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Letter to the Dartmouth Community from Dean of the College James Larimore

May 11, 2001

To the Dartmouth College Community,

Dean Redman has informed me of the outcome of recent disciplinary proceedings involving Zeta Psi fraternity. I am writing to comment on some issues raised in this case and I invite you to reflect on the meaning of that decision for our educational community.

After a hearing held last Sunday, Dean of Residential Life Martin Redman found Zeta Psi fraternity guilty of three offenses: harassment and two violations of Minimum Standards requirements. On the basis of these charges and the evidence supporting them, as well as the record of the organization, Dean Redman decided to impose on Zeta Psi the sanction of immediate, permanent derecognition.

Many of you are familiar with some of the facts giving rise to these charges and this sanction. Zeta Psi prepared and distributed, on at least three occasions, "newsletters" intended to be humorous. Those newsletters, however, specifically targeted fellow students for abusive comments of a demeaning nature. While these "newsletters" were intended to be kept secret, they in fact came to the attention of some of the victims. This was the second significant instance of such institutionalized misconduct; in 1987, the organization's recognition was suspended for a year for similar behavior.

Dartmouth is fundamentally a residential college. A Dartmouth education is based in significant part on the concept of a community of learning, in which there is no sharp distinction between learning inside the classroom from formal instruction and learning outside the classroom from informal discussion and debate, extracurricular activities, and the very real challenges of living in a diverse community of fellow learners. Dartmouth's recognition of Zeta Psi and other CFS organizations is premised on the idea that they contribute positively to the life of the institution. When an organization violates the rules and values of the community in the manner that Zeta Psi has--by abusive treatment of fellow students--it forfeits its right to continued membership in our community.

Since the allegations against Zeta Psi surfaced, there has been considerable discussion on campus of issues of freedom of expression. Some argue that anything that an organization can characterize as expressive conduct must be tolerated even though it violates the rules and standards of our community. They assert, in effect, that the Principle of Freedom of Expression and Dissent "trumps" all our other rules--that it is a license for an organization to engage in any and all expressive behavior, subject to no standard whatsoever. I respectfully disagree with that view, which I believe is corrosive of the very idea of a residential college. If organizations that enjoy the privileges of recognition by the College and membership in our community, and that are a part of our residential life system, cannot be disciplined for acts that violate our rules and are destructive of that community, then it is meaningless to claim we have a community at all. Dartmouth has the right and the obligation to remove from its residential life system an organization that will not conform to the standards of that system.

I welcome community discussion of this decision.

James Larimore

Dean of the College

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