

Historical Issues in Cal Poly's Fraternities

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Course Instructor Professor Andrew Morris

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

By

Vincent Mejia

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Abstract

In recent years, fraternities have grown exponentially at Cal Poly and have served many good purposes on campus. However, from the time of its inception in 1949 until now, there existed a great many problems. Much of the research that exists depicts the negative aspects of fraternities, such as hazing, rape, and racial antagonism. Cal Poly itself has also experienced similar issues throughout the course of its history. Hazing has been an issue at Cal Poly since before any Greek organization was on campus. It is easy to see how that behavior transitioned over once fraternities began arising. An early development of rape culture within SLO county increased the number of rapes at Cal Poly, thus leading to a wider acceptance of rape culture within men in the Greek system. Given that Cal Poly is a predominantly white institution, racial ignorance has sprouted within fraternities leading to act of racial and sexual ignorance as well as exclusion of minorities within the Greek community.

Keywords: *Fraternity, Hazing, Rape, Racism, Greek Life*

Introduction

When people first think of the word fraternity, one of two thoughts come into mind. Some think of brotherhood, laughter, and bonds that will last a lifetime. However, others think of parties, alcohol abuse, and hazing. Opinions on whether fraternities are good for a campus or not vary greatly. Some look to the community service hours and philanthropic work as evidence of their innocence, while others believe such acts to be merely a cover for their bad behavior.

A negative stigma has developed around men in Greek life which has been extrapolated to any individual hoping to join a fraternity. In truth, some students really join with the aspiration of improving their life skills or seeking to find friends away from home. It is unfortunate that the

negative culture found within fraternities has clouded the benefits that they provide. With that being said, it is the responsibility of those in Greek life to change the narrative by actively making a change.

Greek life at Cal Poly has vastly grown in recent years. Since its humble beginnings in 1949 as a three-chapter organization with no nationals or affiliation to the campus, the Inter-Fraternity Council (IFC) has grown to 16 campus-recognized fraternities.¹ Each fraternity has certain standards and mottos that they try to abide by. Each house has particular characteristics that they look for in individuals at rush which is what makes each house unique in of itself. That is not to say that there have not been any bumps in the road. Greek life has had to come a long way since its inception and has had to endure many growing pains to get to where it stands today.

These growing pains were inclusive of many mistakes made by fraternities throughout Cal Poly's history. Aside from scattered articles and old newspapers, there has not been a compilation of evidence depicting the mistakes that fraternities have made throughout the years. Fraternities are quick to boast about their generosity and the accomplishments of their chapter but are quick to hide in a bad situation. Despite all the good that fraternities do for their school, members, and community, their still exists a dark history of hazing, rape, and racial ignorance in Cal Poly fraternities.

Historiography

General research has been done on this topic in the past, but a majority of what has been done has been on the negative aspects of fraternal life. One of the more researched topics is the

¹ Jason Columbini, interview by Vincent Mejia, 18 February 2020.

role of hazing. Jerryl Briggs identifies the role of hazing in fraternities, specifically in African American chapters, as a way of separating the “real members” from the “pledges.” It is not used as a way to create bonds and build brotherhood, as many have suggested, but rather as a way to “...secure respect, credibility, and status” for the new members. This is often done through a number of group activities that involve humiliating and painful tasks. According to Briggs, it is not uncommon for pledges to be forced to consume copious amounts of alcohol or dress in humiliating outfits to class.² Hazing has resulted in many national organizations and college campuses banning such behavior and implementing heavy punishments for such behavior. These may include expulsion of the fraternity and any members partaking in any act of hazing. However, their sphere of influence only extends so far. Fraternities on campuses often continue the practice of hazing despite what the rules may say. Research has actually found that hazing lends a hand to the development of rape culture on many campuses.

In his scholarly piece, Robert Rhoades explains his view on how rape culture begins to manifest within fraternities. He believes that it is “(1) the promotion of hostile representations of women, (2) the positioning of women as passive participants, and (3) issues related to gender perceptions” that make men in Greek life act sexually aggressive towards women. In the eyes of Rhoades, systems such as “the little sister program,” where a fraternity admits a woman to join the brotherhood, is a tool used by men to create a sex-based hierarchy which allows for the men to objectify and control women. He goes on to explain how men of similar nature are more likely to join similar houses. It can then be seen that if a group of fraternity members all view women in one particular way, they are more likely to attract others who share the same views thus

²Jerryl Briggs, *et al.*, *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 480.

creating an atmosphere of rape culture. Rhoades also discusses the role that hazing has on fraternity socialization and how it bolsters rape culture. Particular attitudes and beliefs are developed while being hazed which affects young members' social skills and social cues. The continuation of hazing allows for the continuation of rape culture in the eyes of Rhoades.³

A quick Google search of fraternities would expose the racial prevalence of white students in the Greek system throughout the nation. Matthew Hughey believes this lack of diversity stems from the *Brown v. Board of Education* days. While white individuals were thriving in high schools and colleges, people of color were being discriminated against and limited by systematic oppression. This enabled fraternities to gain a wealthy and white following. The establishment of a predominantly white demographic within Greek organizations has since resulted in "structures and activities [that] encourage homogeneity and discourage interaction across difference." It is no secret that there are many differences across cultural boundaries. Minorities often cannot relate to the fraternal environment and are deterred from joining. If they do decide to join, then it is common for a minority student to be marginalized by their own ethnicity for joining a predominantly white institution.⁴

A History of Hazing?

Hazing began at Cal Poly before fraternities existed on campus. It cannot be said when hazing first began at Cal Poly, but the institution has had rules against the practice since 1911. It

³ Robert A. Rhoades, "Whales Tales, Dog Piles, and Beer Goggles: An Ethnographic Case Study of Fraternity Life," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol.26(3) (September 1995): 306-323.

⁴ Matthew W. Hughey, "The Paradox of Participation: Nonwhites in White Sororities and Fraternities," *Social Problems*, Vol.57(4) (November 2010): 653-679.

stated that those who are caught hazing face the risk of expulsion as well as imprisonment.⁵ Given the lack of early evidence and vagueness of Cal Poly's policy, it can be seen how hazing was not prioritized as a primary issue. It is suspected that sports teams and other on campus clubs were the primary culprits of hazing during those times. However, one did not have to be in any club to be hazed. During the time of the late 30's, incoming freshman would often be hazed by upperclassmen for simply being new to the campus. Many freshmen feared the daily punishment they experienced as upperclassmen would attempt to create new way to haze freshmen in an attempt to outdo the previous year's upperclassmen.⁶ While some feared the threat of permanent injury or being used as mere "tools," others on campus viewed hazing as a "darn good thing" and as a way to "get rid of undesirables."⁷ All this being said, the stage was set for fraternities to take advantage of hazing for themselves.

Fraternities first arrived at Cal Poly in 1949. A small council comprised of 3 fraternities (Chi Sigma Phi, Delta Tau, and Alpha Upsilon) were excited to develop houses that would grow and develop a strong bond between students who they could call brothers.⁸ At that point in time, fraternities were very hard to regulate. They were not regulated by the school nor did they have to abide by the rules of any national organization. This made the ability to track hazing very difficult. As time progressed, more and more Greek organizations began to form. Thus, the Inter Fraternity Council (IFC) was created as a way to build unity amongst the different houses, and as a governing

⁵ *California Polytechnic School Catalogue 1910-11 Announcements 1911-12* (1 May 1911), <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/catalogs/9>, accessed 26 February 2020.

⁶ "What About This Hazing?" *El Mustang*, 13 October 13 1939, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/279>, accessed 26 February 2020.

⁷ Eugene Schoemann, "Question of the Week: What about Hazing?" *El Mustang*, 20 October 1939, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/280/>, accessed 26 February 2020.

⁸ Columbini interview.

body to keep one another in check. The creation of IFC opened the door for a partnership with Cal Poly. Now fraternities had to abide by the rules set out by the University. In the event that any chapter would be caught breaking them, the students involved would be “subject to fine and imprisonment.”⁹

Up until 2008, not many instances of hazing could be discovered, but that does not mean hazing was not a continuous practice throughout Greek fraternities. Periodically, the President of the University and the Dean of Students would put out a warning to all campus organizations reminding them of the consequences of their actions. These warnings may be a result of hazing rumors within Greek organizations, but no official evidence to convict anyone. Similar instances are seen on campus today. If there exist any rumors of foul play from fraternities, a similar warning is sent to all chapters to remind members of the punishment they may face. In 1973, Everett Chandler, who chaired the Dean of Students, did show concern over the growing popularity of hazing at Cal Poly. In a *Mustang Daily* article, he discussed how he did not see hazing as an issue that San Luis Obispo faced but did experience one chapter force their members to dress up in embarrassing clothing and walk around campus.¹⁰ This goes to show how prevalent of practice that hazing could be without any alert from campus.

The post 2000 era saw a large increase in hazing reports at Cal Poly’s campus. Reports of fraternities forcing their pledges to partake in numerous painful and physical tasks began to flood in. For example, one fraternity member recalled having to take numerous shots of hard alcohol, sit on an ice block, fill his mouth with tobacco, then choose to either defecate on himself or throw up. Other instances have included “bros [fighting] their bros butt naked” or passing around multiple

⁹ “Hazing is Illegal; Punishable by Law,” *El Mustang*, 9 October 1959, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/797/>, accessed 26 February 2020.

¹⁰ “Hazing Draws Concerns,” *Mustang Daily*, 7 May 1973, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1902/>, accessed 27 February 2020.

60-ounce bottles of hard liquor and forcing people to drink until it has all gone.¹¹ The worst instance of hazing Cal Poly has experienced resulted in the death of Carson Starkey. Carson was a freshman at Cal Poly in 2008 and a new initiate to Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity. After his initiation into the organization, Starkey was continuously hazed by his brothers to drink copious amounts of alcohol throughout the night. Reports state that Starkey's blood alcohol level to be sitting around .39%-.44%. He was not taken to the hospital until the following morning where he was pronounced dead. SAE was since then dissolved by the school and a criminal investigation was opened against 9 suspects who were believed to be directly involved in the hazing.¹²

Cal Poly Fraternities and Sexual Assault

As mentioned before, one of the most serious problems about fraternities nationwide is rape culture. Similar to hazing, Cal Poly has a history of sexual assault and rape. This history dates back to the late 70s when San Luis Obispo saw a doubling in rapes and sexual assaults throughout the county. At first, Cal Poly seemed to be unaffected by its surroundings, but as time progressed, rape culture began to seep its way into the CSU system. Cal Poly began implementing sexual assault trainings and preventative classes with hopes of educating students of possible red flags that might indicate a dangerous situations, and explaining how to handle those situations if they arise.¹³ Despite the implementation of preventative measures, there still existed many instances of rape and sexual assault in Greek life.

¹¹ Katie Koschalk, "Geeked on Greek? Look before you Leap," *Mustang Daily*, 11 September 2009, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/6851/>, accessed 26 February 2020.

¹² Catherine Borgeson, "Carson Starkey's Legacy," *Mustang Daily*, 11 May 2011, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/7089>, accessed 29 February 2020.

¹³ Lori Marlett, "Student Advisor Outlines Means of Rape Defense," *Mustang Daily*, 14 January 1982, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/2881/>, accessed 29 February 2020.

Fraternities at Cal Poly have had a troubled past with rape and sexual assault allegations. Due to victim protection laws, details of many cases are disclosed for the privacy for the victim. However, in 1989, it was found that 14 of the previous 15 reported rapes involved fraternity men as the main culprit. During that same time, it was estimated that around 90% of sexual assaults and rapes went unreported, so it is likely that there existed many more unreported incidences.¹⁴ Another known incident occurred by a SAE pledge in 1989. According to the victim, she was walking home at night when a student by the name of Taylor led her to his apartment and proceeded with non-consensual actions.¹⁵ Despite the severity of the issue, it seems that this is not an issue that has diminished with time. Today, Cal Poly still experiences serious issues with rape culture. According to a 2018 Mustang News article, Cal Poly has the second most reported rape cases amongst all the CSU schools.¹⁶ More recent cases involving Greek life occurred in 2016 with suspects from the Delta Chi chapter along with Alpha Gamma Rho. Both fraternities were punished with suspensions from campus activities and social events.¹⁷ All in all, there has been countless incidents of sexual assault and rape within the Greek system throughout all of Cal Poly's history.

¹⁴ "What do you do when it happens to you?" *Summer Mustang*, 10 August 1989, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5046&context=studentnewspaper>, accessed 28 February 2020.

¹⁵ Laura Bestor, "Student Maintains His Innocence in Rape," *Mustang Daily*, 9 October 1991, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5030&context=studentnewspapers>, accessed 29 February 2020.

¹⁶ Aidan Mcgloin, "Cal Poly sees rise in arrests, sexual assaults, report shows." *Mustang News*, 26 September 2018, <https://mustangnews.net/cal-poly-sees-rise-in-arrests-sexual-assaults-report-shows/>, accessed 1 March 2020.

¹⁷ Nick Wilson, "10 sex crime allegations reported to Cal Poly this school year," *The Tribune*, 11 April 2016, <https://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/crime/article71208357.html>, accessed 1 March 2020.

Fraternal Ignorance at Cal Poly

There is no hiding the lack of diversity at Cal Poly. Cal Poly sits atop all other California Universities as the wealthiest and least diverse school in California. With that, comes a sense of cultural ignorance. Students are not exposed to different ideas, cultures, and lifestyles. The dominance of wealthy white students disables creates this culture of ignorance where students are not aware if they are stereotyping or making racist remarks. It is these systematic flaws that allow for Greek life to take the face of a predominantly white and ignorant institution at Cal Poly.

In 2013, Phi Sigma Kappa made national headlines for throwing a party with a racist and sexually discriminatory theme. The party was titled “Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos,” where brothers were encouraged to dress up in attire reflecting colonial times in America and women to dress in stereotypical and “sexy” Native American clothing.¹⁸ Anger flooded throughout the campus and Cal Poly community as this act was not only a reflection of racial and sexual ignorance, but also exposed a major character flaw of Cal Poly’s campus and Greek system. Native Americans felt heavily discriminated against while women were disturbed at the fraternity’s willingness to objectify women in such an open manner. At the time, only 0.2% of Cal Poly’s campus identified as Native-American, with a smaller, if any, percentage represented throughout Greek life.¹⁹ This party goes to exemplify how the absence of representation prevents the broadening of ideas. Individuals feel safe getting away with unacceptable behavior because there is no one from the underrepresented group to speak up against the offense. One would

¹⁸ Hannah Croft, “Cal Poly gains national attention for “Colonial Bros and Nava-hos party,” *Mustang News*, 22 November 2013, <https://mustangnews.net/cal-poly-gains-national-attention-for-colonial-bros-and-nava-hos-party/>, accessed March 1, 2020.

¹⁹ “Characteristics of Students Enrolled at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo,” *Poly View*, 2013, https://content-calpoly-edu.s3.amazonaws.com/ir/1/publications_reports/polyview/pv13.pdf, accessed on 1 March 2020.

assume that such a nationally recognized event would cause a sense of racial awareness within fraternities at Cal Poly, yet no more than five years later, they found a way to raise the bar on racial ignorance.

2018 was a very tense year for Cal Poly, as an individual by the name of Kyler Watkins made nationally headlines for wearing blackface at his fraternity house during Multicultural Week. Kyler Watkins was a member of Lambda Chi Alpha, a fraternity that is known to have members that are both less diverse and more wealthy than other fraternities on campus. As the story goes, Kyler was attending a brotherhood bonding event and was part of the “black team”. Kyler claims that his act “had nothing whatsoever to do with racism or discrimination.” Rather he was just “going all out for his team.” Regardless of his intention, Kyler’s actions angered the already marginalized African American population at Cal Poly as well as many others. Within weeks, another photo surfaced of a group of Lambda Chi Alpha members posing as Cholos which is a type of Mexican gangster.²⁰ Once again, Cal Poly’s fraternity system made national headlines for the wrong reasons. All fraternities incurred a self-imposed probation as a stance against Kyler Watkins and his actions.

While there exists much more to the story, the point has been made. A lack of diversity in Greek life results in ignorance of all sorts. Whether if Kyler Watkins knew of the racial history behind blackface, one would assume that at least one member of Lambda Chi Alpha would notify him of the consequences of his actions. Having a fraternity where most, if not all, members are of the same race and socio-economic status prevents a check of discriminatory remarks and actions.

²⁰ Andrew Sheeler, “Cal Poly student apologizes for wearing blackface at frat event,” *The Tribune*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/education/article208831809.html>, accessed on 1 March 2020.

Conclusion

There does not and will not ever exist a clear to answer to whether fraternities are more beneficial to a campus community or not. There is no doubt that their philanthropic efforts and community service benefit the community and others in need, but at what cost? Especially on a campus such as Cal Poly where Greek life has been under immense fire in the past. This is not to say that steps have not been made in the right direction to improve Greek life.

Cal Poly has made strides to improve the behavior of fraternities. The Greek Life office has implemented more rules and policies to hold fraternities accountable for their actions such as meeting with chapter presidents weekly to ensure that their rules are being followed. On campus professors are now being assigned as advisors in order to remind chapters of their obligation to better the campus climate.²¹ While these changes are steps in the right direction, it is up to the individuals in Greek to implement change and acknowledge the mistakes of the past to ensure they never happen again.

What steps can be taken to improve the prevention of hazing within chapters? Cal Poly should implement a more serious hazing prevention training that is mandatory for all chapters. While there does exist a mandatory training now, it is not taken very seriously.²² It is simply a mobile slideshow with simple answers that many click through without paying attention. Perhaps bringing in an individual whose life was severely changed by hazing would show fraternities the actual affect that hazing can have on someone's life. Rather than it being in a large group setting, perhaps have the speaker visit from chapter to chapter to give a more personalized touch.

²¹ Columbini interview.

²² Columbini interview.

In terms of changing rape culture within organizations, it is the responsibility of the fraternities as a whole to hold one another accountable for the responsibilities of each other's actions. Fraternities need to realize that any mistake made reflects poorly on Greek life as a whole. There should be sanctions placed within IFC which mandate that any instance or accusation of sexual assault or rape be answered with immediate social probation. If the accused party is found guilty, then that chapter is removed immediately from IFC thus terminating its affiliation with Cal Poly. Rape is something that fraternity men cannot stand for in the slightest. Everyone must do their part if change is to be made. This includes brothers making sure other brothers are acting accordingly and being responsible around women when socializing.

Lastly, the first step to changing the lack of diversity within Greek organizations has to stem from Cal Poly. There needs to be larger admittance of minorities into Cal Poly's population. The lack of diversity in the classroom and in social circles create distance between different races on campus. Minorities are more hesitant to join IFC fraternities because of the differences both culturally and socio-economically. Only when students begin to understand one another's culture and backgrounds will there exist enough confidence for minority groups to join fraternities.

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