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Keeping Secrets: Student Secret Societies in Historical Context

Jennifer Domagal¹

Secret societies have long been part of the tapestry of American higher education. They have, however, remained largely unexamined and unspoken of, as if their existence itself is a secret. This article explores the contextual development of secret societies within the academy. The role of secrecy in the development of the first student organizations is outlined and examples of current societies are discussed. As student affairs professionals, it is imperative that we understand this historical context, namely the dangers of institutional paternalism and secrecy, in order to create a current conception of the status and influences of secret societies on our campuses.

Secret Societies

Officially, extracurricular activities have played a major role in undergraduate student culture at institutions of American higher education since the mid to late 1800's, when college and university officials finally began to recognize, approve of, and even encourage student involvement outside of a strictly academic arena (Rudolph, 1990). Unofficially, however, undergraduate students had already been forming their own organizations, apart from the official curriculum, for quite some time. For instance, literary societies first appeared at Yale University in the 1750s and Greek letter organizations, namely fraternities, were first founded in the late 1820s at Union and Hamilton Colleges (Rudolph). The motivations for such student involvement often differ, but one historical motivation was a search for autonomy amidst an arena of strict institutional paternalism.

Searching the long record of genesis and growth discloses one ever-recurring and explanatory theme—that of student self-government. By and large, the story of fraternities is one of student initiative and enterprise, one of efforts on their own to overcome the paternalism of their institutions and to provide for their own needs. (Johnson, 1972, p. 3)

This pattern is reflective of students' desire to carve out niches for themselves while also closely associating with others amiable to their own way of thinking and doing. The first secret societies predictably pre-date the official extracurriculum. By necessity, students, in effect, created their own extracurriculum via the foundation of secret literary, Greek letter, and other societies, against the explicit wishes of a predominantly conservative faculty. Secrecy, then, has also played a large part in our colleges and universities, just as it has in American culture as a whole. Secrecy pervades student culture even today in the form of secret societies, semi-secret societies, and Greek letter societies.

This article provides a historical and psychological perspective of the development of secret societies and their effects on student culture. The ways in which secrecy has and continues to hinder and/or enhance student culture will be examined, as will the role student affairs professionals should play in relation to these societies. To support this endeavor, brief descriptions and analyses of two prominent secret societies, namely Skull and Bones and the Seven Society, will also be highlighted. The article will provide a framework for understanding the development and continuing impact of secret societies on students and student culture.

Defining the Term "Secret Society"

The term "secret society" is extremely difficult to precisely articulate. A confusing and often ambiguous rhetoric surrounds this type of student organization. Many times it is referred to interchangeably as a "fraternity," "senior society," or "honor society." Arkon Daraul (1961) helps to further differentiate the causes of this confusion by explaining:

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Almost everyone who has written about secret societies has attempted a definition of what such a society is: yet no satisfactory description of the phenomenon has yet been attained. This is because there are so many variants surrounding the central fact of the existence of the society that what will identify one society will not fit another. (p. 9)

Daraul also states "Not all secret societies are entirely secret" (1961, p. 9). Often specific members or the mission of the group may be public knowledge, either intentionally or accidentally (Daraul, 1961). For instance, the Seven Society at the University of Virginia (UVA) is well known for its philanthropic efforts towards the University, and a number of notable members of Yale University's Skull and Bones Society, including the current president of the United States, George W. Bush, are publicly known.

Daraul continues by explaining "the secret society is an amalgam of many elements which are found in ordinary life" (Daraul, 1961, p. 9). These elements include membership exclusiveness, the importance attached to membership, the use of signs and passwords, and the fact that the objective of such a group may be almost anything (Daraul). Typically, secret societies such as Skull and Bones and the Seven Society attempt to conceal their membership and objectives, while Greek Letter organizations make their membership public.

Stanton K. Tefft (1980) further delineates that:

A secret society is a special type of association that has a set of well-defined norms, secret rituals and oaths, or similar declarations or demonstrations of loyalty that are intended to subjectively bind members to the secrecy required by the group's affairs. (p. 1)

Hazing, in clear opposition to the community standards of most, if not all, institutions is common among these organizations whose secrecy often places them beyond the reach of campus administrators.

Lyman draws an important distinction between "alienative" and "conformative" secret societies (as cited in Tefft, 1980, p. 324). According to him, alienative secret societies "pursue goals that are hostile to the central values and institutions of the...community" (p. 324). Conversely, conformative societies "support or, at least, are in close accord with the dominant values of the community" (p. 324). The Seven Society, by virtue of its role as a benefactor to UVA appears, then, to be a conformative society.

While acknowledging Greek letter societies as being essentially secret societies, the definition used in this article is not inclusive of them except as to provide historical context. So-called senior societies, secret societies, and semi-secret societies are the focus of this article. In accordance, I will use the following, albeit imperfect, definition of secret society: a college society that endeavors to envelop itself in some level of secrecy in order to benefit itself or others.

Regarding Secrecy and Group Involvement

The psychological and practical effects of secrecy and group involvement combine in the case of secret societies. Both play a role in the development and continuation of such organizations. Understanding each of these elements and the ways in which they interact will help to explain the nature and allure of secret societies.

Secrecy

The element of secrecy has many practical and psychological implications. Understanding how it factors into the lives of students and their culture, both past and present, will provide student affairs professionals with a more insightful understanding of these students. Much of the literature regarding secrecy and secret societies revolves around adult organizations rather than undergraduate ones. Implicit in this article are some of the parallels that this literature provides to college secret societies.

According to Tefft in his book *Secrecy, A Cross-Cultural Perspective*.

Secrecy operates as an adaptive device. It enables...groups...to attain certain ends. In this sense, at least, secrecy is instrumental and rational behavior...Through regulated control and disclosure of information, individuals as well as

groups may exert some control over their environments by making it difficult for outsiders...to predict their actions and take counteraction against them. (1980, p. 321)

This explanation of secrecy provides a conceptual framework for understanding the motivations of students to create, through secret societies, bastions of control despite the almost universal animosity of their professors and administrators.

A number of nineteenth-century college presidents, trustees, and faculty particularly the sons of ministers, once again vehemently opposed college fraternities. They charged that the societies conducted secret back-room dealings, played pranks, and sometimes drank. In 1842, the University of Michigan faculty likewise condemned the formation of secret societies on campus. In 1841, the Old Miami trustees outlawed secret societies on pain of expulsion...But while many colleges banned fraternities, students wanted them enough to risk maintaining underground chapters. (Nuwer, 1999, p. 119)

By incorporating secrecy into their actions, students gain control and autonomy over their surroundings and are able to create such groups even in light of direct opposition. Tefft also acknowledges the intrinsic satisfaction that secrecy can provide for an individual in the form of ego enhancement and a sense of power or superiority (1980, p. 321).

It may very well be that these "psychological benefits" are even more prominent today, at a time when students have more autonomy than ever before. Secrecy, in the case of college secret societies, often evokes a feeling of elitism that translates into the "ego enhancement," to which Tefft so deftly refers. On the other hand, students who are not members of secret organizations feel quite the opposite: left out, undeserving, or even inferior, all of which might have detrimental effects to their egos.

Groups

In keeping with Tefft's comments on the psychological implications of secrecy, M. A. Hogg states that:

Being a member of a group can have such dramatic effects upon how you perceive and feel about yourself and others. In a group you can experience a unique sense of belonging and identity, accompanied by powerful positive feelings towards your fellow members. There is a unity of purpose, uniformity of conduct and attitude, and a shared sense of invulnerability. Together these constitute that powerful sense of group solidarity and cohesion that we all experience from time to time. (1992, p. ix)

By itself this explanation of group cohesion does not account for the creation or duration of secret societies on our college campuses. Hogg's theories on groups clearly have implications for any other student organization. However, when these theories are combined with the implications of Tefft's psychological explanations of secrecy, a powerful context in which to understand secret societies emerges. The effect of secrecy and group dynamics might inevitably magnify, thereby creating groups that feel themselves either invulnerable or unaccountable to student culture as a whole. It is also worth noting here that, "College life...never included all students. The very prestige of the fraternities consisted in leaving out the majority" (Horowitz, 1987, p. 56).

The Historical Foundations of Secret Societies

Service Organizations

The antecedents to college secret societies can be found in American society at-large. In his book, *Service Clubs in American Society*, Jeffery A. Charles (1993) asserts that, "In the nineteenth century millions of middle-class American males flocked to organizations that affirmed, through secret ritual, a symbolic brotherhood" (p. 10). He states further that these organizations including, among many others, the Masons, Odd-Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and Noble Woodsmen, "nightly gathered in elaborate lodge rooms, donned exotic regalia, solemnly recited cryptic locutions, and stated bizarre tableaux, all in secrecy" (1993, p. 10). Early college secret societies bear great resemblance to these "brotherhoods." Both were bastions of male bonding and were purported to have a higher purpose of some sort, often including a dedication to service. Charles postulates that, "When a man in late-nineteenth-century America sought companionship and status within the local community, he joined a fraternal lodge" (1993, p. 11). Similar sentiments might also be found among the members of undergraduate secret societies. Secret societies, along with their Greek letter

counterparts, contribute to American higher education in a similar manner, by providing a sense of belonging and intimacy in an ever-growing, ever-changing environment.

Freemasons

The Freemasons predate all college secret societies, as the Order can be traced back to the early colonial period (Dumenil, 1984). This Order is "a quasi-religious secret society dedicated to the ideals of fraternity, charity, and moral behavior" (Dumenil, 1984, xii), and can be directly linked to the establishment of the first secret societies. Lynn Dumenil tells us that:

The order is...significant as an archetype of a secret society. According to anthropologist Noel Gist, who studies secret societies in the 1940s, most fraternal orders evidence a striking degree of 'cultural patterning.' Masonry appears to have been the model for structure, ritual, government, and function of other orders. (1984, pp. 219-220)

In particular, the "cultural patterning" that college secret societies have gleaned from the Freemasons seem to be the lodge, house, tomb, or hall that many secret societies possess. The use of rituals, societal secrets, and positive aims may also be attributed to this Order.

Literary Societies

In an effort to create their own extracurriculum, students founded their first semi-secret societies, alternately called literary societies or debating clubs, at Yale University starting in 1753 (Rudolph, 1990). The establishment of such societies clearly indicates the desire of students to take autonomy over their own lives and studies. This is evidenced by the fact that, "Faculties tended to see the earliest societies as evil threats to their authority and discipline. They fought them vigorously and tried their best to suppress and abolish them" (Johnson, 1972, p. 4).

Phi Beta Kappa

Phi Beta Kappa, known today as a prestigious honor society on campuses across the nation, was once a secret society according to my definition. The aims of the society according to Hastings (1965) were "basically those of a student literary society, self-improvement in the intellectual manly arts" (p. 5). The society referred to itself as a secret society, a fraternity, and an honor society (1965). Hastings also claims that, "Secrecy seems to have played a small role, or none at all, in most other college literary societies, but from the beginning it was emphasized in Phi Beta Kappa" (p. 3).

The organization was founded in 1776 by a group of young men at the College of William and Mary (Sheldon, 1969). The founders of Phi Beta Kappa, "had to clothe their undertaking in the utmost secrecy, for in that year it was both treasonable and dangerous to do anything disapproved by the teaching masters" (Johnson, 1972, p. 4).

There is evidence that Phi Beta Kappa was significantly influenced by the Masons. One of the founding members of Phi Beta Kappa was also a Freemason and many of the rituals and secrets of the organization have comparable equivalents in that Order (Hastings, 1965, p. 4). As many other college secret societies later did, Phi Beta Kappa encountered animosity and hostility on account of its secrecy (Hastings). In fact, a generalized anti-secret society movement occurred in the 1830's following the mysterious disappearance of William Morgan, the purported author of a soon to be published book that would shed light on the secrets of the Freemasons (Current, 1990). As a result, "Like Freemasonry, Phi Beta Kappa began as a society with secrets, but unlike Freemasonry, it eventually gave them up in response to public clamor" (p. 53). Eventually the honor society "lost all but a playful pretense to secrecy and the mysteries of fraternalism, and it put increasing emphasis on academic performance, as faculties took control from students and based elections more and more on grades" (p. 53). Today, Phi Beta Kappa is significantly less controversial, therefore incurring much less animosity from the public, yet membership in the society remains a high, if not higher, honor for its members.

In many ways the founding of "Phi Beta Kappa, stands out as a landmark in the history of student affairs" (Johnson, 1972, p. 10). The reason for this at least partially is that:

Phi Beta Kappa, rather than any of the others, is now taken as the common ancestor of hundreds of other student organizations found in America today. Its several characteristics, including secrecy, the use of initials of a Greek phrase for a name, and plan for chartering branches at other locations, set it apart. Its founders had the courage to be completely independent of faculty or other adult governance. They opened a new era in the long history of student self-government (1972, p. 11).

College Secret Societies

College secret societies spawned from a long line of documented predecessors, including the aforementioned Phi Beta Kappa. The University of Virginia and Yale University are each host to a number of secret societies. Skull and Bones at Yale and The Seven Society at UVA are among the most prominent and oldest in the nation.

Skull and Bones & Scroll and Key

According to Kelley (1974), "Phi Beta Kappa was the direct cause of the appearance of Yale's first senior secret society, Skull and Bones" (p. 224). The society was apparently founded by a group of senior men who had failed to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1832 (Current, 1990, p. 62). Scroll and Key, another secret society in Yale, was conversely founded by Yale men who were not tapped by Skull and Bones (1990). In fact, the proliferation of societies on campuses is considered typical. This phenomenon is referred to as "'schismatic differentiation'-[the] secession of disgruntled and dissatisfied members who form new...groups" (Tefft, 1980, p. 165).

These two organizations are "'peculiarly Yale institutions," and "are the only Yale societies whose transactions are really secret" (Current, 1990, p. 62). Both are considered more selective than Phi Beta Kappa. "In theory the membership is made up of the best men of the year, fifteen in each society, who must be noted either for scholarship, literary ability, athletic prowess, good fellowship, or great wealth. The mystic symbols, badges, and numbers are particularly prominent" (Sheldon, 1969, p. 175). These symbols along with the houses or tombs owned by each society exist as evidence to the societies' peculiar heritage that can be linked from Phi Beta Kappa back to the Masons.

Like Phi Beta Kappa, Skull and Bones has consistently faced animosity. The attitude of the neutrals or the non-society men toward these two organizations was that of bitter hostility....A bogus society, called, in mockery of the Bones, the Bowl and Stones, amused itself ridiculing the usages and symbols of the senior societies (Sheldon, 1969, p. 177).

More recently a student editorial in the Yale Daily News describes the existence of Yale secret societies like Skull and Bones as Yale's "dirty secret" (Nichols, 1998). Student writer Sarah Nichols, however, admits:

Senior Societies have many things to offer. They provide the opportunity to meet and become close with a group of diverse strangers in your senior year. They supply an interesting forum for discussion and debate, a natural window outside of your iron-clad clique. Not to mention the lavish facilities, alumni connections, and bragging rights. (1998)

She also refers to their "exclusion, elitism and power consolidation." According to Nichols, gaining entrance into a secret society is an "elaborate popularity contest" (1998).

In many ways, Sarah Nichols' assertions are correct. In fact, Skull and Bones like many other early secret societies, remained an institution of white male privilege until quite recently. In the case of Skull and Bones specifically, women were not admitted until the alumni, under great duress and by breaking a 159 year tradition, finally authorized the election of six women in 1991 (Yale U. club, 1991). It is clear that in most respects, Skull and Bones could be classified as an "alienative" secret society, as it, in many ways, is not in keeping with the more diversified goals of the institution of higher education within which it resides.

Seven Society

An organization:

which undoubtedly did much constructive work for the university was the ultrasecret Seven Society. Its insignia, consisting of a large "7", plus alpha, omega, and what appears to be the symbol of infinity, is seen all over the Grounds, often in the most unexpected places" (Dabney, 1981, p. 305).

Members of the society have long included both male and female students and, noticeably, favored administrators. Members are never revealed until their deaths after which the campus chimes are often rung in intervals of seven or a seven of some sort appears on their gravesite (Dabney, 1981).

The Seven Society is heralded for its charitable contributions to the UVA campus and community.

A typical episode-at commencement exercises in the late 1940s-was described in the University of Virginia Magazine: "The speaker was concluding his address when suddenly a small explosion was heard just above the proscenium arch, and a piece of paper fell to the floor...a check made out to the Bursar for \$17,777.77. Directions attached stipulated the money was to be used as a loan fund in honor of Dr. John L. Newcomb, the retiring president of the university." (Dabney, 1981, pp. 305-306).

The Sevens have also bestowed upon the university "new electronic chimes" in 1957, a "handsome silver mace" carried during academic processions, and many other beneficial gifts (p. 306).

Like Skull and Bones, the Seven Society is also responsible for a large degree of schismatic differentiation. A number of other secret societies have sprung up in its wake including the Society of the Purple Shadows and the P.U.M.P.K.I.N. Society (Dabney, 1981). Unlike Skull and Bones, however, the Sevens might be considered a "conformative" secret society. Many of their actions are in keeping with the mission of UVA and with the goals of higher education more generally.

Implications for Student Affairs and Student Culture

Like many other forms of student organizations, secret societies have both positive and negative implications for the practice of good student affairs. No one blanket statement or benign generalization can explain the diverse ways in which they impact and contribute to student culture.

Many themes run through these organizations: elitism, meritocracy, service, group cohesion, animosity of non-members, and lack of diversity. And while secret society membership is the lowest it has ever been, to the point that most students are not even aware of their existence, they still have an impact on campuses across the country (Nuwer, 1999). What kind of impact might they have in the future, if, like Phi Beta Kappa, they turned to embrace openness and continued successfully?

President McCosh of Princeton in his case against secret societies once said that, "There is always a tendency in these secret organizations to meddle with college management, to check certain plans of the college authorities, and influence elections to college honors" (as cited in Sheldon, 1969, p. 186). If this is true, then how does this reflect on us? As student affairs professionals we must ensure that students do have societies that might not have entered so remarkably into the academy. The students who founded these organizations must be recognized for the rich history of student initiative that they, in so many ways, began.

Conclusions

The question remains then, how do institutions retain the benefits and rid themselves of the negative aspects that go hand-in-hand with secret societies? It is important to differentiate between societies that utilize secrecy as one tool to help them achieve a purposeful goal in keeping with an institution's mission, like the Sevens perhaps, and those that promote measures not in keeping with the philosophy and values of their institution.

It is imperative that student affairs professionals embrace students' never ending quest for increased self-autonomy. Clearly, we must provide venues for this to occur. We must also work for increased inclusiveness to help students come to terms with and grasp the merits and demerits of such an elitist system. Rather than generalizing, we must instead remember that there are positive aspects alongside the negative. In doing so we can teach by example; by not embracing secrecy in our own doings and by instead instilling the values of inclusiveness, openness, and trust through these actions.

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