

The Fraternity's Job*

by Richard L. Greene, Rochester 1925

A Speech before the Eastern Association, New York City, January 17, 1947

It would be in the best fraternal tradition if a gathering of this kind with its highly pleasant social atmosphere and its background of rapidly reviving activity in our several chapters were to be largely devoted to self-congratulation and contemplation of the remarkable record which now covers one hundred and fifteen years of corporate life. It is a great temptation to speak in this vein, for the subject is a congenial one. With your permission, I shall resist the temptation precisely because I am so proud of the past of Alpha Delta Phi that I wish it to have a future equally prosperous and creditable. I am come neither to praise our fraternity nor to bury it. The one would be superfluous, the other definitely premature. My title is "The Fraternity's Job," and in talking about it I shall use all the tenses - past, present and future. We might look at a fundamental or two to begin with.

The first important thing about Alpha Delta Phi, Kappa Alpha, Sigma Nu and the rest of the lineup in Baird's Manual is that they are college fraternities, not societies choosing their membership from those doing the world's work like the Masons, the various antlered animals, or the rotating and gyrating beaters upon gongs at hotel luncheon tables. Neither are they, except occasionally, connected with graduate or professional schools like the medical or legal societies, which imitate their nomenclature and badges. They exist within the pattern of life set up by the four-year colleges which harbor them, and it is a condition of their existence that they conform to this pattern, which they have done much in the last one hundred years to shape.

The second important thing about them is that they are fraternities, voluntary associations of young men, for the purpose of seeking values impossible to find either in solitude or in large and heterogeneous groups, or, let me add, in the society of the opposite sex. Devoted as I am to the young women undergraduates of the nation and especially to the three hundred and sixteen under my care, I do not think that any chapter house ought to be open house for them. They are not organizations for political action or for the promotion of sectarian religion or for preparation for any particular vocation. They should not be organizations for the display of conspicuous waste, for the certification of social position or for concerted action in raising hell on the campus.

For some people there are no values or pursuits left in life after this rather long list of exclusions. Those people, if young men, should take care not to join fraternities, and the chapters should take care not to admit them, even if they are great grandsons of one charter member and great grand nephews of another. They are often extremely valuable citizens; there is much genius among them, but they should not join fraternities any more than I should a bridge club. I am not sure that they should attack fraternities any more than I should attack bridge clubs, because to me Blackwood will always be a publisher and Vanderbilt an avenue.

What then remains as the proper field for fraternity life? Every one of us knows from experience; everyone would probably feel the same difficulty that I do in putting it sharply into words which cannot be misunderstood. This was more easily done in the last century when the phraseology of the classics about friendship was more current and when the romantic period was younger. In those days we wrote fraternity songs; now we write fraternity reports. I must try to turn the song-language into report-language, I suppose, in my effort to state the positive values of fraternity life. They come out something like this: the enjoyment and stimulus which come from a sense of belonging to a reputable group stronger and more deeply rooted in the parent institution than the individual; experience in self-discipline and the assumption of responsibility for the conduct of an organization's affairs; the working out of personal relations ranging from tolerance to deep friendship within a stable group, from which withdrawal is difficult; and finally, sheer fun, which is much too short a word for a report and which I must therefore change to "unpremeditated and not formally objective-pointed recreational activity."

Now, I maintain that these interests are not irreconcilable with the process of education in the American college, that, on the contrary, they are closely related to the special kind of education which we call liberal and have so much trouble in defining. They are not the whole of liberal education by any means. Nor is fraternity life the whole of college. The attempt to make it so is a sure recipe for failure. But, if we recognize the four-fold development of intellectual, spiritual, physical and social man, which educators so glibly profess to be seeking, the experiences that I have mentioned are as close to the social education of the twenty-year old as the library to his mental life or the swimming pool to his physical training.

It is an incontrovertible fact that fraternities have supplied the side of liberal education which the colleges themselves once slighted, then, taught by the fraternities, attempted to provide through other means. The chapter house is the parent of the student union; the literary program with a faculty member present a progenitor of the seminar, older than the first importations from Germany to the graduate schools. The social fact, first recognized by the fraternities, that one cannot be intimate with a whole college of hundreds, is the basis of newer trends in dormitory construction and college plans and the ubiquitous discussion group. But that lesson has been taught; most colleges have learned it well. Teaching is no longer the fraternity's job.

But the fraternities have a job in the post war college, a job with both short-range and long-range aspects. The first important thing to say about it is that it must be visualized in terms of the job of the colleges themselves. They face their second apparently impossible assignment within six years. They met the first one in the scrambled and shockfilled days just after Pearl Harbor, and they managed to perform it somehow with a good deal of financial help, administrative help, and occasional hindrance from the government and the armed forces. They are taking on the second one now in the form of enormously swollen enrollments with inadequate housing, staff and supplies, and not much real relief yet in sight. They expect to manage this one somehow too, but each institution has figuratively taken a subsidiary motto underneath the Latin on its coat-of-arms. Beneath *Dei sub nomine viget* or *Veritas* or *Terras irradiant* there might well be another heraldic

ribbon bearing in plain English the legend: "No nonsense." The fraternities would do well to make a similar addition to their blazons, and I should like to see it go up first of all right underneath *Manus multae, cor unum*. The importance to the nation of getting the utmost in efficiency out of the existing college facilities demands that chapters give their utmost in cooperation, even when habit, tradition, or intrachapter convenience are interfered with, just as they gave it during the war itself.

"No nonsense" is unquestionably the personal motto of most of the thousands of veterans who are proving how much they are in earnest about education by their tenacity and fine scholastic performance under sometimes appalling conditions of housing and schedule. Many of them have returned to their fraternity chapters; many others are entering fraternity life for the first time. It will be strange, as well as disappointing, if they do not leave there, as they are doing upon classroom activities, the impress of their greater maturity. I should like to think that their influence may have permanent results for the better upon the fraternity pattern. In fact, I believe that the word "maturity" which has already established itself as the key word in discussions of the student veterans must become the key word in the fraternity's next development. To be blunt, the fraternity must grow up with the colleges.

How? Well, it is immature to go to college and not to put studies in first place. There was a time (my own undergraduate years, for instance) when the good-natured collegiate nitwit could answer that he was wasting only his own time and his dad's money and look at all the fine contacts he was making. Now every student knows or should know that his being in college at all constitutes, as President Bowman of Johns Hopkins put it, a "social contract." He knows or should know that behind him there stand others waiting for his place who would not waste the opportunity that is his. Decent scholarship is no longer something that a house can decide to promote when the alumni get fussy about a positive social duty. If a fraternity chapter is not serious in 1947 about seeing that its members are encouraged to study and that hindrances to study are reduced to a minimum, it shows itself too much out of step with the world to warrant much consideration of any kind. Next, any chapters which still cling to an initiation procedure that involves risk of physical injury or that subjects a candidate to public absurdities should stop hemming and hawing about it and wipe it off the docket without waiting for any more conventions to pass any more pious resolutions. For one thing, the adolescent excesses and bad taste of high school fraternities and sororities should be left without any precedent to plead in the activities of college people.

A positive program of intellectual exercise within the chapter should be maintained, restored, or instituted. The changed conditions of life and the urgent national need for more active interest by educated people in public affairs would indicate topics from the social studies as the backbone of this program instead of the belle's letters of an earlier day. As some of you know, I advocate removal of the secrecy surrounding the literary program of Alpha Delta Phi and should like to see other fraternities of high standing join us in making known to college authorities and to the public the nature and extent of these activities and in holding occasional open meetings. The serious side of our chapter life has been concealed from view as if shameful, the gaities being much better publicized.

These are mostly old ideals made imperative by the "No nonsense" regime which is surely going to take over on American campuses whether fraternity alumni like it or not. They are the short-range part of the job. For the longer view I have one point to make which I regard as the most important of all. In attempting to formulate it I am quite aware of the wide difference in local conditions among our chapters and of the weight of tradition which may oppose it. But it seems to me that the fraternity system must take a definite psychological step if it is to avoid becoming a museum piece like the highwheel bicycle and the turtle-neck sweater and the cane rush. This step involves turning away from the idea of exclusiveness, from the emphasis on rivalry with competing organizations to the idea of cooperation with them for the good of the college and society. It means admitting to the neophyte that the vital difference is not between Alpha Delt and DKE and neutral, but between the sound personality and the unsound. It means teaching him how to form and keep a group loyalty but still to be able to say with St. Paul, "I am under obligation to both Greek and barbarian." It means more frequent hospitality to members of other chapters and of no chapter; it means more frequent hospitality to members of other chapters and of no chapter; it means putting some of our charming friends in the sororities or women's colleges in their place now and then if they forget that the pin is "but the guinea's stamp, the man's the gold for a' that." It means sympathy with movements to extend the benefits of fraternity life to those now on the outside looking in through the organization of new groups whether associated with old and prestige-laden national societies or not. It means limitation of future fraternity building to standards of attractiveness and comfort and an end in the name of good sense to baronial halls and king-sized mortgages. It means a minimum of expense for national administration to be passed on to undergraduates and alumni in low chapter dues. In short, it means de-emphasis of the side of fraternity self-consciousness expressed in the second stanza of "Hail to Thee":

*Although the world knows not the tie that unites us
And sees but the casket enclosing the gem,
All honor the goddess whose ties so unite us
And envy the pleasures forbidden to them.*

We might replace it with more emphasis on two lines of the "Pilgrim Song":

*Pilgrims to manliness,
Seek ye the truth.*

I have always thought that we Alpha Deltas rejoiced in the most beautiful symbols of any college fraternity. I know the usual hallowed interpretation of them, I have recited it on many occasions. May I point out another shade of meaning which they can bear? The star is a fixed and unchanging sign for an ideal of manhood; the crescent moon is the world's oldest symbol of change. There are changes for the better coming in the American college after the present feverish years are over. I believe that Alpha Delta Phi is strong enough, secure enough, and wise enough to adapt itself to them and extend indefinitely

an already long career of usefulness, honor, and support for the best rather than the flashiest standards of collegiate life.

**Brother Greene was president of Wells College, in Aurora, NY, from 1946-1950.*