An Analysis of Fraternities as an Organizing System

Introduction

Did you know that it is illegal, according to fraternity regulations, to play a game of beer pong at a fraternity house? The policies of the Fraternity Information and Programming Group - under which most national fraternity organizations execute their risk management plans - outline this, along with an astonishing amount of detailed regulations that are aimed at curtailing risky fraternity behavior. Nevertheless, fraternities across the nation are constantly criticized for committing crimes that are far more egregious than a harmless game of beer pong - from committing atrocious acts of sexual violence, to killing new members during hazing rituals. The situation begs the question: why does the fraternity system, despite all of its self-imposed rules and regulations, fail to reform itself and continue to be a hotbed for outright illegal activity? This case study explores the fraternity industry as an organizing system, and analyzes how some of the flaws in its design principles contribute directly to its long-standing issues.

Dimensions of the Fraternity System

What are the resources that are organized?

The resources of the fraternity system can be split into two categories: physical resources and social resources. The physical resources in play are the private residences that house the members of fraternities. The social resources, on the other hand, consist of the undergraduate male students that are members of fraternities, the student body that interacts with fraternities as a social outlet, and the hierarchical organizations that oversee and regulate the activities of fraternities. For the purposes of this case study, I will focus on its social resources, as they have the most impact regarding the operation of fraternities.

Why are these resources being organized?
The mission statement of Tau Kappa Epsilon, one of the largest national fraternities, reads “to aid men in their mental, moral, and social development for life” (Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity). Most fraternities unite their members under a similar purpose - however, the actualized purpose of fraternities shapes up to being something different: to provide their members and the general student body a premier social outlet that acts as an “underground” drinking society.

**How much of these resources are organized?**

The answer to this question is largely dependent on the university where the fraternities are located. For example, at the University of California, Berkeley, which has a mid-sized Greek system, has 33 recognized fraternities that are comprised of anywhere from 30-110 members, for a total of roughly 1600 fraternity men. The number of students that interact with the system for social events is also dependent on the University. For example, using Berkeley as a reference, if there are 5 social events on a weekend night - a rough estimate of the average amount of events - there can be anywhere from 1500-2000 individuals interacting with the system.

**Where are these resources organized?**

These resources are organized at the physical residences of the fraternities, which are either privately owned by the national fraternity organization that the organization belongs to, or the local fraternity itself.

**Design Principles of the Fraternity System**

Now that we have given some context behind the resources of the fraternity system, let us analyze the design principles of how these resources interact with one another. I will analyze this from two perspectives: a ground-level perspective of how these resources operate and a hierarchical perspective of how these resources are regulated.

**Design Principles of Fraternity Operations**
1) **Undergraduate male students shall be organized into different fraternities, by the criteria of “best-fit” with the values set by the fraternities.**

   The criteria by which fraternities select their members are entrenched in the culture that the chapter holds itself to; for example, if a chapter considers itself to be a “party house” consisting of higher income rugby players, the members that they intake will match that criteria - wealthy and outgoing rugby players. This allows for fraternities to maintain whatever culture they deem is best for their organizations - if they see themselves as breeding a culture of aggressive binge drinking, they can and will continue to do so.

2) **The undergraduate student body will interact with chapters as one of their primary social outlets on campus.**

   The causes of why this design principle came to be is due to multiple factors. In her book “Fraternity: An Inside Look at a Year of College Boys Becoming Men, Alexandra Robbins attributes it to a combination of the media portrayal in the 1980s of fraternity chapters as the place to party, sororities not being allowed to have alcohol on their property by their own bylaws, and the national drinking age being raised to 21 driving undergraduate minors to find their haven to drink at the private residences of fraternities. As a result, fraternities are granted significant social capital by the individuals that utilize it as their primary social outlet. This social capital allows whatever culture the fraternities define themselves to adhere to to thrive. Such culture is often influenced by the media portrayal of what they should be, and directly contributes to the rampant behavior that fraternities incubate.

   However, as noted in the introduction of this case study, there exists an abundance of regulations that, in theory, should curtail any dangers of the culture that is created through these interactions. Why does it not play out that way? To answer this question, we will analyze the hierarchical implementation of these regulations.

**Design Principles of the Governance of Fraternities**

1) **The chapter leadership of fraternities are responsible for the execution of rules.**
All fraternities are lead by an executive board that is comprised of its own members.

2) Hierarchical organizations shall set the rules for their lower-level organizations.

The chapter leadership of a fraternity receives its rules from different organizations, namely the Interfraternity Council - the student-led government set up by all local fraternities at a University, and their respective national organization - which represents the collective interests of all fraternities affiliated with that specific chapter. The Interfraternity Council (IFC), in turn, structures its rules for their local fraternities from the municipal authorities, the University itself, and the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) (which represents the collective interest of most national fraternities).

3) Rules should be designed to shift the liability of violating rules down the hierarchy.

The recent implementation of the hard alcohol ban by the NIC, which dictates that fraternities cannot have hard alcohol present at their property, illustrates this design principle. Let us assume that a chapter decides to break this rule and proceeds to hold hard alcohol at their party - and the night ends with a non-fraternity affiliated minor transported to the hospital. The fraternity, when it comes to their adjudication, is found guilty of violating the hard alcohol ban, and is sentenced to social probation. The hierarchical organizations can now absolve itself of responsibility, because the fraternity broke the policies set out for them.

This approach ignores the root of the issue: why did the culture that the fraternity developed allow for this to happen? Individuals cannot get transported by simply looking at hard alcohol, so the culture that the fraternity promoted at the party must have paved the way for the individual to binge drink what was provided. However, this allows for the hierarchical organizations to absolve itself of the responsibility for allowing the culture at the fraternity to incubate, because the fraternity simply broke the rules.

Conclusion

When viewed as an organizational system, the flaws in the fraternity system’s design principles become apparent. These hierarchical organizations know that the rules they set will
be broken, but they accept the reality in hopes of allowing the system as a whole to live another day. Meanwhile, the underlying culture continues to thrive, contributing to the system's continual offences and halting its reform.

So how do you fix the system? You have to focus on fixing the culture that takes root in fraternities, instead of continuing to place more policies in hopes of preventing the problems that occur. This calls for fraternities themselves to take responsibility for the culture that they create, as well as the individuals interacting with the system as a social outlet recognizing the power of the social capital that they lend to fraternities and act accordingly rather than further the toxicity of Greek culture. Lastly, hierarchical organizations must also take responsibility for the culture, and look to solve it through honest conversations with their lower level organizations regarding the culture that they are promoting, and how to change it. This can only happen through honest conversations regarding how to change the culture.