

Despite Prevention Efforts, Hazing Persists On Campuses



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After the beating death a year ago of Florida A&M University drum major Robert Champion, Champion's parents did what other parents have done when faced with a similar loss.

They grieved. They sued. They started a non-profit foundation as a memorial to their son. Its mission: to "eradicate hazing nationwide."

They have their work cut out for them. Their son's death may have heightened the nation's awareness of the dangers and pervasiveness of college hazing, but it hasn't stopped risky behavior among students:

Police are investigating whether a Fresno (Calif.) State University student who died in August was participating in an alcohol-infused fraternity initiation.

At Chico State University, where a student died in a hazing incident seven years ago and a student was found dead last week after a night of drinking, the school has suspended Greek activities for the rest of the year, noting problems involving allegations of hazing, sexual assaults and drinking.

Ten members of Texas Southern University's renowned Ocean of Soul marching band were suspended this fall for paddling new members.

At the State University of New York-Geneseo, where the 2009 alcohol-related death of a student was attributed to hazing, freshmen on the women's volleyball team were handcuffed, blindfolded and forced to drink hard liquor, court documents allege. Campus officials suspended the women's volleyball team for the season and eight of 11 students charged with hazing and other misdemeanors accepted a plea agreement last week. A judge described the women's actions "premeditated, abusive, degrading and life-threatening."

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Hazing is illegal in 44 states. College administrations don't condone it. And most student organizations have anti-hazing policies on the books. So why is it so persistent?

Anti-hazing activists cite a host of contributing factors, including the secretive nature of hazing, difficult-to-enforce state laws and an acceptance among many students that hazing is part of campus life.

"There's a new crop of students every four years who don't really remember the way things were," says Cornell University student Daniel Robbins. He helped organize a campus student newspaper-sponsored discussion held last week — the same day, as it happened, that the paper reported school officials were investigating allegations that two fraternity pledges who had been hospitalized were involved in hazing.

Hazing — and binge drinking, a related problem — has roiled the Ithaca, N.Y., campus since last year, when sophomore George Desdunes died in a fraternity hazing. Even before then, Cornell officials had prided themselves on their proactive approach to hazing, which included a website where hazing violations are posted publicly and students could report hazing incidents.

"Given our best efforts, we still had a death," says Travis Apgar, Cornell's associate dean of students.

Since then, a task force has developed recommendations, which have not yet been approved, to prevent hazing and enforce anti-hazing policies. For example, it calls for live-in advisers at more fraternity houses, incentives focused on academic excellence and random interviews with newly recruited students.

Other colleges, including Yale and Dartmouth, have similarly vowed to toughen up their efforts, typically in response to a recent tragedy or high-profile incident. At Binghamton University in New York, officials last spring took the unusual step of shutting down fraternity and sorority recruitment after receiving what they called "an alarmingly high number of serious hazing complaints." E-mails obtained by the Binghamton Press & Sun-Bulletin describe reports in which students were forced to vomit on each other, made to do push ups on broken glass or engage in dangerous drinking games.

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While hazing is typically associated with fraternity pledging, Champion's death underscored a growing body of evidence showing that hazing hardly ends with the Greek system. Of more than 11,000 college students nationwide surveyed in a landmark 2008 study, 55% of those students involved in clubs, teams or other organizations had experienced hazing as part of an initiation, and 47% said they had been hazed in high school.

Researchers are now linking hazing to high school bullying, says University of Maine professor Elizabeth Allan, co-author of the 2008 study and co-founder of the National Collaborative for Hazing Research and Prevention.

Allan, who served on a Florida A&M University (FAMU) anti-hazing task force, is cautiously hopeful that students and campus officials are no longer dismissing hazing as mostly silly pranks that sometimes go too far.

"It used to be that people would bring in a speaker or have a workshop on hazing and then they'd move on to the next issue," Allan says. "There is a greater commitment than ever before and we just hope that it can be sustained."

FAMU interim President Larry Robinson agrees, adding that it will take time to change the culture. "We're preparing to fight the long battle," he says.

Changes this fall include a requirement that all students take an anti-hazing pledge, and a new website where students can report suspicious behavior. At least four student groups, including two dance groups, a fraternity for business majors and a sorority for health-care majors, have been investigated based on tips — a sign to Robinson that awareness is up.

All were eventually cleared. Some of the reported activities, such as being forced to stand in place for long periods of time, did not meet state statutory requirements for criminal behavior, police statements show. In one case, the police were unable to identify a suspect or victim.

Hank Nuwer, a professor at Franklin College in Indiana who has written several books on the topic, worries that crackdowns could drive criminal behavior underground. He wants colleges to be more forthcoming, but says many, wary of lawsuits, are reluctant to draw attention to problems on their campuses.

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"If the parents do not press it, the school will be happy to have it go away," says Nuwer, who keeps a running tab of hazing deaths based on news accounts.

By his count, at least one student has died every year in a hazing-related incident since 1970, and about 80% of them involve alcohol.

Nobody knows exactly how prevalent hazing on campuses because nobody is required to keep track. A small but growing number of campuses are posting details but that's not enough, Nuwer and others say.

You can't start (fixing the problem) unless you start getting open disclosure about the problem around the country," says Washington lawyer Douglas Fierberg, who has represented numerous parents of children who died as a result of a hazing. "Everyone is left talking about an elusive problem without having access to the factual information."

Contributing: Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, Binghamton Press & Sun-Bulletin and the Associated Press

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/19/hazing-college-campus-robert-champion/1714431/>