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In wake of tragic hazing, Greek life is changing in compelling, positive ways

Bob Selsor Springfield News-Leader

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Recent coverage of the Danny Santulli tragedy, about a young man harmed in a fraternity hazing incident three years ago, has shined an intense light on harmful hazing practices known to take place in a small number of fraternities. But the proven social and academic benefits of Greek life are numerous and often overlooked, and a lot has changed in three years. A forceful effort to stamp out this kind of conduct, both at the state and national level, has gained significant traction in the years since Danny Santulli was harmed and is showing positive results.

Within weeks of the Santulli incident in 2021, the Mizzou Greek Alliance was formed by a group of fathers and grandfathers who were former fraternity members. Some of us had experienced hazing of some type in our youth and although most of it was harmless, we knew from our 300 or so years of combined experience as advisors that under the right circumstances it could become dangerous. We recruited dozens of Greek alumni to the cause and, channeling our determination, we immediately began a training and education campaign designed to raise awareness and ultimately stamp out hazing, hazardous drinking and other harmful conduct in fraternities. Sixteen fraternity chapters joined our group. We brought in speakers from around the country and we generated a YouTube video now viewed 1,300 times highlighting the worst hazing incidents over the years and the harsh consequences that befell those involved.

We also worked hand in hand with University of Missouri administrators to develop aspects of a new student conduct code that rewards student organizations for policing their own ranks, and punishes them when they don't stand up to bad actors. Our public website likewise highlights a wide variety of resources for chapter officers and advisors, as well as hard data on the problems presented and the solutions that have been proven to work. We have a bill in the Missouri General Assembly known as "Danny's Law," in honor of Danny Santulli, that will give immunity from prosecution to anyone who is the first to call 911 to obtain help for a member of an organization that is in distress as a result of hazing or dangerous action.

The University of Missouri has forcefully addressed the issue as well. Every new member of a Greek organization now has to participate in an interactive training session on hazing and alcohol abuse that teaches them to spot harmful conduct as it is beginning, and to empower them to confront it. National fraternities have likewise devoted millions of dollars in resources towards not only training and education, but also enforcement of conduct standards against rogue chapters and rogue members. Continuing public prosecutions of the worst abusers has also sent a strong message that this type of conduct will not remain hidden, nor will it be tolerated. The result of these and other efforts across the country appears to be translating into measurable results. According to the Hazing Deaths Database, while there were one to two hazing deaths nationally each year prior to 2021, there have been *none* in the past three years.

Finally, lost in all of the rightful focus on these problems are the positive aspects of Greek membership. Most of the 6,000 Greek chapters do not engage in this kind of harmful conduct. Many provide needed support for their members. Large numbers of college students today are in emotional crisis, and much of it arises out of social isolation. According to the NIH, approximately 1,300 college students die annually by suicide. Hard data supports that members of Greek organizations statistically have lower rates of depression than the general public. Academic performance is also higher in Greek communities and, according to the Gallup organization, 84% of Greek alumni would still join their Greek house if they had it to do all over again. Greek alumni are over five times more likely to donate to their alma mater than graduates who did not join a fraternity or sorority. And Greek membership offers leadership experience and unparalleled opportunities to cultivate sociability.

The takeaway from all of this is that, while serious problems remain, partnerships drive change and things are changing in Greek organizations in a meaningful way. And the benefits of Greek membership, which have been embraced by generations of college students, are needed more than ever before.

Bob Selsor is a 1982 graduate of the University of Missouri and the president of the Mizzou Greek Alliance.