

THE RELATION OF FRATERNITIES TO EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

by

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Whatever conclusion educators, and those who are being educated, may have reached, or lack of conclusion, this fact remains patent; fraternities have entered so vitally and so universally into the educational centres of the nation, that their permanence is assured. True it is still a much mooted question in some colleges whether or not college fraternities should be allowed to exist and strong dissensions have arisen; but generally, though often gradually and insidiously, the fraternal organisations have won a permanent home. Excepting the military academies, West Point and Annapolis, where secret societies could not be tolerated by the government, Princeton and Vassar, of all the large eastern colleges, remain with doors closed to Greek letter societies.

The typical home of these fraternities is in the eastern college and the time of their inception dates back to early American history. Like a good many other things, both good and bad, fraternities have been swept westward by the strong irresistible sweep of advanced civilization. Simply because fraternities have met strong and determined opposition is, of course, no proof that their dominant influence is evil. Primarily, merely an evidence of diverse opinions. However, the persistent, extended efforts to crush the movement gives one a just reason to inquire into and find, if possible, whether or not such opposition is warranted.

With this end in view this discussion was undertaken. In gathering the material for this paper three methods were employed. (1) Books and magazines. (2) Personal interviews. (3) By circular letter. The following questions were enclosed in each letter.

(1) Give name and number of fraternities, if any, organized in your College.

(2) Give as nearly as you can the membership of each.

(3) Give total number of men attending College.

(4) State briefly the influence of fraternities in your College on ; (a) Scholarship. (b) Morals. (c) College discipline. (d) Athletics.

(5) Which, in your estimation, preponderates in your College, the good or evil influence of fraternities.

Less than one half of the letters sent out were answered. Of those who answered we give the following withholding the name of the writer only.

From Baker University

(1) 3

(2) About 25 each, 19 %

(3) 400

(4) "Good". to the first three, (d) unanswered.

(5) Good.

The above writer says in conclusion; "Fraternities in our College are under exceptionally favorable conditions, as the Literary Societies are very strong and hold the balance of power.

In my judgment when fraternities are strong enough in a school to hold the balance of power they are a serious source of trouble and often become an unmitigated nuisance."

Another professor from the same university answers as follows." It depends on the character of the school and upon the inter-collegiate fraternity relations. On the whole my observation leads me to believe that fraternities, as a rule, are helpful along all the lines you asked: And yet I must say that I regard the old fashioned literary societies worth far more to the student and to the College than the fraternities."

From University of Rochester N.Y.

- (1). 6
- (2). Average 20, 57 %
- (3). 208
- (4). (a) In the main helpful
  - (b) Generally a story-covering influence.
  - (c) An important aid to discipline.
  - (d) Encouraging
- (5) Good influences

From University of Nebraska

- (1) Eleven boys fraternities
- (2) Average, 21-15%
- (3) 1480
- (4) . (a) Good, when everything is considered
  - (b) Good, on the whole

(c) Good outweighs the bad.

(d) Decidedly good

(5) Good, by all odds.

From the Iowa State College.

"The Trustees, by recommendation of the faculty, have imposed the following rule concerning membership in fraternities:"

" The organization of fraternities among students is permitted. Membership in such fraternities is conditioned upon the completion of at least the freshman year of work in some one of the courses of the institution with an average standing of not less than 3.50. The President and faculty are authorized to impose such additional conditions as they may deem wise."

(1) One

(2 ) 20

(3) 1000 - 2%

(4) and (5) as follows:

"We have found during the past year that students who are ambitious to enter fraternities have sometimes felt the stimulus in their studies. It is my judgment that fraternities have no relation to morality or immorality. It is a question purely of the personnel of the particular chapter as in the case in any particular club. Neither do the presence of fraternities have any special relation to college discipline, except as we may be able to use the senior members to influence the junior members to better scholarship.

They have no special relation to athletics."

From Washburn Coll.

- (1) Only one - Fraternities but recently allowed.
- (2) 20 - 15%
- (3) 130
- (4) , (a) Stimulates
  - (b) Has proved helpful
  - (c) Cooperates with administration
  - (d) Helpful
- (5) Good, by all means.

From Michigan University

- (1) 20
- (2) 25 - 20 %
- (3) 2500
- (4) , (a) On the whole more harm than good
  - (b) Their influence is helpful but, again, more harm than good is done to morals.
  - (c) A helpful factor to college discipline
  - (d) They are the chief leaders and promoters of athletics.
- (5) I believe fraternities have led far more men away from than into an aggressive Christian life.

From Amherst Mass.

- (1) 11.
- (2) Average, 30

(3) 412 - 80 %

(4) & (5) In all these we consider that the good far outweighs the evil.

From Kansas University

(1) 9

(2) Average ,15

(3) 700 - 19 %

(4), (a) With men not good; with girls often good.

(b) On the whole not bad.

(c) Not noticeable; have been helpful on a few occasions.

(d) part good ; part bad.

(5)" Hard to say. If the same men could be put through college first as "frats," then as "barbs" a decision might be reached."

From the foregoing answers fraternities appear in a very good light since but one declared against them, two were non-committal and six spoke strongly in favor of fraternities. Taking an average of the nine colleges and universities, 20 % of the men are members of fraternities. The lowest percentage, 2, in Iowa Agricultural College; the highest percentage, 80, Amherst, Mass.

The following excerpts are taken from a letter written by an eastern man in response to the questions sent out. His statements have an especial value from the fact that they come from one who, for a considerable time, has made fraternities an object of especial

study. His work also brings him into close touch with the men of many colleges and universities.

✕ "It is quite difficult to speak in a general way of the influence of fraternities on the college community, since fraternities differ so widely in their object, scope and standards. Undoubtedly the atmosphere of the college fraternity house in many institutions is not conducive to scholarship, morals or to good athletics. However, from my rather careful study of the fraternity life of the larger institutions of the East and Middle West, I should say that the good influences which the fraternities exert preponderate over the evil influences.

In the East especially the fraternities usually consist of the carefully chosen men of the institution, and the scholarship of these men compares very favorably with that of the men who are not members of fraternities. There is, to be sure, a tendency in such a close life of fellowship to emphasize friendship, and the social life at the expense of persistence in severe mental work. As an offset to this, however, there is the sense of loyalty to the fraternity, and the aid of friendship to make students desire to do their best.

In regard to morals, the fraternities differ in their influence as widely as light differs from darkness. Undoubtedly many fraternities are a menace to the morals of their members. On the other hand the standards of honor and mutual respect and loyalty which are inculcated, to say nothing of certain religious influences which are becoming more and more dominant in the fraternities tend to



make better and stronger men. It is rather significant in this connection to note that about 1500 fraternity men have during the past season enrolled themselves in Bible classes that have met in the chapter houses.

The influence of fraternities on athletics is also such a varying factor that it is hard to speak accurately concerning it. In the institutions of the East where I am most familiar with the inner college life and spirit, and where as a rule the best men in college are fraternity men, I believe the influence of the fraternities on athletics is usually a helpful one. While there are natural rivalries between fraternities for athletic positions these generally result in the best men being chosen for the important places."

Of the twenty men we interviewed, professors, assistants and students, mostly; 7 expressed the opinion that the personnel of the fraternity controlled altogether its influence for good or bad, further, that the personnel gravitated toward social enjoyment and society preferment. 7 declared fraternities to be good in their influence, 4 bad and 2 were non-committal. Ten of the men interviewed were fraternity men and ten non-fraternity. The former were almost to a man in favor of fraternities anywhere and all the time. The latter (the bars) were generally opposed, though not so decided in their expressions against fraternities as the fraternity men were in favor of such organizations.

Below we give some of the most characteristic answers both for and against college fraternities. Listing the favorable

points first, followed in each case with an unfavorable statement.

Scholarship: In this fraternities are a decided help. Many have a "special committee whose business it is to coach any member who is not making good grades." This has been done in our own institution. They pride themselves on graduating all their men. Though this is indeed a brotherly act, yet the very fact that a man is a member of a fraternity often prevents him from studying by keeping "him up late at night dancing and playing cards, smoking, etc." Again scholarship is promoted by fraternities in that they take a keen interest in debating and oratorical contests among the several societies and with the barbs. The members often help their contestant by requiring him to deliver his oration or discussion before the society. And then give kindly criticism, the value of such preparatory training is evident. "It is customary at the regular weekly meeting to have some literary program."

"Fraternities drive out literary societies." Many an organization, which began as a literary society, became a fraternity whose avowed purpose is not literary achievement, but social betterment.

Morals: Fraternity men realize that dishonorable conduct brings their fraternity into ill repute. This alone keeps many an otherwise boisterous youth within the confines of propriety. "The fact, also, that all fraternities of any standing have graduate members helps to secure good conduct." These alumni meet with the undergraduate members in the chapter houses, give informal talks at social

gatherings, banquets, etc. Often the alumni own the chapter house and rent it to the college members, who are thus held responsible. Moreover men who are located in their own club house feel a sense of ownership and that it is to their interest to maintain the integrity as well as the furniture of the house. Again if a man gets noisome the faculty has a hold on him through his fraternity. In one institution the president broke up a disreputable fraternity simply by announcing that it was immoral. The fear of such a public statement has been a strong incentive to wholesome living on the part of many a fraternity.

"What fraternities stand for and what they really do are two entirely different things. If the men did what their organization upholds in its constitution there would be no question about morals." Undoubtedly chapter houses give the inmates a feeling of responsibility and a wholesome feeling that they have part ownership in something of lasting value. But because they have a place where they can go in and shut the door is often a strong temptation to drink, smoke and play cards until late at night. Such proceedings do not form a good basis for a strong, clean character. True: "All well organized fraternities have rules prohibiting members staying out late." But: "These rules, like the laws of Kansas, are not always carried out." "The selfish rivalry and dominant endeavor to win honor produces a veneer and outside polish that leads to snobbishness and false standards."

Discipline: "Very helpful. Often members of the fraternity are also members of the faculty."

"Discipline is much easier for the best men are in the fraternities and through the organisation the faculty can reach every man in it."

"Faculty members often visit with the fraternity men and these friendly visitations help each to understand the other and thus promotes a good fellowship feeling."

"In several instances they have been troublesome to the College authorities, but that was chiefly because the members were young and kiddish."

Athletics: Strange to say only one or two spoke altogether favorably of the influence of fraternities on athletic sports. the most that was said of a propitious nature was that, "Fraternity men were nearly without exception interested in athletics, and attend the games quite regularly and were members of the athletic association." Also if a fraternity had a man up for a position on the team the members saw to it that their candidate put forth his best efforts,

In many places there is such a strong rivalry between the fraternities that those which are not well represented in the athletic team will not turn out to the games and even refuse to pay toward the support of athletics. Each fraternity strives hard to win the most honors, especially in the athletic field. So each works hard to get their man in for captain or manager, buying and selling votes in extreme cases, even when the fraternity knows that its man is not the most competent man for the place. If successful, the team is crippled; if unsuccessful as already pointed out, the fraternity

is likely to withdraw its support and enthusiasm.

"The fraternity man is inclined to a life of ease, letting off his superfluous energy in dances and other social functions, all of which does not go far toward making an athlete."

"A college loses in college spirit as organizations within the college grow and dominate. Each fraternity working for itself and not for college honors."

These discussions might be continued to a wearisome length but we refrain believing that sufficient has been said both for and against to enable the reader to have a fair understanding of the subject and, perhaps, to arrive at some conclusion.

Of this we may be certain that fraternities bear a vital relation to educational institutions because they have to do with the young men and boys at their most impressionable age, the formative period. This influence may be either for good or for bad. Generally it is for the better. However as to that practically all are agreed that it depends almost entirely on the character of the organization,- the personnel of the fraternity. Since an organization grows by adding to itself, "kindred spirits," the personnel of a fraternity is likely to persist, for a considerable time, in about the same tenor as the parent organization.

The two fraternities of this College are to-day suffering because of originally poor timber.

Though, undoubtedly, fraternities have a place in colleges and universities, there is little room to doubt the advisa-

bility of debarring them from high schools. Their influence on high school lads is baneful almost without exception. Colleges would do well- and many do - to prohibit their students from joining a fraternity until at least their sophomore year. We quote the following from a college magazine:

" The faculty of the University of Texas has forbidden Greek letter fraternities to pledge until November.

1. Then the fraternities will be compelled to enter some agreement which will tend to modify the vigor of the rushing campaign." By "rushing campaign" is meant the opening days of college when the fraternities are working hard for new members.

What ought to constitute the chief objection to fraternity life in colleges and universities is that it leads men away from an "agressive christian life." A man's time for things, other than his studies, is quite limited. And as the demand on a fraternity man's time, by his fraternity, is quite heavy, he has little time left for organizations that are altruistic in their endeavors. "The fraternity man's inclinations may be alright, but there is not time for all these things and to him fraternity interests come first." The fact too that the most obvious pastime of the Greek letter fraternities is dancing is, to my mind, devitalizing and a sign of effeminacy.

In conclusion no more fitting words could be given than those of Chancellor Anson J. Upson. "I believe most sincerely in College secret societies, so called. I believe that the Greek letter

fraternities are invaluable in the good influence exerted upon the members by each other, in the unselfish ambitions they encourage in each other, and in the ennobling friendships formed therein, which last forever. My conviction is deliberate, not altogether ignorant, but founded upon considerable experience, That these societies largely promote a loyal and enthusiastic interest in the college or university where they are; and that in college government and in university affairs they can be legitimately used to promote good order, manly ambition and good work. However I fear seriously that the building of chapter houses, now so common in many of our colleges, may increase those exclusive tendencies which are one of the drawbacks of these societies."