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Hazing and Greek Life with Alana Hill from IWU and Eric Snowden from ISU

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Alanna Hill and Alex Snowden, April 1, 2018

Mike McCurdy: Greek life coordinators at Illinois Wesleyan and Illinois State universities are working to prevent hazing incidents through education. 2017 marked a particularly deadly year for hazing-related deaths. Four students died at universities in Pennsylvania, Florida, Louisiana and Texas. And like the high-profile hazing death of Penn State student Timothy Piazza, alcohol was involved in all the deaths. The Pennsylvania State Attorney General's office has dropped felony aggravated assault charges against Piazza's former fraternity members and brother the announcement in late February, however left misdemeanor, involuntary manslaughter charges in place. Alanna Hill is the Director of Fraternity and Sorority life at Illinois Wesleyan University and Illinois State Fraternity and Sorority coordinator is Alex Snowden. He says, "Even though best practices were in place at Penn State, campus culture were not."

Alex Snowden: Do you have a live-in advisor? Is the house dry? Is the organization newer? Are you getting the education? I think what went wrong there is there was a campus culture that individuals gave into. And when you give in to a campus culture and start to lose the way of what you were founded upon, you start to get into that murky water and I think that's what ended up happening there at Penn State.

McCurdy: Alanna, what do you think about the Penn State case?

Alanna Hill: Oh, that's hard since I am not the advisor there. I think .. gosh. .. I would say this across nationally and being in different universities as a greek advisor, I think that there are a lot of protocols in place, a lot of policies, especially in the last 30 years – I mean, even 40 if you wanna go back to, like animal house. I think that it depends on the own organization's culture and so if you have policies put in place but you don't have strong advisors, or the house has – or the chapter has, excuse me, has not been following those policies, that's the culture that creates that. So I think – and I don't know too much about it but I would say looking at the details of that house and what's come out, I would say that they had a problem in their culture. So –

McCurdy: And – and how are the cultures on the two campuses here in Bloomington-Normal? What are the things like at Illinois Wesleyan? How would you describe the campus culture?

Hill: Yeah. So we're kind of unique actually. We are – all of our sororities are over a hundred years old. Our Tau Kappa Epsilon chapter is the first chapter. It's called the Alpha chapter. And then our oldest fraternity, 152 years old which was a Sigma Kappa, my sorority, hasn't even been founded that long. So we have a really historic greek community

which a lot of people, I think, haven't had that experience. We have lots of older alumni that contribute to our chapters, a lot of alumni advisor boards, so as far as our culture, I would say that we still have alcohol problems just like our campuses do. But I think, like the history there, has really helped our culture. We're really small, too. We only got 9 chapters but we're also really big. We're 33% of the campus so we have a lot of support from the university, so I think for us as a private liberal arts institution, it's maybe a little bit different culture than some other big schools, or even some of our other like sister schools that are private liberal arts in Illinois.

McCurdy: And Alex, how many chapter at ISU and how would you describe the culture at...

Alex Snowden: Sure. So we... we have 39 chapters at Illinois State. We have about 14% of student population, or about 2700 students. We were founded – our culture was started, kind of around 1969 was when Greeks came on to campus. It was a different time than a hundred years ago when the groups were starting but I think a lot of what we're seeing in our culture is a younger culture, a ... alumni just now establishing themselves so they're starting to come back. They're starting to see more advisors because Bloomington-Normal outsources a lot of their degrees. You're seeing a lot more advisors in the Chicago area and stuff such as that but you're seeing more coming on. You're seeing more work. I think we have our issues. We have our alcohol problems. We've got – a lot of the problems that face most college students today just at a different level because we do it at an organization level. But culturally they're moving forward. We've got – we tend to have higher GPAs than the average students. We've done a little over 120,000 community service hours... or ... 120,000 philanthropy dollars on average a semester to an year, 25,000 community service hours so we've got a strong Greek community here at Illinois State that is continuously growing. We've got a new group coming every semester, so the culture is definitely ever-changing, and ever evolving but it's a growing and strengthening culture on-campus.

McCurdy: You mentioned alumni, Alanna –

Hill: -Yeah-

McCurdy: -and what role do they play in affecting the culture? I mean alumni might come in and have stories from when they were in the chapter and there was – you know hazing and maybe people with the other way. Does that make your job more difficult? Do the alumni help or hurt?

Hill: Well, it depends on the alumni or alumnae I would say. For our sororities, we kind of have like a council for sororities that helps a lot. Our sorority women have had like the same advisor for many years. They have a good alumnae connection. I've never struggled with any alumnae within the sororities. They've been very helpful with recruitments and kind of like, the housing corporation is all of our sororities have privately owned houses.

For the fraternities, it kind of depends. I can't say since I've been there, there has been a lot more accountability between – especially alcohol use in the fraternities and we've set up advisory boards within the fraternities and partly because we needed to see more accountability from older members. But we're looking at alumni that are at least kind of like 10 years out. It's not like recent alumni that are on our advisory boards and I would say since I've been there – I've only been there 3 years – they've helped more than they've hurt. Now when you do have younger alumni come back to the tailgating at Homecoming, that is sometimes not very helpful but I would say that people are invested in creating a successful environment for the fraternities – yes, they've been really helpful.

McCurdy: And Alex, same question – alumni helpful or – or ...

Snowden: ...so our culture is a little different because we've got some groups that have alumni and some groups that don't. And so for the groups that don't have alumni, they've pulled a lot of their advisory support from non-members to be a part of their team. So they actually pull people in that are – we have one advisor that's on the – that's in the conduct office but not an alumni of the chapter. We've got members that are in the Visor center – the study center. We do all these different things with some of our alumni. I think for us, we've been focusing on educating alumni and getting them involved and getting them engaged. We started to see more and more come back to the table. From our experience, the problems we run into is when there is a lack of alumni – when alumni are engaged, those organizations tend to be pretty smooth sailing, makes them to be doing things the right way. So we encourage alumni involvement, because even – no matter when you graduated – alumni want to be engaged. It's just a matter of how you're being engaged. Are you going to be an advisor? Are you going to be a supporter? Are you going to serve on a house corporation? Are you going to be a donor? Or are you just going to be someone that can mentor students or help them get to the next job, so alumni have this avid flow of where they can help when they can, and so I think that's – that's the hard part – the alumni finding the right – alumni in the right roles.

McCurdy: You mentioned education. I wanna get to education and prevention in just a moment but first the definition of hazing, and I think some people might be surprised at how broad the definition is for hazing. Do you wanna, Alanna, hit some of the high points?

Hill: Yeah. So when I think of the definition of hazing, I would say any activity that's kind of forces one to belong to a group but it causes like harm, causes anything that's not safe for somebody, I would say it's different from bullying, okay, 'cause some people would equate those but it's very different and I would say that the one thing in particular with hazing that I think some people don't understand and see is that it doesn't matter if you're willing or not willing. Any activity that's gonna cause harm, that's gonna humiliate, that's gonna

degrade you even if people say 'Oh, I wanted it to happen to me' it doesn't matter. It's still hazing.

McCurdy: And it's on a scale, right, Alex? I mean, mental or physical harm is different than what the definition says here which is public stunts and buffoonery, for instance.

Snowden: Sure, so there – when it comes to hazing, mental, physical, emotional, whether intentional or unintentional like Alanna said, but I think the big key is how was the hazing done, when was the hazing done, in what capacity was it done? Is it a matter of – they went out of their way to harm these individuals or was it they tried to educate them in a certain way that wasn't appropriate and so it's – that's where you decide if it's a learning opportunity or sometimes learning opportunities your organization needs to leave. It's time to go. I think that's where it's dependent on is – and where - it's broad because a lot of times, these cases are coming out in hazing that you're seeing in the courts and things, aren't just as simple of 'oh, we're making them dress up in a tie'. Some of these are being attached to a assault. Some of these are being attached to putting people at risk, theft, things like that. Those are intolerable things because they're putting people at risk, whereas when you are dressing them up and making them wear a certain type throughout the day, that is technically hazing but is that an educational moment? I would argue that that is something you can educate them on. So I think that's where we talk about when we talk about a scale of – is it a scale of – or somebody's life at risk cause someone is being harmed or are we at a point where we can educate them and shift a culture because it's possible.

McCurdy: Fraternity brothers wearing the same tie on one day, does that give you a red flag and say, well, there might be something else going on here too? Or not?

Snowden: I think that raises the – us to bring it up to question them and sit down and talk to people. It doesn't necessarily mean that that could be the only thing that happened. And a lot of times when they – when the argument that we get back a lot of time is 'Well, we make – we are trying to teach them to be better men of our organization and so that's one of our obligations' and our pushback on that is 'Well, why isn't the active members or the current members also going through that' because as someone who would know the ritual, you should be held to a higher standard than those that are learning how to do it. and so I think that that's – it raises questions. I think you've got to question everything but it doesn't necessarily mean that it'll rose to something outrageous.

McCurdy: So before there's even a report or you see a bunch of people were in the same tie on the same day, what kind of education prevention is taking place prior to even getting a report? What's going on about this issue?

Snowden: So every campus will do it differently cause every campus has to address their campus culture in their way. From an Illinois State perspective, we do what's called hazing prevention online modules, that we do through what's called Hazing Prevention Online Modules that we do through hazingprevention.org and a life tech, which is a company that operates it. every one of our members has to go through that at the beginning of their new member process. Currently all active members. We also do a program called Greek 101 which is an in-person education where we get to answer questions and we get to explain what hazing is and really let the students have a say and understating is this hazing, is it not, is this allowed, is it not, is this education, is it not. And so from our perspective, we figure if you're learning on your own and you're learning in a group, would you have a higher chance of understanding what hazing is and therefore, you have the higher opportunity of not being a victim or potentially putting someone at that risk whether knowingly or unknowingly.

McCurdy: And, Alanna Hill with Illinois Wesleyan University, what sort of education and prevention is taking place at IWU?

Hill: Yeah, so we have what's called New Member education and there's 3 sessions of that. And the first session includes alcohol and drug substance as well as hazing. Our second one includes the bystander intervention and sexual assault. And then our third one talks about like alumni relations and like how to be a productive member. And so everyone is required to do that in order to be initiated, so we have about 200 students that do that every single fall. If we have new students in the spring, we'll also do a little bit of a condensed one with alcohol, drug, hazing and then bystander intervention. And then we also promote programs from Fraternity and Sorority programming board and they brought in the fall speaker from a group called campus peak and it was specifically dealing with hazing. And then we also partake in – and I don't remember the date. I think it's the end of September, beginning of October, we do a national hazing prevention week that we have our organizations get involved in. so there is a mandatory educational requirement for all new members to go through.

McCurdy: And what do you think is going on. is there an upswing in hazing incidents in the United States on college campuses or are the four fatalities last year sort of a one year blip and we go back down to the one or two that we see normally any year?;

Hill: I think that hazing has been a prominent issue for many years and I think a lot of it is coming to light because of social media like Snapchat. I wouldn't even say Facebook but Instagram. So I would say that, is there an uptake? I don't know like individually for campuses but I definitely think that hazing has been a huge issue for many, many years. I know in my college days, like that was a rampant thing but it was just kind of underground so people didn't know about it as much. I think Illinois Wesleyan – since we're a smaller

community and we pretty much know our students I kinda know what's going on cause I kinda think of Illinois Wesleyan as high school sometimes. There's not a lot of secrets so for our campus community we don't deal with major hazing issues. But I would say like nationally it's always been a thing but I think more attention is being brought to it. I don't – you have to remember – in the last like 30+ years there's been someone who passed away from a fraternity or sorority incident where there has been hazing or alcohol so this is not something that's you know brand new. Which is so sad because as a Greek advisor cause it's like we're dealing with the same problems year and year and year.

McCurdy: But you have a new group of students year after year after year as well.

Hill: Yup.

McCurdy: Alex, same question. Alex Snowden with Illinois State University. Upswing? Greater spotlight on the issue?

Snowden: I think there's definitely a greater call to action that we're seeing from the legislation, nationally from university presidents, universities, umbrella organizations that oversee student affairs and Greek life and those kinds of things. I don't know the research well enough to say if it's an uptake or not. I do know that there has been a hazing death every year for a number of years and I think that one thing that is coming from all of this is we're seeing stronger education coming from multiple ways. Before, the only way to educate was you had to put somebody in front of them. now we're seeing different ways whether that's educating the educator to train them to be the ones to educate whether that's – we still do the get in in front of the students but then there's the online modules. There's national organizations that have increased their staff to assist with bringing more individuals into help. There is also an increase in conduct offices holding people accountable for it. And so I think we're seeing a shift in education. So I think for right now, we're at one of the best times to probably combat it and prevent it in the long term. But I don't think we will see a real change in the next month. I think it's gonna take some time for the education to sink and every school is trying to figure out the best way to do it for them and then sharing that education with others so that they can do it as well. And I think we're all trying to get to a place where hazing is gone but I don't think we're there yet.

McCurdy: Why do you think, Alanna, that it's so hard to eliminate? Why is reform so challenging? One student a year on average dies. This year we've – or last year in 2017, there were 4 high-profile cases.

Hill: I mean, when you're working with 18-22 year olds who don't have fully developed brains and they are coming into college wanting to belong somewhere, looking for friendship and fellowship that for some of them, they'll do what it takes. And that's so sad

and that makes me feel like, should we be doing more things in high school to prepare these students. Because this also happens in athletics and this happens ...[overlapping]...

McCurdy: ...[overlapping]... And with marching bands

Hill: Yes, exactly.

McCurdy: in the theatre troops. I mean it can happen in all kinds of different situations.

Hill: Yeah, so I think I mean when you look at a group and you see people wanna be belong – belong to them and be a part of that I think that because their brains aren't developed yet, kind of the “Hell, yeah” part of their brains develop, not the critical thinking skills are. But they'll do what it takes and it's sad because fraternities and sororities are not founded on that and more often than not, and I'll only speak for Illinois Wesleyan. We focus a lot on the friendship than the brotherhood or sisterhood and that doesn't have anything to do with hazing. And so I think that there's a combination of a couple of things. If you have been to a campus where the culture since 1985 has been – it is hell weak every single time during this month. This is what we've been doing for the last 30-40 years, that's also really hard to get rid of. Anything too, like I said, when people are willing to be hazed, that's also a problem because a lot of people think, 'oh, nobody is willing to be hazed.' I can tell you that I have had students that, in the other universities I've worked at, cause I've been a Greek advisor for 8 years now, that would be like “Yeah, I feel good that I was hazed. I feel like I was, you know, I show that I wanted to be part of this organization.” And that's really so sad 'cause that's like not how you prove that you know you're worthy to be in an organization or that you should be in an organization. So I think it's like a combination of factors.

McCurdy: Anything you wanna add about the difficulty when it comes to reform to eliminate hazing?

Snowden: Sure. I think one of the – I think Alanna had a lot of it but I think when you think about reform, you're trying to tell individuals that believe 'oh that won't happen to me', 'oh, we won't push it that far' and the truth of matter is you don't know where someone is. You don't know someone's background. You don't know tolerance levels. You don't know what they've – what they can and can't handle. And so a lot of times there is this need to be want to be a part of a group and you're willing to do almost anything to be a part of that and you sometimes think, 'well, those consequences won't happen to me.' I think we're starting to see a change. I think we're getting a student that is pushing back on that, but in the end, you have to get – you have to be able to give in and fight peer pressure, and that is a very, very hard thing no matter what group you're trying to join. And to teach students to give them the power to be able to do that is what we're trying to do, is to empower them. and I think until you can get to a place where everyone on your campus is in agreement that we're just not gonna do that, that's where you'll face the largest struggles.

McCurdy: Does having a shared experience like hazing or in the military – basic training just to a certain degree – build bonds and lifetime friendships that are hard to achieve otherwise?

Hill: Oh, I don't believe that. And I couldn't say this for a couple of reasons. And going back to what Alex said, there is such a thing as hidden harm and you don't know what people have been through in their lives and maybe they were abused as a child and so when you yell at someone or scream at them or, you know, insert xyz, you could be hurting somebody much more than you could even have an idea of because for some people maybe they can have the crap beaten out of them, it's not a big deal. A lot of those people who brag about being hazed in college, a lot of those people have that tolerance. I would say, though, it does – it breaks trust, people don't know who to trust when they're in an organization, especially if you have like your new member educator or whatever that title is, it breaks trust within the pledge group and the new member class, there's different, you know, phrases for that. But I think that this idea that I build bonds, that it creates this like membership like 'oh, we've all gone through the same exact thing' that's what new member education is about: learning your history of your organization, learning the values of the organization. You can't tell me that hazing brings that to a closer part, to ahead of that. It absolutely to me is unnecessary, hurts people and doesn't build trust like people think it does.

McCurdy: And Alex?

Snowden: I think it's hard to compare this to the military. Talk about the military – the military is going off to war. It is completely different type of bond there, different training. They're training for war. And so I think this is not the same type of environment of building trust and building a bond and looking at things because there's different perspectives here. I do think that you could make an argument that hazing brings a new member class closer? Yes. But usually that bringing closer together is out of fear, of having to come together because we fear what's gonna happen to us if we don't stick together. Then you're building up bunch of resentments towards people that are currently there, so you have that harm that's done. So instead of having one organization when all the hazing is complete, you in essence have 4 different organizations from 4 different hazing type experiences in the same organization. So actually you fractured more than you're built. So can it? you could agree it but in the truth be told, it does more harm than it does good.

McCurdy: And the benefits of a Greek system outweigh the chance of a high-profile hazing incident? I assume you both would say, you both would say yes. You've talked about philanthropy dollars raised and service hours. We've also talked about the bonds without hazing that could be created as a result of this. you both agree that the benefits of a Greek system outweigh the possible –

Hill: I think – okay, being like I said in Greek life for 8 years now, being a member of Sigma Kappa, I absolutely believe in fraternities and sororities. It is heartbreaking to see students pass away, to see parents but I do think that as we move forward, you see even international headquarters have like educators, have people that do like hazing, like we really are prime to have very great successful organizations. Is fraternity life for everybody? Absolutely not. Do I think the positives outweigh the negative? I do. But I'm not blind to know there's major problems within the organizations and in the community but that's where I feel like I can make a difference and I can help our students and make sure they have good experience and be safe.

McCurdy: And Alex, with ISU?

Snowden: I would say that when fraternity and sorority life is done right, there's no better education opportunity for gaining leadership, support academically, the ability to raise philanthropy dollars and to give back your time. There is no better bond that you will have with friendships. When fraternities and sororities are done right, it is the greatest experience one, in my opinion, can have. I do not think even with the amount of money raised, the amount of time given that you can put a price tag on a life because that doesn't add up but I do think that if you are a member of an organization and you are doing right and doing all that you can to make the experiences best way to make someone grow and become better versions of themselves, then the fraternity and sorority will always have a place here. It's when those who decide to go against that and do their own thing, that's when those problems arise.

McCurdy: Okay. Alex Snowden with Illinois State University. Alanna Hill with Illinois Wesleyan University, thanks for your time on Sound Ideas.

Hill: Thank you.

Alanna Hill is the Director of Fraternity and Sorority life at Illinois Wesleyan University and Illinois State Fraternity and Sorority coordinator is Alex Snowden. Hill says that there has been no hazing incidents at Illinois Wesleyan during her three-year tenure as director. Snowden says the last instance of hazing at Illinois State resulted in the suspension of Sigma Alpha Epsilon until April of 2019. You're listening to sound ideas on GLT.