

Reflection 70

In Loco Parentis is Alive and Well

Winter 1989

The concept of “*In Loco Parentis*,” Latin for “In the place of a parent,” was certainly in force when I was an undergraduate in the 1940s. We didn’t call it that; in fact I never knew we had it until we lost it, sometime in the late ’60s. The paternalistic role of the college or university vis-a-vis the family probably started in colonial days, as parents sent their teenage sons and daughters off to William and Mary, Harvard or Yale. It was even more noticeable in the less sophisticated and more conservative colleges in the midwest and the church-related schools.

The Dean’s office regulated virtually every facet of the academic, social and moral lives of the students. The student handbooks were thick, and the rules were stringent. And they were enforced. I can recall a fraternity at a large Big Ten school, considered liberal even by today’s standards, being fined \$2,000 and placed on social probation (no parties) for a full year by the University for having one keg of beer in the house. And another fraternity on that same campus was fined \$5,000 by the University because some of their members—of legal drinking age—were caught drinking at their formal, held in a public restaurant some 20 miles from campus. There was no question raised of due process in those days. The students knew the rules, and when they broke them and were caught, they paid the penalty, and that was that.

The trend we have seen during the past two or three years indicates that universities are, in fact, moving toward more regulation and more control of student conduct. Many have developed what they call “relationship statements,” outlining the minimum acceptable standards for fraternities. Some of these are good, but many fall short when they impose standards on fraternities but do not impose similar standards on other student organizations or students in general. And some even go so far as to dictate when we can recruit members, how many members we can have, and when we can house our own members. This goes far beyond the controls and regulations prevalent even when *in loco parentis* was in vogue.

Meanwhile, the dialogue continues, and we welcome the opportunity to provide our input in the development of standards and policies that define, fairly, the relationship between fraternities and the sheltering institutions.

I don't expect to see a return to the policies of the 1940s. Let's face it—the problems are different. As an example, there was a study about a year ago by the California Department of Education, reported by TIME magazine, that contrasted the problems in their schools in the 1940s with those of the 1980s. In the 1940s, the major problems were: Talking and chewing gum in class; making noise, running in the hallways, getting out of place in line, wearing improper clothing, and not putting paper in wastebaskets.

And the problems in our schools in the 1980s? The California study lists: Drug abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, arson and bombings. Big difference!

Several factors in the 1960s changed all that. One was the lowering of the voting age to 18, and with that came the lowering of the drinking age in many states to 18 or 19. Another factor, probably the major one, was the fire storm that raged throughout the campuses of North America, brought on by the Vietnam War. Students demanded to be heard; they did not want their lives governed; they rebelled at the “establishment”; and university administrators caved in.

Fraternities during this period were like Horatio at the bridge; they (we) were considered part of the establishment. Yet at the very time when fraternities continued to be supportive of the institutions of which we felt we were an integral part, we were abandoned in the overall eclipse of *in loco parentis*.

In recent years, the legal liability crisis and the lawsuits piling up against colleges and universities posed a dilemma for the institutions. More rules and more regulations could result in more exposure to lawsuits. But continuing an arms-length relationship with students (and fraternities) left unchecked the kind of unacceptable behavior that had become prevalent through alcohol and drug abuse, sexual harassment, hazing, and the other ills of today's student society.

The fast track we're on dictates that we do need to be concerned, and we do need to be involved in working *with* our student members to improve the quality of the fraternal experience we're providing. We need to keep teaching responsibility coupled with accountability. And colleges and universities also need to be involved in this process.