

# Greek life makes college worse

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## ABSTRACT

Defenders of Greek life cite friendships, networking, opportunities to perform community service, social convenience, big fun, and other benefits it confers on members.

## FULL TEXT

The university at which I teach has no fraternities or sororities. When I took the job, I didn't think much about that, but it turns out to be one of the best things about working there. That's because fraternities and sororities, on balance, make life worse on campus. I wouldn't mind seeing them banished by colleges and universities, but it would be even better if students just stopped joining them and they went away.

Defenders of Greek life cite friendships, networking, opportunities to perform community service, social convenience, big fun, and other benefits it confers on members. But you can get all those things from college without joining a frat or sorority. Whatever value they might offer along those lines is more than compensated for by the surplus of stupid and mean behavior they produce not as an aberrant exception but as part of their reason for being.

I went to a college with a marginal frat culture and almost no sororities. Frats' role on campus consisted mainly of hosting predictable parties. Greek life there was mild compared to the University of Oklahoma or Dartmouth, but the frats still struck me as bad places where guys who could have turned out all right tended to go rotten.

There was the frat for athletes who preferred to mix only with people who were impressed by athletes. There was the frat for guys who aspired to be rich jerks. There was the frat for guys who assuaged the sorrow of not being good enough athletes to be in the frat for athletes by semi-covertly watching each other have sex with unwitting, and occasionally unconscious, women. The persistence of fraternities was one of the reasons that being in college sometimes made me feel like an anthropologist parting the bushes for a glimpse at the bizarre rituals of a lost tribe.

It was there that I first saw the stunting effect that frats tend to have on a college career. In college, you were supposed to try things and gradually expand your range of interests, knowledge, skills, acquaintance, and experience, thereby increasing your chances of encountering ideas and people that could come to really matter to you – a field of study, genuine friends and colleagues, a passion or calling to commit to. This process could take a while, but the people I knew who joined frats brought it to an end much too early. Before the end of their first year they had picked a frat and the prefabricated identity that came with it, effectively suspending their freshman selves in Jello-shot aspic for the balance of their college careers.

My first full-time teaching job was at a college with a Greek scene so dominant that there was a name – "independents" – for students who didn't pledge. I could always tell when I had several members of one frat or sorority in a class, because the best students among them would be careful not to participate too much in discussions or otherwise show excessive scholarly zeal in front of their brothers and sisters.

One evening, during fraternity initiation week, an elevator in a campus building opened in front of me to reveal a pack of guys carrying a fellow student like a log on their shoulders. He was trussed head to foot with duct tape,

mouth taped shut and eyes bulging in terror. I asked the captive if he wanted me to get him out of this mess. There was a long pause and then he shook his head. He was supposed to be an adult, so that was good enough for me. I let his abductors go on around me and off to maroon him in distant woods, or paddle his quivering backside – whatever they were going to do to him with his abject consent.

If he lapsed into a submissive moral coma and made it through the initiation, he could look forward to three years of getting to haze succeeding cohorts of pledges. I suppose there's some kind of education in that, but it isn't one that institutions of higher learning – especially considering what they cost these days – should be in the business of providing.

Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College. His latest book is "Playing in Time: Essays, Profiles, and Other True Stories."

Credit: By Carlo Rotella Globe Columnist

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