

# The Importance of Healthy Expression of Group Formation in New Member Education

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This white paper is presented in support of the current dialogue between the administration of Whittier College and the community of men's and women's on-campus societies as it pertains to the new member education process ("NME," or "pledging").

How individuals come together and form groups has been long-studied. Groups (in the course of this paper: society pledge classes) offer special advantages to individuals, like safety and strength, and while it might be difficult for an individual to form an identity, membership in a group offers it quite well.

Since the 1950s, many social science researchers and practitioners have studied the intricacies of group development. While each theory has unique characteristics, most agree that there are predictable stages that every group experiences on its way to become effective and efficient. In his highly regarded 1965 research document, "Developmental Sequences in Small Groups,"<sup>1</sup> Bruce Tuckman designated four stages of team development: Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. Each stage is present, and typically highly visible/observable during the process that society pledge classes experience during new member education.

As a group begins the Forming stage, the participants establish who they are as a collective. The principal work for the group during the Forming stage is to create a team with clear structure, goals, direction and roles so that members begin to build trust. A good orientation/kick-off process helps to ground the members in terms of the team's mission and goals, and can establish clear expectations about both the team's product and, more importantly, the team's process. During the Forming stage, much of the team's energy is focused on defining the team and creating its identity: "who are we, what qualities make us special, how do we want our society actives to view us, how do we want the larger college population to experience our unity?"<sup>2</sup>

As Seth Godin argues in his book [Tribes](#), "Human beings have a need to belong, 'to be part of a tribe.' Symbols, team names and logos help give teams a tangible identity to which they belong. A few other ideas that can easily be implemented when trying to create a tangible team identity

is to come out with a team mascot, team color, team slogan, team song, team cheer, team rituals, team newsletter, team T-shirt or even a team greeting.”<sup>2</sup>

In this way, the uniform designates the group; one’s dress indicates membership. Admission to the group may be symbolically indicated by the conferring of a uniform, or parts of it (e.g., pledging attire, making and carrying a pledge book, pledge pins, etc.). The uniform makes the wearer’s status much more visible than other types of dress; it minimizes the possibility of confusing members with nonmembers, for example.<sup>3</sup>

The very existence of a uniform implies group structure where the organization has granted an individual, in this case the members of a pledge class, the right to wear its uniform. By permitting the use of its uniform, a group certifies an individual as its representative and assumes responsibility for his/her activities. The uniform is a symbolic statement that an individual will adhere to group norms and standardized roles, and has mastered the essential group skills, knowledge, and values: the process of becoming a full member of the society.

Many theorists believe that group cohesion results from a deep sense of "we-ness," or belonging to a group as a whole. By becoming enthusiastically involved in the efforts of the group and by recognizing the similarities that exist among group members, more cohesion is formed. Furthermore, group pride creates a sense of community that strengthens the bonds of unity that link group members to one another.<sup>4</sup>

Tuckman might argue that this natural need for identity surpasses the simple expression of pride. Subsequent research on this model has shown that, when the Formation function is suppressed or restricted, teams will develop subversive approaches that satisfy the normal need to create identity.<sup>4</sup> Several pledge classes at Washington State University, for example, had their sorority motto tattooed on their feet, making their “Forming” actions invisible to scrutiny from the university. Arguably, matching shirts, sweaters, or suspenders might be a more desirable alternative to the hidden tattoos. By fostering conditions in which society members can grow and develop a sense of self, while still connecting to a shared identity of being a member, the college administration can partner with societies to positively channel the natural need for identity. It is important to foster conditions in which society members can grow and develop a sense of self while still connecting to a shared identity of being a member. <sup>5</sup>

At its core the society experience is one that works to create a sense of mattering for members. Fundamentally, societies provide a place for connection among members. Our “tribes” are organizations that can make a campus seem smaller and, especially for students who are living away from home, ideally create a family environment where members can thrive and grow with others who care about them.<sup>6</sup> Rather than working to suppress these normal and predictable process flows of healthy group development – and potentially driving irresponsible behavior

underground -- theory and practice encourages those in positions of power to establish reasonable guidelines and allow the forming groups the latitude to create their own healthy identities.

1. Tuckman, B.W. "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," Psychological Bulletin, 1965, Vol. 63, No. 6
2. Godin, Seth, Tribes, We Need You to Lead Us, Penguin Group, 2008
3. Joseph, Nathan and Alex, Nicholas, "The Uniform as Group Emblem," American Journal of Sociology, vol. 77, no. 4., January 1972
4. Owen, W. F. "Metaphor Analysis of Cohesiveness in Small Groups," Small Group Behavior, 16, 415-424, 1985
5. "Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering," in Student Development in College: Theory, Research and Practice, Evans, Forney, Guido and Patton, Wiley & Sons, 2010
6. Chickering, A.W., Education and identity, SF, Jossey-Bass, 1969

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