issue with an outright ban on frats. Princeton University administrators do not recognize fraternities officially, and in 2004, they sent a letter to incoming freshmen discouraging them from joining off-campus chapters. Bowdoin College, Colby College and Alfred University have also announced “no-tolerance” policies.

But as Princeton University spokeswoman Cass Cliatt acknowledges, “There’s very little we can do about student activities outside of campus,” and so banning frats does not automatically eliminate them from college life. An estimated 15 percent of Princeton students belong to off-campus chapters. And as soon as a fraternity is pushed off campus, it can no longer be regulated by the university. Instead, fraternities are beginning to be regulated more and more by the courts. Increasingly, members are being

held accountable for hazing- and alcohol-related injuries and fatalities in criminal and civil lawsuits.

In 2001, during “Hell Week” at Ferris State University in Michigan, Stephen Petz, a freshman pledge was left unconscious after a drinking bout. Members of Knights of College Leadership tried to revive the lanky, 150-pound Petz with a cold shower. As the members responsible for the hazing argued over whether to take the unresponsive freshman to the hospital, Petz’s respiratory system was shutting down. “They wouldn’t even pick up the phone knowing that someone was dying,” says Ruth Petz, Stephen’s mother. “They were afraid of getting in trouble.” Petz, 19, died in the hospital the next morning. Five members of KCL were later convicted for giving a minor alcohol, with one serving a substantial prison sentence.



And other laws are being implemented to punish hazing before it reaches a deadly outcome. “Laws are powerful deterrents and strengthen the hands of college administrators. Put something tangible on the books and...people can’t walk away from these life-threatening behaviors,” says Eileen Stevens, who lost her son in a hazing incident at Alfred University in 1978. Stevens waged a largely one-woman crusade to get an anti-hazing law passed in New York State. Forty-four states, including Florida, have adopted anti-hazing legislation to date.

But some say these laws aren’t adequate. Even with legislation in place that broadly defines hazing as everything from pressuring or coercing the student into violating state or federal law to any forced activity that could adversely affect the mental health or dignity of the student, it can be very hard to get a hazing conviction in the courts. “Prosecuting attorneys find [hazing] hard to prove,” says Nuwer. He claims that most prosecutors charge perpetrators with assault rather than hazing charges because “the wording of the law is so off target that they’re not sure they can get a conviction.”

Such was the case with Marcus Jones, a 20 year-old Florida A & M University student, who alleges that five fraternity brothers beat him with canes, boxing gloves and bare fists during initiation last February—a beating which led to a broken eardrum and necessitated surgery on his buttocks. But a Tallahassee judge declared a mistrial last month when jurors couldn’t decide how Florida’s new hazing law, the Chad Meredith Act—named after a University of Miami student who drowned swimming across a Florida lake during a

fraternity initiation in 2001—defined ‘serious bodily injury.’ Nuwer argues that federal legislation is necessary to unify the language behind various laws.

In the meantime, some students have begun to respond internally. Hernandez himself lamented the state of the fraternity system in a series of editorials for the Independent Florida Alligator, calling it “an entrenched bastion of white hegemonic male privilege” that was unwilling to confront its questionable behavior. “I think fraternities are in danger of becoming irrelevant if they don’t offer greater programs to their members and return to the values they were founded upon,” he says. But Chris Bullins, director of the UF office of sorority and fraternity Affairs, believes fraternities can remain relevant. “We think if done right, [fraternities and sororities] are a complement to the academic mission of the university,” he says. But nobody thinks that finding their way through the haze will be easy.

PART THREE

Frat Finance

By Kate von Bronkhorst

The walls had holes; the bathrooms had no doors; no one even wanted to imagine what was growing in the swimming pool. Such was the state of the University of Oregon’s Zeta-Omicron chapter of the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity last spring. In debt to its national chapter and in trouble with its insurance company for the conditions at the chapter house, Zeta-Omicron was deep in the red. And nobody wanted any part of it. Its national governing body placed the chapter on probation, then the university severed all ties with it, declaring it a “rogue group” and booting the brothers from their rundown house.

The numbers of Zeta-Omicron in Eugene, Ore. are not the only ones facing increasing financial burdens. Across the country, rising costs are making it harder for fraternities to stay afloat. With insurance premiums high, housing options dwindling and alumni giving often precarious, Greek groups are finding themselves in danger of going under.

It wasn’t always like this. The 1970s and early ‘80s saw many fraternities secure favorable insurance plans that protected effectively against liability. But a number of high profile lawsuits in the 1980s—resulting in multi-million-dollar payouts—changed how insurance companies viewed Greek organizations. By the end of the decade, the National Association of Insurance Commissioners assessed fraternities and sororities as the sixth riskiest organizations to insure—following hazardous waste disposal services and asbestos

contractors. As a result, rates skyrocketed and fraternities found insurance coverage beyond their means.

In an attempt to address the problem, nearly twenty fraternities banded together and formed the Fraternity Insurance Purchasing Group. It laid down mandatory guidelines for its members, then used the collective buying power to negotiate affordable insurance rates. By 2003, 63 percent of Greek chapters nationwide were under that umbrella and committed to following FIPG risk management policy.

Still, for many chapters, the cost of insurance remains prohibitive. For Lambda Chi Alpha at Oregon, a decline in the number of pledges meant that each brother's payments rose. The frat brothers there fell behind on rent, dues to the national organization and upkeep of their house. In May, it all came to a head. According to Zeta-Omicron treasurer Erik Higgins, the chapter was suspended by the national fraternity for two reasons: its insurer refused coverage for the Oregon chapter; and Zeta-Omicron had run up a gigantic debt to the national. So the chapter was already in freefall when it was also suspended from the university.

Some fraternities no longer regard the expensive insurances packages as a worthwhile buy. Stanford's Sigma Rho Chapter chapter of Delta Kappa Epsilon has existed without a house since the late 1990s. The group's insurance is handled by the national chapter, with the Stanford brothers paying a variable fee to the organization for coverage. According to 2004-2005 chapter President Kenneth Gundle, now a first year student at Harvard Medical School, says: "We had to negotiate with the national chapter, and try to find a payment schedule that works on both ends. The more insurance money we paid, the less we had for programming." Not only did insurance costs drain the fraternity's coffers, but Gundle was never quite sure where the money was going. "It's one thing to have a house: what if it burns down? What if it gets robbed? What if there's an earthquake? But for us, those weren't issues."



Nor are insurance costs the only financial concerns. Alumni giving can be the deciding factors as to whether a chapter can survive the financial rigors of the 21st century campus. Most of the money collected from members goes to risk management and daily organizational costs, according to Matt Noble, president of Fraternity Management Group, which offers fraternities advice and services for alumni and parental relations. He says that if chapters aspire to more ambitious goals, like renovating or building a new house, they are dependent on alumni help. According to the North- American Interfraternity Conference, Greek organizations own and manage \$3 billion in student housing, but quite often it is an alumni group, not the local chapter, that is the actual owner.

While an estimated 30 to 50 percent of fraternity alums still donate to their former chapters, undergrad missteps can drain the well very quickly. "Alumni do not contribute to chapters with some sort of risk management issue," says Noble. He believes that donations may actually be on the rise, though there are no defining numbers one way or another. But he has no doubt that hazing or alcohol violations will reverse that trend for a chapter, getting it in as much trouble with its donors than it might be in with the law.

Oregon's Zeta-Omicron chapter of the Lambda Chi Alpha found a new home in exile—a formerly empty frat house across town. Money remains short, and the chapter faces the challenge of trying to keep its identity—and its benefactors involved: "It's hard for the alumni," says Higgins. "This is their house, but it isn't the house they lived in when they were in school." Nonetheless, the change of venue has been welcomed as an opportunity to move forward from the chapter's troubled past. "Ultimately it brought a lot of us closer together and fostered a new sense of responsibility among the members." It may not have a pool like the old house, but at least the chapter is still afloat.