

**TO RUSH OR NOT TO RUSH?**  
**AN EXAMINATION OF AMERICA'S**  
**MOST CONTROVERSIAL**  
**COLLEGIATE SYSTEM**

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## STILL LIFE OF A GREEK LIFE

The collegiate Greek system is nearly as old as America itself. In 1825, just under 50 years after the American Revolution, Union College found itself home to the first social fraternity. With the implementation of chapter houses in the 1920s, Greek organizations' presence on campuses increased by 142%. As the system expanded, hazing, binge drinking, and sexual assault became more prominent on college campuses across the United States. The harsh forms of hazing that have populated recent headlines were originally introduced to schools in the late 1960s by military members returning from the Civil War. The most recent to fall victim to fraternity hazing was sophomore Timothy Piazza. In February of 2017, Piazza was found dead in the basement of Beta Theta Pi's chapter house at the University of Pennsylvania after participating in dangerous pledge rituals. He was lying on a couch where fellow members had abandoned him the previous night. Piazza sustained many wounds, including multiple traumatic brain injuries, class IV hemorrhage shock, and a punctured spleen caused by falling down at least one flight of stairs. Two days afterwards, a fraternity member deleted all surveillance footage depicting the events that had transpired. Felony charges were lifted from 18 members, leaving them with minor misdemeanors.

In this installation, flowers are used to illustrate the positive and beneficial aspects of the Greek system. Yellow represents friendship, joy, and caring, while pink and orange represent gratitude and enthusiasm, respectively, and the combination of red and white roses symbolizes unity. The car and the objects on and around it represent the negative features of Greek life, such as binge drinking, hazing, and sexual assault. The hand atop the pillar draws inspiration from the ancient Greek style of marble busts.

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## **To Rush or not to Rush? The Ups and Downs of America's most Controversial Collegiate System**

*Writer's Note: As someone who, within the next few years, could potentially find herself on a college campus with a large emphasis on Greek life, the issues and controversies surrounding the entire system are more relevant to me than ever before. Regardless of my own decision of whether or not to associate myself with one of these organizations, fraternities and sororities have a sizable presence, and thus a sizable impact, on many college campuses. Aside from wanting to continue on my path to becoming an informed citizen, the many problems stemming from this institution have the potential to directly affect my college experience and relationship to my school community. Additionally, the Greek system can present many issues of sexism, elitism, misogyny, and more, of which the majority of the population outside of the college community are not commonly properly informed.*

## ***I: Greek, The Classics, & Literary Lounges***

Before the days of Frat Row and Sisterhood, beer pong and socials, university campuses across the United States found themselves populated by more academic, yet strikingly similarly, student groups known as literary societies. With private libraries and lavishly furnished lounges, these elite gatherings aimed to fill the intellectual gaps left in a school's curriculum. In 1825, the first fraternity — Kappa Alpha — was designed to provide similar stimulation for students at Union College. This new brotherhood focused on the social aspect of college life, rather than the academic, and provided the first form of student self-government known to the United States higher education system (Grandillo 1).

Twenty-six years later, in 1851, Wesleyan College found itself home to the nation's first "women's fraternity," known as the Adelphean Society (Grandillo 3). Now called Alpha Delta Pi, the organization has provided sisterhood to many notable alumnae, including actors Kathy Bates and Michelle Pfeiffer, and Former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes ("Accomplished Members").

Interestingly enough, although everything in the system's name points to Greece, there are little to no significant cultural overlaps between "Greek life" and the lives of actual Greeks. Greek societies' ties to ancient Greece occur primarily through classical texts and their prominence in higher education at the time, rather than any realistic societal links between the two. The only connection between the structure of ancient Greek society and fraternity lifestyle lies in what early members believed to be "the trappings of an idealized ancient Greece" (Grandillo 4), combined with those of freemasonry. Because the members of these groups had spent years studying languages such as Greek and Latin, Greek originated the names of these elite societies — perhaps to further elevate members in comparison to the general population.

## ***II: The Rise of a Movement***

The popularity of today's Greek life varies from school to school. An average of about 15% of freshmen at the University of Washington join a sorority or fraternity ("Housing Information"). Overall, approximately 11.5% of all 30,475 undergraduates are affiliated with a Greek organization ("Housing Information"). Meanwhile, at the University of Southern California, 24% of 18,123 undergraduates are affiliated with a Greek organization (Office for Fraternity & Sorority Leadership Development).

However, before Greek letter societies developed the presence they now hold on many campuses, they were formed as secret societies not affiliated with any portion of the college or university. However, with their rise in popularity, Greek organizations abandoned their secrecy and became more widespread.

Although the tradition of members living in chapter houses began in the 1890s, it did not become popular until the 1920s. Between 1920 and 1929, the number of chapter houses had more than doubled, increasing from 774 to 1,874, and by 1930, approximately half of the student body at state schools were involved in Greek life (Grandillo 6). This rapid increase "illustrates the power of this social movement on most colleges and universities (Grandillo 6). At first, colleges were not thrilled by the presence of the Greek system. However, they grew to accept it and learned to work with the chapters affiliated with their school.

## ***III: What's in a Name? and Under the Umbrella***

The names of Greek letter societies are made up of one or two Greek letters, such as Kappa Kappa Gamma (ΚΚΓ) or Sigma Chi (ΣΧ). These letters represent a motto, known only to

members, that embodies the individual values, goals, and purpose of that specific fraternity or sorority (Grandillo 9). In addition to the entire organization's name, each chapter is assigned its own Greek letter — or two. For example, the University of Southern California's chapter of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority is the Delta Tau chapter, while the University of Washington's chapter of Kappa Kappa Gamma is the Beta Pi chapter.

All officially registered fraternities and sororities fall under two “umbrella” organizations. The North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) represents 66 fraternities with 6,100 chapters nationwide (*North-American Interfraternity Conference*). The National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) represents 26 sororities with 3,488 chapters nationwide (*National Panhellenic Conference*).

#### ***IV: Right Hand on the Bible, Left Hand on the Keg***

With the rapid increase in sorority and fraternity houses came the pressure on individual chapters to fill their respective houses. This need is what drove the process now known to college students as “rushing,” a recruitment process during which sororities and fraternities host a large gathering to discern who, of the attendees, would make a suitable member. It also provides perspectives members with a chance to experience and educate themselves about the various organizations on campus. Rushing occurs at the beginning of the fall and spring semesters, typically lasting a few weeks, during which various Greek organizations host a variety of events, from formals to barbeques to theme parties. Although most schools do provide an application form, interviews are not typically included. Instead, organizations become familiar with potential members, and vice versa, through conversations that occur during events. At the end of this period, the leaders of each chapter extend an invitation — known as a “bid” — to those they believe would be a good fit with their fraternity or sorority. Upon accepting the bid, new members begin the pledging process.

After rushing, the selected prospective members — “pledges” — are initiated into their fraternity or sorority. Traditionally, initiations are special ceremonies that are unique to each Greek organization, during which pledges learn the history, purpose, values, and traditions of their specific organization. This ceremony is very exclusive, typically performed in private, and only attended by pledges and current members. However, as hazing grew in popularity — especially among fraternities — some organizations began to implement forced alcohol consumption or various demeaning acts in their initiation rituals.

#### ***V: Saturday Night's Alright for Hazing***

Hazing finds its roots in ancient Greece and medieval Europe. Later, it appeared at boarding schools in England and eventually found its way to the colonies. “Freshman laws” became a popularized term at schools like Harvard University in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kripke 13). These “laws” made freshman run errands and carry out menial tasks for upperclassmen students. Much like freshman laws, new pledges run errands for other members and complete chores around the chapter house. When more serious hazing was first introduced to the Greek system, it was only used as a punishment if pledges failed to complete their assigned tasks (Grandillo 7). However, as upperclassmen began taking more and more advantage of new members, hazing grew to become a more widespread practice. The harsher styles of hazing that tend to be more prominent today were introduced to college campuses by military members after the Civil War (Kripke 13). According to Hechinger, “returning soldiers brought military-style hazing to college campuses” (Kripke 13). Hazing in the military often involves violence and

physical punishment (push-ups or other exercises), occasionally in extreme conditions, such as while wearing full-body armor or in the middle of the night. Known today as harassment hazing or violent hazing, behaviors have adapted to include stealing, kidnapping, forced consumption of alcohol, foods, or other liquids such as dish soap, abandoning pledges and requiring them to find their way back, and even whipping or branding. These actions have become institutionalized at schools across the United States and are the ones most often affiliated with many fraternities' pledging rituals.

In February of 2017, Pennsylvania State University Sophomore Timothy Piazza was found dead in the basement of Beta Theta Pi's chapter house after participating in a pledge ritual. Alongside various traumatic brain injuries, Piazza suffered class IV hemorrhage shock and a punctured spleen due to falling down at least one flight of stairs (Kripke 1). He was placed on a couch, where members left him for 12 hours before seeking medical help. Two days later, video surveillance depicting the events that had transpired were deleted by a member of the fraternity (Kripke 1). Felony charges were lifted from 18 members, leaving them with only misdemeanors (Kripke 23). 14 of the 18 will face trial but any jail time is highly unlikely (Kripke 23).

Legal punishment for situations involving hazing incidents are tricky, especially when death or serious injuries occur. Death can come as a result of negligence and failure to seek medical attention as much as it does from the actions themselves. That is not to say that the activities fraternity members participate in are devoid of blame, however, because — in the case of Piazza and many others — the lack of willingness to obtain medical help stems from them attempting to avoid repercussions for violent methods of hazing. Although it could be argued that the cause of Piazza's death was not the hazing itself but the failure of other members to obtain medical attention, it remains clear that the activities other members forced Piazza to participate in were, if indirectly, still very closely linked to the cause of his death. Therefore, even if hazing did not technically present itself as the primary cause for what killed Piazza, ethically, it remains just as much of a factor as the Beta Theta Pi members' failure to recognize Piazza's life-threatening condition.

Regardless of the repercussions these 14 will face, the problem at hand is much larger than what occurred within this individual chapter. Piazza's death provides yet another sign of the underlying issue that encompasses Greek organizations on campuses across the country. In addition to becoming another tragedy that has occurred purely due to a corrupt system, his death presents the face of a much larger problem that is begging to be dealt with, rather than merely swept under the carpet for reputation's sake.

## ***VI: A Reputation for Sexism, Assault, and Elitism***

Founded at the University of Alabama in 1856, Sigma Alpha Epsilon is the nation's largest fraternity, with 336,000 members in total since its origin (Kripke 5). Its expansive alumni network provides members with many opportunities and connections when they graduate. However, despite the benefits that Sigma Alpha Epsilon provides its brothers, the fraternity has earned itself a bad reputation. In its early years, the organization preached "generosity and decorum" but sustained a reputation for being segregationist and elitist. For many years, the fraternity was widely known for "despicable displays of racism and misogyny" (Kripke 4). The original chapter has not admitted a single black member in the 150 years since its founding (Kripke 10). One person of color did walk those white-washed halls — a custodian frequently referred to by members as "the butler" (Kripke 11).

Of the 60 fraternity deaths that occurred nationwide between 2005 and 2013, Sigma Alpha Epsilon was responsible for 10, the highest number of any individual fraternity (Kripke 5). Drunk driving, frozen to death, alcohol poisoning, drowning, and various methods of hazing are only a handful of contributors behind the deaths that Sigma Alpha Epsilon has caused. During a pledging ritual at Cornell University, a student was blindfolded and tied up by members before they “poured nine cups of vodka, strawberry syrup, pieces of a sandwich, dishwashing soap, hot sauce” into his mouth (Kripke 7). After blacking out, he was abandoned on a couch — in typical Sigma Alpha Epsilon fashion. The following morning, he was found by a janitor with “zip ties and duct tape strapped around his ankles (Kripke 7). From 2012-2017, 130 chapters were penalized and 30 were shut down for violating school rules, NIC policies, or state laws. These actions, in combination with the fraternity’s multiple charges of sexual assault, has earned them the nicknames “Sexual Assault Expected” and “Same Assholes Everywhere” among students across the country.

### **VII: “Innocent” is not Spelled A.T.H.L.E.T.E.**

As a young woman heavily engrossed in the college process, the presence of these fraternities on campuses will affect my future, regardless of whether or not I choose to become part of a Greek organization. The primary cause of concern regarding most female undergraduates is sexual violence. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), “23.1% of [female undergraduate students] experience rape or sexual assault through force, violence, or incapacitation” (“Campus Sexual Violence: Statistics”). Sexual assault is an issue that plagues the minds of many young women, and the utter lack of discipline given to those found guilty of sexual violence promotes feelings of a deficient effort towards protection and disregard for our safety.

The most “extreme” consequence for a student charged with sexual assault comes from Columbia University, where students can be suspended for one semester (*The Hunting Ground*). The University of Toledo and the University of Colorado Boulder charge students a \$25 and \$75 fine, respectively, while Yale University suspends students for one day, and Brandeis University lets them off with only a warning (*The Hunting Grounds*). Although these rules are stated in each school’s policy, the likelihood of them being consistently enforced is slim, given the lack of action from most schools and legal systems for accusations of rape or any sexual assault.

In December of 2012, Florida State University student Erica Kinsman accused fellow classmate and football quarterback Jameis Winston of rape. During the incident, Kinsman suffered bad bruising and had even passed out (“‘Virtually No Investigation’ in Heisman Winner Rape Case; ‘Monster Sophomore Season’ Expected”). Police were able to identify Winston as the offender through DNA found in the accuser’s underwear (“‘Virtually No Investigation’ in Heisman Winner Rape Case; ‘Monster Sophomore Season’ Expected”). However, they made no effort to contact him for two weeks after his identity was confirmed, and “Prosecutor William Meggs closed the case within a year, claiming not enough evidence was provided” (“‘Virtually No Investigation’ in Heisman Winner Rape Case; ‘Monster Sophomore Season’ Expected” 2). However, according to *The New York Times*, “police and the university did little to determine what had happened” (“Jameis Winston and Woman Who Accused Him of Rape Settle Lawsuits” 6). Winston went on to have a record-breaking season, and, on December 14 2013, he received the Heisman Trophy. The Heisman is awarded to the player “whose performance best exhibits the the pursuit of excellence with integrity (“Heisman Trust Mission Statement”), and despite his

accusations of rape, he maintained his award and is currently the quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the National Football League.

Partially because of schools' tendencies to dismiss cases such as Kinsman's, only 20% of female college students report sexual crimes to law enforcement ("Campus Sexual Violence: Statistics"). It is crucial for the safety of students that college officials begin to properly and fairly discipline offenders — regardless of athletic status. By continuing to disregard various offenses committed by students, schools are inadvertently supporting the hazing, assault, and multiple other issues that have proven harmful to all members within a college community.

### **VIII: *The Perfect Recipe for Disaster (and Education)***

Aside from issues revolving around hazing or sexual assault, many fraternities also struggle with public displays of racism. The most recent in a long line of Greek life-related scandals: California State Polytechnic University's blackface incident. The school's chapter of the Lambda Delta Chi fraternity attended a multicultural celebration event, where members donned gang-like outfits, with one even painting his face completely black. The NIC suspended the chapter almost immediately after images of the student surfaced. The fraternity released a statement explaining that the event involved splitting up into teams distinguished by color and that he had painted his face black to show he was on the black team (Haag 8). They continued, writing "We are extremely sorry and embarrassed for failing to recognize the racial impacts this brought forth," (Haag 9). Kyler Watkins, the student at the root of the misconduct, reiterated this point in an apology email he wrote to the university and added that "my own lack of awareness has placed my life in danger and worse, has hurt other people whom I had no intention of alienating, mocking or offending in any way" (Sheeler 9). Assuming his previous ignorance is true and not just an excuse for his misbehavior, it stresses the importance of universities educating their students, instead of just suspending or expelling them. It remains crucial that students understand not only that what they did was wrong but *why* it was wrong, because consequences have a less effective impact on people who are not fully aware of the reasoning. Additionally, punishments do come to an end, and if students do not comprehend why their actions were offensive or generally unacceptable, what is to stop them from repeating similar actions after they graduate? However, if students learn the impact of their ignorance, they will hopefully hold themselves accountable for their own actions — a skill that is critical to post-graduate success.

However, education is not a replacement for discipline. The highest chance of success comes when both are used together, because punishment does nothing when there is a lack of understanding, and frequently, newfound awareness does not provide a sufficient consequence. Although many may consider Watkins blackface to be a hate crime, the student is likely safe from permanent repercussions — including expulsion. In an interview with the San Luis Obispo Tribune, university president Jeffrey Armstrong stated that Watkins actions are "very, very likely protected by free speech, and freedom of expression" as much as it conflicts with his personal feelings about the incident (Boboltz 3). Exceptions to the protection of free speech include obscenity and true threats ("Freedom of Speech and Press"). However, since Watkins claims he was unaware of the racism behind blackface, it is unlikely that his actions would fall under such categories and will therefore be protected by freedom of speech and expression.

### **IX: *Going Greek, Going Gold***

Sororities often work with the administration to ensure members are held to high standards —socially and academically—both within the school community and the world at large. Chapters provide members with beneficial activities, such as socials, formals, and service opportunities, that give students a well-rounded social platform to successfully build upon after graduation. Not only do members learn valuable community experiences, but they have the opportunity to learn important life skills, such as how to live well with others and work together to solve problems within a community. Being a part of a brotherhood or sisterhood provides students with a guaranteed support system and can prevent them from feeling lost in a sea of thousands of students. Even post-graduation, members continue to reap the benefits of the Greek system. Additionally, “affiliating with a fraternity or sorority enhances the development of mature interpersonal relationships, facilitate the development or leadership skills, teaches teamwork, fosters interchange of ideas, promotes values clarification, and can facilitate the development of sense of autonomy and personal identity” (Grandillo 13).

Many sororities and fraternities stress philanthropy in their mission statements and affiliate with one or more national non-profits. Partnerships with charities are not solely for publicity or reputation either. In 2013, the Sigma Chi fraternity raised over one million dollars for research at the Hunstman Cancer Institute (“Philanthropy”). If Greek letter societies can use their platform for more beneficial causes and begin a journey towards improvement, many negative aspects of today’s Greek life will eventually fade to the background, leaving room for the numerous advantages of being part of such a close-knit community to shine through.

### ***X: Reform is a Dish Best Served Soon***

Alongside the increased regulations provided by the NIC, individual schools are working to combat the dangerous tendencies of many fraternities. Pennsylvania State University is attempting to reduce the amount of parties and alcohol violations by increasing accountability among Greek organizations. In October of 2017, the school implemented scorecards for each fraternity and sorority. These scorecards record the number of members in the chapter, their average GPA, whether their average GPA is above or below the school average, and any policy violations (Falce 12). This enforcement of responsibility has caused an increase in chapter suspensions, which hopefully helps to eliminate the more reckless or dangerous fraternity chapters. According to the school, underage and excessive drinking still poses an issue, but the number of hospitalizations caused by alcohol and “pledge-inspired abuse” have decreased (Kripke 19).

In addition to their schools, individual fraternities have been working towards reform. After spending time in the hot seat for multiple hazing violations, chapter leaders of Sigma Alpha Epsilon decided it was time for the fraternity to begin turning over a new leaf. In 2014, they abandoned pledging (Kripke 19). Instead, prospective members are offered a “bid” by the chapter, and they have the ability to choose whether or not they wish to join — no humiliating or harmful activities included. Although Sigma Alpha Epsilon is making strides in the right direction, their attempts at reform do not yet make up for their previous actions. However, other Greek organizations can learn from them and begin working towards their own reform. Although the system, as a whole, has plenty of room for improvement, there is a lot of potential. Greek letter societies provide students with support and comradery that can be difficult to find in large communities like colleges or universities. Additionally, they impart students with a familial bond away from home. However, many Greek organizations are hurtling towards a point of no return. If reformative actions are not taken soon, either their actions will bare the burden of the entire

system being shut down or end up permanently tainting the reputation of every organization in the system.

## **XI: Conclusion**

Although Greek letter societies have many benefits to offer their members, a sizable number have lost site of their original values. They were created to provide students with social stimulation and a place within a community, but these days they find themselves causing people more harm than good. Hazing has been the primary issue that fraternity and sorority members face. However, it remains a very complicated problem to prevent, as it falls under the category of a misdemeanor, rather than a crime, even though victims can be injured or killed. Additionally, as journalist and Pulitzer Prize finalist John Hechinger said, “Even though [hazing] is deadly, it’s hard to make the case for involuntary manslaughter when some might argue that the victim participated voluntarily” (Kripke 24). Hechinger does believe that fraternities are capable of making “incremental change,” but if Greek organizations fail to meet calls for reform, their beneficial aspects may forever be overshadowed.

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