

Nuwer calls for formation of national task force on Greek life

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"Number of Safety Days Without a Greek Death: 2" by Hank Nuwer Like a safety sign outside the steel mills of Buffalo where I worked to put myself through college, a box on my hazing news site (<http://www.hazing.hanknuw...>) proclaims "Number of Safety Days Without a Greek Death." Today the number is two, for 48 hours ago, University of Maryland student Daniel Reardon was taken off life support. All the facts and toxicology tests aren't in yet, but the Maryland Greek adviser said Daniel's life-ending coma, at least partially alcohol-induced, if not totally so, came after he accepted his bid to pledge Phi Sigma Kappa. Daniel was the second Greek to die this school year at Maryland. And yes, both Maryland and Phi Sigma Kappa have knocked themselves out to implore their students to act responsibly. If Daniel's were the only recent Greek-related death, we could point the finger at Maryland, wave it vigorously, and go back to our over-packed schedules. But it isn't the only death, and that is the point. Since March 15, 2000, from all causes, I have tracked 51 deaths of Greeks, Greek guests, and innocent passersby. (Because deaths at isolated schools might not make Lexis-Nexis, I don't pretend to think this list is THE final tally.) These deaths are at good schools such as Indiana, Georgia, Cal-State Chico (2 deaths), Alabama, Tennessee State and so on. A few were accidents that could have happened anywhere. The rest were preventable, deeply regrettable, and involved alcohol, drugs, hazing, or risk-taking behavior. What can be done? Alfred University's trustees, following the disturbing death this month of a young Zeta Beta Tau member found in a creek near the fraternity house just hours after he'd been beaten by two fellow members, said on Feb. 16 they plan to create a task force to evaluate the future of the Greek system. I think it is a sober plan, and I commend Alfred, except that I think the Indianas, Georgias, Cal States, and Marylands of academe ought to side with Alfred under the banner of a collective national task force, and with the input of Greek fraternity undergraduate council officers, Association of Fraternity Advisors, the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, faculty, parents of Greek victims, Security on Campus, US Department of Education, and Greek-letter organization executive officers and etcetera form a truly national task force to attack the risks attached to Greek life. Such a commission would lend a hand to beleaguered Greek advisers nationally, not lend just pointed fingers. The carnage we've all seen too much of says such a commission is way overdue. Shutting down a Greek chapter by so-called "derecognizing" it clearly does not work. Many chapters just go underground, continuing to party and accept pledges under their own fraternity name or some newly coined name and they're then too often out of reach of national or school sanctions apparently. Two recent deaths at San Diego State and deaths at SUNY Cortland and Ferris State were at chapters supposedly out of harm's way because they had been shut down. What will work? Many are ready to blame the Greeks themselves for their deaths. I recall an essay by journalist Barry Farrell after the deaths of Sharon Tate and her movie crowd at the hands of the Manson Family in 1969. "If you live like that, what do you expect?" was the mantra said by so many people, according to Farrell. I suspect many on campus and off-campus would respond in similar words when asked to consider these deaths at Alfred, Bloomsburg State, Valparaiso, Louisiana Tech, Miami, Ohio State, the University of North Carolina, on and on. But that's a smug, parochial, simplistic attitude, and I think it is unworthy of anyone who is part of an educational community. Plus, it ignores the fact that others on campus from collegiate athletes to students without any group affiliation whatsoever also are injured or dying in appalling numbers as well. The societal problems of today have more than just the Greeks caught in a hard-to-escape net. Would it work to shut down the Greek system? Many schools have tried since 1825, and a few such as Williams apparently have thrived without the Greeks once a ban was imposed. Would it work to reform it? Auburn and Texas and Alfred have tried. I'd hate to think how many deaths might have occurred if they hadn't tried. Would it work to write three books on hazing? As I can attest as an author of the same, sadly no. So we need, I conclude, nothing less than a collective and national team effort to address these problems squarely once and for all. Yes, we might try and be defeated, but not to try is to assure ourselves of defeat. Having a Greek background myself, I hope it is not simple bias that makes me implore any and all task forces to avoid the easy way out by simply closing down all Greek houses. For one thing, there are too many great chapters nationwide who don't have deaths, whose behavior is consistent with fraternal ideals, who learn the value of volunteer service, and who keep up their grades and do honor to their schools as alums. But even with a Greek background, I would not keep the discussion of a ban completely off a committee's agenda. In any intellectual community, whether I like it or not, all sides to a problem and all possible solutions need to be discussed. Alfred University, which I've criticized in the past in my book "Broken Pledges," has been traumatized by the alcohol-related pledging death of Chuck Stenzel; an alcohol-related football team initiation; and now a death of a fraternity

member under circumstances bizarre and disturbing. The school has tried hard to confront hazing with its survey of NCAA athletes' hazing practices and its willingness to forfeit a football game and to punish students involved in risky behavior. It has done so at some cost, taking a cheap shot from Sports Illustrated which made light of the NCAA survey and hazing itself, before reversing its position and doing a serious look at hazing on its national TV show. Because of its willingness to go very public right now, I think Alfred deserves respect and support as its Board of Trustees establishes the task force it deems necessary to keep future students safe and to conduct the business at hand of educating young people. On the other hand, many other schools have also suffered Greek deaths. Others hundreds of others have had close calls in which students found themselves in emergency rooms with death kept at bay only through medical intervention. The time for a national task force to study Greek life was March 15, 2000, some 51 or more deaths ago. But since the past is past, the next best thing is for such a national committee to be formed now. Can we educators, parents, students, activists, journalists, and Greek leaders really look at ourselves in the mirror if we do nothing and, two years, hence, another 51 deaths are directly or indirectly connected to Greek life? If we turn our heads like that, what DO we, in our heart of hearts, REALLY expect the citizens of 2122 to say about our head turning in a time of crisis and carnage? Risky behavior, as many of us know firsthand, has or can have horrific consequences. So does turning our heads to a problem that is as evident as a safety sign. Why is it only steel mills and industrial plants that dare put up signs proclaiming that "X" number of days without an accident or fatality have passed? I'd put similar signs on the front lawn of every campus in America. Our students should leave our campuses in robes. Too many leave in boxes. --Hank Nuwer, Adjunct professor of journalism, IUPUI author, *Wrongs of Passage: Fraternities, Sororities, Hazing and Binge Drinking* (Indiana University Press)