

Doctor Gentry's Blog

Doctor Gentry's Blog covers a variety of topics related to student affairs and the fraternity/sorority industry, including hazing prevention, brother/sisterhood, Title IX, student development and more. Follow Dr. Gentry McCreary on twitter @doctorgentry

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Who is Drawing the Line in Your Chapter?

I was recently on a campus working with a chapter that had been in hot water for hazing. I had a great conversation with the chapter executive board about some of the traditions in the chapter that were contributing factors to the hazing culture.

I asked them to explain to me how they communicated their expectations about hazing to the chapter. In other words, where did the chapter “draw the line in the sand” when it came to what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, and how was that communicated to members?

Here is the response I got from the chapter president:

“Every semester, I tell the pledges to come talk to me if anyone asks them to do anything that goes too far or makes them feel uncomfortable.”

Naturally, I asked him how many of the 44 pledges they had the previous semester came to him with grievances against members of the chapter. I knew the answer before he gave it to me.

Zero.

I really do think the president of this chapter was genuine in his desire to have the pledges come to him with any problems. As chapter president, he knew it was ultimately his responsibility to make sure that every new member was having a safe and positive experience, and he wanted the new members to keep him informed of any problems.

Unfortunately, there was a major flaw in his plan. Everything we know about the power differential inherent in many fraternity new member processes, as well as the pressure of new members to conform to the norms of the group and to be obedient to authority, tells us that the likelihood of a new member coming forward with a grievance is slim to none.

When I speak to students about hazing and the myth of the “voluntary participation” of new members, I always talk about three psychological studies that I think perfectly frame why new members are not in the best position to be the whistle-blowers on hazing in the chapter. The [Stanford Prison Experiment](#) highlights the immediate subjugation of the prisoners to their captors in a simulated prison, with some great parallels that can be drawn related to the fraternity new member process. The [Milgram Experiments](#) highlight the willingness of individuals to obey orders from those they perceive to be in positions of authority, even when those orders seem to be dangerous. The [Asch Conformity Experiments](#) demonstrate the willingness of individuals to conform to the norms of a group. These three landmark studies, when taken collectively, paint a very clear picture - new members are not in the best position to decide what is acceptable and what isn't. They should not be the ones drawing the line in the sand.

All a pledge or new member wants to do is keep a low profile, go with the flow, and make it through until the end without raising too much of a fuss or drawing any unwanted attention to him/herself. The LAST thing they want to do is speak up, be perceived as a complainer, a whiner, or (pardon the expression) a pussy. No matter how bad the hazing gets, their primary objective is to just make it through. Yet so many well-intentioned chapter leaders put the pressure of blowing the whistle on inappropriate hazing squarely on the shoulders of the new members without ever telling them what is acceptable and what is not. It is a recipe for disaster.

Instead of putting the responsibility of drawing the line of acceptable behavior on the new members, that responsibility needs to be placed on the active chapter. Chapter leadership needs to do four things in order to make this happen effectively:

1. Set very clear standards for the chapter. Make sure everyone is on the same page and understands clearly and precisely where the line is drawn. Leave no room for confusion or ambiguity. Chapter members have to be on notice and have a clear understanding of what is acceptable and what isn't.

2. Make sure members know the consequences of crossing the line. Not only do chapter members need to know where the line is drawn, they need to have a clear understanding of what will happen if they cross that line. Accountability is incredibly important - without it, the polices of the chapter have zero credibility. Chapter members have to see individuals being held accountable for their actions in order for your line of acceptable behavior to have any credibility.

3. Have a clear policy on retaliation. Chapter members need to know that, in the rare event that a new member does come forward to report inappropriate behavior, retaliation against that new member will not be tolerated. Again, the policy must be clear, and the consequences must be real.

4. Always work to push that line back to less severe forms of hazing. We know that hazing tends to get worse over time. If you aren't always actively pushing the line of acceptable behavior back towards less severe forms of hazing, then the hazing will naturally get worse every year. As I have argued in a [previous post](#), today's "Level 7" hazing is tomorrow's "Level 9" hazing.

Stop putting the pressure of calling out inappropriate hazing on your new members. They are ill-equipped to be whistle blowers. Start setting clear expectations for your active members, and begin addressing the hazing culture in your chapter. It's time to draw a line in the sand.

About Me



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Consultant, speaker, researcher and author Dr. Gentry McCreary is the CEO and managing partner of Dyad Strategies, LLC, an assessment and applied research firm specializing in working with fraternity and sorority communities. Gentry is also an affiliated consultant with the NCHERM Group LLC, a higher education risk management firm, where we works with college campuses on hazing prevention, investigation and adjudication. Gentry worked for over 10 years in higher education, most recently serving as the Associate Dean of Students/Deputy Title IX Coordinator at the University of West Florida. Previously, he served as the Director of Greek Affairs at the University of Alabama, during a time in which that fraternity/sorority community became the largest in the United States. He speaks and writes on topics related to higher education, hazing, fraternities and sororities and student development. In his spare time, he is an avid outdoorsman who enjoys golf, canoeing, backpacking and upland bird hunting with his German Shorthaired Pointer, Ellie.