

## The Challenge of Abusive Affiliation

By: Brett A. Sokolow, JD

*This issue is dedicated to hazing. Many of you are aware that I do not believe that colleges and universities have the authority to address statutory crimes. Therefore I refer to hazing, which is a misdemeanor or felony in most states, as abusive affiliation when referring specifically to violations of campus policy, but still use the term hazing when speaking generally of a set of behaviors.*

For a few years, it seemed that abusive affiliation was being tamed on many campuses. If we saw it, it seemed like a kinder-gentler version—hazing light. Campuses cracked down, and hazing went underground. It's back, and now all we have to show for it are policies so constitutionally overbroad that F.I.R.E. has easy pickings. Fraternity and sorority nationals clamped down too, and fought back, encouraging us to view abusive affiliation more broadly, as something that impacted many campus organizations, including bands, secret societies, and ROTC groups, in addition to fraternities and sororities.

We recognize that abusive affiliation is not monolithic, even amongst fraternities and sororities. It was traditionally less frequent and severe in the women's groups, but some observers see a clear pattern toward greater abuse, with Latina sororities attracting much notoriety. This trend is paralleled by increases generally in violence and abuse by and between female students. Traditionally white NIC fraternities have made alcohol the hallmark of their abusive affiliation practices, though that perception comes more from the fact that alcohol is involved when they get caught, rather than from the fact that all abusive affiliation involves alcohol. Some pledging and initiation rituals strictly forbid it. African-American fraternities generally eschew alcohol use, and so it does not typify their abusive affiliation practices, which can tend toward more overt violence. Local fraternities and sororities are a special case, as they have no oversight from and risk management coordination with national organizations. Their abuse develops without the same historical intra-organizational references and traditions. For example, suppose Alpha Alpha Alpha is a national fraternity. If the chapters practice abusive affiliation, its abuses may bear some resemblance from chapter to chapter. This is unlikely with a local. All practices develop internally, though there may be intra-institutional similarities, if a large local system at the same college inbreeds abusive practices. Locals are less likely to have chapter risk managers. Most fraternity chapters today cannot afford sufficient insurance for the harm they may cause. My concern with locals is that they are even more underinsured, with many holding no insurance at all. They can't afford to exist. It's just that their members haven't realized it yet.

When fraternities engage my services, I learn a lot about abusive affiliation. Being able to cover our conversations by attorney-client privilege empowers fraternity men to talk about practices and rituals that normally are kept secret. Some of the descriptions of graveyard and flotation rituals to which I have been privy are quite common in form, if

not execution, with initiation rites of some secret societies. Why would an organization that practices abusive affiliation tell an attorney what they are up to? The reason is that many chapters don't tolerate or condone abusive affiliation, but aren't sure whether their practices and rituals are abusive. One of the things I help them to do is to confidentially compare their practices to state law and college policy, and determine areas of possible violation. Then, we work together to find creative ways to reshape the events or practices so that they are no longer abusive. One of my techniques is to help them self-measure the risk of their own practices. Those we can reshape, we do. Some, we mutually agree cannot continue, in any form. I ask them to commit to eradicating them, both in writing and orally.

I always help them to create a replacement for the abandoned practice. I insist on it. This is profoundly important for creating buy-in to eradicate the practice, and for helping to ensure it does not resurface. You cannot take something away without empowering the genesis of an alternative. Otherwise, the power only flows one way, and the organization feels that it has been deprived of something important and valuable. There is always some reason for the practice or tradition, and something the members believe they gain from it. We strategize an alternative ritual, initiation, tradition, pledge practice, etc. that has meaning for them, without the abusive qualities of the replaced practice. One of things we work on in these sessions, and all of us who want to address abusive affiliation must work on, is that chapters and organizations have convinced themselves that if the initiates self-submit to the abuse, it is not hazing. They have deluded themselves into the belief that consent makes abusive affiliation okay. We talk about why they believe this, and it never takes long to break this conceit down. Essential to the conversation is making sure they have an operative understanding of what coercion is, how it works, and how it makes something that is seemingly consensual into something that is not consensual at all.

A key question is, who is doing this on a regular concerted basis with chapters and organizations on college campuses? Maybe some chapter advisors. Greek advisors? This is what is needed, and I get to do it only rarely, when an organization (and not an institution) is my host. Chapter consultants rarely take this effort on, and they are somewhat compromised on objectivity by being members themselves. On the same note, one of the weaknesses of the Greek advisor system is that Greek advisors are often Greek. While this is an aid in their role as facilitators, I believe strongly that is compromising for many advisors in their function as authorities and rule-enforcers. Worse is a somewhat common practice of chapters honorarily inducting their advisor as a member. This creates too much potential for conflicts-of-interest between the advisor's role as a member of the organization and as an institutional employee. You're not their buddy, and if you fail to exercise reasonable controls, you're going to get sued. Negligent supervision is a cause of action that every Greek and organizational advisor needs to be aware of, at a state institution.

### Can We Eradicate Abusive Affiliation?

I do a one-hour program for students on hazing. Dave Westol from Theta Chi does a great program called “Hazing on Trial,” There are videos, in house programs, efforts by chapter risk managers, etc. All of these efforts raise awareness. Whether they prevent anything is anyone’s guess. If pluralistic ignorance is a cause of hazing, awareness programs can ameliorate some of that ignorance, as long as the 25% of your organization who weren’t required to attend the program weren’t the primary abusers. Explaining insurance and liability for negligent and intentional torts is something that is sobering to every organizational member. But, are we really getting at the heart of hazing? Not yet.

Why do abusive affiliation practices occur? You must get through the excuses (and I do an exercise on that, too), such as “We have always done it that way,” or “They want us to do it,” or “It’s how we make sure they really are one of us.” or “It was done to me, so they have to have it done to them,” or “It is our tradition,” or “Our founders did it,” etc. Based on hundreds of discussions with those who haze, the answer is clear to me. People who haze and those who subject themselves to hazing are seeking a bonding ritual, and meaningful connections within a shared membership environment. Is that perverse? We paddled our brother until he needed hospitalization because we wanted to create respect and trust. It’s true. That’s always why they do it. They lack the vocabulary for meaningful connection and bonding. In that vacuum, it is easy for abuse to fill the void. Abuse is an unenlightened exercise of power. If I do not know how to earn respect, I do know I can command it through fear, power and intimidation. We will share the bond of each having run this gauntlet together.

I believe that hazing exists because of a failure to establish meaningful emotional engagement among organizational members.

### Appreciative Inquiry

I believe that Appreciative Inquiry is one of the most promising approaches to resolving the root causes of abusive affiliation. David Cooperrider, a professor at Case Western Reserve University pioneered AI twenty years ago, as a system-level organization-building tool. It has been widely embraced in the corporate and non-profit worlds. It is now being tentatively tested with students on college campuses. The principles of AI derive from the belief that higher-order organizational function is not based on problem-solving (focusing on weakness), but on building from strengths to create more strengths. Appreciative Inquiry-based facilitation is effective team-building, because it teaches team members to respect and value the other members of the team. At its best, AI enables participants to emotionally engage with each other, identify with each other, and work toward shared goals. While there are many who are skilled AI facilitators and have been for a long time, I am learning rapidly, and working with small groups on campuses to test the potential to address hazing. I first used it to help a small campus engage in a dialogue to identify the shared values that would underlie a new code of conduct we were creating. The theory was that the buy-in created by this generative approach would help to assure compliance with the policies that emerged.

What does an AI facilitation include? It's fairly simple, though this description is really just meant to give those unfamiliar with AI a taste, rather than to teach how to do it. The idea is to work in small groups, starting with pairs, and expanding gradually. The team-building can be structured around a number of exercises. What is your greatest accomplishment? Share the experience about which you are most proud? What is the most difficult obstacle you have overcome, and how did you do it? What leader or prominent figure do you most admire, and why? What relative are you closest to, and what do you value most about your relationship with them? You can share a set of wisdom statements, or pictures of artistic work, or passages from literature, and ask each person to select the one that most resonates with them, and to explain why. With Greeks, it is possible sometimes to do this with multiple founders of the organization, about whom members frequently know a good bit, and who were often men of principle and character worthy of admiration. Which founder do you connect with best, and why? The job of the person in each pair not answering is to take notes or otherwise absorb enough information that they can then take five minutes to share the detailed information they have learned about their partner with other members of the group. Then, they switch. Later, pairs rotate. In the process, each person becomes expert about (and appreciator of) those with whom they interact, discovering things about each other they would be unlikely to learn through years of shared membership in their campus organizations. And, by sharing, they teach their expertise about each other to other members of the group.

If you can paddle your brother, it is because you cannot see his humanity. You objectify him or her as an outsider to the group who wants in. Once you have participated in AI facilitations, it becomes very difficult for you not to see the humanity in every member of your organization. Will this make it impossible for you to paddle them? Maybe not, but it will make it much harder. Can you strike someone, pour lye on them, make them drink foul concoctions, or abandon them in the woods when you know their hopes, their dreams, their finest accomplishments, their favorite relatives, those they most admire? AI can create a level of bonding and emotional connection that men, in particular, and more and more women, have difficulty establishing with peers. AI, when done with this focus, can give participants an appreciation for the humanity in each of the other participants, and creates the emotional basis for trust, respect and transpersonal connectedness. If you are looking for meaning and you have experienced AI, hazing will become a useless and crude tool for organization-building. I am even more excited for the possibilities once members of these organizations learn to facilitate AI for themselves.

Not only do I believe that AI can help us to combat hazing, I believe it can help to build each campus organization into the positive, contributing asset to our communities that they and we want them to be. It will encourage more effective role-modeling, shared leadership based on talents and interests (we all know that leaders of our campus student organizations are rarely elected for their wisdom), less enabling behavior, and more desire to intervene rather than to be a bystander to behavior that contravenes the values of the organization and its members. To learn more about AI, visit the Appreciate Inquiry Commons, at <http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu>

*All information offered is the opinion of the author, and is not given as legal advice. Reliance on this information is at the sole risk of the reader.*

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