C.U. Works to Eliminate Hazing in Greek System

By Ben Eisen

Created Feb 6 2008 - 12:00am

After a mass meeting of Cornell students on Oct. 17, 1901, the University decided to eliminate fraternity hazing for good. An article in The New York Times reported, “rushees attended by personal injuries have been frequent, and students have been taken by force to gatherings where they were made the sport of the throng. [Cornell] President Schurman regards the latter practice as interfering with the rights of the students, and says that the practice must be stopped.”

Nearly 107 years later, houses in Cornell’s Greek system still have pledge processes for their new members, and hazing is just as contentious an issue as it was a century ago. The University has recently taken steps in an attempt to be more proactive on the issue, but hazing is still a widespread part of campus fraternities and sororities, as well as sports groups and other student organizations.

Lance Polivy ’08, former executive vice president of the Cornell Interfraternity Council and chair of the Greek Action for New Member Education committee (GAME), estimates that about a quarter of the 40
fraternity houses in the IFC use hazing in their new member education process. Polivy defines hazing as something that physically or mentally harms a new member.

“I think it’s more prevalent than most people think it is,” said Travis Apgar, associate dean of students for fraternity and sorority affairs. “As well, there’s a lack of understanding that it comes in many different types.”

Many say that this is no secret for anyone who frequents or knows people in fraternities that haze. A sophomore woman who wishes to remain anonymous said she often visits a West Campus fraternity and has repeatedly seen pledges drunk and passed out from being forced to drink. A North Campus fraternity president whose house does not haze recalls hearing friends’ stories of harmful activities they were forced to participate in while pledging freshmen year.

Cornell’s official definition of hazing states that it is something that “could be seen by a reasonable person as endangering the physical health of an individual or as causing mental distress to an individual.”

Polivy says that many of the things that could fall under this definition may not be construed as harmful in the pledging process. However, he believes hazing is on the decline across campus.

“Something is changing in the seriousness with which people look at hazing,” Polivy said. “Because of the voracity of the consequences of someone getting hurt, people are veering away from dangerous activities.”

This may be a result of some of the IFC’s recent strategies to eliminate the act. The relatively new hazing amnesty policy allows fraternity members to come to the IFC, recount their current hazing events without getting in a trouble, and work with Apgar and others to eliminate the hazing practices while keeping the traditions associated with them. Many of the fraternity houses have taken advantage of this new policy.

The IFC instituted a mandatory seminar for pledges called the Delta Series, which deals in part with issues of hazing. The Multicultural Greek Letter Council (MGLC) has a similar program in which all new members must meet with Jarrod Cruz, assistant dean for fraternity and sorority affairs.

GAME, which is being put into effect this semester, is also meant to suggest alternatives to hazing through four main activities: community service, leadership, athletics, and Cornell Outdoor Education activities. Among other things, GAME will instigate the creation of a junior IFC for new members to talk about ways to get involved in Greek life, athletic leagues for pledges and subsidized use of COE’s facilities.

“I wouldn’t be putting this much work into [GAME and the IFC] if I didn’t believe in the Greek system,” Polivy said. “It has helped create so much positive for so many people. But to benefit from the positive, we have to make sure hazing is minimized.”

Though the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs has done a lot to encourage alternatives to hazing and retroactively punish those caught hazing, the responsibility to carry out a hazing-free new member education program rests mainly on individual houses. Unlike at fraternity parties, where the IFC inspects houses to make sure they are following the rules for serving alcohol, pledge events are for the most part unmonitored. However, most of those involved with the Greek system veer away from such oversight.

The president of the MGLC Taylor Le Melle ’09 said, “It’s a fine line. A lot of intake processes involve rituals and traditions that have been in existence for 100 years. It’s hard to check up on events because then they’re not private.”

Houses are required to submit a list of pledge events that police can cross-reference if they see anything suspicious, but Apgar believes anything more than that would push people to hide hazing rather than eliminate it.
“Unfortunately, the way we find out is if something goes horribly wrong,” Apgar said. “But hazing is a little bit different than a party. You can take 15 or 20 guys off-campus where no one could find you, whereas it’s relatively easy to monitor a party.”

Though Cornell has seen its fair share of hazing experiences over the years — the second registered hazing death took place at the University in 1873 — many speculate that Cornell is ahead of most other schools in eliminating harmful pledging activities.

“People understand the reason we’ve been around so long is that we adapt to changes in the system,” Greg Schvey ’09, president of the IFC, said. “At other schools that’s not the case.”