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STUDENTS

Change at 4 Fraternities

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A Party House That Bans Pledging

No fraternity has come under closer scrutiny than Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Bloomberg dubbed it America's "deadliest" (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-03-07/most-deadly-u-s-fraternity-scrap-initiation-for-new-members>) fraternity in 2013 because at least 10 had people died in fraternity-related events since 2006. Its chapter at the University of Oklahoma became infamous this spring after members were caught on video singing a racist song. In the middle of this bad press, members twice voted against banning alcohol.

But last year the fraternity's leaders unilaterally banned pledging. Bradley Cohen, who just ended a two-year term as SAE's president, argues that two-tiered membership fuels a culture of hazing and binge drinking.

Beyond that, he says, SAE, which has about 15,000 students, needs to strengthen its network of alumni advisers. Like others who oversee fraternities, he worries that alumni are often a weak link in the chain that connects the chapter to the national organization. That's either because particular people are a negative influence or because the chapter lacks involved advisers.

At the same time, Mr. Cohen says fraternities can only do so much to rein in bad behavior. Students come to college with problems, including alcohol, then bring them to the fraternity's doorstep. And, he adds, "I can't control what they do in apartments or dorm rooms before events take place, because that's where the binge drinking is happening."

A Reformer Embracing Change

Delta Upsilon began a series of changes in 2009 that radically reshaped the organization. The fraternity closed a quarter of its chapters for poor performance, including risky behaviors, poor grades, and weak service records. Then it opened a similar number of new chapters under the close guidance of the national organization. The fraternity, which has 4,300 students, doubled its

staff, from 11 to 22. Those new employees have advanced degrees in higher education or nonprofit management, a level of expertise the fraternity didn't have before, says Justin Kirk, Delta Upsilon's executive director.

The organization has increased the number of members who go through educational programming, including international service work. Today more than half of undergraduate members participate in at least one educational program per year. Often, says Mr. Kirk, a national organization just focuses on chapter officers. "If you only send two men in a 50-man chapter, they're on an island," he says. Both membership and the average grade-point average of members have increased, he says, since these changes went into effect.

An Early Adopter of Dry Chapters

In the wake of the hard-partying 1980s and '90s, Phi Delta Theta pledged to go alcohol free by 2000. Membership dropped at first, then rebounded. Today it has 12,000 members, up from 8,500 in 2000. Members' average grades are higher. Insurance costs have dropped to \$80 per person from \$160, thanks to a 60-percent decrease in the number of claims. And alumni are more willing to invest their time and money, helping increase the size of their foundation's endowment to \$16 million from about \$6 million in 2000, says Bob Biggs, the fraternity's executive vice president.

Despite such success, Phi Delta Theta is one of just two fraternities in the 74-member North-American Interfraternity Conference to go dry. (Two others, Sigma Nu and Theta Chi, made similar plans in the late 1990s, but reversed course.) Too often, Mr. Biggs says, fraternities avoid tough stances on alcohol because their governance structure discourages it. The governing board is chosen by students and alumni. "If they take away the alcohol," he says, "they may not be re-elected as board members."

He is frustrated by the slow pace of change. If abuse of alcohol is the No. 1 problem on campuses, he asks, "why aren't we the leaders in addressing it?"

An Ethnic Fraternity On the Rise

As the number of minority students attending college has grown, so has the number of culturally based fraternities. Sigma Lambda Beta reflects that trend. Established in 1986 as a fraternity for Latino undergraduates at the University of Iowa, it has expanded to about 100 campuses and thousands of students over the past three decades. Most culturally based fraternities, including historically black, ethnic, and religious ones, are younger and smaller than historically white ones. The first black collegiate fraternity was established in the early 20th century, while the Latino Greek movement didn't begin until the 1970s.

Ricardo J. Cortez, executive director of Sigma Lambda Beta, says that because many minority students are the first in their families to attend college, finding a community of others with whom they can share that experience is important. And on campuses where minority students are a small fraction of the student body, that camaraderie is especially critical.

Many of Sigma Lambda Beta's chapters have fewer than 10 students, compared with an average of 45 students in the more traditional fraternities. It has broadened its membership to include black, Asian, and other minority students. And it doesn't own any housing, which keeps membership costs low.

Sigma Lambda Beta is one of just a handful of cultural fraternities in the North-American Interfraternity Conference. Its board recently invited leaders of the Latino fraternities to talk about their work, a first step, Mr. Cortez says, in the umbrella group's efforts to think more broadly about diversity.

— Beth McMurtrie

Correction (8/4/2015, 9:15 a.m.): This article originally included an incorrect title for Justin Kirk. He is executive director, not president, of Delta Upsilon. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

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