

## Fraternities' role in college drinking **Analysis**

What are the relevant ARQ Questions to Apply? Need you pay attention to issues of **tone** or **bias** or **seriously ambiguous terms**?  
How good is the evidence?  
What are Fierberg's values?  
What descriptive assumptions underlie the argument?

### Article with commentary:

I was encouraged by USA TODAY's cover story on college risks because it brought deserved attention to the dangers college students face from hazing and binge drinking ([First year in college is the riskiest](#), Jan. 25).

As legal counsel **[he's a lawyer who sued]** for two of the victims profiled, Daniel Reardon and Lynn Gordon "Gordie" Bailey, however, I was disturbed to see that the article permitted Geof Brown, director of alcohol-education initiatives for the North America Interfraternity Conference, to perpetuate the erroneous myth that fraternities are "taking a **more proactive posture**" to address these problems. **[He's quoting the newspaper article, which quoted Brown] [Ambiguous—what is the error, how erroneous? What steps have been taken?]**

In fact, the **fraternity industry** **[do fraternities collectively represent an "industry?" Why use such a term from business and commerce? Sarcastic, cynical tone here]** has known since at least the mid-1990s — long before the deaths of these young men and so many other people — that it plays a lead role in an unparalleled number of fatal incidents of binge drinking and hazing. **[How will he prove that this "industry" has "long known," or will this remain an unsupported claim?] [He's created a cynical tone not quite supported by his evidence.]**

We established **[proved in court? won the suit?]** in the litigation involving Daniel Reardon's death that fraternities have a steadfast desire to keep alcohol available to members and guests, and they — unlike any responsible business in this country — rely on underage, **untrained** students (**often** intoxicated) to implement and manage **alcohol policies** **[What are those policies? What training do the managers get? How often are they intoxicated?]** that can mean the difference between life and death. We also established **[proved in court? won the suit?]** that the **industry** has long known that **this method of managing alcohol** **[what method, exactly?]** is dangerous, and that it refuses **[what proof is there of refusal?]** to change because it fears losing membership and revenue.

When too much light is shined on the tragedies caused by these secret societies, most fraternity leaders have a tradition of feigning **[i.e., faking]** surprise, **real concern** or a **commitment** to solving these problems in any meaningful way.

*Douglas E. Fierberg  
Washington*

**Descriptive Conclusion:** Despite what Geof Brown says, fraternities are not “taking a **more proactive posture**” against alcohol abuse.

- **Reason 1:** the fraternity industry has known since 1990's that it plays a lead role in the unparalleled number of fatal incidents of binge drinking and hazing.
- **Reason 2:** We established that fraternities have a **steadfast desire** to keep alcohol available to members and guests
- **Reason 3:** Fraternities rely on underaged, **untrained** students to manage **alcohol policies**.
- **Reason 4:** We established that the industry has long known of the dangers of this method of managing alcohol.
- **Reason 5:** Most fraternity leaders feign surprise and have **no real concern or commitment** to solving these problems.

**Ambiguous terms/missing information in the conclusion** that might affect the conclusion:

- Unless “**a more proactive posture**” is clarified, we don't know what the writer really expects/wants.

**Ambiguous terms/missing information in the reasons** that might affect the conclusion:

- “**fraternity industry**” implies a network of coordination and organization that may not really exist, and suggests that virtually all fraternities are at fault.
- “**We established**” (Does this mean, as it implies, that a jury accepted this as proven in a court case he won? If so, then the reason has the force of “fact,” rather than opinion. Therefore, “**steadfast desire**” is ambiguous but probably not that important; same for “**keep alcohol available**” in order not to lose membership.)
- “**untrained students**” We need to know what training Fierberg thinks is sufficient.
- Just what are the “**alcohol policies**” that Fierberg doesn't like?
- “**We established**” (Does this mean, as it implies, that a jury accepted this as proven in a court case he won? If so, then the reason has the force of “fact,” rather than opinion. Therefore, “**long known**” isn't so importantly ambiguous.)
- “**most fraternity leaders have a tradition**” How many? What proportion? How has this proportion changed over time with education and “proactive postures?” How would Fierberg define/measure **real concern** and **commitment**?

**Values:**

- *corporate* (fraternity) over *individual* responsibility
- saving lives

**Evidence:**

- There is no specific data or facts given to support Fierberg's accusations. We must assume there is “courtroom” evidence to back them up.

**Assumptions:**

- We must assume that all of Fierberg's unsupported claims of the negative motives of the fraternity “industry have proof that is not available in his short letter. It is not an unreasonable assumption in this context (*NY Times* letter to the editor from an attorney familiar with the issue), unless the reader is defensive of fraternities.
- *All* ambiguous terms have an assumption in them: that the reader and writer agree on the term's meaning. To accept Fierberg's argument, we would have to assume that whatever *he* means by “**a more proactive posture**” and “**alcohol policies**” are appropriate responses to the problem. But perhaps Fierberg expects too much, or at least more than the reader would demand/expect.

**Tones:**

- **Cynical/skeptical/sarcastic:** Fierberg does not give the fraternity “industry” any benefit of the doubt, but casts suspicion on their motives and claims to want to do better. Without evidence of their continued bad faith and false motives, Fierberg could be accused of committing an **ad hominem** fallacy.

**Bias:**

- To some extent Fierberg is **biased**, probably because of past experience with fraternities having to defend themselves in lawsuits. He may be unwilling to see any real changes occurring throughout the “industry”—or he may be right.

**Main problem:**

- If Geof Brown is claiming that fraternities are "**taking a more proactive posture**" against alcohol abuse, but Fierberg disputes that, then I want to know just what evidence Geof Brown does have for his claim. I might agree with Brown. And just what proactive posture would be appropriate, according to Fierberg? I might agree with *him*. But without more specific information, I am unable to either accept or reject Fierberg's conclusion.

**Summary statement of critique:**

In his letter to the editor (“Fraternities' role in college drinking”), attorney Douglas E. Fierberg, who (apparently) successfully sued a fraternity for negligent binge drinking deaths, claims that fraternities have long known that their policies have done little to reduce the dangers of fraternity drinking because they have a vested interest in keeping alcohol available. Fierberg has some pretty damning accusations to make about the motives of the “fraternity industry” in their alleged failure to do anything to reform dangerous practices, but his vigorous cynicism is not matched by sufficient evidence to support his claim—at least, not in a courtroom. If one accepts the assumption that Fierberg is both **competent** and **honest**, then one can assume he has ample evidence to support his claims. In this necessarily brief letter to the editor, because of the ambiguity of his claims, Fierberg fails to prove his claim that the fraternities have done little or nothing to reform, and he fails as well at the even harder task of proving that they don't want to reform.