

Eastern Illinois University

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1967

The Influence of the Fraternity Ritual

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The Influence of the Fraternity Ritual

According to many critics and even some friends of the college social fraternity, traditional fraternity rituals are no longer meaningful to students in the modern collegiate society (Union College, 1963). Most statements testifying to the value of the ritual in fraternity, even in the esoteric fraternity publications, are made by older men (Robson, 1963, pp. 11-12). To be sure, there are a few isolated sentimental statements attributed to undergraduates, but all too often these statements are excerpts taken from convention speeches chosen by older alumni who select what they want to hear. No one, it seems, has systematically asked undergraduates how they feel as a chapter about their fraternity's ritual.

A study of opinion about sororities by Hultsch (1964) indicated that undergraduate women do like and want the ritual as part of their sorority experience. The present paper reports the results of a survey designed to elicit opinion in four fraternity-related subjects, ritual, loyalty, personnel relationships, and chapter growth and development, administered to two undergraduate chapters and mailed to the national officers of a large national fraternity (Eberly, 1966). The results of the study tend to support Hultsch's conclusions.

Method

Twenty-two statements in a 150-statement, alternate response questionnaire were devised to compare the responses of the undergraduate groups with those of the national officers of the same fraternity, and to determine qualitatively the difference in attitude toward the fraternity ritual in a chapter at a large eastern private university as compared to a large midwestern public university. The remaining 128 statements in the questionnaire were developed similarly to assess three other subjects: loyalty, personnel relationships, and chapter growth and development.

The statements, 22 in number, were designed to obtain an impression of group attachment to the ritual. The opinions they represented ranged from strong allegiance to complete indifference. Seventy-four per cent of the eastern chapter, 65.5 per cent of the midwestern chapter, and 68.6 per cent of the national officers completed and returned the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

A majority of the undergraduates in both groups felt "the ritual expresses the best philosophy for a person in a college student group," but while most of them agreed "the ritual should affect a person's values," many admitted "it usually does not." The national officers endorsed the ritual as a philosophy and indicated that it affected students' values.

Although the undergraduates did agree with the national officers that the ritual contained "actual religious values," they were not certain if it helped "to strengthen

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a person's belief in religion" or whether it was "an interpretation of religion for the chapter."

These results may indicate a trend among some subgroups in the chapters (especially in the eastern chapter) away from allegiance to the ritual, but they do not indicate the blanket rejection of the ritual that some fraternity critics imply. Asked whether "the ritual is a tradition which we could get along just as well without today," over 80 per cent of all groups disagreed.

There was a moderately strong opinion that "every member of the fraternity should make a practice of occasionally reading the ritual," but this opinion was not congruent with reported practice. In the eastern group, 59.1 per cent indicated members should occasionally read the ritual, but only 25.0 per cent reported doing so. At the midwestern chapter, 83.8 per cent thought the ritual should be read, but only 38.2 per cent had done so. These results were significantly different from the national officers, almost all of whom had read the ritual (92.9 per cent) and believed it should be periodically re-read (95.2 per cent).

Although they agreed with the officials that performing the ritual did not take too much meeting time, significantly more undergraduates held the view that "it is not necessary to hold ritual meetings more than once a month," as recommended by the fraternity laws. It would seem that in both chapters there is an apparent lack of desire among the men both to read or to perform the fraternity ritual. That such large percentages of men in both chapters believe the ritual should be read does indicate, however, that the men recognize the ritual may have some worthwhile value.

Nonetheless, neither undergraduate group thought that the ritual gave them "a sense of awareness of others," a result significantly different from the opinions of the national officers. Evidently, the ritual fulfills some other requirements among the peers in the two undergraduate groups.

Another value of the ritual to the groups might be to explain the philosophical meaning of fraternity. The eastern chapter believed that many men pledged and initiated by the fraternity were "ready to make a strong commitment to the ideals of the fraternity." This result would not seem to follow in view of the eastern group's neutral responses to statements strongly supporting the ritual. This raises the question as to whether the "ideals of the fraternity" in the eastern group are equated with the ideals stated in the ritual. The midwestern chapter's responses to statements referring to member commitment are significantly less strong. Almost 80 per cent thought that many men were "not ready to make a strong commitment to the ideals of the fraternity." Whatever the concept of "ideals of the fraternity" is to the midwestern group, it would seem to be doubting its members' commitment to the ritualistic ideals. Similarly, the national officers doubt that undergraduates realize the true meaning of fraternity, and like the midwestern chapter, agree that many undergraduates are unready at initiation to make strong commitments to the fraternal ideals. These responses seem to indicate a generally pessimistic attitude toward loyalty of the undergraduate to the ideals and the ritual of the fraternity.

Since the ritual is intended as a philosophy for college men, another value of it might be as a group problem-solving instrument. This concept of the ritual was not strongly accepted in any of the three groups; even more than 40 per cent of the national officers disagreed that the ritual could be used to mediate group problems. According to these findings, the ritual provides a basis neither for group awareness nor group problem-solving.

(Continued on page 14)

9. Schedules study hours, makes best use of study time.
10. Learns to use different methods of study effectively, e.g.,—when to scan, read, reflect, and digest material under study.
11. Acquaints himself with the many resources at the college, utilizes the library and curriculum workrooms.
12. Makes use of guidance and counseling opportunities.
13. Seeks assistance and advice from experienced students.
14. Takes a periodic look at himself and his work—(is honest), e.g., study time—good notes—understanding of topics, etc.
15. Has a good sense of humor, is able to laugh at his own mistakes and to recover from “let-downs.”
16. Gets sufficient amount of sleep and proper food in order to remain healthy and alert.
17. Comes to class prepared—having read material assigned—hands in assignments when due.
18. Is punctual for classes and appointments.
19. Attends classes unless he has a good reason for being absent.
20. Is courteous to instructors, avoids an act of “know-it-all.”
21. Is appreciative of instructor’s assistance and guidance.
22. Respects rights and privileges of other students in classroom and living quarters on campus.
23. Is kind, pleasant, helps other students to adjust to campus life and to understand principles of subject matter by discussing them.
24. Participates as a responsible citizen in the community.
25. Participates in social, extracurricular and campus sports activities after scholastic goals are first personally satisfied.
26. Is well groomed and appropriately dressed.

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Although neither undergraduate chapter would discard the ritual as a personal philosophy “unrealistic in today’s college culture,” it was the consensus of both groups that the fraternity man seldom “uses the lessons of the ritual to govern his daily decisions.” The eastern chapter went so far as to suggest that fraternity could exist “without a religious and moral atmosphere.” Thus, while there are some segments in the three groups who see the ritual as an omnipotent document, it exists for the majority primarily as tradition.

As Hultsch suggests for sorority members, fraternity members do feel some need for the ritual as a part of their fraternity experience. Nevertheless, the results of this study raise serious doubts as to whether the ritual plays a very significant role in the average undergraduate’s fraternity experience.

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