

Is It Hazing?



The following post for StopHazing was written by Travis Apgar, Sr. Associate Dean of Students at Cornell University and national hazing prevention speaker and consultant. For more information on Travis, visit [here](#). Have an idea for a blog post? Email us at info@stophazing.org.

Determining if an activity is hazing typically requires examination beyond the basic details of the event such as time, place, and manner. While those aspects are important, they are not always sufficient as hazing is often more complex. Nuanced components of the activity, such as intent and atmosphere, generally separate appropriate activities from inappropriate. While most who seek an answer to the question “what is hazing” are looking for the definitive list so as to avoid breaking the rules, it is not nearly that simple.

Activities asked of individuals who desire, or wish to maintain, membership in an organization should always have relative relationship to the core mission, principles, and purpose of that organization. The composition of manufactured activities for individuals to engage in which have little or nothing to do with the purpose of the organization as a means to prove their worth to members is frequently a gateway for hazing. Those practices demonstrate an attitude and atmosphere generated by an unhealthy power hierarchy as opposed to a process focused on meaningful education and group bonding experiences designed to successfully transition those who desire to achieve or maintain a membership status.

A healthy organization with members and leaders who are truly committed to core values, purpose, and mission use those guiding pillars as they go about all aspects of business, especially the orientation of new members or development of ongoing members. A simple productive model used to determine the activities members should engage in includes identifying the group’s core values, generating a carefully thought out list of desired outcomes, and intentionally designing every activity to accomplish one or more of the desired outcomes while legitimately aligning with one or more of the organization’s values.

This framework only works however, if the members of the organization put aside ego, outdated tradition, and the desire to pass along what may have been their personal experience, if it included inappropriate activities. It takes maturity, leadership, and members operating in a mentorship frame of mind. It is the difference between an attitude toward new members in which they are expected to prove themselves worthy, and one in which members have a desire to see new members be successful. In the latter, individuals seeking status are presented opportunities in which they can demonstrate their commitment to the legitimate work of the organization and fellow members through activities the organization is normally engaged in, such as leadership skill development, community service, or cultural programming.

To put it simply, hazing is as much about the attitude in which an activity is conducted as it is about the actual activity. One example is the use of a scavenger hunt. On one hand this form of activity is used each year as college campuses go about training their new student staff. They may have a portion of a day in which teams of student staff, such as residential assistants, are to follow a set of clues to locate various offices and other significant locations on campus. The point is most often to familiarize these staff with the resources available to them and the students they will work with, such as the counseling center, academic assistance, wellness centers, and so on. It is done in a friendly and encouraging way, perhaps with rewards for timely completion. On one campus which I worked, the President of the University actually greeted each and every student staff member as they came through the office. The flip side of scavenger hunts might take the form of a list of ridiculous, illegal, perhaps even dangerous activities a group of sport team rookies, or sorority pledges, must set out to complete. No matter the defense offered, placing members, potential or otherwise, in harm’s way is never acceptable. The latter example is definitely a form of hazing.

I cringe when I hear that organizations or institutions have made sweeping decisions about activities, such as scavenger hunt, classifying them as hazing no matter the form. I believe we must do better explaining the nuances of hazing to our group members, placing upon them the responsibility for appropriate membership development activities, and holding them accountable for conducting these activities in alignment with organizational values and mission.