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MMC6469 - Research Prospectus

Hazing: A Wicked Problem In Greek Life

Component One

System Background

A complex system, as defined by the social scientist Herbert Simons, is “A system that can be analyzed into many components having relatively many relations among them, so that the behavior of each component depends on the behavior of others.” The system that will be discussed today is Greek life.

Before diving into the current details of our system, it is important to understand its origin. In the late 1700s, student fraternities began to form, but separate fraternity and sorority councils did not begin to form until about 100 years later (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Over the years, different Greek life councils began to form. Two of them are, the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), founded in 1902, and the North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC), founded in 1910 (Johansen & Slantcheva-Durst, 2018). These councils were welcomed, as they play an important role in helping to regulate the Greek life institutions on higher education campuses (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Now, over a century later, it is estimated that there are over 750,000 active fraternity and sorority members in colleges across the United States and more than nine million alumni (Barshay, 2021).

There are many components that make up the Greek life system. As just previously discussed, there are national councils. Those national councils then communicate with the advisors and executive boards of the individual chapters on each campus. From here, information is relayed to active members, as well as alumni. Although each chapter may have its own specific way of spreading information and having a channel of communication, this is a basic overview of the flow of communication.

The Wicked Problem

There is an ongoing debate across the country about the current state of Greek life and whether it is more beneficial or harmful to college campuses and students. One major wicked problem that is a part of the Greek life system is hazing. A wicked problem, as discussed throughout this course, is a difficult and complex issue that has not yet been resolved. Hazing is something that is still ongoing today, and the serious consequences are not getting any better. Hazing, as defined by the *StopHazing Research Lab*, “is any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them, regardless of a person’s willingness to participate.” There are many forms of hazing that may occur within sorority or fraternity organizations. However, according to a study from the *StopHazing Research Lab* in 2008, drinking and drug-related activities are the most common forms of hazing. More recently, in 2019, Eastern Kentucky University conducted a study on hazing, where the results showed that 73% of students that join sororities or fraternities have experienced hazing, and over 30% of those hazing experiences include drinking or drugs.

Although hazing is still a prevalent problem, there have been measures taken to try and put a stop to it. In 2007, Tracy Maxwell started HazingPrevention.Org (HPO). Her vision was to

move the common conversation from how to punish one for hazing to how to prevent it in the first place. With this organization came educational resources, hazing prevention programs at schools, and even a whole hazing prevention week in order to spread awareness. Sorority and fraternity chapters across the country show their support for hazing prevention week in different ways including posting informational graphics and hanging banners.

Pennsylvania State University has announced a set of reforms that will aim to prevent hazing in Greek life. This will include a zero-tolerance policy for hazing including drugs and alcohol (Reilly, 2017). Other schools across the country have also adopted these reforms and zero-tolerance policies.

As I have just discussed, awareness has been raised and policies have been created at universities. However, even with these attempted solutions, hazing is still a wicked problem in Greek life.

Component Two

Andrew Coffey, Florida State University

In November of 2017, Andrew Coffey was attending an off-campus fraternity party as a pledge at Florida State University when the brothers of the fraternity Pi Kappa Phi prompted him to finish an entire bottle of bourbon that was taped to his hand. That night, Andrew Coffey tragically passed away due to alcohol poisoning (Hatter, 2019). This was an extremely eye-opening experience for students, faculty, parents, and lawmakers.

Following this tragic incident, the president of Florida State University at the time, President John Thrasher, made the decision to suspend all Greek life at FSU until further notice.

This meant that there could be no new member events, council and chapter meetings, tailgates, and other social events at the university (Levenson and Hassan, 2017). During the time of suspension, President John Thrasher and the Greek life councils began to work on ways to induce a Greek life culture change. They had a goal of shifting the common drinking, drugs, and partying culture, to one of philanthropy, networking connections, responsibility, and personal growth.

One thing that was done to help promote this culture shift was the strengthening of the Chad Meredith Act with a bill that was passed called Andrew's Law. This bill was an important step in the right direction, creating a stronger liability for hazing, and granting immunity to those who call 911 in a hazing emergency (Kervern, 2019).

In addition to taking action from a legal standpoint, President John Thrasher and the Greek life councils decided to implement a seminar and survey that every on-campus fraternity and sorority has to complete each semester. This seminar and survey focus on anti-hazing practices and the detriments that come out of choosing to haze members. This seminar and survey are still something that must be completed each semester at the present time.

Although these newly implemented practices are not causing harm, they are not creating a solution to the wicked problem of hazing. Two years after the implementation of these practices, in 2019, Florida State University's Delta Tau Delta was suspended for extreme hazing tactics including physical harm. Actually, since the passing of Andrew Coffey, more than five fraternities at Florida State University have been suspended or dismissed because of hazing-related incidents including Pi Kappa Phi, Phi Sigma Kappa, Phi Delta Theta, Chi Phi, and Alpha Epsilon Pi (Etters, 2019).

Where Did They Go Wrong?

As previously discussed, even with the changes made to Greek life at Florida State University, hazing is still a wicked problem that needs to be resolved. Why were the new innovations introduced not a success? Diving into the seminar innovation, I can use the research I have found to propose a reason for its low success rate. The seminars are given to the fraternities and sororities in a large group setting, typically at a weekly chapter meeting that all of the members attend. Studies over time have shown that being exposed to learning material in large groups, like a lecture hall, is ineffective in getting the listeners to retain and comprehend the information being shared. This is mainly due to a lack of engagement (Hamilton, 2012). We can relate this finding to the seminars being shared with fraternities and sororities. When members are exposed to this content in a large setting, there is less pressure for them to actively pay attention, participate, and therefore comprehend the important information being presented to them.

If the seminars were required to be given in smaller, more intimate groups, there is a large possibility that more engagement and comprehension would occur. *The Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* (Johnson et. al., 2014) helps us to understand that sharing information in smaller groups helps to draw out people who would probably not be paying attention in a large group setting, helping to promote participation and information retention. Therefore, if the seminars were required to be given in small groups, there is a possibility that they would be more effective in educating members about the detriments of hazing, and even possibly reducing the number of harmful hazing cases on campus.

Component Three

Changing the Game

Taking a look back at what previous innovations have been attempted in order to stop the wicked problem of hazing, I believe that the innovations were headed in the right direction. However, after doing research, I feel that I could propose an innovation that could be more successful at stopping harmful hazing. I think a major aspect that needs to be looked at is the point of entry. I agree with President John Thrasher when he noted that he wanted to change the overall culture of Greek life, I just don't think he started in the right place.

Throughout this course, we have learned about something called a change agent, which in our situation, is the one who is going to help encourage the adoption of this Greek life culture change (Rogers, 2003). Thrasher attempted to start with the Greek councils and created a seminar that would then have to be shared with the chapter as a whole. Instead of spreading this information directly with the chapter all at once, I think that starting with the executive board in a small group would be more effective. As I have previously discussed, the research that I have found from *The Journal on Excellence in College Teaching (Johnson et. al., 2014)* helps us to understand the importance of teaching in small groups and how it makes a large difference when it comes to comprehension and adoption of the information presented. I propose that an innovation could be created where a hazing prevention framework is produced. In this framework, the Greek councils could work one-on-one with each fraternity and sorority executive board to build anti-hazing practices and shift focus on how to build bonds and respect in a more positive and less harmful way. The executive boards, especially the New Member Educators (typically the position in charge of new uninitiated members) could utilize the

practices discussed and encourage other members to do so, beginning to spread a new culture of Greek life with time.

In this course, I have learned about the Innovation-Decision Process. This describes the overall process of one finding an innovation, forming an attitude about it, adopting or rejecting it, and implementing it (Rogers, 2003). After reading about this process, I can apply it to the innovation that I have just presented. First, chapter members must gain knowledge of the new hazing prevention framework. This could be done by the executive board announcing it to the chapter, posting it on chapter social media platforms, and more ways that may be specific to that individual chapter. Next, the executive members need to induce a state of persuasion. This could be done by offering an incentive for following the framework, or a punishment for not following it. Then, chapter members must decide if they are going to adopt the new hazing prevention framework. If adopted, the chapter members can implement the innovation by promoting alternate forms of bonding for new members, brainstorming harmless ways of creating a form of respect for each other, and spreading their new culture to other members. Lastly, the more members that choose to adopt the hazing prevention framework, the more confirmation that can give members to keep utilizing it and spreading its purpose.

When it comes to introducing innovations, there is always a possibility for barriers. I believe that one barrier is time. Changing the culture of Greek life is not something that will be adopted and occur overnight. This is something that could take months, even years. With it being something that could take such a long time to be adopted by everyone, there is a chance that the diffusion slows down to the point where it is no longer being spread and adoption stops. In this case, those who never adopt the hazing prevention framework are considered the laggards.

However, with the innovation continuing to be pushed by those who have adopted it, the barrier of time can potentially be overcome.

Conclusions

Overall, hazing is a wicked problem that has caused, injuries, deaths, and more. It is a problem that has been prevalent in Greek life culture in the past and the present. Although innovations have been introduced in the past and have been unsuccessful, the research that I have conducted leads me to believe that using small groups as a point of entry for a hazing prevention framework is the key to ending this wicked problem.

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