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Oft-assailed fraternities focus on responsibility

Organizations rebuilding their reputations

By **Matt Rocheleau**

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 08, 2014



23 COMMENTS



CHERYL SENTER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Members of Alpha Chi Alpha fraternity at Dartmouth College shingled a house for Habitat for Humanity.

College fraternities — their reputations tarnished by episodes of sexual violence, hazing, and dangerous, even deadly, partying — are taking new steps aimed at curbing the destructive behavior, and repairing a battered public image.

Although fraternities have faced criticism for decades, the spotlight has never been harsher amid heightened awareness of the most serious and prevalent social issues affecting college campuses, particularly concern around sexual assaults and binge drinking. College administrators say fraternities' efforts appear to be more concerted and serious than in the past.

At Dartmouth, which has drawn national attention for alleged fraternity misconduct, fraternities hosted a forum last month to raise awareness of and explore ways to prevent sexual assault, said Chase Gilmore, a junior who presided over the school's interfraternity council this summer. And this fall, he said, Greek organizations at Dartmouth will for the first time require that before students can try to join a fraternity, they must go through

bystander intervention training, which teaches students to help others who are in a potentially dangerous situation.

Gilmore said Dartmouth fraternities require at least one person to remain sober at social events. The organizations are considering new measures to make those sober-designated individuals more easily identifiable, perhaps by having them wear bright-colored clothing “so students know exactly who they can turn to if they need help,” he said.

“I think the issues we face at Dartmouth aren’t specific to fraternities and aren’t specific to Dartmouth, as well,” said Gilmore . “But it doesn’t mean fraternities can’t be leaders in solving these issues.”

Fraternities at several other campuses said they have taken similar steps to reduce misbehavior.

At MIT, the Interfraternity Council spent the past school year working with administrators to overhaul the fraternities’ training program about safe partying. The new training is being launched this fall, said senior Haldun Anil, the council’s president.

“I believe we’ve only scratched the surface and still have a lot more to do,” Anil said.

Fraternities are also seeking to bolster their public image with more community service and philanthropy. Connor Walsh, president of the Interfraternity Council at Boston University, said fraternities have taken steps to boost fund-raising and community service, raise academic standards for members, and collaborate more with outside groups.

“Our standards are getting higher every year as we continue to excel in becoming well-rounded gentlemen who will contribute to society,” Walsh said.

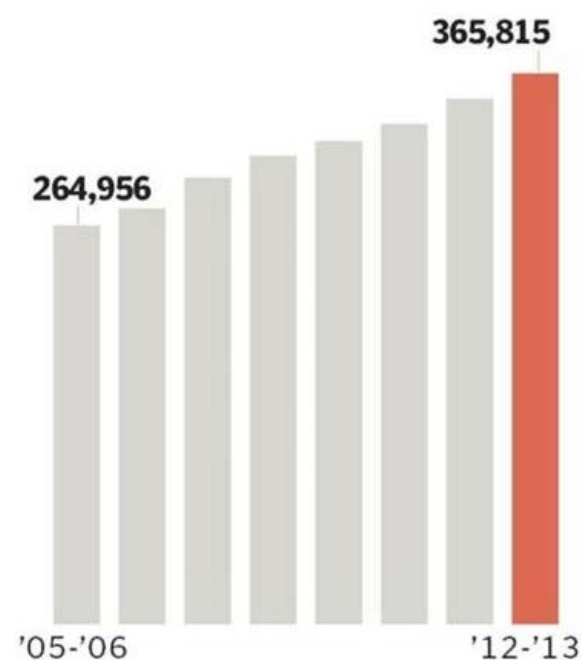
Fraternities face increased scrutiny amid sharply rising membership nationwide. The North-American Interfraternity Conference estimates that its undergraduate member population has grown by 38 percent over the past decade to 365,000.

In some cases the colleges themselves are responding to fraternities’ troubling behavior by cracking down.

Last week, MIT suspended a fraternity pending an investigation after a woman fell from a window during a party, and banned large parties at all Greek houses.

In just the past two years, BU suspended three fraternities and a sorority due to cases of reported misconduct,

Fraternity membership in the US since 2005



SOURCE: North American Interfraternity Conference

LUKE KNOX/GLOBE STAFF

including two cases of hazing, repeatedly hosting wild parties, and an incident last spring where a student died from apparent accidental alcohol poisoning after he allegedly attended a fraternity party. Hazing at another BU fraternity prompted criminal charges and led to the chapter being closed.

Despite struggles and setbacks among fraternities, administrators at area colleges credited the groups for making strides toward improving their image.

At UMass Amherst, fraternities recently have increased education around alcohol and sexual assault issues, stepped up community service and charity efforts, and are using social media to raise awareness of the positive programming they run, said Erin Donnally Drake, director of student activities and involvement.

Emily Perlow, student activities director at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, said freshmen often hold misconceptions about Greek life based on outdated or extreme depictions from popular culture.

“They’ve seen ‘Animal House,’ they’ve watched ‘Old School,’ and that’s often the extent of what they know about fraternities and sororities,” Perlow said.

BU’s dean of students, Kenneth Elmore, said that although fraternities need to do more to address problems, he sees signs they are trying.

“There’s a lot of regulations and rules and criticisms, and I think these young people are doing the best they can.”

National fraternity officials and student leaders at local chapters reject the notion that problems are unique to their organizations. Still, they said they do not pretend that fraternities don’t have work to do.

“I think we have a responsibility to respond to the criticism with action,” said Peter Smithhisler, president and chief executive of the North-American Interfraternity Conference, which represents fraternities on more than 800 campuses. “If we want to be a part of the higher education system, we have to lead,” he said.



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Will Hickman, a fraternity member at Dartmouth College, worked on a Habitat for Humanity project in August.

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