Brown as a Fraternity College:
Past, Present and Future

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Brown University has been a fraternity college for well over a hundred years. Indeed, it was among the earliest to permit secret societies. The purpose of the present proposals is to build upon that long tradition while making a constructive move not only for its preservation but its strengthening. To achieve these ends we must bring current practice into harmony with sound educational requirements, supply proper housing, and provide satisfactory food, all at reasonable cost. We must discharge more effectively the Charter requirement that a "constant regard be paid to, and effectual care taken of, the morals of the College."

Fraternities have had a free hand to exhibit their capacities independently. There has been substantially no regulation or control. The houses are owned by corporations, usually composed of alumni. These organizations have bought properties in their own discretion, have financed them as they chose, and have maintained them or allowed them to deteriorate without interference. The number of boys who could join each chapter was not limited by the University; the number which could live within the houses was left to their own decision. Each fraternity could determine whether or not to operate a dining service and what charges to make for room and board; initiation and membership fees were wholly in their control.

The policy of substantial independence has had a long and undisturbed trial. The coming of the war and the survey of the facilities available at Brown for the instruction, housing, and messing of military units, however, occasioned a review of the desirability of continued independent management. Accumulated experience and the detailed facts revealed by that review make it clear that only drastic measures could save the fraternity system at Brown. Not half measures will suffice.

At the June meeting of the Corporation a report was made on student housing in general and the fraternities in particular. (An excerpt appears on another page.) The resulting strong expressions of view by Corporation members led to further investigation, and a proposal for action was laid before the Advisory and Executive Committee at its next meeting. The draft was carefully studied, many suggestions were made, and the officers were directed to revise it further. At a subsequent meeting the matter was again laid before the Advisory and Executive Committee, and after active discussion and further amendment, the proposal was approved and transmitted, with a recommendation for adoption, to the full Corporation at its fall meeting in October, 1943.

At that meeting there was a further brief report on student housing and on our experience in preparing fraternity houses for use as civilian dormitories. More time was given to consideration of this proposal than to any other item on the agenda, and it was adopted with no dissenting vote. Subsequently it was laid before the alumni representatives of the fraternities, the Executive Committee of the Associated Alumni, and the undergraduate Inter-fraternity Governing Board. Further suggestions were received, which are being given careful and sympathetic attention.

From the financial standpoint, the condition of most fraternities is completely unsatisfactory. Relative to their age and membership, the societies for the most part have very slender assets. If we accept the tax assessment as a fair reflection of value and deduct the total of the mortgages, the net equity in real estate of 16 fraternities owning property is $196,704. This figure is actually excessive, for experience has shown tax assessments to be higher than market values.

The situation is not improving. In recent years two houses have been lost and the charters withdrawn. Some fraternities are mortgaged for almost as much as, or even more than, their tax valuations. Others, though mortgaged for less than assessed valuation, did not receive bids equal to their mortgages when put on the market. Only one new house has been acquired recently, and except for another which had a serious fire, no major improvements have been made for several years. Only two fraternities have cash reserves for improvements, and there are no definite plans for the acquisition of new fraternity properties or the reconstruction of those presently in use.

Taking the total number of years for which the fraternities have been chartered, the average growth of assets is only about $10 per fraternity, per year. That figure is significantly less than in other colleges with which we are associated. No substantial improvement in the property situation is possible under any such rate of progress. It is clear, therefore, that there has been no such healthy growth in assets, no such energetic action in acquiring desirable property as would be necessary to maintain fraternity houses at Brown.

From still another point of view, the financial position of the fraternities is weak. The total interest and tax payments are approximately $14,000 a year. These costs place the fraternity houses at a marked disadvantage as compared with the dormitories, which have neither taxes nor mortgages. In order to set their room charges at a level to compete with the dormitory rooms, therefore, they have sacrificed maintenance and improvements, and furniture has been kept in service long beyond its proper lifetime. Without the ex-
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penditure of at least $100,000 in plant, furniture and equipment by the alumni corporations, these disadvantages cannot be overcome. Such new investments, however, would raise tax assessments yet further and might increase mortgage payments, leaving fraternity houses still at a serious relative disadvantage in comparison with the dormitories. It is an important fact that urban universities have not been able successfully to operate a fraternity system upon the basis which has been in effect at Brown. The audit of our experience, therefore, coincides with experience elsewhere under similar circumstances.

What is true of the finances of the alumni corporations is doubly true of undergraduate finance, which, to express it charitably, has been unstable. It varies from the satisfactory to the intolerable, from house to house, and from year to year. The undergraduates have not been getting sound business experience nor have they been adequately encouraged in the habit of meeting their obligations promptly and fully. There is no sense in teaching economics in the classroom and encouraging unbusinesslike habits outside.

The financial situation is bad, but the physical condition of the houses is intolerable. There is not a single fraternity house among the sixteen which is well adapted to its purpose. Some with unsatisfactory lounges are short of bedrooms and studies; some have good dining rooms, but others have dining rooms which are entirely unsatisfactory from the standpoint of access and safety; not more than two or three have satisfactory kitchens; the bathrooms and toilet facilities are in no case wholly satisfactory and in most cases are completely unsatisfactory. None is fireproof, and many are serious fire hazards. Their heating systems are uneven, but predominantly unsatisfactory, and the interior decoration almost uniformly in bad shape. The furniture is as decrepit as the fabric of the houses.

No one who did not make a first-hand inspection would readily believe the ill-kept, dirty condition in which the houses were maintained. A number of them were infested with rats, several with roaches, and one or two, unbelievably, with bed bugs. The physical conditions were complete, absolute, and final evidence that independent operation had not proved a success. None of the officers of the University would be willing to take further responsibility for the continuation of independent operation.

In addition to weak financial position and bad physical conditions, the scholastic standing has been unsatisfactory. Scholastic achievement has not been in direct proportion to the tangible assets of the several chapters. In fact, some of those with the largest assets have consistently shown the worst standings, and, on their current record, might well be declared bankrupt intellectually. Apparently the energies of the alumni were directed to finance rather than to the scholastic aim of the fraternities. Neither the age of the chapter nor the number of its distinguished alumni have guaranteed effective alumni leadership in this respect. Some of the oldest fraternities actively compete for the bottom position, and show the heaviest academic mortality.

Taking the fraternities as a whole, their average standing in the last 21 years has never been as high as the standing of the non-fraternity men. The disparity has been growing. It is the fruit of overcrowding, poor environment, and discouragement on the part of alumni. The officers of the University believe that with proper living conditions and the concentration of alumni leadership upon sound scholastic and healthy social life, the fraternities can perform a real service. For many years they exercised intellectual leadership; that tradition should be revived.

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Whether viewed financially, physically, or scholastically, the need for drastic change is evident. It is equally clear that the fraternities stand or fall together. In the years before the war, only 50 per cent of the freshmen pledged. A number of chapters have withdrawn from Brown, and without vigorous action several more will not survive the war. If the number of chapters is reduced much below the present total or if the percentage of the student body joining fraternities falls substantially below 50 per cent, the officers of the University are united in their belief that the fraternities cannot make enough contribution to the life of the institution to justify their maintenance. They are equally convinced that if the trend is now reversed, the fraternities can prosper along with the University.

If this proposal is adopted, the University will have to make an initial investment of not less than $100,000 to put the present houses in acceptable condition. There is no indication that the alumni corporations are able to undertake this task. The current physical condition of the houses is such, however, that the University cannot make an investment in the purchase of the houses and still work out the problem. In many instances, the locations of the houses are unsatisfactory from the standpoint of connection with University holdings. They are not desirable as purchases; indeed some of them are on the margin of acceptability as gifts. They are all included merely because we have reached the minimum number of chapters that seems desirable.

It is the intention that each fraternity shall maintain its own individuality. It is planned that in addition to the operation of its chapter and lounge rooms by the fraternity, its dormitory quarters would be occupied exclusively by chapters members. As the proposal itself states, it is designed to assure the continued and healthy existence of the fraternity system at Brown, which is now menaced by unstable finance, unsatisfactory quarters, poor housekeeping, and inefficient dining arrangements. It is proposed to improve the scholarship of the students, and to offer them the opportunity for a richer and more wholesome social life. In making the proposal, the Corporation goes on record in support of the fraternity system.

The Proposal

The proposal, as approved by the Corporation and distributed to the fraternity representatives, is as follows:

THE PROPOSAL to have the fraternities make a gift of their houses to the University is based upon the following premises:

(1) There is an identity of interest between the fraternities and the University. The fraternities exist only as a part of the larger structure and would have neither meaning nor life outside its program and policy. Fraternity chapter houses should be as much a part of the University as a campus dormitory or dining hall. In recent years fraternity houses have roomed and boarded approximately 30 per cent of the resident undergraduate men.
“(2) The fraternities, being an integral part of the social and intellectual life, and of the dormitory and dining system of the University, ought not to be at a disadvantage in terms of overhead and taxes as compared with other University housing and dining units.

“(3) The alumni corporations, being voluntary associations, ought not to have laid upon them burdens which they cannot reasonably be expected to fulfill, and historically they have not adequately fulfilled; namely, to see that the houses are kept safe for occupancy, in good repair, properly furnished, heated, and cleaned, and, in addition, make collections for room rentals and maintain financial stability. These are functions which can best be discharged by University departments: Buildings and Grounds; Housekeeping; Bursar; Dining Rooms; and Purchasing.

“(4) If the houses are given, the University would operate them under the following general principles:

a. It would assume the management and housekeeping of the rooms, make room assignments to individual chapter members, and assume responsibility for the charging and collecting of equitable rental charges.

b. If a fraternity dining room is to be operated, it would be done under University management, which would maintain the equipment for kitchens and dining rooms, supervise the purchasing, preparing and serving of food, and charge and collect reasonable board rates.

c. If the University finds it necessary to make a substantial investment in a house in order to improve living conditions, it would not expect a return of over 4½ per cent. This return does not refer to the value of the house as acquired, but rather to the investment for major changes. Setting the 4½ per cent as a ceiling, it would put all balances in reserves for replacements, large scale improvements, or for the reduction of the University’s investment in the property.

d. Each chapter would have an option for the annual renewal of its lease upon the lounge and chapter rooms and would be permitted to supply its own furniture for these rooms in order to express its own individuality. No opportunity would be given to another chapter to occupy that house unless:

1. The original chapter surrendered its charter or chose other quarters made available by the University; or

2. Over a period of two years the fraternity had too few resident members to justify the operation of the chapter house; or

3. For broad reasons of University policy, it was desirable to sell or raze the house, in which case the University would make available at least equal, and presumably better, quarters.

“(5) Nothing herein contained shall modify or limit the right of the University to determine the policy that shall be followed with respect to fraternities and their part of the structure of the University.

This proposal would constitute a definite move to assure the continued and healthy existence of the fraternity system at Brown, which is now menaced by unstable finance, unsatisfactory quarters, poor housekeeping, and inefficient dining arrangements.”

EXCERPT FROM THE PRESIDENT’S REPORT TO THE CORPORATION

JUNE, 1943

Student Housing

There is an urgent problem to which the Corporation must address its attention. The housing situation within the University is unsatisfactory. It is becoming more unsatisfactory daily, and in the conditions likely to prevail at the end of the war, it may well prove intolerable.

Brown has never had anything which could be called a dormitory policy. In the year 1850 Francis Wayland said: “In the first place, we assume the responsibility of a superintendence which we have rendered ourselves incapable of fulfilling; and we have lost the humanizing effect produced by the daily association of students with older and well bred gentlemen, so obvious in an English college: and, in the second place, we have expended almost all the funds appropriated to education in the construction of unsightly buildings, we had almost said barracks, for which, perhaps, the highest merit that can be claimed is, that they are not positively and universally a nuisance.” (He must have had a prevision of Massy?)

Moreover, though most dormitories are free of debt, they have neither been maintained in satisfactory physical condition nor have reserves been established for their replacement. Indeed the budget has customarily taken revenue from them which, in view of their physical deterioration without reserves, amounts to the expenditure of our capital. Some smaller units, moreover, were acquired under emergency conditions and cannot be regarded as permanent features of our equipment, either in their present state or even after remodeling.

The space available for student housing has not been adequate. Students have lived in rooming houses in town under conditions for which we have indirect responsibility, but over which we have inadequate influence, not to say control.

All these considerations taken together mean that unless we define our policy and then pursue it with vigor and consistency, we cannot hope to maintain and further develop the type of student body by which alone our educational plan and program can be justified. We are one of a small group of liberal arts institutions whose tuitions are set at the highest level in the country. On this campus there is now the sharpest disparity between the instructional...
qualities which such tuition implies and the living conditions which would properly accompany our educational facilities. That is not to say that the accommodations should be College-rated, but they should be appropriate, well maintained, convenient.

I believe that immediately at the close of the war we should construct adequate housing for from 300 to 400 boys. This should be in units, with social rooms, music rooms, and dining halls with the proper atmosphere. The whole should be under such social supervision as President Wayland envisaged, and should be well maintained not only in terms of cleanliness but by continuous repair and upkeep.

Fraternities

The Corporation in 1846 recognized the fraternity problem and adopted rules delivering the societies into the hands of the President. He could appoint their times and places of meeting, inspect their constitutions, by-laws, records of business and names of members, and attend any meetings. In case a fraternity violated the rules, the Faculty was "authorized to suppress such society." From that time forward there has never been any question that the officials of the University, in fact, has no policy touching the real estate problem. The record of fraternities attached to Brown have been forced to surrender their charters.

Fraternities are the only available source of social and financial arrangements. Having leased the fraternity houses by the payment of an amount equivalent to the taxes, the interest on the mortgages, where they occur, the insurance costs, and 2 per cent of their value for repairs, members of the administrative staff made a first-hand inspection, and the house-keeping department, in preparing some of them for occupancy as dormitories, investigated even more thoroughly.

To express it in the most moderate terms available and with the greatest possible charity, the conditions were found to be shocking, running far beyond anything that I described in June. It immediately became clear that nothing but drastic measures would meet the situation. It is obvious that there can be no return to the old basis, for we cannot take the responsibility for some of the fire hazards, for disrepair, for improper or inadequate furniture, for unsanitary kitchens, or for dirt and vermin.

We have now room in Hope College and Slater Hall to house all our resident civilian students without employing any of the fraternity houses except for the overflow of students from Pembroke College, and by the use of one of their dormitories for the Navy. The savings in operation for the balance of the year will amount to approximately $15,000. It seems obvious that by the close of this year the situation will be such that we need not employ the fraternity houses for any college purpose. In view of the size of our deficit and the uncertainties we face it is a lively question indeed whether we have any right to assume a net expense of $22,511 per year for these buildings for which we have no use. The continuance of the war would make this an acute issue. On the other hand, it is equally clear that if we do not rent the houses, many fraternities will not survive. If a few survive and others die, the fraternity system, as a part of the college life, would be effectively destroyed, leaving us with a thoroughly undemocratic situation which would speedily become intolerable.

In an effort to meet all these difficulties, a memorandum has been drawn containing a proposal for action. It has been laid before the Advisory and Executive Committee and comes to you with their recommendation.