

# ESSENTIALS

## **"Yeah, but it wasn't hazing!" Research-Based Insights on Why Students Underestimate Hazing**

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Time and time again, when responding to campus hazing incidents, student affairs professionals face protest from incredulous students, parents, and others who insist the behavior in question was certainly *not* hazing. While we don't dispute the possibility that some incidents may be erroneously labeled as hazing, we also know it is often the case that students participate in hazing behaviors yet don't see their behavior as hazing. In fact, in our recent survey (Allan & Madden, 2006), one out of five students reported they had experienced behaviors that meet the standard definition of hazing; yet when asked directly whether or not they had experienced hazing, only one in 20 of these students said yes.

Many students who report being subjected to specific hazing behaviors do not consider themselves to have been hazed and provide explanations such as "nothing happened to me that I did not agree to" or "it was all in fun." This disconnect between students' experiences and interpretation of those experiences as hazing mirrors a similar finding that emerged in the Alfred/NCAA survey (1999) of varsity athletes. Intrigued by the disparity between the reporting of behaviors that meet the definition of hazing and the failure of students to label those behaviors as such, we sought to explore this phenomenon further through 90 individual interviews with students, staff, and administrators at the participating institutions. The students interviewed were leaders of a range of student groups, organizations, and members of athletic teams; some were members of fraternal organizations. Catalyzed by questions raised from the survey data, interviews provided an opportunity for a more in-depth examination about perceptions of hazing, and helped generate some insights on why many students seem to underestimate hazing.

### **Why the Disconnect?**

When we asked students to define hazing, we encountered responses ranging from some students who held could not define hazing to those who could articulate a partial definition. For example, the following student revealed a very limited understanding of hazing: "...you are never really taught specifically, but you are just told you can't do that because it is hazing and you'll get in trouble."

Others revealed how lack of understanding can sustain stereotypes about hazing as exemplified in the following quotes: "I heard it mentioned in high school as something fraternities and sororities do. It seems like a word the media... labeled them with." "My interpretation was you have a fraternity or sorority and you have to do rushing and different acts to prove you want to be there."

Some student definitions were more accurate - but still incomplete. At first glance, such responses seemed to capture the essence of hazing by focusing on power dynamics. For example, many students depicted hazing as involving an element of force as in the following quote: "A power thing... forcing people to do things they don't want to do."

However, when we probed further to ask what students meant by "force," they typically gave examples involving physical force (e.g., being held down and forced to imbibe alcohol, being tied up, or somehow restrained). Student images and definitions of hazing rarely articulated how coercion can serve as a substitute for physical force in hazing. This may help to explain why many respond "it wasn't hazing because we gave everyone the choice to do it or not; they could have chosen not to participate." Often,

students do not see the power of peer pressure and coercion central to hazing. Many may feel it, but aren't sure how to name it, while others perceive they were "in control" of what happened to them.

### **Technically it May Be Hazing, But...**

It is not uncommon for students to use euphemisms like "tradition," "rites of passage," or "stunts," to excuse or deny hazing behavior. Even when students acknowledge that a groups' behavior may constitute hazing, they often justify the behaviors by discounting the seriousness or categorizing it as "low" level hazing. According to students, "low level" hazing is viewed as silly antics, scavenger hunts, drinking games, nudity, and sexual simulations that are often described as "fun." One student shared a story about how juniors and seniors initiate first year students by giving them a list of "five to ten funny things to do." For example, "One girl didn't like talking about porn so they made her go to the video store and take a picture holding a porn video." Some other examples of behavior described as "funny" included requiring humiliating or demeaning attire and behavior in public, licking whipped cream off bananas, nude or suggestive photographs of participants, and female students pole dancing for a male audience.

Another student explained that adults go overboard in their concerns about hazing,

*There are loads of reports indicating hazing is harmful and unwanted by the students joining organizations. However, when speaking to most of the students who go through it, it is not as bad as adults and authorities make it out to be. Most of the activities are not harmful and whether you are a part of an organization or not, most college students will be involved with some kind of drinking activity.*

In labeling some behaviors as less serious, students fail to understand that activities that may seem like harmless antics to some can be uncomfortable and emotionally charged for others. An individual's past experiences with physical, mental, emotional, or sexual abuse can drastically affect they way they experience antics like those described by students in the study. Furthermore, hazing behaviors that appear harmless can set the stage for more severe hazing, especially where alcohol consumption is involved.

In addition to downplaying the potential harm of hazing behaviors, some students justify these behaviors by focusing on what they perceive to be the positive aspects of the experience. Some view hazing as leading to positive outcomes such as bonding, group unity, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of achievement. These sentiments can be heard in the following quote:

*The term hazing has many degrees to it and those I've experienced have been minimal, often times memorable, and useful in creating group unity. I would argue that hazing in harsh contexts should be done away with but without some form of hazing there's no sense of achievement.*

### **Recommendations**

In the face of limited definitions and understandings of hazing, along with denial and/or strong justifications constructed by students, what can be learned from these findings? Clearly it is important to sustain efforts to educate and build campus awareness about hazing. In particular, finding ways to engage students in deeper discussions about hazing may prove especially worthwhile. In addition to familiarizing students with the basic definition of hazing, we recommend in-depth discussion sessions designed to enhance students' understanding that:

- Hazing often occurs in the absence of physical force.
- What one person experiences as silly antics might not only be uncomfortable for another but could tap into another's past experiences with abuse and cause emotional harm.
- Coercion is a powerful force that negates true consent.
- "Low level" or "little hazing" is still hazing - and these behaviors often pave the way for "big

hazing.”

- Hazing is more than simply a list of prohibited activities; context and power dynamics are at the core of hazing.
- Positive non-hazing approaches are more likely to achieve group unity, bonding, and a sense of accomplishment.

These research findings and recommendations are derived from a [regional pilot study](#). A follow-up national hazing study is currently underway and includes survey responses from 10,000 undergraduate students enrolled at more than 50 institutions throughout the U.S. and interviews with staff and students from 15 institutions across the nation. These data will continue to deepen our understanding of the ways in which students define and justify hazing. Helping students develop more sophisticated understandings of the definition and dynamics of hazing is a key step toward changing the culture of hazing.

## References

Allan, E. and Madden, M. (2006). *Examining and transforming campus hazing cultures*. Pilot study report. Retrieved September 12, 2007, from <http://www.hazingstudy.org/>

NCAA and Alfred University (1999). *National Survey of Sports Teams*. Retrieved September 12, 2007, from [http://www.alfred.edu/sports\\_hazing/introduction.html](http://www.alfred.edu/sports_hazing/introduction.html)