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Tradition Today: How Student Affairs Professionals Can Strengthen and Preserve Campus Traditions

Matthew J. Van Jura

On November 18, 1999, 12 people were killed and 27 injured when the tower of logs they had erected collapsed, crushing the victims underneath. This tragedy took place on the campus of Texas A&M University, where students had been preparing for "Bonfire," an annual tradition nearly 90 years old. As a result of tragedies like this, some critics oppose campus traditions.

Yet, traditions have long played an instrumental role on college campuses through their ability to build community, connect students with the heritage of their alma mater, and develop institutional pride. The question facing many administrators today is what should be done about traditions that marginalize or put students at risk. This article offers student affairs professionals suggestions for ways campus traditions may be preserved and strengthened, thus improving their school's community.

Traditions play a unique role in the culture of student life. They have the potential to teach students about the history of their institution, provide a means of building community, instill common values that span generations of students, and generate pride and enthusiasm. However, there can also be negative qualities associated with college traditions. As certain rituals become ingrained in a university's culture, it may become increasingly difficult to recognize the risks that some traditions pose to health and safety, requiring university officials to take appropriate action to correct them. Similarly, as campus populations become increasingly diverse, traditions that fail to create an inclusive environment for historically marginalized students must change as well. For the sake of correcting, strengthening, and preserving these rituals and all the positive contributions they have to offer, today's practitioners must also recognize the faults within them. This article will study the development of college traditions before focus-

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ing specifically on past and present practices at the University of Vermont, Texas A&M University, The Ohio State University, and Bryant University. In addition to examining these institutional traditions, national hazing statistics will provide a context for rituals that often occur at a student organizational level. All examples will be placed within the context of recent scholarship, examining the need for traditions, and the importance they have for students. Suggestions will be offered for ways in which student affairs professionals can preserve such customs in a safe and inclusive manner so that students may enjoy them for years to come.

History

Original campus traditions were not the campus-wide gatherings attracting large numbers of students and alumni that are common in higher education today. When Greek letter organizations first appeared in the 1840s, they introduced the importance of social communities to a select few (Rudolph, 1962). Other students whose campus accomplishments were most noteworthy might receive recognition from their peers by being selected or “tapped” into a class honor group. While such rituals may have been memorable for those who were fortunate enough to participate in them, these experiences were nonetheless restricted to a privileged elite of the student body. By the start of the 20th century, new traditions began to emerge for students outside the realms of Greek organizations and honor societies, focusing on the advancement of class unity and institutional pride.

Some of the most popular traditions were associated with athletics. In the 1890s, students began to adopt school colors, mascots, and compose lyrics to alma maters. Dressing in school colors and singing fight songs while attending athletic contests, such as football games, allowed students to exhibit allegiance to their institution in great numbers (Thelin, 2004). Other traditions focused on building loyalty and cohesion among members of a particular class, often beginning during their first year. At the University of Vermont, a variety of rules were in place for first-year students to follow, including the need to wear beanie caps displaying their class year. As described in the Freshmen Handbook, “The Freshman Beanie has become a tradition on this campus. This tradition is a part of that intangible and indefinable entity called ‘spirit’ which is significant to any university. Please remember this and wear your beanie” (University of Vermont, 1960, p. i).

Although many colleges and universities had similar regulations in place for first-year students, eventually schools began to adopt rituals unique to their respective campuses, as well. At Texas A&M, the tradition of Bonfire began in 1909 to celebrate the Aggies’ annual football game against their rival, the University of Texas (Fearn-Banks, 2002). In the decades that followed, other schools developed their own traditions associated with sporting events. Various football programs have

their own unique game day rituals performed every autumn for generations that serve to remind current teams of their schools' storied histories. Players might walk through the grove at the University of Mississippi on their way from the student union to the football stadium, rub Howard's Rock in the final moments before running onto the field at Clemson, or touch the "Play Like a Champion Today" sign that hangs in the Notre Dame locker room. Even beyond the scope of athletics, at institutions such as Bryant University in Rhode Island, traditions play a key role in student life. Each December, students, alumni, staff, and administrators participate in "The Festival of Lights," an event that celebrates the various holidays occurring near the end of fall semester. Although the institution is secular and the event planners attempt to celebrate multiple holidays, Christian images frequently dominate the decorations.

Some rituals, however, can be dangerous and put the institution in a position of being held liable, should an accident occur. Others may neglect the beliefs or identities of a particular student population, thus alienating those students from the sense of community that the tradition is intended to provide. In some instances, administrators may have no alternative but to discontinue a tradition.

When Tradition Goes Wrong

In 1883, students at the University of Vermont (UVM) began a custom that, for the next 86 years, would become the most popular event of the school year for students, alumni, and citizens of Burlington. "Kakewalk," as the tradition was called, was held each February as a variation of a winter homecoming, featuring performances by a nationally known band, a ball, the crowning of a king and queen, and skits performed by fraternities and sororities. The most popular event was held on Friday and Saturday nights, when pairs of fraternity men would dress in blackface and perform dance routines many had been practicing since December. At the conclusion of the performances, winners would be announced and trophies awarded.

Yet as University Archivist Jeffrey Marshall (1991) explained, "the spirit of Kakewalk was the spirit of racism" (p. 78). The performance took its origins from slavery, where plantation owners would force slaves to entertain them by dancing, awarding pieces of cake to the winners. The UVM tradition was originally named the "Kulled Koons Kakewalk," with the three "Ks" highlighted on posters. In addition to dressing in blackface, performers would wear kinky-haired wigs and dance to the song "Cotton Babes" (Marshall). Over time, this explicit symbolism faded. However, the tradition reinforced a subconscious degradation of African Americans, which many community members did not see as harmful (Marshall).

Opposition to Kakewalk began as early as the 1950s when writers for the school

newspaper, "The Cynic," demanded that performers no longer dress in blackface. In 1964, the Interfraternity Council obliged and instead mandated that students paint their faces green, but public reaction was overwhelmingly negative as many thought this "ruined the event" (Marshall, 1991). In 1969, amidst continued concerns of racism, students voted to cancel the 1970 performance. Kakewalk has not been held since. The tradition of Bonfire at Texas A&M met a similar fate in 1999, though for different reasons.

In many Texas A&M publications, Tradition is literally a word spelled with a capital "T," and Bonfire has historically been the school's most popular Tradition (Fearn-Banks, 2002). First held in 1909, the fire represented the Aggies' "burning desire to defeat its archrival," the University of Texas, or "t.u." as the school is called to purposely agitate Longhorn fans (Fearn-Banks). Beginning in 1935, the structure grew larger each year, with the 1969 Bonfire reaching a record height of 109 feet. In 1970, limitations were placed on the Bonfire's height and diameter, although these restrictions were rarely enforced (Special Commission, 2000).

Bonfire was managed almost exclusively by the students. Preparation would begin 2 months in advance and involve roughly 5,000 students devoting approximately 125,000 work hours to the project's construction. Once completed, Bonfire structures often weighed approximately 2 million pounds. On the eve of the football game, 30,000 to 70,000 students, alumni, and members of the community would gather for the tower's lighting with legend dictating that if the fire burned past midnight, the Aggies would win the following day (Bonfire Memorial Website).

In the weeks following the 1999 collapse, the University established an independent commission to examine the factors that caused the tragedy. In its report, the commission cited both structural and organizational mistakes as contributors to the accident. First, there was no written methodology for how to build the Bonfire structure. According to one individual, "Bonfire was never built the same way twice" (Special Commission, 2000, p. 27). Instead of an established plan, students who lacked engineering expertise were responsible for making the decisions that contributed to the structural failure. In addition to these structural deficiencies, the cultural bias toward Bonfire carried equal responsibility. Administrators ignored past warning signs, and although the University valued the safety of its students, it did not take proactive measures to address the problems of Bonfire due to the widespread belief that "we have always done it this way, and it has always worked" (Special Commission, p. 35). A lawsuit filed against Texas A&M stemming from the Bonfire tragedy was recently settled, with the institution ordered to pay \$2.1 million to victims and their families due to lack of engineering oversight (2008).

In addition to the cancellation of these two notable university-wide traditions, administrators' attempts to phase out traditions practiced by student organizations have also been subject to controversy. Most notably, hazing rituals have attracted increased scrutiny due to the dangers these ceremonies pose to student well-being. Perhaps most frequently associated with Greek letter organizations, a recent study indicated that hazing behaviors are also common among student athletes, student organizations, military groups, club sports, and honor societies (Allan & Madden, 2008). The study found that, "college students are participating in unacceptable, high-risk, and potentially illegal behaviors in order to belong to a student group or team," (p. 16) and that these behaviors included: drinking alcohol to the point of getting sick or passing out, sleep deprivation, verbal harassment from older members, enduring harsh weather conditions without being provided appropriate clothing, performing sexual acts, and more (Allan & Madden). When students were surveyed regarding their perceived outcomes of having experienced such treatment, many believed that hazing had positive results such as: causing one to feel more like a part of the group (31%), feel a sense of accomplishment (22%), or feel stronger (18%). Fewer students believed the effects of hazing were negative; such as feeling stressed (11%), humiliated (3%), or in danger (2%) (Allan & Madden). Ninety-five percent of students responded that they would not report hazing to campus officials, yet every year students are injured or die as a result of their participation in such rituals (Allan & Madden). HazingPrevention.org, a website created by the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, stated that as of November 1, 2007, 89 known student deaths have been attributed to hazing rituals conducted by Greek organizations and that 82% of these cases involved alcohol.

Traditions such as Kakewalk or Bonfire, as well as rituals that involve hazing, pose a threat to the university. These activities put students at risk of suffering physical, emotional, or mental harm, and they work against their stated purpose of building community. Nevertheless, these cases are extreme examples and their inclusion in this paper should not be perceived as a condemnation of all traditions on campuses. On the contrary, research shows that when planned and executed properly, school traditions have many positive effects and enhance the student experience.

How to Build Community: A Qualitative Approach

In his 2004 article, "Student's Sense of Campus Community: What it Means, and What to do About it," David X. Cheng attempted to qualitatively determine, from a student's perspective, what components of campus life contribute to the development of community. Cheng, the Assistant Dean for Research and Planning at Columbia University, had noticed in recent surveys that students were unsatisfied by the lack of community on campus. A web-based survey was sent to

first-years, sophomores, and juniors, presenting students with 26 statements such as, “I feel valued as a person at this institution,” “My social interactions are largely confined to students of my race/ethnicity,” “I am proud of this institution’s history and heritage,” “The institution’s traditions and celebrations play an important role in my life as a student,” etc. (Cheng, p. 221). Students were asked to rate their reactions on a four-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Cheng, p. 220). The analyses of the survey data led Cheng to three conclusions. First, that a student’s sense of individual value and belief that the institution cares about them directly impacts the student’s belief that they belong to the university community. Next, “the most negative influence on a student’s sense of community comes from his, her, or his feeling of loneliness on campus” (p. 227). Finally, the quality of social life, not only among friends, but also through access to university-sponsored programming, enhanced a student’s feeling of community (Cheng). Cheng summarized his findings by stating the following:

In order for students to have a sense of campus community, student affairs administrators should strive to build a community that (1) has an open environment where free expressions are encouraged and individuality is accepted and respected, (2) engages faculty and students in teaching and learning, (3) provides an active social and learning environment in residence halls, (4) fosters positive relationships among ethnic and cultural groups through programs and student activities, (5) celebrates traditions and heritage of the institution, and (6) provides assistance to students when they feel lonely or depressed (p. 226).

These recommendations are supported by Kathleen Manning in her 1994 article, “Rituals and Rescission: Building Community in Hard Times.” Manning agreed that traditions play an important role in building community on campus. The actions associated with traditions allow people to express their beliefs, values, and associations with one another in a manner that language often cannot convey. Traditions allow students to connect with their institution’s heritage and share a common set of ideals, and can also be adapted to strengthen community as the needs of student populations change. As student bodies become increasingly diverse, traditions play a pivotal role in either welcoming marginalized groups into the greater community or further alienating these students. Manning (1994) stated that, “rituals reinforcing campus monoculturalism...are not neutral but, rather, embody a history extending into the present. This history often causes conflict on campuses and becomes the focus of contentious battles concerning culture, race, and change” (p. 275).

Examples would include the traditions at certain institutions of displaying the Confederate flag at events such as football games (Manning, 1994). In the past, the flag might have had one particular meaning for students and alumni, yet today

students of color attending these institutions may interpret the flag's presence on campus from an entirely different perspective. These students may subsequently question the degree to which the institution cares about their community if school officials attempt to rationalize the flag's affiliation with the institution while discounting the objections voiced by those who feel threatened or offended by its presence.

At their core, traditions are designed to foster feelings of community. Administrators must be wary of traditions that send the message that some members of the community are more valued than others. When planned and enacted properly, traditions not only reinforce established institutional ideals, but can also "draw new, existing, and disenfranchised members into the community" (Manning, 1994, p. 278). For student affairs professionals, the task therefore becomes preserving traditions on one's campus while ensuring these rituals are conscious of both an increasingly diverse campus population as well as matters of risk management.

Suggested Action Steps

With the importance that traditions have on positive student experience and the need for greater professional guidance, it might seem that improving traditions would be an ideal opportunity for professional staff to offer increased support to the students planning these events. In reality, the answers are not as clear as one might believe. There is much debate as to whether or not student culture can be effectively managed or controlled by administration (Manning, 1993). Administrators who seek to evaluate campus traditions and implement changes must first understand that for any decision to be well received by students, students should be a part of the decision making process from start to finish. Through collaborative meetings between student affairs staff and student leaders, both parties can gain a stronger understanding of what needs to be done to improve traditions on campus while preserving the spirit and heritage of these customs. One strategy that practitioners might successfully employ is reaching out to historically marginalized student populations to ensure that these student voices are incorporated into any conversation regarding the evaluation of existing traditions or the creation of new ones.

In some cases, where the very foundation of the tradition cannot be salvaged, the best decision for all may be to end the tradition entirely. Kakewalk is an ideal example of this scenario, since the spirit of the ritual had its roots in racism and a foundation that may never be erased. At other times the circumstances are less clear, such as with Bonfire at Texas A&M. While some may feel that the deaths of 12 students in such a tragedy would automatically prevent the tradition from ever taking place again, when it comes to traditions, the circumstances on each

campus must be treated independently (Manning, 1994). The culture of Bonfire is such that even after a catastrophe, many believe that the proper means of honoring the victims is to allow the tradition to continue. These proponents include students, alumni, family members of victims, and even former President George H.W. Bush, whose library is located on the campus of Texas A&M (Fearn-Banks, 2002). In regards to the importance Bonfire has for the community, many say, “you have to be there” to understand the importance of the tradition and that it epitomizes “the Spirit of Aggieland” which “keeps Aggies of today and yesterday in a tight bond” (Fearn-Banks, p. 175). Since 1999, no university sanctioned Bonfire has been held on campus, but unofficial Bonfires have been hosted off campus. Based on the culture surrounding the event and the lessons learned from the commission’s report, the best course of action may be to allow Bonfire back on campus. If managed under the supervision of administrators and engineers who can regulate Bonfire from year to year and ensure that proper safety precautions are in place, the tradition will be safer than if Bonfire continues unregulated off campus, where mistakes could easily be repeated.

A recent study evaluating the Mirror Lake Jump at Ohio State offered a similar recommendation. Each November during the week that leads to the Buckeyes’ football game against archrival Michigan, thousands of students gather on campus at Mirror Lake one night to jump into its shallow waters, sing fight songs, and display their excitement for the upcoming game. To date, no student has suffered debilitating injury or died from participating in the event, but taking proactive measures to ensure that students understand the risks that accompany jumping into a shallow body of water in late November is in the university’s best interests. Rich Hollingsworth, former Vice President of Student Affairs at Ohio State, is in favor of keeping the event but believes it can be safer (Hwang, Fisher, Tighe & Whalen, 2008). Currently, the university’s facilities and operations office remove all fountains in the lake prior to the night of the jump, and during the event 60 police officers are present to manage crowd control. However, the students conducting the survey recommended that further action be taken, such as the creation of an official website which provides students with information regarding the depth of the lake, the dangers of hypothermia, frostbite, alcohol use, and drowning (Hwang et al.).

Finally, at Bryant University, simply balancing the emphasis of which holidays receive the most attention would address the concerns that many students have regarding the Festival of Lights. While not all cultures celebrate a winter holiday, creating a conversation space for students and administrators to discuss a solution would be a step in the right direction. These students must understand that their experiences matter to the institution and that they are a valuable part of the community on campus. The decision to have this conversation lies with the administrators, who must admit that at present the tradition does not satisfy its

intended purpose and work with students to create a tradition that accurately reflects the diverse identities of all students at the school.

University traditions have come a long way since the days when first-year students were initiated into the campus community through hazing rituals. However, there are still improvements that can be made to the traditions that students currently participate in year after year, both on an institutional and organizational level. As decisions are made concerning the future of these rituals, it is important for administrators to realize that traditions must remain a primary component of student life, that the heritage of traditions should be preserved when possible, that the culture of the institution plays a critical role in any decision making process, and that to truly serve their purpose, traditions must unite all students as one community. To an observer these ceremonies may seem silly or trivial. Yet for those who live these rituals, traditions create a bond between students and their alma maters that lasts far beyond graduation. Given the potential for positive effects on student life, these experiences should be preserved for tomorrow's students to enjoy.

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