Discussion Guide: Should UR Abolish Greek Life?

Before the discussion

It’s important to understand the history of Greek Life before taking a position on whether or not UR should abolish its Greek Life system.

Take some time to read chapter 3 of Palaces For the People, “Learning Together”, and pay particular attention to pages 96-98. While you read, ask yourself:

1. How did fraternities begin? Why were they eventually accepted?
2. How do sororities and fraternities operate as exclusive social infrastructures?
3. Are fraternities linked to sexual assault? If so, how?

After reading chapter 3 of Palaces For the People, read the following articles and ask yourself the questions below the links:

“Why Colleges Should Get Rid of Fraternities for Good”- Lisa Wade

https://time.com/4784875/fraternities-timothy-piazza/

In the aftermath of the hazing death of Timothy Piazza, a 19 year old fraternity pledge at Penn State, associate professor of Sociology Lisa Wade argued that the only way to combat fraternities is to abolish them completely.

Wade first informed readers about the foundations of fraternities on college campuses and the attitudes surrounding them. She then described the connection between the foundation of fraternity history with current events, specifically the death of Timothy Piazza at Penn State.

1. Who created fraternities and for what purpose were they created?
2. How did fraternity members gain power within their colleges?
3. How did the foundations of fraternities create the stereotypical “party” image that is associated with fraternities in the present day?
4. What critiques do you have for Wade’s stance?

“The Future of Frats”- Kiley Roache


As arguments about abolishment of Greek Life heightened, many sorority and fraternity members felt that “their way of life” was under attack. Although there was discomfort about being attacked, a conversation arose about abolishment and reform. One sorority member at Stanford, Kiley Roache, argued that abolishment was not necessary, but reform was desperately needed.

1. What aspects of Greek Life are beneficial? What aspects of it are detrimental?
2. How does Greek Life facilitate the abuse of social power between fraternity men and sorority women?
3. What solutions can help Greek Life combat exclusionary acts?
4. What critiques do you have for Roache’s argument?
“A Call to Abolish Greek Life”- Jessica Valenti  
https://www.marieclaire.com/politics/a29155/frats-and-sororities-should-be-banned/

As a national conversation about the repercussions that Greek Life needed to face, American feminist writer argued that the only way to solve the Greek Life dilemma is to abolish it. According to Valenti, a culture of sexual violence, hazing, and intolerance are all sufficient reasons to abolish Greek Life from campuses.

1. What factors of Greek Life are detrimental? Can they be reformed?
2. What consequences should sororities and fraternities face for intolerant, racist acts?
3. How can you compare positive individual experiences with the negative aspects of Greek Life? Do they outweigh the harm produced by Greek Life?
4. What critiques do you have for Valenti’s argument?

Watching the Documentary

As a group, take some time to watch “The Naked Truth: Frat Power”. If it is not possible to watch the whole documentary, pick and choose the clips you feel would make for the best discussion for your group.

“The Naked Truth: Frat Power” is an investigation into fraternities across the country. The documentary lends itself to the topics of rape culture, racism, hazing, and the power of Greek organizations in business and politics.

Please be aware that parts of the documentary describe acts of sexual assault. This may be triggering for some members of the group.

You can watch the documentary here: https://vimeo.com/277720016  Pause at the following time stamps and ask the group these questions:

8:32- One aspect that is often ignored about fraternities is their enormous social and political power.

On the national scale, they benefit from a political action committee (PAC) that lobbies legislation that benefits fraternities. The connections fraternity men make with D.C. politicians cannot be forgotten, either.

On the smaller, college scale, fraternities yield enormous social capital. When much of on-campus activities center around fraternity parties, student life does too. Students then feel compelled to participate in Greek activities since they would otherwise be left out of the social scene. It should also be noted that certain individuals are more welcomed into this social scene than others, which produces a homogenous population among Greek Life as a whole.

Additionally, both sororities and fraternities hold substantial political power on campuses. Already controlling the social life on campus, sororities and fraternities can transition their social power into significant student government positions. There they can produce campus legislation that benefits sororities and fraternities while blocking anything that works against Greek Life.
1. What are the consequences of having a segregated Greek system?
2. Does forcing sororities to accept black women into their groups solve the problem of exclusion? Why do you think so?
3. Do you believe that UR has any system similar to that of The Machine? If so, which one?

**Please be aware that this section includes an interview where sexual assault is discussed.**

14:52- Because fraternities have less restrictions on the things they can do, students depend more on their events. More specifically, because fraternities can have alcohol and parties social life revolves around fraternity parties.

On the other hand, because sororities are restricted from having alcohol, they rely on fraternities for these activities. As such, you cannot talk about sorority events without also talking about fraternities. One consequence of having sororities connected to fraternities is sorority women’s vulnerability to sexual assault/misconduct. Because fraternity men are aware of the power they have over social events, they know that they have significant social power over sorority women. Unfortunately, many fraternity brothers take advantage of this relationship and abuse their power.

1. How would you describe the power dynamics between fraternities and sororities?
2. Why are power dynamics significant in understanding sexual assault on college campuses?

21:14- Experiencing sexual assault can cause many damaging problems for victims. Not only did they face a horrendous act, but they now have to live with the memory of their power being taken away from them. Being a sexual assault survivor as a student, however, has unique troubles. Students have the possibility of seeing their abuser in classes, on the way to their dorms/apartments, in between classes, and at the library among other locations. In addition to having stress from classes, survivors have to live with the stress, and often trauma, of their assault. This leads many students to feel overwhelmed, especially when they do not receive the appropriate care from their university.

University response to sexual assault cases committed by fraternity members is also a very big issue. As the documentary states, there are various instances when universities feel like it is not appropriate for them to investigate sexual assault cases that their students committed. Oftentimes when universities decide to investigate, they victim blame. UR is not an exception to this observation, either. In 2016, a sexual assault survivor, who was currently a student at UR, came forward about her assault. Once administrators decide to investigate, they victim blame. UR is not an exception to this observation, either. In 2016, a sexual assault survivor, who was currently a student at UR, came forward about her assault. Once administrators decided to investigate the matter, one administrator stated that “[he] thought it was reasonable for [the abuser] to penetrate [the victim] for a few more minute if he was going to finish” (Source: “There’s a Brock Turner in all o(UR) Lives”, CC Carreras”. It wasn’t until students demanded for administration to investigate the matter that the issue was taken seriously. Although this act occurred in 2016, the @abolishrichmondgreeklife Instagram page has demonstrated that sexual assault at UR is rampant, and it has clear connections to Greek Life. According to a post on August 2nd on the account, UR administration has remained silent for 27 days since its launch on Instagram.
1. What support should sexual assault survivors be provided on campus?
2. What is the role of university administration in investigating sexual assault cases done by their students? When is it appropriate to investigate these cases?
3. What criteria would you use to assess administrative response to victims of sexual assault?
4. What criteria would you use to assess the manner in which university administrators investigate sexual assault cases?

The connections that fraternity men and sorority women make within their chapter is undeniable. In fact, many individuals decide to rush due to the connections they can make to alums that were once in their fraternities or sororities. Many of these alums are already in positions of power in business and politics, so the advantage is very easy to take. Cason Kirby is a prime example of this argument. His connection to his fraternity allowed him to take advantage of a local election. Even sorority sisters felt compelled to vote for his campaign, which ultimately led to Kirby winning the election. Kirby’s situation begs the question: If this can happen locally can it happen nationally?

Fraternity and sorority alumni also account significantly for alumni donations, which grants them significant power over administrators. The documentary notes that many university presidents have challenged fraternities and sororities, but many have faced anger from Greek alumni. Because university presidents are aware that Greek alumni contribute greatly to donations, and therefore the operation of the university, they have a large amount of leverage against any policies proposed against Greek Life. At that point, it almost seems like a trap for administrators to challenge Greek Life as it can ruin their careers.

1. How is Cason Kirby’s election an example of alumni using their relationships to get into positions of power?
   a. What does this example reveal about corrupt political systems?
2. If university administrators feel threatened by Greek alumni, what solutions are even possible?
3. Should university administrators place more weight on current student demands compared to alumni demands?

End- Hazing is a national problem that is faced by members of Greek Life everywhere. Attention to hazing increased in recent years due to the unfortunate death of Timothy Piazza, a fraternity pledge at Penn State. Piazza was rushing a fraternity that was considered to be the best of the best. In fact, alcohol had been banned at the fraternity. This, however, was not enough to stop hazing from taking place at the fraternity.

To understand hazing more completely, we have to consider how power dynamics play a role into it. According to Auburn University, someone has to acknowledge that they are in a position of power and choose to use power over an individual that does not have that power. Although it appears to be counterproductive to harass pledges, especially at the risk of them leaving, it actually works in the favor of fraternities. According to Hazing Prevention, “hazing is about inclusion”, victims of hazing are meant to feel embarrassed, harassed, or ridiculed, even at
the risk of emotional and/or physical harm so that they can be initiated into a group. In many ways, pledges know that fraternities have enormous influence over social life on campuses, and they would not be wrong to want to take advantage and have pull in influencing the social life of their peers. Existing fraternity brothers know this and abuse this power dynamic to haze pledges.

1. What are the parts or features about social power that fraternities possess that allow certain acts, like sexual assault and hazing, to be silenced by students?
2. What criteria would you use to assess whether a fraternity or sorority has the resources necessary to combat hazing?
3. Do you believe that UR has a hazing problem among its sororities and fraternities? If it does not exist within Greek Life, does it exist among other organizations?

Discussion Questions

Without a doubt, talking about the issues present within Greek Life is not something that is exclusive to one topic. Issues regarding Greek Life stem from power dynamics. Fraternities and sororities know how much they influence social life on campuses, and who they choose to be apart of their groups is very telling to who they believe should even influence campus life. Because they know of their power, fraternities and sororities can abuse it to do heinous acts, like hazing and sexual misconduct. It is now up to campus administrators to decide what the best course of action is to address the Greek Life issue. However, students will not and should not be ignored from the conversation.

1. What have your experiences been like with Greek Life?
2. Does UR’s campus life revolve heavily around Greek Life?
3. Were there any aspects of Greek Life that you were not aware about or underestimated?
4. What complaints do you have about Greek Life?
   a. Do the complaints you have about Greek Life outweigh the positives? In other words, are there any redeeming aspects of Greek Life?
5. Were there any issues you saw in the documentary or in the readings that you believe are present at UR?
6. What criteria would you use to assess the inclusivity of Greek Life at UR?
   a. After describing the criteria, do you think Greek Life at UR is inclusive? If so, why?
7. How do fraternities facilitate a culture of rape on campuses?
   a. Is there a rape culture present at UR? If so, in what ways?
8. What is the best course of action when it comes to addressing the problems present within Greek Life: reform, abolition, or no action?
9. What is the role of students when it comes to changing the system of Greek Life?
10. Were there any issues that were not talked about in the documentary that are important to discuss when talking about Greek Life?
   a. If the group has no suggestions, mention homophobia, transphobia, colorism, classism, and intolerance to religions that are not Christianity.