Some traditions die hard. Some do not die at all. Hazing has been a pervasive practice in fraternities and sororities on college campuses for generations. A 2008 study by the National Collaborative for Hazing Research and Prevention found that more than 73% of "Greeks" reported being hazed. The National Study of Student Hazing revealed that same year that most hazing incidents went unreported. According to its defenders, hazing can be a rite of passage that promotes knowledge of and loyalty to the organization and bonding with its members. Critics point out, however, that hazing can endanger physical and mental health through the forced consumption of alcohol, sleep deprivation, sexual assaults, beatings, and humiliation. At least one hazing related death has occurred each year since 1970 (when records began to be kept).

Recently, "the dark power of fraternities" has come under heightened scrutiny. At Cornell University, where I am a professor and administrator, hazing is prohibited by the Campus Code of Conduct, the Fraternity and Sorority Judicial Code, and New York State law. In 2005, the university launched a web site, which allowed visitors to report violations and read about alternative organization-building activities. One fraternity, a post alleged, forced "pledges" (individuals who receive an invitation to join but have not yet been fully and formally accepted as chapter members) to take off their clothes, lie in a pool with six inches of ice water, urine, beer, and kitchen garbage,
while his "brothers-to-be" took turns dropping raw eggs into their mouths.

In 2011, following the death of George Desdunes, a sophomore, in a hazing incident, Cornell revoked recognition of the offending chapter for five years and ordered its house to be vacated. Cornell's president, David Skorton, directed student leaders of the Greek system to develop approaches to member recruitment that did not involve hazing or other risky behavior, either directly or indirectly. A twenty-four person task force recommended several reforms, including mandatory attendance at intensive education and social programs, an elimination of the word "pledging," and a reduction of "the new member intake process" from eight to four weeks.

Characterizing these recommendations (which have been implemented at other institutions as well) as "important first steps," President Skorton insisted that "it is equally clear that we are not yet where we need to be."

Skorton was right. In 2014 and 2015, for example, the Greek Judicial Board found a chapter guilty of hazing. On November 13, 2015, the National Organization of Kappa Sigma fraternity suspended its Cornell chapter, pending an investigation of hazing allegations. And Cornell students continue to tell me that the practice is still pervasive on campus. In my view, without root-and-branch reforms hazing will continue to be "the unattractive face of college fraternities." Here are two changes that could have a significant positive impact:

1. The "probationary" period, when pledges are especially vulnerable to harassment and intimidation, should end. Testimony of alumni to the contrary notwithstanding, hazing is neither an effective, safe, nor fair way to promote knowledge of the chapter and deep and enduring friendships with members. Following "rush," a 2-4 week period when fraternities and sororities host activities and actively recruit new members, and the tendering of "bids" (offers to join), undergraduates should make a decision; they should then be inducted in short order into the chapter they have selected, in full possession of all the rights and responsibilities attached to membership.

2. College and university leaders should encourage, and if appropriate, facilitate, the establishment of co-ed Panhellenic "houses." After all, on-campus residence halls in most institutions of higher education in the United States are now co-ed. Spending time in the dominant company of same-sex peers, Lise Eliot, a professor of neurobiology at the Chicago Medical School of Rosalind Franklin University, points out, "shifts a person's vocal pitch, relational style, academic and extracurricular interests, and career choices in ways that arguably prevent their full development as human beings." Applauding the establishment of co-ed eating clubs at Princeton, Eliza Mott, the editor-in-chief of the Nassau Weekly, suggests that "the presence of women in fraternities would prevent male students from having absolute control over social events and would reduce the risk of sexual assault." Co-ed houses should be formed as alternatives to - not replacements of - same-sex fraternities and sororities. And in a nation committed to free market capitalism, their supporters could then legitimately proclaim "let the competition begin."

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Conversations