



Greek Life or Death

Dannica Ramirez

*University of California, Merced*

*Keywords:* Greek life, Hazing, Alcohol Abuse, Rape Culture



## Abstract

Chun “Michael” Deng, a nineteen-year-old freshman at Baruch College in New York, pledged to the Pi Delta Psi fraternity in hopes of forming lifelong friendships among his fellow brothers. Like most college students who decide to join a fraternity or sorority, they are bright, eager, and excited to become a part of a community built on trust and unity. But Michael Deng suffered from a harsher reality. On a cold, December night, Michael Deng—one of the many other victims of hazing—was blindfolded and forced to trek through an icy field while bearing the weight of a backpack filled with thirty pounds of sand (Reuters). Without his sight, Michael was immediately made vulnerable as he aimlessly trudged across the frozen ground, bearing the crushing weight of the backpack added to his shoulders. Then without warning, he was plowed to the ground by an overwhelming impact, his body and the extra thirty pounds slamming against the dirt. Still blind and now fear-stricken, Michael did not understand what was going on until he was tackled again—and again. Attacked and beaten incessantly by his “brothers”, Michael was then tackled from a 15-20 foot running start, causing him to forcibly collapse to the ground, knocking him unconscious (Reuters). One hour passed before Michael was taken to the hospital. By the time medical assistance reached him, he was already brain dead (Reuters).



## **Introduction**

These deadly types of hazing incidents such as the tragic story of Michael Deng is just one of the many reasons why the presence of fraternities and sororities on college campuses are posing as more of a threat than a benefit among college students. The Greek system has extended across a vast majority of colleges and universities in the United States; yet many people are unaware of the dangerous underground culture that the Greek life promotes: substance abuse, rape, and hazing. Although Greek life may also promote service and community, fraternities and sororities should discontinue and banned from all colleges and universities due to the life-threatening practices that take place among fraternity and sorority members.

## **The Dangers of Alcohol Abuse**

One issue the involvement in Greek life promotes is binge drinking. Binge drinking, the act of excessively consuming dangerous levels of alcohol in a short period, is a more common activity among fraternity and sorority members than non-fraternity and sorority members. According to the scholarly journal “High-Risk Drinking Among College Fraternity Members: A National Perspective” by Barry D. Caudill, “Researchers have shown that students’ drinking styles correlate more closely with behaviors of their immediate social network than with drinking practices of students in general at their colleges” (142). Because fraternities and sororities are made up of students ranging from first-year-students to seniors, alcohol is more readily available for consumption, therefore increasing the likeliness of students binge drinking while at parties or other social functions hosted by fraternities and sororities. Caudill’s academic journal also discusses a study done over the course of 6 weeks, where researchers measured and surveyed 3,000 participants from 98 fraternity chapters of one national college in the United States to



determine how frequent college students consumed alcohol on a daily basis (Caudill 143). After considering the factors of race, demographics, and blood-alcohol concentration levels, the study concluded that “all the respondents (97%) labeled themselves as *drinkers*, with an overwhelming majority meeting the criteria for *heavy drinkers* (83%) and *binge drinkers* (86%)” (Caudill 145). If 86% of only 3,000 fraternity members identified as binge drinkers, it can assume that the percentage would be consistent when including sorority members and the remainder of the Greek chapters not included in the study. The result of this experiment indicates that binge drinking is an issue among fraternities and sororities, especially since members constantly surrounded by social environments that encourage drinking. In the academic journal “An Examination of Drunkorexia, Greek Affiliation, and Alcohol Consumption” written by Rosie Marie Ward, a public health professor at the University of Miami, fraternity and sorority members are more likely to binge drink due to the preconception that alcohol consumption is an essential part of Greek culture, and will therefore enhance their college experience (50). This mindset leads to the belief that the more you drink, the more you will be accepted by your peers; this ultimately is a factor that leads to binge drinking. Additionally, along with the possibility of liver damage, binge drinking also leads to an increase in irrational behavior, driving under the influence, and sexual aggression. These characteristics not only harm the consumer but also could potentially harm others, especially when one is constantly in social environments. If fraternities and sororities banned from universities, it would lower the risks of binge drinking and eliminate the factor of excessive peer-induced substance consumption, especially since alcohol will not be as accessible to those who are underage. Fundamentally, most parties hosted by fraternities or sororities expect their guests to be responsible for themselves, but the risks that arise from the substance abuse within the Greek system is not worth it.



## **The Problems with Rape Culture**

Furthermore, an additional problem within the Greek system that is widely overlooked is the rape culture. Sarah K. Murnen, a social psychologist at Kenyon College, claims in her scholarly journal “Athletic Participation, Fraternity Membership, and Sexual Aggression Among College Men: A Meta-analytic Review” that “compared to non-fraternity men, fraternity men have been found to have more traditional attitudes towards women; a more sexually permissive peer group; stronger belief in male dominance; and greater belief in ‘rape myths’” (147). These “traditional attitudes towards women” imply that fraternity members have the tendency to believe that women are inferior to men, and that women only exist to indulge men in bodily pleasures. This, as well as having a greater acceptance of “rape myths”, promotes the concept that the mistreatment and sexual aggression and harassment of women is acceptable—including rape. Murnen suggests that these behaviors and beliefs are more common in fraternity men due to the circumstance that “fraternities engage in anti-female behaviors as a way to prove their masculinity given the potential for homoeroticism that can occur in a group of men who spend a great deal of time together” (147). Although this may be so, men not being confident enough in their masculinity and sexuality should not be a valid excuse to degrade and objectify women. These fraternities are essentially promoting the idea that being a “man” involves legitimizing the belief that women are nothing more than things that need to be dominated. This not only encourages rape culture, but it also puts the women on college campuses, especially sorority members, at high risk for becoming victims of unsolicited sexual advances, more so at parties where drinking occurs. In 2006, a woman reported that she was held against her will and raped at the Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity at the University of Arkansas (Murnen 146); in that same year, a drunk college freshman said that she was raped at a Kappa Alpha fraternity party at Penn State



University (Murnen 146); in 2015, Brock Turner, a student at Stanford University, was found raping an unconscious 23-year-old woman behind a dumpster outside of a fraternity party on Stanford's campus (Sernoffsky). These shocking and appalling accounts of rape affiliated with Greek parties displays the ongoing problem with the Greek system overlooked rape culture. Rather than endangering, even more, lives of becoming victims of sexual assault, fraternities and sororities should expelled from colleges and universities to lower the chances of creating even more victims.

### **Common Greek Life Practice is Hazing**

Lastly, one of the most common Greek life practice is hazing. In the academic journal "Death by Hazing: Should there be a Federal Law Against Fraternity and Sorority Hazing?" by Devon M. Alvarez, hazing is defined as the "practice of initiating new members into a group, often through harassment and humiliation" (43). Hazing is viewed as a ritual between fraternities and sororities as a way for new pledges to typically display their allegiance. Although some mild forms of hazing can be view as enjoyable and appropriate for both parties, the practice of hazing has evolved into an activity where pledges' lives put in danger. The first recorded death caused by hazing was in 1873 at Cornell University when Mortimer N. Leggett fell into a gorge after being blindfolded and left alone in the dark by members of the Kappa Alpha Society (Alvarez 46). Yet after years passed, death by hazing has become an overlooked issue that the public is not very aware. In 2014, Armando Villa was forced to "[hike] eighteen miles through the Angeles National Forest while blindfolded" without shoes, electronic devices, or a sufficient source of water as part of a hazing ritual for Pi Kappa Phi at California State University, Northridge (Alvarez 44). During the middle of the hike, Armando Villa collapsed and fell



unconscious. By the time he reached the hospital, a heatstroke had already stolen his life (Alvarez 44). According to Alvarez, “since 2005, more than sixty college students have died in hazing-related incidents, with five of those students dying in 2013 alone” (44). Fraternities and sororities are supposed to encourage an inclusive community built on unity and friendship, yet why do hazing rituals pose as such a danger to the innocent lives of new pledges? According to Alvarez, “Seventy-three percent of students involved in a Greek letter organization reported they experienced at least one hazing behavior” (48), yet the act of hazing continues to remain an ever-growing issue that a clear majority of the public is ignorant on. This seeming lack of concern over hazing, however, can be explained by how little the disciplinary action distributed regarding dealing with the hazing incidents. Due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, “Universities are able to use FERPA protection by claiming an incident was neither violent nor sex related” (51). Because of this, if hazing incidents were to occur, ultimately the university would have the power on whether to reveal the issue to the public. This can explain why the danger of practicing hazing can so easily overlooked: because colleges and universities would rather not mention even minor hazing details to preserve their image to the public. Hazing is a practice that occurs ritually, yet why does it take the death of students for it to viewed as a serious matter? Therefore, it would be better for the collective well-being of the student populations of colleges and universities to ban the creation and continuation of fraternities and sororities. Without having organizations with a deep history of hazing and abuse, the less hazing will be promoted.



## **Conclusion**

Joining Greek letter organizations are only some options that people can choose to enhance their college experience. The Greek life can be diverse, exciting, and fresh, yet the negative qualities certainly outweigh the positives. Choosing to be involved in the Greek life means choosing to be involved in the practice of alcohol abuse, rape culture, and hazing. Even though not all fraternities and sororities partake in such activities as extremely, it is wrong to neglect further the pressing issues that occur in fraternities and sororities that threaten the lives of college students on a daily basis. All fraternities and sororities should be removed from college campuses. If this solution had enacted much sooner, perhaps people who suffered like Michael Deng would still be alive.



## References

- Alvarez, Devon M. "Death By Hazing: Should There Be A Federal Law Against Fraternity And Sorority Hazing?." *Journal Of Multidisciplinary Research (1947-2900)* 7.2 (2015): 43-75. Academic Search Complete. Web.
- Caudill, Barry D. "High-Risk Drinking Among College Fraternity Members: A National Perspective." *Journal Of American College Health* 55.3 (2006): 141-155. Education Source. Web.
- Murnen, Sarah K. "Athletic Participation, Fraternity Membership, And Sexual Aggression Among College Men: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Sex Roles* 57.1/2 (2007): 145-157. Education Source. Web.
- Reuters. "President of New York Fraternity Where Pledge Died during Hazing Reveals the Rituals Were Encouraged and Members Would Cook up EXCUSES If Someone Got Hurt." *Daily Mail Online*. Associated Newspapers, 01 Dec. 2015. Web.
- Sernoffsky, Even. "Stanford Sex Assault Victim Honored by Glamour Magazine." *SFGate*. N.p., n.d. Web.
- Ward, Rose Marie, et al. "An Examination Of Drunkorexia, Greek Affiliation, And Alcohol Consumption." *Journal Of Alcohol & Drug Education* 59.3 (2015): 48-66. Education Source. Web.