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Note to editors: The following is the second of four articles published in Duke University's faculty-staff weekly newspaper, *Dialogue*, examining key aspects of university life now under study at Duke. This article appeared in the April 1, 1994 issue.

**A LOOK AT GREEKS;  
DUKE PANEL ASKS WHAT IS THEIR ROLE?**

**by Virginia Boyd**

Duke University is joining a number of the nation's colleges and universities in taking a fresh look at a centuries old tradition -- student membership in greek organizations.

Conducted by a special task force, the current examination of greek life at Duke is part of a broader self-appraisal of undergraduate life at the university. Other panels are studying overlapping areas that look at the intellectual climate, residential life and the future of East Campus.

Two of the leading voices in the ongoing debate concerning student life and the educational environment at Duke have been the Rev. William Willimon, dean of Duke Chapel, and English Professor Reynolds Price.

Price, in particular, spoke out strongly against fraternity life at Duke in his 1992 Founders' Day speech. Although he is an alumnus of a fraternity that still exists at Duke, Price claimed the organizations have become outdated and urged the establishment of a residential college system in their place.

Willimon's five-month review of the relationship between academics and student life picked up on some of Price's concerns and what Willimon called "a strange disjunction" between life in the classroom and student life after 5 p.m. and on weekends.

While it appears unlikely that the task force will recommend dismantling the greek system, it is possible that the panel could recommend significant changes in the social experience for current and future Duke undergraduates.

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To some, it is ironic that the university's focus on the greek system and social life comes at a time when most college guides rate the quality of social life at Duke as a major attraction. Yet Price, Willimon and others question whether the emphasis on social life is conducive to intellectual growth.

Of all the studies underway, the greek assessment also is generating the most controversy, possibly because many alumni were fraternity members and look back fondly at their days on campus.

All the task force reports are due to be completed this spring. President Nannerl O. Keohane has said the administration could make some decisions based on the advisory panels' recommendations as early as next fall while other recommendations may require further discussion, and some may not be accepted.

College fraternities date back to the earliest days of the nation and greek life at Duke can be traced back to the establishment of a chapter of Chi Phi in 1871 at Trinity College in Randolph County. Today, the greek system at Duke includes 13 sororities as well as 20 fraternities officially recognized by the university.

Despite frequently voiced doubts about the contributions fraternities and sororities make to the higher education experience, a growing number of students have decided to "go greek" on America's campuses.

Fraternity membership did dip in the 1970s, says Jonathan Brant, executive vice president of the National Interfraternity Conference. But, the confederation of 63 men's college fraternities, with some 400,000 members today, has more than doubled the membership highs recorded in the '60s.

While many argue that greek groups provide an important sense of belonging for student members, critics have charged that nationally, these organizations have been propagators of negative behavior including elitism, racism, sexism, substance abuse, date rape and hazing.

At Duke, the 18-member task force on greek life is examining issues as varied as housing, rush timing, the need for improved communications, facility availability, alcohol distribution and hazing.

The study was initiated by Vice President for Student Affairs Janet Smith Dickerson last fall following the release of Willimon's report at the end of the 1992-93 academic year. The students, administration representatives and faculty members on the task force have met almost every Friday since early last October. Their report is expected to be presented to the student affairs committee of the board of trustees in May.

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"This committee clearly wasn't crafted with the intent of dissolving the greek system since two-thirds of the committee has a greek background or a greek point of view," said Steven Baldwin, a professor of chemistry and co-chairman with Susan Coon, associate dean for university life.

Baldwin said the task force has met with a number of groups and individuals, including the student leaders of the Interfraternity Council (IFC), the Panhellenic Council and the Duke Association of Black Greek Letter Organizations (DABGLO) as well as the administrators who are their advisers. Representatives of the judicial board, housing and student health also have met with the task force.

In January, the task force held a town meeting in an effort to provide an "opportunity for people who had something to say to say it," Baldwin said. Since the town meeting, a number of focus group meetings have been held involving the upperclassmen housing association, black non-greeks, resident advisers from selective dorms, individual fraternities and concerned students.

One of the early distinctions that had to be made is that there are at least three different greek

systems at Duke, Baldwin said. "There is the white fraternity system, the white sorority system, and then there is the black system — and they are as different as night and day," he explained.

"Duke is inclusive on the whole, but in fact they (groups) form little cells within the whole. I decided it was something that is beyond the scope of this group," he said. "It isn't something that is simply manifested in the greek community, which is less than 50 percent of the student body, so it seems as though you can't really solve the problem by tackling it only from (looking at) the greeks."

However, Baldwin added that the task force report probably will comment on whether or not the greek system facilitates or even encourages separation of Duke students.

Many of the issues the task force has been examining relate most directly to the residential fraternity system. "When people say there are problems with the greeks at Duke, what they're really saying is that there are problems with the white fraternities — that's probably 90 percent of that comment," Baldwin said.

One of the concerns about the traditionally white fraternity system is its perceived "lock" on housing, particularly on West Campus. Baldwin said the task force is waiting for the results from a survey the Residential Life Committee has conducted as part of its review of student life at Duke before they will make final recommendations. That survey is still being assessed.

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"The intellectual criticisms of the greeks at Duke would be at least partially addressed by delaying rush," Baldwin said. "We're considering either a spring rush freshman year or, personally, I would favor a fall rush sophomore year ... My view is that freshmen students ought to spend their first year sort of figuring out where they are in life from an intellectual and social point of view and get some perspective. Then, I think you're a little bit more ready to make these decisions and you're going to make them for the right reasons."

A delayed rush also would reduce the focus of some fraternities on their prime housing space because fraternity members would not be able to live in the fraternity section until their junior year, Baldwin said.

Communication between the administration and the greek organizations, as well as between the greek fraternity and sorority systems, needs to be improved, Baldwin said. He suggested increasing the role of administrative advising for the greek groups and of creating one umbrella organization for all the greek groups.

One of the tough issues the task force has had to address is the distribution of alcohol at campus parties, Baldwin said. Recent changes in the state law now make the party that distributes alcohol responsible for the consequences of the behavior of people who consume it, significantly increasing the liability of the university and the fraternities. This has led insurance organizations that cover fraternities to strictly exclude from liability coverage incidents involving open distribution of alcohol, i.e. "kegs."

"Open distribution would be one thing if it were monitored, but it's not. The university has made a lot of progress in the way it has handled alcohol -- cutting back seven nights to three nights to

two nights in terms of allowable kegs is a big jump. While I don't even want (students) to stop drinking because learning how to drink socially is just one of those things, I really don't like the idea of having some 17- or 18-year-old freshman being able to come in and drink as much as he or she wants to."

Hazing also remains a concern, even though it has been a difficult issue for the task force to research. "You just can't get any real information on hazing but we want to talk to enough people about it, so we can say that hazing is basically this and when it happens, and when it's identified, the institution needs to respond to it," he said.

Although their organizational structures may vary and rush may be conducted differently, representatives of non-residential greeks reiterate shared concerns — the need for appropriate facilities and a simplification of the red tape involved in planning a party or social event on Duke's campus.

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Senior Nkenge Gude, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, said the black greek organizations vary from their traditionally white counterparts in their primary purpose -- one that is philanthropic rather than social. At the end of the year, Gude said, her sorority's budget is supposed to be spent in donations to community organizations and scholarship funds. Finding space for large parties that attract big crowds and raise lots of money has become extremely difficult, she said.

Tina Brown, a junior and a member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority, said another difference between white and black sororities is the duration of membership involvement. "The white sororities tend to look at it as just a collegiate experience, but for black greeks, it's a lifetime commitment," she explained.

Because their parties are non-alcoholic, Brown said they are not very concerned about alcohol distribution. "Our parties are more emphasized around dancing and socializing, not standing around drinking," she said.

Brown's point echoes one made by former Duke student body president Hardy Vieux, an African-American, in a letter to the TV news show "60 Minutes" after a broadcast this past April claimed that blacks and whites seek self-segregation. The broadcast noted that virtually no blacks lived on West Campus. Vieux suggested that the reason why blacks don't choose to live on West Campus is alcohol.

"The majority of African-American students do not drink and find the climate on East and West inhospitable. The majority of African-American students do frequent dance parties sponsored by African-American greek-letter organizations," Vieux wrote in the letter to "60 Minutes."

The percentage of undergraduate Duke women in sororities has increased in the past couple of years to 45 percent. Former Panhellenic Council president Lori Wood, a Duke senior, said she thinks that increase indicates a strong interest among female undergraduates in "not only being greek but in seeking the relationships and resources that sorority life has to offer."

Wood said the sorority leadership has worked hard to increase educational programming for students on women's issues, and involvement in philanthropic pursuits as well as to strengthen the ties between sororities. She said efforts also have been made to reduce attention to self-serving interests

in favor of a more "responsible and accountable" role.

Having the opportunity to join a sorority during your first year at Duke is important, Wood said. "I know not only from my personal experience but also from sharing with my pledge sisters that the transition period at Duke is very tough.

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"This is one mechanism whereby you can meet and interact with upperclasswomen. The friendships you make with your pledge sisters are also important," she added.

Fraternity men live together, party together, frequently eat together and are often seen just hanging out together in clumps on the painted benches that dot the campus landscape. All this time together is what binds these men to each other, according to both the current and most recent former presidents of the IFC -- Michael Bown and Chetan Ghai.

"Fraternities provide for the young men on our campus instant community," said IFC adviser Maureen Cullins. "They are placed where through ritual, residential associations, meetings and proximity, people come together and form a community.

"The men in fraternities will tell you they make life-long associations, they have the opportunities to network for career and social options, and they point to the fact that they have this brotherhood -- these friends -- that they can count on to help and support them as they go through this university. From that perspective, I think that they're very good."

"A lot of people have complained that fraternities dominate West Campus," said Bown. "However, fraternities have about 23 percent of the housing on main West Campus and they represent about 23 percent of the student population, so it's not true numerically. We are a dynamic and organized group, so it may be true from that standpoint," he added.

Cullins, who also is dean of campus community development, said that while the concerns about fraternity life are real, many of them also apply to other residential living groups.

Cullins believes that if the alcohol policy is dealt with effectively, "the associated problems such as abuse, damages, date and acquaintance rape -- all those things that are so very closely tied to alcohol abuse -- will begin to diminish."

Bown, a junior and a member of Kappa Alpha, argues in support of the fraternity system's current timetable for rush, which begins in the fall and ends in the spring with pledging. "We feel that right now we have the best rush system in the nation," Bown said. "It's a semester long, not a superficial two weeks like a lot of other institutions. And you can defer to your sophomore year if you feel you're not ready to make a decision."

Moving rush to second semester freshman year would prolong an organized introduction to upperclassmen, but postponing rush until sophomore year would upset the balance of leadership in the fraternity, Bown said. Fraternities are dependent on the enthusiasm of sophomores and the involvement and trained leadership of the juniors to effectively run their organizations, he added.

Ghai, a senior who completed his IFC presidency in January, said one thing he'd like to see is all housing for fraternities located on one campus. This would reduce the competition for housing among fraternities, he said.

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A member of Delta Sigma Phi, Ghai said he sees the main problem with fraternities as hinging on the idea of self-governance. The fraternity system needs to set up its own judicial process where peers could work with offenders to help them stop negative behavior.

Students choose not to join a greek organization for a variety of reasons, according to Cannon Alsobrook. Some are "forced to stay independent" because they are not invited to join the group they chose. Some don't drink alcohol, some don't have the money to pay dues, some see the system as superficial and others simply aren't motivated because they are already satisfied with their group of friends, he said.

Alsobrook is a senior and an independent. He is chairman of the undergraduate publications board, a contributor to *The Chronicle*, an adviser to the judicial board and a resident adviser for Hanes Annex dormitory.

He said the belief that greek life drives the social life at Duke is a common misconception. "Greek life is nothing but a branch of the social life at Duke and needs to be considered along with all the other facets of social life," he said.

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