

The Changing Role and Relevance of Fraternities in Modern Society

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A discussion of the reasons that the American Social Fraternity remains relevant in modern society, despite changing social/cultural relationships and a number of negative critiques recently published in the contemporary press. The paper argues for a dynamic and flexible model of Fraternity that engages with changing times and spaces while remaining grounded in the organization's tradition and heritage.

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Fraternities, as a whole, have a long and storied history. While the American college fraternity is somewhat more recent, it has been no less impactful. The roots of the modern incarnation of the college fraternity predate the foundation of the United States. Fraternities have produced presidents, supreme court justices, Fortune 500 CEOs, Nobel Prize winners, and Olympic athletes. Fraternities contribute millions to charities annually. Fraternity members are more active on their varied college campuses before graduation and more likely to contribute to their alma maters after graduation (*Fraternity Statistics...*). Despite this myriad of benefits, the modern fraternity system is under siege.

Caitlin Flanagan's article for The Atlantic, *The Dark Power of Fraternities*, was a particularly loud salvo in this assault (Flanagan). However, it was not the first and it will not be the last. The media is pouring forth a deluge of anti-fraternity rhetoric. Some of it is sensationalist; some of it is not. Articles appearing in The Atlantic, MSNBC, CNN, and others claim that the era of the fraternity is over ("Viewpoint: The time has come to end frats [sic]"). The media perception of fraternities has soured.

Unfortunately, not all of this negative press is underserved. Fraternities have evolved since their inception. Originally crafted for literary and academic purposes, Fraternities have come to serve as social nexuses and to provide housing in residential community. These

evolutions have largely been positive. However, this change must not stop now. As the climate of public opinion becomes increasingly hostile to fraternities, it is imperative that they redefine and restate their roles and relevancy. Fraternity evolution must continue if they are to stay current in modern society; the current status quo cannot be the destination.

That said, it is easier to get to where you are going if you know where you have been. The earliest incarnation of what is now the modern college fraternity was the F.H.C. Society, popularly known as the Flat Hat Club (Merrill). The Flat Hat club was founded in 1750 at The College of William and Mary (Merrill). Its founding served as a way for members to express academic interests and consider literature that was not found within the traditional educational mantra of the day (Merrill). In this, the Flat Hat Club was very different from the modern conception of the fraternity. The Flat Hat Club did not have a house, did not through large social events, and did not end up in the news until well after its closure (Merrill). Instead, the Flat Hat Club served the more sedate purpose of uniting young men through academic pursuits. This is a trend seen in the early life of many fraternities ("Homepage, Pbk.com").

The earliest college Greek letter organization was Phi Beta Kappa. Also started at The College of William and Mary, PBK was founded in 1776 (pbk.com). PBK was founded to provide an escape from the rigors of academic life at the time. That is, PBK was founded as a kind of rebellion against the cloying environment present at the colleges of the day. PBK provided an opportunity for its members to have interaction with one another in a non-academic context. In this, PBK was similar to modern college fraternities; PBK was founded for largely social reasons.

Clearly, fraternities and similar organizations served an extremely valuable purpose when they were first founded. However, no one argues that campus life is the same today as it was during the mid eighteenth century. Consequently, the question remains: are fraternities relevant? In order to successfully answer this question, one must first ask what fraternities are relevant to. Merely being relevant to oneself is insufficient cause for existence.

Any organization which claims to be in the business of personal development must first be relevant to its members. As fraternities purport to espouse values-based growth and maturation, it is imperative that fraternities remain relevant to their membership. Additionally, fraternities must be relevant to their host institutions. Though membership is for life, the modern fraternity is inextricably linked to the colleges and universities at which they reside. Unsurprisingly, these two objectives are mutually fulfilling.

As relevance to membership is essential to establishing broader relevance, it should be addressed first. One of the primary functions of the modern fraternity is connect students to deeply to their brothers. Such a connection is invaluable during the increasingly trying college environment. As the job market becomes increasingly competitive, the college experience becomes increasingly rigorous as it becomes both more necessary and more difficult to distinguish oneself from one's peers. As has been shown repeatedly, young adults are more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and other mental disturbances during the formative years of college (Gonzales, Hancock). All of these factors combine produce a college experience that can be likened to a crucible: not only refining and strengthening but also demanding and scorching.

In such an environment, fraternities can and do provide a safe haven. Fraternities which take their brotherhood seriously provide a much needed buttress to support each of their brothers

throughout a difficult formative period. People with close support networks are at lower risk for depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Gonzales et al). Additionally, people who feel connected to the people with whom they reside are more likely to ask for help and more likely to notice if someone begins to withdraw or demonstrates aberrant or concerning behavior (Tandoc, Ferruci, Duffy). People who report having multiple people whom they feel comfortable sharing with also report a higher overall happiness. All of these benefits stem from connectedness; the brotherhood which fraternities provide catalyzes and insists upon such connectedness.

While fraternities are not the only group which can provide such connectedness, they are more effective at it than most other groups. Fraternities are grounded in ritual. From initiation to chapter meetings, many aspects of fraternity life are steeped in ritual which generally reaches back to that fraternities founding. This ritual serves as a common basis of shared experience for the thousands of brothers of any given fraternity. Studies have shown that groups with ritualistic traditions form deeper and more lasting than bonds than those without (“The Importance of Tradition”). Consequently, fraternities are able to more quickly and more effectively galvanize a disparate group of people into a cohesive unit.

This bond shows its depth by the behavior of fraternity men post graduation. On average, fraternity men give much more generously to their alma maters (Jacobs). This stems from a desire to support and perpetuate a connection which has greatly behooved them, and to allow others to find a similar phenomenon. Additionally, fraternity men return to conventions, Founder’s Day celebrations, and a variety of other events long after their undergraduate years have passed. This would not be true if being in a fraternity did not establish a long term, meaningful series of relationships.

The tendency of fraternity men to commit time and money to their organizations long after such things are no longer required of them speaks to the potency of the connections fraternities forge. People commit their resources to things that matter to them. Such an outpouring of resources clearly bespeaks a force of supreme relevance to the people who make it up.

Beyond massive support benefits, fraternities also provide valuable life skills. Running a fraternity requires managing budgets that are often quite large, providing for the upkeep of a house, organizing a group of people from a heterogeneous variety of perspectives and backgrounds. Being in fraternity leadership requires the monetary acumen of a small business owner. Fraternity chapters are generally independently incorporated; this means that house leadership must file taxes, handle utilities, and generally handle the finances of institutions with operating budgets that run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. These skills are invaluable in an age where many struggle to successfully administer a personal budget.

Additionally, running a fraternity requires managing an often unruly, sometimes blatantly contrary, group of constituents. College students, including fraternity men, are not generally well known for stellar decision making. Organizing a group of these individuals in such a way as to not only mitigate interpersonal conflict but also to lead campus' gpa's, complete hundreds of hours of philanthropy, and handle the administration of a complicated organization is a herculean endeavor. The skills acquired in such a task make one a much more valuable asset to employers in the future. Additionally, the ability to effectively lead a team of people is invariably valuable, in areas both personal and professional.

These things, amongst others, are what make fraternities valuable to their members. It is through this valuation of members that fraternities make themselves relevant to their host institutions. By grooming leaders, fraternities improve the crop of students that their host universities accrue each year. Equipping students with leadership skills makes them more efficacious stewards of the resources which their universities bestow upon them.

It is in the best interest of a given college or university to prepare its students, as ably as it may, for whatever challenges may befall them. Fraternities are extremely helpful in this pursuit. Fraternities equip their men with a set of skills which better enables them to function in a complex world. Living and working in a fraternity gives one experience working with a diverse range of people to tackle a broad spectrum of issues.

Furthermore, men who were in fraternities are far more likely to remain engaged with their alma mater than those who did not affiliate (Jacobs). Fraternity men are more likely to attend class reunions and otherwise be available to their institutions. This creates a depth of history and network of advisors which enriches a university and the experience of the students who attend it. Finally, fraternity men are much more likely to give generously to the schools from which they graduated (Jacobs).

Unfortunately, for all of their benefits, fraternities are not without their vices. Allegations of hazing, sexual assault, and binge drinking have plagued fraternities for decades. Troublingly, many of these allegations prove to be true. In order to truly determine the place of fraternities, one must examine the bad with the good.

When examining the perils often associated with fraternities, hazing is often brought up first. While the exact legal definition of hazing varies from state to state, the general definition is

“the imposition of strenuous, often humiliating, tasks as part of a program of initiation” (dictionary .com citation). Hazing originally stems from a desire to protect the exclusivity of membership of an organization or to catalyze bonding within a class. Lofty though these goals may be, hazing is an unjustifiable method of attaining them. Additionally, and unfortunately, hazing is often emblematic of a much baser desire: the desire to possess and exert power over another human being.

Lamentably, fraternities are far from blames when it comes to hazing. In most cases, fraternity hazing grew out of ritualistic new member initiations. Any process evolves over years of practice, and fraternity initiations are no different. Each national or international fraternity organization maintains some common body of ritual; however, this ritual is practiced by dozens, if not hundreds, of undergraduate chapters each at a unique university with a unique environment and unique membership. Some drift in practices is inevitable.

However, this drift cannot serve as an excuse. While the national organizations of many fraternities officially condemn hazing, it has yet to be effectively stymied. There has been at least one fraternity hazing related death every year since 1979 (“Hazing Research and Prevention”). This is an unacceptable trend. Systemic mistreatment of potential members seeking entry presents a massive and glaring red flag. This is rightly so.

Fraternities cannot brand themselves as values based organizations and allow such practices to continue. Furthermore, such practices are relics of a bygone age and are no longer fit for society. We no longer live in an era that condones debasing treatment of initiates. If fraternities wish to retain their relevance today, they must adapt today.

This adaptation requires that each fraternity commit a systematic review of their practices. Fraternities must evaluate why they do what they do and be able to articulate the reasons for each of their practices. If asked, every member, undergraduate or graduate, active or elder, should be able to articulate the relevance of their fraternity as it applies to themselves. Not only should brothers be open to questions about the value of fraternities; they should invite them. The negative press and negative case studies are pluripotent and legion. Fraternity men must be vocal and demonstrative to overcome this; it takes positive actions from many to obviate the deleterious actions of a few.

The evidence shows that fraternities are constructive and relevant to today's society. Fraternities provide a critical support network which can buttress an organization's members through trying times. Fraternities push their men to become more effective leaders. Additionally, fraternities cause their members to develop a collection of life skills earlier and more deeply than would otherwise be the case.

However, not everything fraternities do is constructive. If fraternities are to remain relevant, they must identify which elements of tradition comprise their rituals and their identities and which parts are chaff. The world has changed since the inception of the fraternity system; fraternities must continue to change with it.

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