On the Use of Questionable Anti-Hazing Messaging

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Abstract

Some collegiate anti-hazing programs are employing anti-hazing messaging that consists of exaggerated, misleading, or dubious claims. These claims are typically phrased in a way that is either a poor representation of the overall state of the research literature on hazing or oversells the findings from a single study. The failure to prioritize veracity in student messaging around hazing is problematic and needs to end.

Many colleges and universities are engaged in anti-hazing efforts, that is, programs designed to lessen the use of abusive newcomer induction practices in student groups. Hazing spans a wide variety of activities, and can include intoxication, sleep deprivation, the ingestion of nauseating substances, servile labor, and humiliation (Cimino, 2017, 2020). Administrative anti-hazing efforts are well-intentioned and in many cases have been compelled by extreme instances of hazing that have led to serious injury or death. However, one of the challenges with preventing or reducing hazing is that the phenomenon is not well-understood from a scientific perspective (Cimino, 2011; Cimino & Thomas, 2022). By this I mean that there is a relatively small set of empirical, quantitative studies that include hypothesis testing, and these studies do not collectively paint a clear picture of hazing's causes or consequences.

Given the limited scientific knowledge on hazing, how are anti-hazing organizations and universities approaching its prevention? Part of their approach consists of student-directed, anti-hazing messaging. While the content of these messages is often largely unobjectionable, there are certain hazing issues that seem more likely to occasion the use of claims that (regardless of intent) are misleading, exaggerated, or dubious. In particular, when messaging turns to the evident dangers of hazing or to its putative functional outcomes (e.g., group solidarity), the information given to students tends to be glib. The purpose of this essay is to suggest that anti-hazing messaging needs to be more rigorous and carefully aligned to scientific research on the phenomenon. Below, I will discuss three examples of problematic messaging.

Example 1: Hazing and Negative Impacts The anti-hazing organization HazingPrevention.Org (n.d.) has a dedicated webpage to explain to students the negative consequences of being hazed. The text of

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

their page has been copied and adapted by various universities (e.g., Chapman University, n.d.; Stetson University, n.d.; University of Michigan, n.d.). It reads as follows:

> Death is the consequence that is most often reported by the media. Although death is the worst possible outcome, hazing can lead to less severe, but still life-altering consequences.
>
> One study has shown that 71% of those who are hazed suffer from negative consequences including:
>
> - Physical, emotional, and/or mental instability,
> - Sleep deprivation,
> - Loss of sense of control and empowerment,
> - A decline in grades and coursework.
> - Relationships with friends, significant others and family suffer.
> - Post-traumatic stress syndrome.
> - Loss of respect for and interest in being part of the organization.
> - Erosion of trust within the group members.
> - Illness or hospitalization with additional effects on family and friends.

The one study mentioned is a survey of high school hazing authored by Hoover and Pollard (2000). To determine the negative consequences of hazing, Hoover and Pollard provided students with a list of binary outcomes they could indicate having experienced, such as "Got sick" and "Fought with my parents," as well as a write-in option of "Other." However, HazingPrevention.Org's list of outcomes does not clearly correspond to Hoover and Pollard's. The following is HazingPrevention.Org's list of negative consequences, on which I have crossed out those outcomes that Hoover and Pollard's study did not actually measure:

- Physical, emotional, and/or mental instability,
- Sleep deprivation,
- ~~Loss of sense of control and empowerment,~~
- A decline in grades and coursework.
- Relationships with friends, ~~significant others~~ and family suffer.
- ~~Post-traumatic stress syndrome.~~
- ~~Loss of respect for and interest in being part of the organization.~~
- ~~Erosion of trust within the group members.~~
- Illness ~~or hospitalization with additional effects on family and friends.~~

Some of HazingPrevention.Org's outcomes appear to be derived from idiosyncratic interpretations of a handful of write-in answers (e.g., a single example of "suffered low self-esteem" may have been rendered as "loss of sense of control and empowerment"). However, other outcomes appear to have no justification whatsoever (e.g., "erosion of trust within the group members"). It is particularly egregious for HazingPrevention.Org to have implied that Hoover and Pollard measured the incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a serious psychiatric illness with a set of detailed diagnostic criteria. One cannot measure its presence with a non-validated instrument consisting of ad hoc, binary questions. Nor did Hoover and Pollard even claim to have done so.

Example 2: Hazing and Group Bonding Just like HazingPrevention.Org, StopHazing is an anti-hazing organization that partners with universities in various hazing prevention efforts. On StopHazing's website

Figure 1. Hazing and Group Bonding
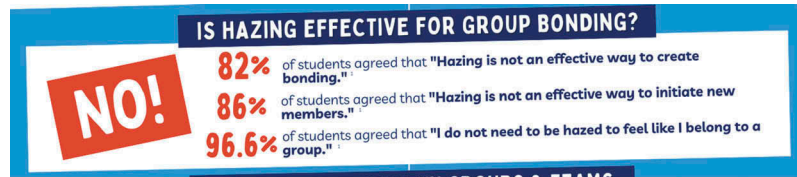
Source: StopHazing (n.d.).

(n.d.), they encourage schools to download and distribute their infographic entitled "So, What is Hazing?" It contains the section included in Figure 1.

The statistics they cite come from a published survey of college students led by the director of StopHazing, Elizabeth Allan (Allan et al., 2019). First, in order to make sense of these findings, it is important to note that students do not typically label their hazing experiences as "hazing," and this is true in both the cited work and elsewhere (e.g., Allan & Madden, 2008). If most students have private definitions of hazing that do not correspond to the formal definition in use, it is difficult to clearly interpret high agreement with these statements as meaningful reflections of hazing's efficacy. Second, Allan et al. (2019) asked the aforementioned questions[1] of everyone in their sample, regardless of whether they had experiences that objectively met the definition of hazing. The subset of their sample who were confirmed to have had experiences in college that met this definition (regardless of whether they recognized it as such) were given follow-up questions about the outcome. Allan et al. (2019) summarized these outcomes as follows:

> Students frequently reported positive associations with their hazing experiences such as *feeling more like a part of the team or group (62.8%)*, feeling a sense of accomplishment (54.0%), and feeling stronger (35.7%). Some respondents, however, did report experiencing negative outcomes such as feeling stressed (26.4%), having trouble with academics (12.6%), feeling humiliated or degraded (9.0%), having difficulty sleeping (8.7%), having difficulty concentrating in class (8.5%), and feeling depressed (7.4%), among other negative outcomes. (p. 13, emphasis added)

In other words, Allan et al. found that the most commonly reported outcome of being hazed was feeling more like a part of the group, i.e. *group bonding*. Thus, StopHazing is answering their question with an unqualified "NO!" while omitting a contradictory finding from the very same study they are citing, and one that actually addresses the population of interest: those who have been *verifiably* hazed. Most importantly, Allan's work suggests full awareness that there is currently no definitive and straightforward answer to hazing's effect on group bonding (Allan et al., 2020, pp. 4–5). The relevant literature has a number of conflicting findings (e.g., Kamau, 2013; Keating et al., 2005; Lodewijkx & Syroit, 1997), many of which have questionable internal or external validity (see Cimino & Thomas, 2022).

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[1] It is worth noting that the third statement "I do not need to be hazed to feel like I belong to a group" is a non-sequitur. No one is arguing that non-hazing groups lack any sense of belonging. Instead, some argue that hazing might substantially *increase* the sense of belonging.

Example 3: Hazing and Social Norms Cornell University (n.d.) has been engaged in a multi-year social norms campaign directed at hazing. The goal is to show that most students reject hazing and thus presumably would not haze another person. Sharing this knowledge widely would then correct any false assumptions about hazing's acceptance and shift any conformity pressures to favor not hazing.

In order to determine individual student acceptance of hazing, Cornell distributed the following survey question: "I believe that humiliating or intimidating new members of a student organization or team is [never okay, sometimes okay, always okay]" (Marchell et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of students selected "never okay" (91% in the most recent survey). The high percentage of "never okay" responses was then prominently incorporated into a social norms marketing campaign.

However, the authors of this program have acknowledged that such high percentages might be inflated (Marchell et al., 2022, p. 9). Issues include the fact that their survey question (a) is devoid of context and (b) may trigger socially desirable responding. Indeed, I would suggest that their survey question has obvious social desirability issues and is entirely divorced from the contexts that seem to motivate students to haze (Cimino, 2011; Cimino et al., 2019). And while one might hope that an acknowledgment of potential measurement issues would prompt a pause in the social norms campaign, Cornell is still prominently employing the numbers on their anti-hazing website. This is unfortunate, because when Marchell et al. (2022) affirmed that their social norms measures "warrant examination of their validity and reliability," it indicates the possibility that Cornell is currently misleading thousands of students (p. 9). If we later discover that Cornell motivated a reduction in hazing by using a method that exaggerates student opposition, should we consider that a successful social norms campaign or a successful social falsehoods campaign?

Students Deserve Veracity

One way to defend the aforementioned examples is to focus strictly on the sense in which the claims at issue might be *occasionally, somewhat, sort of* true, while ignoring their overall persuasive intent and context. The point of this article is not that anti-hazing messaging consists of sheer fiction, but rather that it sometimes leans on exaggerated, misleading, or dubious claims. All three examples are derived from public messaging meant to convince students that hazing is harmful, nonfunctional, or broadly rejected by their peers. If each example were forced to add the relevant caveats to their claims (or to speak to the state of the evidence more broadly), they would look different, and their ostensible persuasiveness would be thereby reduced. For example, if HazingPrevention.Org were not able to use the imprimatur of a formal study with a high percentage of negative outcomes, they would be left with anecdotes for dramatic claims about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. If StopHazing were made to provide students with an accurate, scientific answer to the question "Is Hazing Effective for Group Bonding?," they would have to resort to the milquetoast "We Don't Know." Additionally, if Marchell et al. (2022) had attempted to validate their measure's connection to individual hazing propensity (in the laboratory or real world), it might have subsequently lost its role as the centerpiece of an ongoing social norms campaign. At the very least, a more honest version of such a campaign would explicitly acknowledge to students that there are reasons to doubt its validity other than cognitive dissonance (Cornell University, n.d.).

How (Not) to Craft Student Messaging on Hazing

For years, I have watched anti-hazing advocates make claims about the phenomenon that are poor representations of the available evidence. I have sent private e-mails to some of these individuals and organizations, encouraging them to make corrections and to avoid glib summaries of hazing research. Regardless, the pattern continues. The consistent and prominent use of dubious anti-hazing messaging suggests that what we are witnessing is not the product of occasional errors, but is instead an outcome of failing to prioritize veracity when creating student messaging around hazing. And while I am confident that no one involved has an intent to deceive, de-prioritizing veracity can still lead to a sloppiness that results in the exaggeration of what was found in a particular study, the omission of contradictory findings, or even a failure to promptly address measurement issues that have the potential to mislead the entire student body.

Given the present state of the evidence on hazing, practitioners should consider these simple rules when crafting student messaging:

1. Do not claim or imply that hazing is nonfunctional, dysfunctional, or less functional than non-hazing "alternatives."

Hazing's measured effect on functional outcomes like group bonding is currently both mixed and uncertain, and is thus ripe for misunderstandings and the cherry-picking of specific studies. Different hazing activities may have different impacts on measures of group solidarity, and researchers like myself are still in the early stages of understanding these impacts. This present uncertainty means that confident claims about hazing and group solidarity should be studiously avoided. Furthermore, we do not have the kind of understanding of hazing that would allow for the recommendation of non-hazing "alternatives," a recommendation that itself assumes a high level of understanding of what motivates hazers and what hazing does to hazees.

2. Do not claim or imply that hazing is *broadly and nontrivially* harmful.

There is undoubtedly substantial harm at the extreme edges of hazing, such as when hazing intersects with phenomena like sexual assault. However, anti-hazing advocacy has been directed at hazing more broadly, and anti-hazing student messaging does not confine itself to severe ordeals. This is important because much of the assumed, *generalized* harm of hazing has only a weak empirical foundation. Consider that the two largest studies of college student hazing—in addition to establishing its high prevalence—also show that students report substantially more positive than negative outcomes of being hazed (Allan et al., 2019; Allan & Madden, 2008). To be clear, all such outcomes are measured by simple, binary questions that are open to interpretive flexibility (e.g., whether students felt "stressed"). Thus, we cannot draw strong inferences from such measures. However, it remains the case that the best data available fail to convincingly paint a broad, dark picture of hazing victimization, and oddly suggest a greater upside than might be assumed. Until we have data from improved studies, practitioners should consider focusing anti-hazing messaging around indisputably dangerous ordeals. This would include those involving sexual assault, beatings, and heavy intoxication. The prohibition of lesser ordeals can of course be mentioned, but it should not be implied that they are known or likely to cause substantial harm.

Finally, as a more general reminder, *any* hazing messaging should be grounded in a coherent, organization-wide definition of the phenomenon. Most hazing definitions in use largely overlap with one another, but they differ in a few key ways, most notably in their tendency toward false positives (Cimino, 2017). For example, Hoover and Pollard's (2000) definition of hazing is "any humiliating or dangerous

activity expected of you to join a group, regardless of your willingness to participate" (p. 4). This sounds reasonable until one considers the fact that danger is a necessary component of some legitimate student groups (e.g., football teams, rock climbing clubs). Even a "humiliating" induction may sometimes occur with student groups assessing public performance skills, such as those dedicated to debate or the performing arts. (Such performances do not always go well.) Thus, I have recommended that organizations use the "strict" definition of hazing:

> Hazing is non-accidental, costly[2] aspects of group induction activities that: a) do not appear to be group-relevant assessments/preparations or b) appear excessive in their application. Group induction activities are those tasks formally or informally required to obtain membership or participatory legitimacy for new or prospective members. (Cimino, 2017, p. 144)

This definition accurately captures the fact that what tokens "hazing" to most researchers is not simply unpleasant induction activities, but rather those that seem disconnected (in content or extremity) from the group's typical activities. For more on the strict definition, see Cimino (2017).

I am sympathetic to the fact that the aforementioned recommendations may require rewriting some messaging on hazing. However, there is no getting around the fact that hazing is a complex phenomenon, and the limited scientific knowledge available necessarily constrains the kinds of claims (and implications) that should be offered to students with confidence. Furthermore, any research finding graduated into student-directed messaging should be subject to a higher level of scrutiny in both the validity of its claim and the context in which it is presented to students. If we set aside such scrutiny, we risk distributing messaging that is more propagandistic than accurate.

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[2] Here "costly" covers all manner of currencies: opportunity costs, energetic costs, social costs (e.g., humiliation), etc.

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