

## **We Need More Fraternities**

What Happens Next - 07.22.23

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, education, and culture.

Today's Topic is We Need More Fraternities.

Our speaker is Anthony Bradley. Anthony is the Distinguished Research Fellow at the Acton Institute and a Professor of Interdisciplinary and Theological Studies at Kuyper College. He is also the author of the book *Heroic Fraternities: How College Men Can Save Universities and America*.

I hope to learn from Anthony why fraternities are so important to young college men, and why university administrators and others want to shut them down.

Let's begin today's podcast with Anthony's opening six-minute remarks.

Anthony Bradley:

One of the reasons I wanted to write this book is that men are struggling. College men in particular. In the fall of 2022, about 61% of all new college students were women. What we're seeing now is that men are not even going to college. We have about 9 million men right now who have disappeared from the workforce. They are not in trades, they're not in school. They're sitting at home doing absolutely nothing. And add on the mental health issues that a lot of men face.

I'll just give you some data. Male college students report in the last 12 months that 46% of them felt hopeless. 75.3% of them felt exhausted. And this is not from physical activity. This is emotionally exhausted. 56.3% felt very lonely. 59% felt very sad. 34.8% felt depressed. 49.1% felt overwhelming anxiety. 37.4% felt overwhelming anger, and 11.3% seriously considered suicide.

My thesis is that one of the best institutions to address the issues that college men are struggling with are college fraternities. These are places where men can have these issues addressed in an incredibly healthy way.

85% of Forbes 500 executives are men who come from fraternities. 76% of those in Congress were part of Greek life.

Every vice president since 1825, with the exception of two, were from fraternities. Kamala Harris was in a sorority also from Greek life. So, Greek life actually produces the nation's leaders. And it's really important that we begin to support and resurrect the importance of these institutions rather than vilifying them, which has been the normal orientation of colleges. Colleges want to get rid of fraternities, they want to get rid of the very institutions that are uniquely positioned to address the issues that college men are struggling with. Whenever I stand in front of a group of college men, I see a group of men in pain. I see a group of men who are struggling. I see a group of men who want to be great men, but they don't know how. And fraternities are a great place to provide that orientation to being a great man.

Just a few things that make fraternities great. First is they provide a context for friendship. One of the things that high school guys are really worried about when they attend college is, can they make friends? Every man needs a brother or two that has a relationship that runs deeper than simply watching football and drinking beer. A man with whom he can be accountable and be vulnerable.

All guys need a tribe. Guys move in packs. There's nothing more encouraging for young man than to know that another group of men has his back.

Thirdly, fraternities help men find their strengths. It's a process of initiation that we have lost in our culture.

I think we can produce a culture of men who use their power and their creativity for the benefit of others. This is what it means to be a man in a heroic fraternity.

Larry Bernstein:

Your first observation is that 61% of college students today are women. And in the world of education, there seems to be a desire to feminize men. Why can't these boys be as productive and as well behaved as women in class? What do you think about the feminization of boys in school?

Anthony Bradley:

Well, this begins in the K through 12 experiences. Most boys don't even have a male teacher until middle school or high school. In most K to 12 contexts, boys are expected to behave like girls. Boys are more likely than not to be diagnosed with ADHD or hyperactivity when in fact they're just being boys. So, what we do with boys is we medicate them. By the time we get to college, guys have been so emasculated and discouraged about education, they begin to fall off. We see a context where being masculine has been conflated with the word toxic.

And so instead of encouraging men to use their power and their creativity for the benefit of others, what we do instead is say, actually act against your nature and behave as if you are not a

man. The only models we're giving them are really these sanitized, emasculated versions of what it means to be a man. I just think guys are lost because we've suppressed all of their intuitions about what it means to be masculine. If they are assertive, they get shamed for that.

Larry Bernstein:

I sent my son to Allen-Stevenson, a private school in NYC that is a single-sex, boys' school from K to 8. David Trower was the head of school for 32 years, and he passed away a few days ago. In my first parents' meet the headmaster discussion, Trower said that he understood boys. Because boys can't sit still, they can move around in class. There will be frequent recesses. The class content will be boys focused like building bridges and fighting. And the boys loved it.

Anthony Bradley:

Boys are different than girls. The data is so clear on this I wonder why people even argue about it. Boys in all-boys school outperform boys in co-ed schools. That's just a fact. To press it even further, if you want to get the academic performance scores up for both boys and girls in low-income communities, you separate the sexes. The highest performing schools in inner city Chicago, in New York, in Philadelphia are all boys' schools. Now, what's so fascinating is that really wealthy people have figured this out. Some of the best schools for boys and girls are single-sex schools. And then we have this understanding that in low-income communities, the best schools are single-sex schools. But in the middle, we have this unbelievably irrational doctrine that coed education is best.

And the data doesn't bear that out. Boys need to be in an environment where their particularities are integrated into the educational experience. I used to be a high school teacher, and expecting boys to sit in a room for seven hours a day is absolute insanity. The best boys' schools use the boys' energy and incorporate that into the education experience. They're doing addition by picking up and counting rocks. And they're using a boy's imagination to encourage him toward the aspiration of the heroic.

If you look at their Halloween costumes, if you look at the things that they draw, they want to be heroic, they want to be great men. They love to fight evil. They're going to draw dragons, they're going to draw weapons, they're going to draw all sorts of dangerous things. And in a lot of contexts right now, the parents will be called by the teacher because there'll be some suspicion. The boy has some kind of psych disorder, <laugh>. And I'm like, no, he's just a boy. So, we take boys and we sanitize all their boyiness out, and then we get mad at them when they don't act like men later on in life.

We've created this whole scenario by inadvertently emasculating all the things that boys love. And it begins in those K to 12 years. I would tell parents, listen, if your son is drawing dragons, ask him to tell you a story about the dragon and what the dragon's going to do, and then ask him,

who's going to save the dragon? The world is really dark and evil in a lot of places. And to raise up your sons to be the kind of boys who are like, "you know what, dad, mom, when I grow up, I don't want to just have a great house and a nice car and a safe neighborhood. I want to go out and do good in the world and fight some evil, right? I want to make the world a better place." For some reason, we are against that and it starts by saying, "Hey, don't draw that gun when he's in the third grade."

Larry Bernstein:

In your opening remarks, you said that boys are depressed and lonely. How will fraternities help improve the situation?

Anthony Bradley:

One of the reasons that young men want to join fraternities is that they consider it a new family. No matter what fraternity it is, that word brotherhood is going to be central to their experience. And why is that important? Because guys are deathly afraid of being alone. We are pack animals by nature. We're social animals by nature. And imagine the anxiety of having a pack in high school, and then it evaporates, and then you're thrown into a new context where you have to form a brand new pack. Well, what's interesting and maybe sad about this generation, is that they don't have the social skills that previous generations did at forming relationships and friendships and forming new packs. Why is that? Well, they've been so coddled by adults who've micromanage every aspect of their lives, K to 12, that they never had to test out those skills at forming new relationships because their parents did it.

All parents organized play dates. Parents organized everything. And so, what we're finding right now is that a lot of high school guys will only want to go to colleges where they already know people. And fraternities are saying, "Hey, listen, we will accept you as you are. And the moment that you become an initiated brother, you are a brother. We are a new family where we're going to treat you like a family. As a family member, we're going to love you as you are, your good aspects and your bad aspects.

When you're depressed and anxious at two o'clock in the morning, you'll have somebody to talk to. When your girlfriend dumps you, you'll have a shoulder to cry on. When you run out of money and you need to buy some food on Friday night, you have a brother who'll just give you some money without the expectation of it being returned.

One of the fascinating things that I encounter when I do interviews of fraternity guys across the country is they used language like this. A student at Mississippi State University, I thought he was going to start crying. He just kept saying, "these guys care about me. They actually care about me." And he said it over and over and over again.

I think we have misunderstood the fact that guys want to be loved. They want to be cared for. And a fraternity is a community where your son is going to be deeply cared for in every aspect of his life. That's the opportunity and the benefit of being initiated into a brotherhood that they will actually be loved deeply. These men will tell you that they have acquired lifelong friendships because of what they experience in their fraternities. And it starts with that pledgship and that initial entry into that brotherhood. And so that's why I think the word brotherhood is used so strongly.

Larry Bernstein:

The initiation process and the rites of passage are associated with negative values like hazing and excessive drinking. How can fraternities turn pledging into a positive force?

Anthony Bradley:

Historically, if you look at all cultures across the world, it's a way of helping young lads find what they're good at to find their strengths. I tell fraternities that all of your activities during the pledge season should be connected to helping these pledges find out what they're good at to find their strengths, because you want to use those strengths to make the fraternity even that much better.

Pledging isn't intended to mess with the guy just because it's fun, you're actually putting obstacles in front of them so that they can discover that they're actually greater than they imagined. And they did it with their pledge brothers. And so, they learned a couple things. One, I have way more capacity than I realized, but secondly, I can only do great things with other people. And it seems to me that we want a culture in America where men are able to aspire to do great things, but to recognize that they can't do it alone.

And the one of the best places to cultivate that sense of I can do great things and I need other people to help me do them, is in a fraternity. To me, it's this, it's a master class in character development and the development of the aspirational vision of being a hero.

Every indigenous culture in the world has some sort of initiation process where a man transitions and it's clear that he is now a man. But in the West, particularly in the UK, Canada, Australia, we don't have anything. So what happened? A bunch of adolescent boys just made something up: drinking, driving a car fast, hooking up with the girls, being an expert at video games, stuff like that.

But fraternities have an opportunity because they're on a college campus surrounded by thousands of people, they have an opportunity to help a guy discover what he's good at and find a place for him to exercise those good virtues and those good attributes.

Larry Bernstein:

I attended the University of Pennsylvania and was a member of Tau Epsilon Phi fraternity. As a pledge I was required to interview each of the individual brothers. This was an essential way for us to find mentors and learn from the older generation.

Anthony Bradley:

At fraternities there's a fantastic opportunity for mentorship, to have a big brother.

I know of a fraternity that actually flipped the interview model, and I thought it was absolutely extraordinary. What they do with their pledges is they rent a hotel room, and about eight to 10 older brothers are waiting on the pledge. So, when the pledge enters the room, each older brother tells the pledge what they see in him that makes them want him in the fraternity. They identify all of his attributes, all of his assets, all the good things that they see. Now imagine that you're 18 years old and there's a line of 20-, 21- and 22-year-olds telling you why you're awesome. Most men in America never experienced that ever. They don't even get that from their own fathers.

Larry Bernstein:

I go to my college reunions and it is fun to see some of my old friends. But it is nothing compared to going to my fraternity reunion, which is a total blast because the friendships are stronger and more meaningful.

Anthony Bradley:

When I arrived at my own fraternity reunion, I was kind of emotional, to be honest, because what you saw was a group of middle-aged men in their forties and fifties and early sixties. Because they had had this three-to-four-year experience together, they had a level of connection and depth that they didn't have in their relationships across the campus in general.

And I've been to reunions with other organizations at my college over the years, and yeah, it's been kind of nice and happy, whatever, but there's nothing like walking into your fraternity reunion and they literally stand up and start clapping and screaming your nickname because you arrived. And then what's even more fascinating is that the conversations that you start having in that reunion is almost as if you never left college.

They just kind of pick up where you left off. You can be completely honest and completely vulnerable about the good times and the bad times, about the struggles, about the successes without any shame, because you know that these men are not going to look at you according to your performance or how successful you are. They're going to look at you the way they did when you were in college, when you were all in the same spot in the first place. A lot of men don't have friendships like that after college. In fact, what the data shows is that most men don't make a new friend once they reach the age of 30.

There just aren't a lot of contexts where young men get to bond like that. In our culture, there's the military. It's even deeper than a college experience. You have sports teams, and at the college level, the only thing that's going to match the level of connection and depth and struggle and pain and joys in a community forged together on the basis of comradery and shared goals is a fraternity.

So much of what's important about fraternity life, because it's multi-generational, is the benefit of the deposit of wisdom from older brothers to younger brothers. One of the things that we experienced at my reunion was it provided opportunities for the young guys to ask us questions, "Hey, what's it like to start a business? What's it like to be a lawyer? What's it like to be a doctor? What's it like to try to raise a family? And how do you do all of these things?" It just provides that context for the deposit of wisdom.

Larry Bernstein:

I was very studious in college. I was in the library six hours a day, every day. The fraternity offered dinner in the house each night and a full social calendar. It was my lifeline.

Anthony Bradley:

Absolutely. Fraternities make social life efficient for young men. If you want to have a community of guys with whom you go study together from 7 to 10:00 PM in the library, you can go find that. Whatever your social needs are, your social interests are, you can find a group of brothers and in your chapter who are also into that very same thing. One of the things that data shows is that Greek men academically outperform other men on campus. It helps guys really focus and be more efficient with their time.

Larry Bernstein:

There is a movement to close fraternities by the college administration as well as other members of the community both inside and outside the university. Why do they hate fraternities so much?

Anthony Bradley:

Two things come to mind that really explain why people just detest fraternities. On the one hand, there's a stereotype that frat boys are dangerous and toxic. To be called a frat boy is actually an insult. There have been situations on a lot of campuses where the minority of fraternity guys who are horrible people do really horrible things. And that gets projected against Greek life in general. If you look at sexual assault, if you look at alcohol abuse and drug abuse, when two brothers in one chapter do something really horrible, it affirms people's confirmation bias.

A lot of university presidents, they just don't want the liability. LSU, for example, just awarded a family \$6.1 million because their son died during a pledge activity. 6.1 million from one

fraternity, one chapter, one event, one evening. So, university presidents are really nervous about the liability that fraternities could potentially bring to their campuses, and it's just easier just to get rid of them. At Duke University, for example, they changed the rules so stringently in Greek life that of the 11 fraternities, 7 left because the rules were just so ridiculous.

Larry Bernstein:  
What about hazing?

Anthony Bradley:  
A lot of fraternities have this idea that you have to break guys down and build it back up again to get good fraternity men. And the belief is that that is from the military. So they watch these movies of basic training.

Larry Bernstein:  
Like the movie Full Metal Jacket.

Anthony Bradley:  
Exactly. And what do they see? They see a drill sergeant yelling at a recruit. But what they don't realize is that in that military context, they're getting guys ready to be a part of a unit so that they don't die. What they're doing is they're purging their individualizing tendency and they're reforming them to see themselves as a part of a group.

And what a lot of guys do is they look at that and they say, "we should do the same thing in a fraternity." That doesn't make any sense because in your fraternity, you're not training anyone to go fight in a war.

One of the things I tell fraternities is that every single pledge activity should be philosophically justifiable. You should be able to tie every pledge activity to a particular value or virtue in your fraternity. So, for example, if your fraternity values friendship, then you should develop an activity during pledging that is going to foster and encourage and develop deeper friendships. That might be a ropes course, it might be playing kickball, it might be doing a Habitat for Humanity house together.

Larry Bernstein:  
I was a pledge 39 years ago and my fraternity was worried about excessive drinking and sexual assault. At the fraternity parties, we would delegate tasks among the brothers. Big guys like Mike Z would work the door, and smaller guys like me would guard the stairs. We all knew that if something went wrong, the whole fraternity was at risk.



Anthony Bradley:

One of the things that I tell fraternities when it comes to both women and alcohol is to frame it differently than prevention. So, we're not going to have a party and structure it so that we're preventing alcohol abuse or that we're preventing women being sexually assaulted, but to flip it toward a direction of virtue, wisdom and prudence character. I'll tell fraternity guys, "Hey, listen, what would it take for your fraternity to have a reputation for it being the safest place on campus for women to be? And what do you have to do at your fraternity party to make it be that? And for women to experience having a good time in your fraternity house, and they leave better off than they were when they came in. They were more human because of the experience there. And what does it mean to use alcohol in a responsible way legally to have fun but to not use it as a way of soothing discomfort or numbing your own pain so that you can be a different kind of person."

One of the things that I'm really concerned about is that we are telling young men to just be less bad. And I think it's a horrible framing that's not aspirational. Instead, we should encourage these men to be loyal and trustworthy. To use their confidence to make the world a better place, to make their pledges better, to make their brothers better, to add value to the campus.

When you invite college age men to be men of honor and character and virtue and excellence, do you know what happens? They get excited about it and they want to be that.

Larry Bernstein:

There is a football fraternity, an arts fraternity, Jewish and black fraternities. These fraternities try to find like-minded men to join. These are not diverse groups. And right now, diversity is considered the holy grail for group behavior.

Anthony Bradley:

I think the problem with diversity is that we tend to reduce it to one variable, which is race. You can have a fraternity that's full of all white guys, or what we racialize as white, and it could be incredibly diverse because there are other types of diversity. There's religion, there's political affiliation, there's geographic diversity, there's family background diversity. There's also diversity of interests, cares, concerns, aptitude, abilities. There are all diversities that really do matter but for some reason we don't celebrate those. Part of the diversity and equity and inclusion discussion, what it does it reduces diversity to this one variable. It obscures the fact that fraternities are already diverse and that the perceptions of homogeneity, when you look at them across the board actually may not be the case.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Anthony Bradley:

I'm incredibly optimistic about young men who are working really hard to help the country reimagine that what it means to be a man is to be a person who uses his skills and his presence and his creativity and his power for the benefit of those around him. I'm excited because they are finally speaking out and making changes on campuses across the country. And fraternities are becoming better places because we're full of men like this. I'm also encouraged what it's going to do for the country once these men graduate and become fathers and husbands and employers and employees.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Anthony for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic was AI & Humans Working Together – Not Independently. Our speaker was Tom Malone who is a Professor of Management at MIT's Sloan School and the Director of the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence. Tom wrote the book *Superminds: The Surprising Power of People and Computers Thinking Together*. Tom described how people will interact with AI-based algorithms in the future to become a Supermind by combining the best that humans can do with the computing power of AI.

I would now like to make a plug for next week's show. The topic will be the ethics of big data and the speaker will be Richard De Veaux who is a Professor of Statistics at Williams and the author of several of the bestselling college statistics textbooks.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website [whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining me, good-bye.