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Barber: Creating Meaningful Change for Fraternity and Sorority Communities

CREATING MEANINGFUL CHANGE FOR FRATERNITY AND SORORITY COMMUNITIES

JAMES P. BARBER, EDITOR

As we come to the close of the academic year, it is a natural time for reflection. The summer generally brings a slower pace, with fewer events (and crises) on campus. There is finally a chance for college educators (both in academic affairs and student affairs) to breathe, think about the past year, and plan for the future.

I am thinking about two major developments that happened last year in the fraternity/sorority movement, and their implications for the future of fraternity/sorority advising and research. The first is the situation at Swarthmore College. In April 2019, a four-day student protest resulted in the two fraternities at Swarthmore disbanding and surrendering their campus-owned lodges. Swarthmore is a highly selective, private liberal arts college outside of Philadelphia.

Following the release of racist, homophobic, and misogynistic documents and videos from a local fraternity named Phi Psi, including jokes about sexual assault, a student group called the Coalition to End Fraternity Violence staged a sit-in at the Psi Phi house on campus. Undergraduate students took over the space and committed to stay until the college disbanded the two fraternities on campus and reallocated their campus houses to serve minoritized student groups.

Four days later, Phi Psi voluntarily disbanded, as did Delta Upsilon. This effectively ended fraternity/sorority experience at Swarthmore. A May 10th message from the college president stated firmly that “fraternities and sororities will no longer exist at the College.”¹ Swarthmore’s only sorority chapter, Kappa Alpha Theta, will be allowed to continue with its existing members through 2022 when the youngest members graduate, but they are not permitted to recruit any new members moving forward.

It’s significant that undergraduate students made this change happen. Students were successful in ending fraternity/sorority life at Swarthmore. The college administration did not act against the fraternities when the documents were initially released, instead opting to wait for a task force report that was expected later in the week. But students didn’t wait. After years of allegations of discrimination, hazing, and assault, and a perceived lack of discipline by the college, students took matters into their own hands and began protesting at Phi Psi. It was the protesters who held their peers accountable. This was grassroots activism by undergraduates – not a top-down mandate from administrators. It is a clear message that if advisors, administrators, and faculty do not act to assure that health and safety are the utmost priority, our students will.

The case at Swarthmore is a reminder of the power that students have through activism. Students, individually and collectively, have a great ability to create change. It’s often underestimated by students and educators alike, but it’s unmistakable.

Although this case demonstrated the ways that students can effect change, educators should not be sidelined in these important situations. College educators in faculty, student affairs, administrative, and coaching roles have a responsibility to address student behavior that is violent, dangerous, and discriminatory.

The second major development in fraternity/sorority life I have been reflecting on is the establishment of the Timothy J. Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research and Reform. This research center, housed at Penn State University, is the next evolution of the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, founded in 1979 at Indiana University (and later renamed the Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research). The center is named in memory of Timothy Piazza, a sophomore

¹<https://www.swarthmore.edu/presidents-office/student-social-events-and-community-standards-update>

who died following a hazing incident at the Penn State Beta Theta Pi chapter in 2017.

The Piazza Center is expected to have an \$8M endowment to fund its mission of creating positive change in fraternity/sorority communities. We have never before seen this level of support and resources for fraternity/sorority research. The Piazza Center will study the practices that influence individual student behavior and fraternity/sorority chapter culture and figure out how higher education institutions can replicate that work broadly across campuses. The resources afforded to the Piazza Center are truly transformational to the field of fraternity/sorority research, and we at *Oracle* support it's work enthusiastically.

The student protesters at Swarthmore and the Piazza Center have very similar goals. They want to create meaningful change that will influence student behavior and ultimately create safer campus environments. The three articles in this edition of *Oracle* also speak to this notion of influencing and improving student behavior. Gordon W. Maples, Emily Perrin Britt, John M. Braxton, and Amy S. Hirschy offer an approach to decrease behaviors such as homophobia, racism, sexual assault, drug use, and alcohol use within fraternity/sorority communities. Gabriel Sema, Dawn Wiese, and Stephen Simo examine how fraternity men and sorority women may respond to educational programming based on gendered social and behavioral differences. Lastly, Jill Russett and Kaitlyn Oates provide a content analysis of the strategies fraternity/sorority headquarters use in alcohol education, and how many of these programs are based on evidence.

Enjoy this edition of *Oracle*, and have a restful and productive summer!