

ON THE CAMPUS

Frat Boys at Bay

David K. Easlick, Jr., and Thomas Short

Williams College banned fraternities in 1968. It was ahead of its time. The antifraternity movement really got rolling in the mid-1980s and is maintaining its momentum into the 1990s.

After Williams acted, sixteen years passed before Amherst College and Colby College followed suit. Four years earlier, Amherst had required fraternities to admit women, but by 1984 that was not enough and fraternities were abolished altogether. At that time, 624 of Amherst's 1,523 students were fraternity members, nearly a third of whom were women.¹ Amherst's action was not popular. As of fall 1991, approximately 12 percent of its students remained secret members of fraternities.² These students have reported that they are subject to discipline, including expulsion, if caught; that the college president writes to incoming students about the baleful consequences of engaging in fraternity activity; that resident dormitory counselors sign a document promising to report any student discovered to be involved with fraternities; and that the dean of students' office has compiled a partial list of suspects and denies those listed equal access to scholarships and student jobs.³

When Colby banned fraternities, college authorities required all students to sign documents pledging not to violate the "no fraternity" mandate. As it happened, some students were found engaging in prohibited fraternity activity thirty miles off campus, an hour's drive away. College authorities obtained their pledge list and all sixty-one members, composed mainly of the football team, turned themselves in. Their frank confession elicited no mercy. Twenty-five sophomores and juniors were suspended for one semester; nineteen seniors were denied the right to participate in commencement and senior-week activities; and the seventeen freshmen were barred from taking part in extracurricular activities for the remainder of the semester. The suspended juniors included three members not present at the forbidden rites, since they were studying in England at the time.⁴

Other colleges and universities have been a little more subtle, or cautious, but their animus is no less evident. In 1988, the trustees of Franklin and

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Marshall College voted to withdraw recognition of the Greek system. The result is that fraternities and sororities no longer have access to campus meeting rooms and food services. Two years later, also in Pennsylvania, Gettysburg College delayed fall "rush" to spring break, forcing students who want to join a fraternity or sorority to forego their vacation, and Dickinson College discouraged membership by postponing rush to the sophomore year.⁵ In a similar attempt to make fraternities less appealing, Kenyon College, among other tactics, barred sophomores from living with their fraternity brothers.

Another technique is to allow fraternities to remain, but only if they are totally transformed. In 1990 Middlebury College gave its fraternities two options: disband, or adopt *in toto* a "reorganization" plan that included the following stipulations: fraternities had to admit women members, dissociate themselves from their national organizations, drop their Greek-letter names, and stop calling themselves "fraternities."⁶

A key issue is fraternities' exclusion of women. At Trinity College and Wesleyan University in Connecticut and at Pomona College in California, fraternities are forced to admit women and to disaffiliate from their national organizations if the latter persist in remaining all male. Much to the same effect, Bucknell College and Colgate University require fraternities and sororities to admit every student, of either sex, seeking membership.⁷ And at Bowdoin College, where feminists have been accused of trying to keep sororities off campus, the administration insisted that all Greek organizations become coeducational by September 1991.⁸ Similar pressures have been successfully brought to bear on Yale's and Princeton's secret societies and eating clubs, whereas Stanford University has merely refused to increase the number of fraternity houses on campus.

It is not possible to compile an exhaustive list of the schools that have begun to wage war on their fraternities. Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, and Tufts and Lowell Universities in Massachusetts indicate the academic and geographic variety of the institutions involved. "At no time of the fraternity movement has the interest been so high among students," claims Michael Sciola, Greek adviser at the University of New Hampshire, "and at no time has the negative attention of the administrators been so high."⁹ Sciola's impression is confirmed by the indices of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: from the academic year 1973-74 (the first year indexed) to the academic year 1977-78, the number of index citations to fraternities per year varied from 0 to 5, with 2.4 being the average; subsequently, the number of citations rose steadily, reaching 30 in 1988, 37 in 1989, 42 in 1990, and 36 in 1991. As the title of a 1987 article indicates, the *Chronicle's* coverage leaves little doubt that fraternities are on their way out: "Like the Brontosaurus, Fraternities Are Engaged in a Futile Struggle against a Changed Climate."¹⁰

The climate has indeed changed, but among students it has changed in favor of fraternities. When Williams eliminated its fraternities, in 1968, student interest in the Greek system was at its lowest point ever, but now, as Sciola says, interest is the highest it has been, at least during the past half-century. Why, then, does the changed climate mean that the fraternities' struggle to survive is futile? The answer, of course, is that the climate referred to is that of college and university administrators.

Some signs of resistance have been sighted. The suspended Colby students sued and were represented *pro bono* by the Maine Civil Liberties Union. The question in this suit was not whether Colby had the right to disband fraternities; the MCLU argued only that the college could not punish students for their (perfectly legal) involvement, on their own time, in off-campus associations. The Maine Superior Court, however, refused to interfere with the actions of a private institution.¹¹

One of the nation's smaller fraternities, Delta Kappa Epsilon, has spearheaded the resistance. At Middlebury, four fraternities caved in to pressure, but the Alpha Alpha chapter of the DKEs refused to become coeducational and in March 1991 filed suit against the college, primarily on the basis of a freedom of association claim.¹² The DKEs have also refused to accept the similar situation at Bowdoin. Together with some other fraternities and a local sorority, they dispatched press releases and mailings to trustees and alumni presenting their side of the argument. Under the threat of expulsion, the students maintained their membership in the single-sex organizations and received favorable coverage from a Maine public television program. Bowdoin consequently set back its promised date for taking action against fraternities from September 1991 to September 1993.¹³

What's All the Fuss About?

Fraternities' "destructive behavior" is often cited as the reason for their elimination. But that does not stand up to examination. Fraternities have not grown noticeably more violent in the past five years. On the contrary, a recent Carnegie Foundation report on campus life indicates that only 18 percent of liberal arts college administrators complain of increased rules violations by fraternities (17 percent for all college and university administrators), as opposed to 25 percent who say that such violations have *decreased*. Significantly more administrators complain of increased rules violations in *non*fraternity residence halls—26 percent for all colleges and universities and 32 percent for liberal arts colleges (only 24 percent of the latter say that these violations have decreased).¹⁴ Again, 40 percent of liberal arts college administrators report that alcohol abuse is a greater problem and only 6 percent say it is no problem, 25 percent say that theft is a greater problem while only 5 percent say it is no problem, 21 percent say that physical violence is a greater problem and 31

percent say it is no problem, and so on—yet no more than 10 percent of the same administrators say that “Greek life problems” are greater and 55 percent say that Greek life is not a problem.¹⁵ This is not to say that fraternities have been models of campus decorum. But if the question is how campus life is changing, then the answer is that it is changing for the worse outside, and not in, fraternities.

If their misbehavior were reason to abolish fraternities, why are they being abolished now and not ten, twenty, or thirty years ago? Besides, if fraternity misconduct were the problem, that could be solved less drastically simply by enforcing campus rules more vigorously. Instead, for several decades, administrators have allowed fraternities’ frequently outrageous behavior to go virtually unchecked. They have been allowed great latitude—and now, suddenly, fraternities find themselves under attack.

The efforts of administrators to rid their campuses of fraternities is puzzling, for at least two reasons. One is that, as a group, fraternity alumni are their colleges’ most generous donors. Those alumni can understand, or at least acquiesce to, administrative crackdowns on fraternity excesses. Why, then, risk losing alumni financial support by banning fraternities altogether or by actions tantamount to the same thing, such as forcing them to disaffiliate from national organizations?

The other reason such actions are puzzling is suggested by the statistics just cited. While they do not prove that fraternities are oases of civility, the numbers show that if there is a problem with civility, it lies outside fraternities. Indeed, even administrators who are hostile to fraternities acknowledge their positive social role on campus. David Wilder, director of psychological services at Bucknell and a recognized authority on and critic of fraternity life, has observed that they tend to be “the social glue that keeps the campus together.”¹⁶ By dismantling the Greek system, administrators will only hasten the social disintegration currently plaguing campuses.

The war against fraternities therefore lacks the motive usually ascribed to it. If administrators were worried about destructiveness, they would not ban or harass fraternities: they would bring them under stricter control but otherwise foster them. Perhaps, then, it is the faculty, somewhat differently motivated, who are forcing administrators to take extreme measures they would otherwise rather avoid. There is some evidence to support this hypothesis.

According to Jonathan J. Brant, executive vice president of the National Interfraternity Conference, once 35 to 40 percent of faculty were fraternity members but the percentage declined to 5 or 10 by 1990.¹⁷ This generation of faculty is greatly influenced by the campus turmoil of the late 1960s, which included a deep animus against fraternities. A Tufts University professor recently lamented, “I’m disappointed that, in the aftermath of the Sixties, fraternities didn’t wither away. There was an expectation that that would

happen."¹⁸ And at Middelbury, where the fight is perhaps at its hottest, English professor Jay Parini forthrightly asserts his generation's political purpose: "After the Vietnam War, a lot of us didn't just crawl back into our library cubicles; we stepped into academic positions....Now we have tenure, and the hard work of reshaping the universities has begun in earnest."¹⁹

Antifraternity sentiment among politicized faculty members has less to do with fraternities' real or alleged destructiveness than with their real or alleged status as enclaves of privilege. Anyone familiar with the catalogue of prejudices known as political correctness will understand why fraternities are in such bad odor. Fraternities, the argument runs, are a microcosm of the white male "hegemony." Peggy Reeves Sanday, professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus*, contends that the fraternity system must be abolished if true social justice is to be realized. "To have white upper-class males occupy prime residential property," she says, "is just wrong and part of the gross inequality."²⁰

Are fraternities under attack, then, simply because they are politically incorrect? That explanation, too, is less than fully convincing. It assumes that their enemies believe that fraternities remain what they were in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*. Perhaps many in the academy do believe this. But, if so, it is because they want to. For it is perfectly obvious that fraternities are no longer the bastions of "privilege" or even of white male exclusivity they once were: fraternity membership cuts across socioeconomic lines, none are allowed to exclude racial or ethnic minorities, and on many campuses women have been admitted as members.

While there are still relatively few black members of many fraternities, that is at least partly due to black students' self-segregation. Many predominantly black fraternities have been formed, as well as fraternities predominantly of other formerly excluded groups, such as Jews. In addition, homosexual students have been founding gay fraternities, such as Delta Lambda Phi at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, and lesbian sororities, such as Lambda Delta Lambda at the University of California at Los Angeles and some other campuses.

The distance travelled since Fitzgerald's day, even—or especially—in the Ivy League, is enormous. Take Amherst, for example. By 1981, a year after they began admitting women, Amherst's fraternities experienced some unanticipated problems. Rather than resulting in promiscuity, proximity of the sexes seemed to inhibit romantic relationships—to the point where one fraternity woman is quoted as complaining of an "incest taboo." At the same time, she described herself and her fraternity sisters as resenting "invasions" of Smith women for weekend parties: "It's like I want to say, 'Get out of my house, bitch.'"²¹ These are not the fraternities Fitzgerald knew.

Thus, the persistence of a dated image of fraternities itself needs explaining. It certainly is not explained by its being true. Abolishing fraternities means banning black fraternities, gay fraternities, coed fraternities, and sororities as well. Yet the antifraternity juggernaut rolls on. At Bowdoin in 1992 as at Amherst in 1984, women are prominent among those contesting the actions taken against the Greek system. Whatever some may think or say, banning fraternities has little to do with overthrowing white male privilege.

Furthermore, the relationship between pressure from radical faculty and administrative action against fraternities is neither simple nor uniform from one institution to another. At some colleges, such as Gettysburg, administrators have acted less drastically than their faculties recommended. This suggests that they were engaged in their usual task of balancing the demands of competing forces (in this case, radical faculty versus profraternity trustees).²² But at other institutions, administrators seem to be taking the lead and to be proud of it. The authorities at Bowdoin, for example, refused even to consider compromises that would allow chapters to retain national affiliation with single-sex fraternities even while sharing facilities with an associated sorority. And after Colby prevailed in Superior Court, its president, William R. Cotter, mailed a thirteen-page "master plan" to other college and university presidents, explaining how he rid his campus of fraternities.²³ Indeed, the frequency with which the same tactics and arguments reappear on the most diverse and geographically distant campuses indicates that higher education's administrators are taking their cues more from one another than from their faculties. Often, as at Kenyon College, the ball is set rolling by a presidentially appointed panel to study conditions of campus life, which then produces an antifraternity manifesto.

The more one examines this phenomenon, the stranger it becomes. When asked why they wish to rid their respective campuses of fraternities, or why they want fraternities to go coed, deans and presidents seem bereft of convincing reasons. Dickinson president A. Lee Fritschler and Gettysburg president Gordon A. Haaland reached back into the Victorian era to come up with this one: if women were to live in fraternity houses they would "civilize" the men.²⁴ Not easily outdone, a Middlebury dean stated that a young man who was not in a coed fraternity, where he could be subordinate to female leaders, would be unable to handle work with female superiors later in life.²⁵

A Lesson in Freedom of Association

Since other explanations ring hollow, perhaps the charge that fraternities are "anti-intellectual" is the reason for the assault upon them. However, a 1986 study by the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity indicates that 62.9 percent of fraternity men are performing at or somewhere above the national scholastic average (sorority women fare less well, with 38.9 percent having

grade point averages above the national average).²⁶ What, then, is the basis for the claim that fraternities are anti-intellectual? Certainly, fraternities are not founded for intellectual purposes, but the same can be said of many student organizations that are *not* under attack. Not being founded for an intellectual purpose is not the same thing as being anti-intellectual.

Prominent among favored nonfraternal organizations are the various student political groups. These have become notorious for substituting demonstration for debate and even preventing speakers of alternative views from being heard. Unlike fraternities, these groups are truly anti-intellectual. And yet they are generously financed by mandatory student activity fees and otherwise enjoy the support and encouragement of faculty and administrators. The argument that fraternities are anti-intellectual rings hollow.

In the present campus climate, "anti-intellectual" seems to function as a code word for something quite different, namely, the condition of being nonideological. And here we come, I believe, to the true reason why fraternities are under attack. The problem is not that they are populated by a politically incorrect type of person, namely, the heterosexual white male. The problem is that they are not political at all. Or perhaps not being political is another species of political incorrectness. In any case, fraternities do not fit in with ideologically-driven plans to reinvent campus life. These plans are inspired and supported by radical faculty, but they are rooted in the ranks of midlevel "student affairs" administrators, providing them with a much-needed *raison d'être*.

At Colby the Greek social system was abolished simply because, as Dean of Students Janice Seitzinger put it, "Fraternities were inconsistent with the new vision of residential life."²⁷ This new vision does not appear to be shared by the students. It is brought to them, and will be forced on them, by administrators with a self-chosen mission. Dickinson, similarly, has announced its intention "to liberate" students from fraternity-fostered "narrow perspectives and provincial moral and social assumptions."²⁸

Basing its conclusions on an attitude survey of college and university administrators, the Carnegie Foundation states in its aforementioned report that fraternities and sororities "are especially inclined to separate themselves too much from others for the wrong reasons."²⁹ We are not told what the "wrong reasons" are. It is no secret, however, that fraternities and sororities are social organizations founded in part to create a more stable framework for personal attachment than can be sustained in the anonymous flux of the larger student body. If that is a "wrong reason" for a group to seek a separate identity, the "right reason" must lie in those forms of separation college and university administrators do support.

At many institutions, administrators have established separate orientation sessions for minority students and have provided them separate housing and/or other facilities as well; and at some institutions they have at least

acquiesced to minority students' consequent demand for separate commencement exercises. In addition, administrators have channeled mandatory student fees to support groups espousing "gay rights" or other group-affiliated causes and have created special centers for women (invariably under the control of radical feminist and often lesbian feminist factions). Beyond these exercises in divisiveness, a growing list of institutions have established mandatory "sensitivity training" seminars, in which students and sometimes faculty are taught that all whites are racist but that no "person of color" could possibly be a racist, regardless of what he says or does.

Separate academic programs and departments of Afro-American studies, women's studies, and gay and lesbian studies need to be mentioned in this context only because their very ubiquity tends to cause us to take them for granted, forgetting that they convey explicit or implicit doctrines of separatism. It may seem too facile to relate the curricular attack on Western civilization to the seige mounted against fraternities. Yet Colby's dean does not help us fight the temptation to do so, when she quips, "After all, Greek civilizations have died before, and the world seems none the worse for it."³⁰

If separation occurs for purely social purposes, it is wrong, and anachronistic claims of racial and ethnic prejudice are used to justify suppressing it. If separation occurs by allegedly oppressed or "marginalized" groups, dramatizing their victimization by American society, then that is right and is supported when not in fact instigated by college and university authorities. This must be the "new vision of residential life" announced by the Colby dean. The "narrow perspectives and provincial moral and social assumptions" from which Dickinson wishes to "liberate" its students presumably include the view that a social group can be formed just for fun and fellowship, without reference to America's real or alleged racism, sexism, and "homophobia."

Fraternities interfere with the agenda of the student affairs staff. They do so not because they are havens of prejudice but simply because they exist for another purpose. Fraternities engage students' attention and absorb their energies in ways that distract from the inculcation of guilt and anger. More important, fraternities provide a social setting, free of administrative manipulation, in which their members can share their reactions to campus events and discover that they are not alone in doubting the doctrines so insistently promulgated. This provides much-needed psychological support for independent thought. Fraternities, in short, have become a sanctuary for campus heterodoxy, and that is why there are those who feel they must be stamped out.

Notes

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3. "Amherst Greeks Down-and-Out in 1984...ALIVE in 1991," *Campus Commentary* (October 1991), 1, a publication of the National Interfraternity Conference.
4. "Colby Disciplines 60 Fraternity Members," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 23 May 1990, A2-3; and "The Colby Saga."
5. Carol Innerst, "College Faculties Rushing to Abolish Fraternities in U.S.," *Washington Times*, 12 April 1990.
6. "Middlebury Faculty Votes to Revamp Fraternities," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 November 1988, A2.
7. Carol Innerst, "Universities Declare War on the Greeks," *Washington Times*, 18 March 1991.
8. Innerst, "College Faculties Abolish Fraternities."
9. Michael Hirschorn, "Behavior of Students in Fraternities Worsens on Many Campuses as Membership Soars," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 March 1988, A34.
10. Earl Smith, "Like the Brontosaurus, Fraternities Are Engaged in a Futile Struggle against a Changed Climate," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 December 1987, B2.
11. Scott Jaschik, "Maine Court Upholds Private College's Penalties against Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 August 1991, A20.
12. See David K. Easlick, Jr., "The Battle for the Northeast: Alpha Alpha and Theta Under Fire," *Deke Quarterly* (Spring 1992): 7.
13. Ibid.
14. *Campus Life: In Search of Community*, a special report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, with a forward by Ernest L. Boyer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), table B-7.
15. Ibid., table B-5.
16. Hirschorn, A36.
17. Innerst, "College Faculties Abolish Fraternities."
18. Lauren Keefe, "Several Northeastern Colleges Re-evaluating Greek Systems," *Tufts Daily*, Commencement 1990 edition, 5.
19. Jay Parini, "Academic Conservatives Who Decry 'Politicization' Show Staggering Naïveté about Their Own Biases," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 December 1988, B1.
20. Liz McMillen, "An Anthropologist's Disturbing Picture of Gang Rape on Campus," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 September 1990, A3.
21. Lorenzo Middleton and Anne C. Roark, "Don't You Just Hate These Parties?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 July 1981, 3.
22. Innerst, "College Faculties Abolish Fraternities."
23. "The Colby Saga."
24. Innerst, "College Faculties Abolish Fraternities."
25. David K. Easlick, Jr., *Middlebury Update*, report of a undated telephone conversation in a January 1991 press release.
26. Hirschorn, A36.
27. Keefe, 5.
28. Dickinson College, *Report of the Select Committee on Greek Life* (October 1989), 10.
29. *Campus Life*, 49.
30. Smith, B2.