

## Reflection 2

# Pledges—Who Needs Them?

*February 1970*

Can Lambda Chi Alpha, or any other fraternity, get along without having pledges? I submit that not only can we, but in the long run we must.

Lest that startling statement shock the reader into thinking that the Executive Director is suggesting a phasing out program which would eventually eliminate fraternities, let me hasten to add that I don't mean we should stop the recruiting of new members—in fact we must continue to increase our efforts in this direction, and the program suggested in this column is designed to do just that.

Since last summer members of the Grand High Zeta and the administrative staff have been talking with our student members, alumni, and college administrators about many of the problems which confront us as chapters, as an international fraternity, and as part of a fraternity system. Some of the problems are chronic, others are new, as times and students, attitudes and philosophies change. All of them must be faced seriously and knowledgeably if we are to deal with them effectively.

One of these problems is the tragic loss of so many of our pledges who never make it through to initiation. Last year 1,358  $\Lambda$ XA pledges did not become members—about 30% of all men pledged. For some reason I had always felt that more men were depledged by the chapters than dropped by their own action. Perhaps this was true at one time—apparently not anymore.

A study completed last summer showed that 65% of the men depledged last year withdrew by their own action. Any thinking member must wonder why, since this represents one out of every five men pledged. After long and careful analysis of the problem, I must conclude that most of them drop out because we're still playing games with them, and they have decided that they have better things to do with their time.

And, come to think of it, why should a bright young freshman (or sophomore, or

junior) who has met the entrance requirements of his university, who has perhaps worked all summer to help finance his education, be expected to enjoy a role in which his fraternal status is second class? We expect a pledge to obey every rule (while actives don't); be respectful to the housemother (while actives frequently aren't); light cigarettes; carry matches; say "yes, sir; no, sir"; clean the toilets; and never say anything which offends anyone. In these negative ways the pledge is "proving" himself worthy of membership. Yet if we found a spineless person who would subject himself to such a status of semi-servitude anywhere else in society, we'd be disgusted with him. The problem, as I see it, is that we have been doing an excellent job of training men to be pledges ... a role they will no longer have as soon as the training period is over.

In an area which cries out for dramatic changes, we have found many of our student members (and, tragically, some alumni) reluctant to break with tradition. The concept of *pledge education* vs. *pledge training*, which we introduced several years ago, has been almost universally accepted, but at the chapter level the transition has been made, for the most part, in the name of the program only, not in practice. While it is true that fraternities have rid their programs, for the most part, of physical hazing, there remain in most programs strong elements of separation between actives and pledges, with sharp distinctions between these two classes of membership.

What I feel is needed is not a new look at pledge education, but a totally different concept of this period between initial acceptance and initiation. In the program which I envision as the type of approach all fraternities must eventually adopt:

1. There is virtually no distinction between an active and a pledge.
2. The pledge period is limited to no more than six to eight weeks.
3. Pledge tasks and pledge work sessions are replaced by chapter work sessions involving both actives and pledges.
4. Pledges attend at least half the active meetings or a major portion of all chapter meetings.
5. Pledges are included on chapter committees and are given a voice in chapter affairs.
6. Pledge class unity is not considered a desirable goal since it tends to create horizontal divisions within the chapter.
7. Pledges are in no way subservient to active members, and discipline of pledges is handled within the same framework of laws and policies which govern all members.
8. Instruction of pledges is handled through a series of conferences using the concepts of group discussions, case studies, and individual development, rather than the traditional classroom methods and pledge class organization.

It may well be that the most serious deterrent to the implementation of such a program is the word "pledge" itself, since it has for so long been associated with subservient status in fraternities. Accordingly, ΛΧΑ has developed this totally new approach into a program which we call FRATERNITY EDUCATION. In which the newcomer is called an ASSOCIATE MEMBER. Jon Nielsen, director of chapter services, has prepared an excellent paper on the program which was enthusiastically received at last summer's management training seminar. In it, he states that

While this program allows for a reasonable time of mutual observation, it pursues education of the new member from the standpoint that, since he has been chosen for unique and noteworthy talents and abilities, he can therefore participate with most major membership privileges from the outset and learn the guidelines of fraternal experience by doing. This is complemented by a series of educational conferences which emphasize chapter operations, fraternity history, personal and leadership development.

At the end of the six-eight-week period, if college or IFC regulations do not permit immediate initiation, he then assumes all membership rights and responsibilities as an *active member* but must wait until he participates in the ritual to become an *initiated member*.

The paper concludes that associate membership is best understood as comprised of eight types of experience, some spontaneous, some organized. These include: member influence; participation; conference-type instruction; personal development; behavioral responsibility; academic and intellectual development; leadership development; and individual, unique experiences.

We genuinely believe this concept of *fraternity education* will appeal to students who are interested in the fraternity experience but who are unwilling to subject themselves to the lengthy, immature, and time-consuming activities which traditionally characterized fraternity pledgship. Some chapters have already adopted the program in total—some in part—others are talking about it and gaining converts. Lambda Chi Alpha can take the lead in adopting wholeheartedly an innovative, imaginative, and exciting program in which each new member is given the freedom to explore his fraternal experience, to discover his talents and abilities, and to develop his individuality. His experience in ΛΧΑ will be meaningful because it is *his*.