The Pain of Pledging: Hazing at Cornell

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It is 11 p.m. on a Thursday night and all you want to do is finish your problem set and watch Snooki get punched in the face on *Jersey Shore*. But no such luck — you have a pledge event to attend. Hours later, in the chaos of Ke$ha's “Tik Tok” and overflowing bottles of Andre, an older girl urges you to play Edward 40-hands with two handles of Gordon’s vodka. After mindlessly downing the liquid that smells like nail polish and tastes even worse, you begin to feel nauseous and find yourself fading in and out of consciousness. When you wake up from your comatose state in Cayuga Medical Center the next morning you are told that you’d been hazed.

Students who have undergone similar “rituals” sometimes don’t realize that they have been hazed. The university defines hazing as “an act that ... could be seen by a reasonable person as endangering the physical health of an individual or as causing mental distress to an individual ...”. However, this definition leaves a lot of gray area in classifying hazing behavior. Most recently, at Cornell’s Pi Kappa Alpha (PIKE) chapter, a drinking incident led to the hospitalization of three students. The fact that the hospitalizations were at a rush event and not during the new member period calls into question what exactly qualifies as hazing, and how it should be addressed at Cornell. Allen Miller, president of Cornell’s Inter-Fraternity Council (IFC), states that the fraternity has been instructed to “terminate all activities, including and not limited to recruitment, initiation and social events.”
Choking Under the Pressure: Hazing, both at Cornell and across the country, affects fraternities and sororities, athletic teams, and many other organizations.

However, Miller emphasized that the IFC, the Cornell Police Department, the Ithaca Police Department and the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs are still investigating the incident to ensure that the issue is “resolved in the most appropriate way.” In the Cornell Chronicle, Susan Murphy, Cornell’s Vice President for student and academic services, speaks for the administration in stating: “We are concerned about the health and welfare of our students, and we take reports like this very seriously.”

Cornell is not alone when it comes to hazing. According to hazing expert Dr. Susan Lipkins’ website, Inside Hazing, there has been at least one hazing-related death on a college campus each year since 1970. In a recent study, the National Collaborative for Hazing Research and Prevention found that more than half of college students involved in clubs, teams and organizations experience hazing. The most common hazing practices across all student groups include forced alcohol consumption, humiliation, isolation, sleep deprivation and sexual acts.

Students who think they’re just having a bit of fun may have unwittingly exposed themselves to a great potential danger. According to Lipkins, psychologist and leading hazing expert, “hazing is becoming more violent and more sexual each year.” She explains, “There are conscious and unconscious psychological sequelae to everyone involved in hazing; though the degree of trauma changes according to one’s experience. Sometimes bystanders are even more affected than the victims themselves, because they feel stuck ... wracked with guilt for not intervening and scared to report.”

The victims’ psychological issues will often include anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Sharon Dittman from Gannett Health Services states that one in three Cornell students report having been hazed at least once during his or her time at the University.

The actual number of hazing incidents may be much higher, however. The National Study of Student Hazing reports in a 2008 study that 95 percent of hazing incidents go unreported.

Gannett offers confidential counseling to those who need both medical attention and emotional support. Dittman emphasizes that all of the Gannett providers, including nurses, doctors, and counselors, are alert to signs and symptoms of hazing.

http://cornellsun.com/print/40543
Some Cornell hazing victims themselves are certainly aware of the psychological damage that hazing can inflict.

In his confessional paper for the Sun, “Hazed and Confused,” Adam Zwecker ’04 reflected that there were several pledges “who suffered meltdowns or became depressed to the point of contemplating suicide.” He marked both the superficiality of rush and the pressure to recreate oneself to fit a specific mold as major causes of these psychological symptoms.

Tim Marchell, the creator of Cornell’s hazing site, hazing.cornell.edu, notes that “The consequences of hazing are often hidden. For example, a tradition in which people are expected to take off their clothes can be distressing or even traumatic, especially for individuals who have been sexually abused in the past.”

Susan Murphy said she believes that hazing “runs counter to every value we have regarding student life as well as runs counter to our core missions.” The administration’s stated mission is to support the health and well-being of the campus community, and more specifically to support students’ academic and personal endeavors.

Murphy asserts that “Hazing not only fails to contribute to the health and well-being of the campus community, it also can have very negative consequences for individual students and the culture of student organizations.” Marchell agrees that there “is a substantial gap between what groups that haze say they value and what they actually do. Hazing is the opposite of respect and dignity.”

What Exactly Is Hazing?

One major difficulty in assessing the reach of hazing stems from the difficulty in defining it. Lisa Roloson ’11 said that the point of distinction between hazing and a rite of passage occurs “when hazing interferes with an area of life that has nothing to do with the group you’re joining ... for example, if you experience a drop in grades due to hazing. You’re at Cornell first and foremost to learn, so the Greek system should be a fun addition to life here, but it shouldn’t interfere with learning.”

Laura DeCesare ’11 similarly believes that hazing “becomes hazing when it’s unhealthy, detrimental, and when it is no longer about proving yourself. In extremity, hazing becomes pointless.”

The severity of hazing can differ widely. Most students approached for this article chose to remain anonymous due to obligations to their fraternities and sororities. One West Campus fraternity brother said, “There’s a lot of cleaning ... definitely a lot of cleaning, but I don’t think anything horrible.” But upon asking Cornell students, it became apparent that some hazing incidents are not so harmless. One fraternity brother reports, “I heard of an incident where someone was electrocuted — I think it was an accident, but it was a result of hazing.”

Cornell’s hazing website reveals various extreme cases from recent years. One fraternity forced new members to strip down and lie in a pool filled six inches high with ice water, urine, beer and kitchen garbage, according to the site.

Meanwhile, the other new members hovered over the pool and took turns dropping raw eggs into the mouths of those lying in the grotesque concoction. In another incident, fraternity members were taken to Cayuga Lake on a winter night, after being forced to drink mass amounts of alcohol, and were ordered to retrieve sticks thrown into the water by the older members. One of the new members had a life-threatening reaction upon entering the water and was rushed to the emergency room, according to the site.

Although the Greek system has taken the limelight regarding hazing, the issue may be even more prominent among athletic teams. The National Study of Student Hazing found that among undergraduate students from 53 universities across the country, 74 percent of varsity athletes had experienced at least
one incident of hazing as did 73 percent of fraternity and sorority members. Perhaps more disturbingly, 25 percent of coaches or organization advisors were aware of the group’s hazing activities.

Do the Victims Always Know Best?

Although National Collaborative’s study shows that 69 percent of students admit that they are aware of having been hazed, studies also show that more students perceive positive rather than negative effects of hazing. This trend is apparent within the Cornell community.

Some students claim that hazing isn’t bad because it is a rite of passage. DeCesare, member of club and varsity swim teams, believes that some light forms of hazing can be positive. She says, “Some traditions or processes that may be considered hazing are really more like rites of passage.

For example, some sports teams conduct ‘initiations’ or have the newest members perform certain tasks, like collecting equipment or getting water, which is really just for the newest members to earn their place on the team and to become unified as a class. These processes also make being the oldest member of the team so much more rewarding because they have fulfilled their responsibilities and deserve the positions they received.”

A West Campus fraternity member, when asked whether he minded what he had to do in order to join a fraternity, replied, “No, a lot of people don’t. ... I did have to endure physical discomfort but there was always a line, and if the line were drawn I would not have crossed it and I still would have been able to join the fraternity. I feel like very infrequently is that line crossed.”

One of the most common arguments made for hazing is that it unites the members. One fraternity member argues, “As a whole, what we do really brings you closer to the people in your pledge class. My best friends are all from my pledge class because we share a common bond going through that experience together.” Even students outside of the Greek system see positives in hazing.

Marc Dominianni ’12 said, “The positives of some mild hazing, like being forced to stay up late or to be physically active at night, would be that you have endured the trouble together with your teammates or fraternity brothers. The bonding would really construct a cohesive brotherhood. It’s a rite of passage, too, I’m sure, and newbies gain respect and trust upon completion. Overall, the positives of mild hazing seem to greatly outweigh the negatives.”

While some students seem to think about hazing in a more positive than negative light, a few students spoke out in opposition. One fraternity member reflects that “pledge activities often don’t actually promote bonding; they are more often senseless time-wasting.”

Another fraternity brother notes that “late-night hazing events were not conducive to good schoolwork the next day.” A non-Greek Cornellian points to hazing as one of the main reasons he chose not to rush a fraternity: “I wouldn’t want to be future brothers with the same people who would potentially verbally or physically harass me. The concept doesn’t make any sense.”

Although the majority of student arguments seem to be in support of hazing, administrators and experts don’t seem to be on the same page as Cornell’s students. Author and journalist Hank Nuwer, who has written about hazing for over 20 years, believes that there is no form of light hazing. He said that “there is simply no door you can open to allow hazing. It’s like saying you can shoplift a little.”

Susan Murphy said that there is no positive of hazing. However, she helps to explain the student consensus in stating that “those who haze often view it as positive and necessary, and because of a vocal few who believe it is successful, it is perpetuated. The reality is that the perceived benefits of hazing are largely unrealized.”
Tim Marchell attacked the core concept of hazing: “The idea that you need to intimidate and humiliate people in order to form strong relationships with them is misguided. If we don’t believe that about families, why would we do those things to new ‘brothers and sisters’?”

From Hazing to Homicide

Hazing is not only a current issue, but has been a problem since Cornell was founded. The New York Times archives reveal the horrific history of hazing, both at Cornell and elsewhere. Flashback to a night in 1873: During initiation to the Kappa Alpha fraternity, Cornellian Mortimer M. Leggett, Class of 1877, and his fellow pledges were led several miles away from campus into the country. They were blindfolded, left alone, and told to find their way back to the fraternity house. Upon his return, Leggett stumbled his way into two older members who removed his blindfold and they walked down a hill towards an opening in the brush. But what they had expected to be a road turned out to be a 37-foot cliff, and Leggett fell to his death in the gorge, becoming the first person to die in a college fraternity initiation.

One would hope that this tragedy made an impression on the habits of Cornell’s Greek system, but just one year later, Cornell’s hazing managed to take the life of a non-Cornellian. Cornell sophomores threw a welcoming banquet for freshmen and filled the banquet hall with chlorine gas — an act that they saw as a devilish prank. This “prank” quickly turned into homicide, killing a young female bystander and leaving many others unconscious.

Several years later, in 1899, hazing caused yet another death. E.F. Berkely, a Cornell freshman, was pledging Kappa Alpha when his older fraternity brother brought him to the suburbs of Geneva and told him to pin a piece of paper to a tree a quarter mile away. He walked through the darkness and fell head-first into a canal, drowning to death.

Fortunately, there haven’t been any recent Cornell deaths as a result of hazing, but the list of hazing-related student deaths is extensive on campuses across the country. In 1967, a Baylor University student died during an eating ritual from choking on a grotesque concoction created by the brothers. In 1974, a Monmouth College student died from suffocation after being buried in a grave that his members asked him to dig on the beach. In 1994, a Southeast Missouri State student was beaten to death by the members. In 2003, a Plattsburgh State student died of swelling of the brain associated with water intoxication.

What Is Cornell Doing

To Reduce Hazing?

College students talk a lot about hazing. Administrators preach about it, on-campus organizations condemn it and the Greek community organizes a full week in honor of anti-hazing campaigns. But has all that talking led to change? In light of Leggett’s death in 1873, the Intrafraternity Council voted to make violators of its anti-hazing legislation liable to fines or expulsion from the IFC. One hundred ten years later, in 2004, Cornell’s Intrafraternity Council, Panhellenic Association, and the Multicultural Greek Council jointly adopted the “Sunshine Policy,” a policy which mandated that all reports of hazing behavior would be made accessible to the public. In Cornell’s Campus Code of Conduct, adopted in May 2008, hazing is listed as a violation of the “regulations for maintenance of an educational environment.”
The consequences for students found guilty of the violation range from an oral warning to suspension from school. When an entire chapter is found guilty of hazing, the punishments may include a compliance program, where a chapter must complete multiple anti-hazing programs. In more extreme cases, the University may withdraw recognition from the chapter for a period of time.

Various Cornell chapters have since been disbanded as a result of hazing; however, some of these groups have returned with modified initiation programs that are intended to eliminate such activities.

These incidents do not always go unpunished, however. Perpetrators of hazing may experience legal consequences for the physical and emotional pain they inflict. According to New York State law, hazing can be categorized either as a violation or a misdemeanor depending on the severity. If students go to court for hazing, they could end up spending a year in jail.

But how can the prevention of hazing actually be implemented and enforced? Since neither administrators nor the red-jacketed frat bouncers (the IFC police) can attend the pledging events where hazing most often occurs, there is ample time for neglect of the newly enforced policies. Panhel President Nora Allen doesn’t think that most fraternities and sororities are caught for their hazing: “I think often people see hazing as a part of joining an organization and won’t necessarily report it.” Despite the anti-hazing regulations, Hank Nuwer asserts that “There has been no united campaign by college presidents or boards of trustees. It is needed.”

According to Kent Hubbell ’67, the University takes a more educational approach to hazing. He described education as a more proactive route to change than punishment through the judicial system, and aims to acquaint students with the administration’s values and expectations. The Delta Series, an annual program sponsored by the IFC and Panhellenic Council, educates new members on issues of hazing, leadership and general membership.

In the academic realm, action is being taken to enhance the performance of initiated Greeks and new members. The IFC is confident that their April 2009 Minimum GPA Recruitment Resolution will be strictly enforced. The new policy requires a 2.25 minimum GPA to rush, the national standard across the US.

Additionally, if the cumulative GPA of a pledge class drops between .3 and .4 grade points during the semester of pledging, the whole chapter will receive four weeks of social probation. If the whole pledge class suffers a more than .4 drop in GPA, the house will have an eight-week social probation. Mike Mascarenhas ’11, the incoming vice president of programming for the IFC, said, “I think the new policy will be very effective in preventing hazing because if you focus on academics and on raising or maintaining GPAs of new members, aspects of hazing will dissipate.”

While both New York State and Cornell’s Greek system stand united in their position against hazing, Cornell’s students may not. Their contrasting opinions on hazing present the challenge of defining a new membership process that will promote feelings of accomplishment and unity without inflicting pain and humiliation. But until members find that perfect balance, they are left straddling a blurry line. The Cornell community is seeking alternatives to hazing that lead to the same positive results as the “traditional” approaches to hazing. Sharon Dittman emphasizes that “Gannett has been very active in education about hazing and alternatives to hazing” and stresses that they are committed to creating a climate that supports bonding, friendship, and a student community free from hazing.

As evidenced by its murky definition, students’ and administrators’ conflicting viewpoints, and a history shrouded in secrecy, hazing is anything but clear. The complex and long-standing nature of this tradition makes it doubly difficult for students and educators alike to begin to understand exactly what they’re facing when they seek to address hazing behavior. The University’s challenge, therefore, in clearing the air lies not only in defining hazing, but also in finding the right ways to address it.