

SHOULD BLACK FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES ABOLISH UNDERGRADUATE CHAPTERS?

Yes, unless . . .

By Walter M. Kimbrough

THIS PAST SPRING, I set off on a four-month lecture tour, eager to interact with bright and interesting students and present my thoughts on black fraternities and sororities—the subject of my recent book. As I prepared for the opportunity to share strategies with colleagues and offer my humble advice on matters facing a very visible but marginally understood student culture, I figured that I would primarily assume the role of teacher, entertainer, and honored guest. All three roles were part of the tour, and I enjoyed them all (especially because I think of myself as an aspiring comic). But I underestimated another role—that of student. Over the course of more than sixty engagements, I learned a great deal about black fraternalism today, and quite frankly, much of what I learned frightened me.

The first two weeks went as expected. I encountered the normal concerns facing black fraternities and sororities on campus today. Most chapters had very small numbers; they didn't always get along with one another; and it was fairly clear that the vast majority did not follow the 1990 decision by their respective national organizations to abolish the practice of hazing during pledging. On one campus, at least two groups acknowledged having their candidates for membership openly participate in the type of hazing activities that were reminiscent of those conducted prior to 1990. The pledges ran across the campus wearing identical uniforms and even made a scene in a cafeteria.

During the decade since pledging was outlawed, undergraduates have not only continued the tradition underground—that is, in a form that is virtually invisible to administrators and organization officials—but have sought opportunities to publicly flaunt their rebellion. This level of brazen defiance was interesting to me, especially because the students saw this as a way to make Greek life exciting again, which would therefore

increase interest on campus. But on almost every campus I visited, at least one group was on suspension for hazing-related activities.

At the end of the second week, I had a shocking conversation with a sorority member. She spoke about how a chapter of her sorority allowed its aspirants to be “pledged” by members of other sororities. From my personal experience, this is

something that never would have occurred almost twenty years ago when I was initiated. Today, it seems that, at least in this case, “pledging” was defined as an opportunity for Greeks to haze another group's aspirants so that they would earn “respect” on campus. In the post-1990 world of black fraternalism, respect comes from breaking the rules and engaging in outlawed pledging.

THE NIGHT AFTER that conversation, I went to bed troubled. My wife had accompanied me on the trip; we were both completely shocked at this new

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development in the culture of underground pledging. The next day, as we traveled home, we had lunch in the Atlanta airport. That day, ironically, was the tenth anniversary of the death of Michael Davis, the victim in a highly publicized hazing case at Southeast Missouri State University. Davis died from internal injuries, including injuries to the liver, kidney, spleen, brain, as well as a torn lung. I asked my wife, "How can we stop hazing?"

That day, February 15, in the journal I used to summarize my thoughts after each campus visit, I wrote a phrase that I never expected to consider: "Should black fraternities and sororities abolish undergraduate chapters?" After more than a decade of doing research, writing and reading articles, participating in speaking engagements, and authoring a book about these groups, I suddenly felt impotent to help solve this monumental problem, which was spiraling out of control.

I decided that day that I would begin to share my misery with students across the country, so during question-and-answer periods, I looked forward to an opportunity to ask what I have dubbed *the* question: "Should we abolish undergraduate chapters?" The response was always a swift and resounding no, but when pressed to develop substantive reasons for not taking such an unthinkable action, students generally lost some of their confidence and resolve.

Within a month, students presented me with a familiar set of answers to *the* question, but none of the answers were supported by sound facts and logic. Their answers included (1) undergraduates started these organizations, (2) graduate chapters haze too, (3) people join because of the presence of undergraduate members, and (4) the groups derive a sizable portion of their operating funds from undergraduates. The problem is that all

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of these answers fail to address the two major consequences of their behavior.

The first is that every year, numerous students are injured, both mentally and physically, by their peers as they attempt to gain membership in one of these fraternal organizations. Since the major black fraternal organizations abolished pledging in 1990, an average of four hazing cases have been described in some form of the news media each year. Since 1999, the rate is greater than seven per year. This may be a product of increased access to on-line news items as well as, seemingly, more incidents.

Unfortunately, it seems that most students accept this as an occupational hazard of full acceptance within the organization.

Second, the numerous injuries and even deaths have now fed into a litigious society, and actions viewed as tradition by undergraduates threaten the very existence of organizations burdened by the costs of settlements or defense. In September 2002, lawyers in California filed the largest lawsuit against any fraternal organization ever for \$100 million. It was one of about

five lawsuits filed since 2000 against black fraternal organizations for hazing.

Within a month after first asking *the* question, it became easy to predict students' answers. As they offered superficial but sincere responses, I raised counterissues. Soon, they became hesitant to offer quick answers in the face of these serious issues. So the more I asked, as the tour progressed, the more reserved students became in their attempts to answer. I asked and asked, and became disheartened, because I desperately wanted to find a satisfactory answer.

One of the main things I learned is that the students did not have good, solid information about how the organizations operate or even the state of the organizations. For example, one reason often cited for preserving undergraduate chapters was that they brought in a significant sum of money. They could not have been more wrong. Generally, less than 25 percent of the active, dues-paying members are current undergraduates. A recent membership report for my own fraternity showed college brothers at 20 percent of the membership.

More interesting, I also learned that in most cases,

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the core assumptions and values perpetuated by college members are diametrically opposed to those of their national leadership. Undergraduates indicated that hazing proves that people love the organization, while graduate members see hazing as a real threat to the organization. Undergraduates also admitted confusion because persons who hazed or were hazed now tell them not to do it. They appear to be in a stage of development that prevents them from understanding the big picture because it interferes with their immediate desires and perceived needs. It is almost as if black fraternities and sororities are experiencing a Du Boisian "double consciousness," with "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 45).

I PROMISED students that at the end of the tour, I would offer a judgment on the question in writing. That time has now come. If I logically review all of the facts—most significantly, the continued harm, injury, and death to students, as well the continued lawsuits against black fraternal organizations—I must say that black fraternities and sororities must end undergraduate chapters if they want to preserve their organizations.

I may be the first to ask this question publicly, but the national presidents of the major black fraternal organizations have asked this question for years. The choice for the leadership has been, "Do we continue to halfway address hazing and underground pledging and hope that we don't get sued out of existence, or do we ensure the organization's survival by eliminating its biggest cancer—hazing by undergraduates?"

Prior to making this move to end undergraduate chapters, I have one last idea. I propose that all nine of the organizations that are members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, the umbrella body for the largest black fraternal organizations, simultaneously impose a five-year moratorium on membership intake. I have personally criticized moratoriums because they don't work in a vacuum. Normally, one group institutes a moratorium on new members or suspends a chapter for as long as four years, but in one or two other groups, underground pledging continues in full swing. The reason is that those who violated the rules, even though

they may have graduated, still exert an influence on new members. More important, the students who are members of other organizations on the same campus who continue to pledge underground also challenge the new members to pledge or be disrespected.

So everyone has to stop at the same time. During this moratorium, the nine groups would commission a task force to seriously study pledging and membership intake and to develop recommendations for a new process that has the potential to work. Pledging as a concept is not bad, but the challenge is to create pledging without hazing. The groups have yet to work as a unified force against this common enemy; therefore, their individual efforts have been ineffective. They should devote the necessary resources, especially fund-

ing, to hire noted experts, sociologists, psychologists, university administrators, and others to tackle this issue. The end result would be a new process that all groups would follow, which would level the playing field and get buy-in from the undergraduate culture that transcends individual memberships.

After this new process is developed, the ultimatum must be given. Students

must understand fully that this is the final attempt to salvage undergraduate chapters. If chapters violate the new process, they will immediately be revoked forever. After a period of five years, the organizations should jointly review the number of chapters revoked for hazing abuses. If that number is high, they would agree to abolish undergraduate chapters immediately.

Black fraternities and sororities should abolish undergraduate chapters only after they make a drastic, last-ditch attempt to save them by reworking membership intake and replacing it with a highly educational and engaging membership education program. If the leadership is unwilling to make this kind of stand, then we should abolish undergraduate chapters now. Otherwise, the courts will soon abolish black fraternal organizations altogether.

NOTE

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Classic, 1995. (Originally published 1903.)

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