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Hazing Beyond the Frat House

December 23, 2011 - 3:00am

By [Allie Grasgreen](#)

The hazing death of a Florida A&M University drum major last month has exposed an open secret: hazing often happens outside fraternities, and its consequences are no less dire.

Although hazing occurs in organizations from intramural sports to honor societies, the vast majority of people -- even on campuses -- still associate the activity first and foremost (and in many cases, exclusively) with students pledging into fraternities and sororities. But the death of Florida A&M's Robert Champion has revealed the reach of hazing in a jarring way.

"There is really a great deal of ignorance about the extent to which hazing occurs and the fact that it affects students in many different kinds of settings, not just fraternity and sorority life," says Elizabeth Allan, a University of Maine associate professor of higher education leadership, who co-wrote the [National Study of Student Hazing \(http://www.hazingstudy.org/publications/hazing_in_view_web.pdf\)](#). "When you have a limited understanding of something and you have a limited understanding of the scope of it, then you're less likely to see it."

That goes not only for those who might reprimand the behavior, but also for those who are victims of it, Allan says. Nine out of 10 students who are hazed in college don't consider themselves to have been hazed, according to Allan's research -- and students whose experience doesn't fit the ["Animal House" \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdFLPn30dvQ\)](#) image could be even less likely to report an incident or believe it's hazing at all.

"I think it goes back to that limited image," Allan says. "When something falls outside that image, it's often dismissed. It's more likely that a student would say, 'That wasn't hazing -- it wasn't in a fraternity.' "

The Nov. 19 incident is still being covered extensively in the news media, in part, experts say, because of its brutality, but also because of the

context -- the Marching 100 is a storied student group. (It also has a history of hazing activity; even after Champion's death, three band members were charged with hazing and beating a female student, who suffered a broken thigh and blood clots. She is also suing the university, saying she faced continued harassment after reporting the beating to FAMU's band director, Julian White.)

Champion died on a bus after a football game, and dozens of witnesses have testified to what happened. According to a Florida medical examiner's autopsy, the death resulted from "hemorrhagic shock due to soft tissue hemorrhage, incurred by blunt force trauma sustained during a hazing incident." Champion's injuries -- "extensive contusions of his chest, arms, shoulder and back with extensive hemorrhage," the autopsy says -- caused "significant rapid blood loss."

The story has also sustained the news cycle because it resulted in White's forced administrative leave and Gov. Rick Scott's request that President James H. Ammons step down at Florida A&M. (Following protest from students and alumni, FAMU's Board of Trustees said it will wait to take action beyond reprimanding the president until criminal investigations are finished).

According to Allan's survey of more than 11,000 students and interviews with hundreds more, 55 percent of students involved in different clubs, teams and campus organizations experience hazing. And while 73 percent of students in social fraternities or sororities reported being hazed, they didn't even top the list -- that was students on varsity athletics teams, 74 percent of whom said they'd been hazed. Students in club sports were next, at 64 percent, followed by those in performing arts organizations (such as marching band), at 56 percent. The group with the least hazing is honor society, but even there, one in five students said they had been hazed.

Percent of Students that Experienced at Least One Hazing Behavior

Group	Percent
Varsity Athletic Team	74%
Social Fraternity or Sorority	73%
Club Sport	64%
Performing Arts Organization	56%
Service Fraternity or Sorority	50%
Intramural Team	49%
Recreation Club	42%
Other (religiously affiliated groups, culture clubs and groups, student government)	30%
Academic Club	28%
Honor Society	20%

Source: *National Study of Student Hazing*

"This would speak to the need for colleges and universities to recognize that this is broader than a Greek issue," says Daniel Swinton, president of the Association for Student Conduct Administration and assistant dean and director of Vanderbilt University's Office of Student Conduct and Integrity. "Oftentimes we're aware of the hazing that goes on elsewhere, but so much is focused on the Greek realm that we neglect, I think, some of these other ones where it's often not as high-profile."

Kim Novak, a consultant in campus safety and student risk management and namesake of the [Kimberly Novak Hazing Prevention Institute](http://www.hazingprevention.org/programs/novak-institute) (<http://www.hazingprevention.org/programs/novak-institute>), says a limited perspective has led colleges to direct their hazing policies and prevention efforts primarily toward fraternities and sororities.

"It's a comfortable audience to focus on -- it's easy. Who's going to walk in and say, 'We don't have hazing in our fraternities and sororities?'" Novak says. "It's a more difficult conversation to talk about hazing in performing arts organizations or paraprofessional groups. It's a different type of a conversation; it's not as easy to engage administrators in."

She and others believe colleges should approach hazing as a public health issue -- educating the entire campus, not just individual sectors, on things like what hazing is and what to do when it happens. (The bystander intervention model, for example, which trains students to step in when they see something awry, is a popular method for preventing sexual assault, [bullying](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/11/03/colleges-adapt-new-jersey-anti-bullying-law) (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/11/03/colleges-adapt-new-jersey-anti-bullying-law>) and [alcohol abuse](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/08/03/getting_wasted_argues_for_bystander_intervention_to_support_drunk_college_students) (http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/08/03/getting_wasted_argues_for_bystander_intervention_to_support_drunk_college_students) that could be applied to hazing.)

Some colleges have begun approaching the issue in a more holistic way, Novak said, and experts generally agree that Champion's death will encourage others to move in that direction. The Novak Institute, for instance, brings together students, faculty and staff from different campus groups, administrators and law enforcement to discuss and map out this prevention approach. (And effectively addressing hazing clearly requires more than punishing the perpetrators -- in the years leading up to Champion's death, White had suspended dozens of students for hazing.)

The University of Kentucky, which sends a delegation to the Novak Institute and received the 2011 [Zeta Tau Alpha Award for Innovation in Campus Hazing Prevention and Education](http://www.hazingprevention.org/recognition-a-awards/zeta-tau-alpha-innovation-award) (<http://www.hazingprevention.org/recognition-a-awards/zeta-tau-alpha-innovation-award>), formed a Hazing Prevention Coalition made up of student leaders and staff representing Greek life, violence prevention, counseling, athletics, public relations, residence life, parents and alumni. They reviewed the university's hazing prevention programs, as well as [its hazing policy](http://www.uky.edu/regfiles/ar/AR6-10.pdf) (<http://www.uky.edu/regfiles/ar/AR6-10.pdf>), the latter of which it proposed revising to protect not just students but anyone affiliated with the campus as potential victims. Kentucky's prevention program includes workshops and seminars for Greek members and registered student organizations, presentations and meetings with varsity and club sports athletes, briefings for new Reserve Officers Training Corps cadets, and a session for parents during the fall season's welcome week.

"It is critical that staff, administrators, faculty, coaches, advisers and parents recognize and respond effectively to hazing, whether it occurs in or out of Greek life," Timothy C. Marchell, director of mental health services at Cornell University, said in an e-mail. Cornell has [openly acknowledged](http://www.hazing.cornell.edu) (<http://www.hazing.cornell.edu>) hazing outside the Greek system, and President David J. Skorton this summer [said he would ban pledging to eliminate hazing](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/08/25/cornell_university_ends_pledging_in_fraternities_and_sororities_hoping_to_stop_hazing) (http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/08/25/cornell_university_ends_pledging_in_fraternities_and_sororities_hoping_to_stop_hazing). The university's [general hazing policy](http://dos.cornell.edu/activities/sao_handbook/policies.cfm) (http://dos.cornell.edu/activities/sao_handbook/policies.cfm) applies to all student organizations, however. "Also, we need to teach students that humiliation, coercive drinking rituals and physical suffering are not the basis for lasting friendships and commitment to a group."

Hank Nuwer, who has written several books and articles about the topic and maintains a [hazing prevention blog \(http://www.hanknuwer.com/blog/\)](http://www.hanknuwer.com/blog/), wants colleges to report all hazing activities to the authorities as possible criminal behavior. He hears about hazing in groups like honors or business societies from time to time, but "what you mainly hear are good efforts by people involved in the organizations to end it." (The [Kappa Kappa Psi \(http://www.kkpsi.org/\)](http://www.kkpsi.org/) honorary band fraternity is one example.)

These policies and reforms can be effective in preventing high-profile deaths; the last non-Greek hazing-related death occurred in 2001 at the University of Minnesota, where a male student who was drinking at a rugby initiation party fell into a creek and died. That death was ruled an accident, though, not a homicide, as Champion's was. (Nuwer also points out that Champion's case, in which the victim of hazing was already a member of the group in question, could be seen as changing the definition of hazing, which is typically thought of as a rite of passage into a given organization.)

In athletics, which is undoubtedly the second-most-recognized setting for the activity, hazing has actually been driven underground by policies, says Jay Johnson, an assistant professor of kinesiology at San Jose State University who has written extensively on initiation and hazing in varsity sports. That's because a number of factors have made the development of hazing policy in athletics particularly complex: institutions drafted their policies as damage control in response to high-profile hazing incidents, aiming as much to salvage their image and protect themselves from potential litigation as to declare their mission and values. In the rush to get something on paper, athletes and coaches were largely left out of the process, Johnson says. And athletes on teams that traditionally haze new recruits, more inclined to focus on the present rather than the big picture, responded by making "superficial rather than structural changes" like moving activities off campus or making sure one veteran athlete stays sober during the hazing. The response from coaches hasn't been much better, Johnson says.

"Many coaches have reacted by removing themselves from the team initiation process entirely. Some have instructed their players to discontinue the practice of hazing but offer no alternatives. Many now turn a blind eye to the fact that their teams are continuing to hold initiation ceremonies, believing that it is a valuable exercise which does foster cohesive bonds between players. Few have taken an active role in involving themselves in the structure and implementation of initiating new recruits within the boundaries of policy," Johnson said in an e-mail. "The reality is that there will be no change without an administration which supports the elimination of hazing through clearly defined policy, educates all varsity athletes, coaches, administrators, support staff and alumni, and provides funding for alternative orientation possibilities."

The more diverse the voices at the table, the better, says Novak.

"The people we need in the room need to be interdisciplinary. It's not that I don't have an interest in having a conversation about hazing in fraternities and sororities," she says. "But if we continue to only focus on hazing as a Greek problem, then we're not dealing with the problem."

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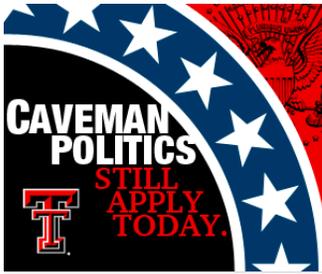
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