Should Fraternities Be Shut Down?
While System May Have Problems, Experts Say Fraternities Can Play Positive Role

For two Tulane University students, pledging a fraternity became a nightmare after the older members of Pi Kappa Alpha allegedly scorched them with boiling water, leaving them with second- and third-degree burns across their bodies.

Ten students from the New Orleans university are now facing felony battery charges after the Wednesday incident, which was reportedly intended to give pledges an opportunity to prove their pain threshold, according to The Associated Press. The incident occurred during "Hell Week," when fraternities try out prospective members.

Earlier this week, San Diego State University suspended six fraternities after drug enforcement authorities arrested several of the chapter's students on suspicion of dealing drugs on campus.

Police, who arrested 75 students in the drug bust, believe that one SDSU fraternity, Theta Chi, was selling cocaine to fellow students.

And while tales of pledging horrors make headlines from the University of Texas student who fell to his death from a balcony during a hazing event in 2006 to a more recent University of Wisconsin-Madison incident where fraternity members allegedly poured buckets of human waste over their peers many experts on Greek life still resist arguing for the abolition of fraternities.

"I think people make a very compelling case about the Greek system being a broken system," said Alan DeSantis, an associate professor at the University of Kentucky and author of "Inside Greek U: Fraternities, Sororities, and the Pursuit of Pleasure, Power and Prestige." "But with all the vices, it produces a unique experience for young men and women looking for fellowship."

Can 'Broken System' BeSaved?

DeSantis, who has been a member of the Greek community himself for more than 25 years and has studied it for almost as long, says that the system's problems can be solved.

"Fraternities shouldn't be shut down, because they have the potential of doing some really good things," said DeSantis. "The problem of course is that many times these organizations do not live up to their potential.

"As an institution I think it's worth saving, but what it's going to demand from us is a more active role in the guidance of these young men," DeSantis told ABCNEWS.com.

He suggests that fraternities have as much guidance as college sports teams do coaches, faculty advisors and university officials oversee much of NCAA athletic programming.
"Fraternities are really unique in the fact that they have university affiliation but very little governance over what takes place in these secret organizations and isolated houses," added DeSantis.

But some say the events at Tulane and San Diego, and other hazing and drug-related issues are not a sign that the system is broken, but rather are isolated, unfortunate events.

"It's very important that we distinguish [the incidents at Tulane and San Diego] as not the norm but as exceptions to the rules," Peter Smithhisler, CEO of the North-American Interfraternity Conference, told ABCNEWS.com.

"When a fraternity is done right it's the premiere leadership experience on the college campus," said Smithhisler, who added that a swift response like the suspension of the chapters in Louisiana and California is routine in times of misbehavior.

Fraternity Members Say It's Worth It

Nathan, a recent college graduate who asked his last name not be used to protect his identity, told ABCNEWS.com that he was hazed extensively when pledging as a freshman at a small, East Coast liberal arts school.

"We had to ingest a lot of concoctions that were spoiled bad," said Nathan, who added that he estimates he vomited during 70 percent of his pledging activities. "I got my lowest GPA when I pledged."

And while Nathan says he doesn't think hazing is a "good thing," he does appreciate the close relationships he formed with his peers because of it.

"I have a special bond with [my fraternity brothers] that I can assume is akin to what people experience in the military," said Nathan, who added that he was "embarrassed" when he heard about the incidents at Tulane and SDSU.

"If Greek life were to shut down I'd be really upset about it," said Nathan. "Fraternities are a good thing but lost in all this shuffle is information about all the good things we do. We don't just join a fraternity to join."

Dan Hogan, a senior at the University of Iowa and member of the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity one of the organizations involved in the SDSU drug bust says that philanthropy and community service projects organized by the group are often overlooked among the headlines about hazing deaths and drug dealing.

"It would be a horrible decision if fraternities were to begin to be shut down," said Hogan, who says he was not hazed nor has he hazed other members. "The good outweighs the bad."

"These guys they're my closest friends for life," said Hogan. "I cannot imagine what college would have been like without being in the [fraternity]."