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GENERAL INFORMATION

Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors advances the study of college fraternities and sororities through a peer reviewed academic journal promoting scholarly discourse among partners invested in the college fraternal movement. The vision of Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors is to serve as the premier forum for academic discourse and scholarly inquiry regarding the college fraternity and sorority movement.

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Research articles for Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors should stress the underlying issues or problems that stimulated the research; treat the methodology concisely; and, most importantly, offer a full discussion of results, implications, and conclusions. In the belief that AFA readers have much to learn from one another, we also encourage the submission of thoughtful, documented essays or historical perspectives.

EDITORIAL: NOT “GREEK” UNLESS YOU ARE FROM GREECE: WORKING TO IDENTIFY INCLUSIVE RESEARCH TERMS

J. Patrick Biddix
Oracle Editor

As researchers, we classify variables to make them measurable and interpretable. As educators, we understand the importance of acknowledging difference, but are empathetically sensitive to the meanings people attach to classifications. An example is the use of the terms, "Hispanic" and "Latino/a," both used as broad classifications intended to be inclusive of Chicanos, Puerto-Ricans, Spanish-Americans, and others. While we generally use Latino/a in education, there is wide disagreement over which term is correct, owing to the size of the umbrella used to cover groups that are historically Spanish-speaking (which is still not entirely accurate).

We are similarly confronted classification issues working with fraternity/sorority research. Oracle board members have lost count of how many times we revise the word "Greek." To distinguish, we refer to students as “affiliates” versus “non-affiliates,” “fraternity/sorority members,” or “members of fraternal organizations.” This issue, we faced a similar challenge.

One of the studies published in this issue had a compelling reason to differentiate between men who belonged to what the researchers referred to as culturally based (i.e., historically Black, NPHC-member) and social (i.e., historically White, NIC-member) fraternities. This designation sparked a friendly debate during final editing involving several perspectives impacted by the decision, including: AFA, NIC, NPHC, current Oracle editorial staff, and former Oracle editors.

Some felt that there was no reason to differentiate, while others believed the difference should be designated by Council. The latter was not possible as the survey asked participants only to classify themselves broadly. The culturally based designation was not limited to NPHC member organizations, but could also include other Councils (e.g., United Greek). Another group proposed a longer title designation, “originally historically minority” versus “originally historically non-minority.”

After evaluating all perspectives and in consultation with the researchers, we chose to defer to how the survey instrument was worded, preserving the originally used terms. One of the researchers articulated this sentiment best in an email regarding how to proceed:

I was pondering using "historically White" and "culturally based" as solutions, but I worry that sets up a false dichotomy that White must be something other than a cultural/racial designation if it is meant to stand in opposition to the "culturally based" group. . .my instinct is to just go with the same language as the survey instrument and hopefully use this as a good platform to strive to reach some consensus on the myriad of available terms down the road.
As a general guideline, the research question/s should direct the decision of how to distinguish participants. If all participants belong to a particular Council, researchers should distinguish by Council, but only when there is a compelling reason – such as using the differences to account for an outcome. In this case, the researchers wanted to determine if group affiliation affected self awareness. In another article included in this edition, the researchers referred to NIC-affiliated groups as “social” fraternities, but this designation it did not add to the analysis and was dropped.

As researchers, how can we be sensitive to language yet still being mindful of the compelling reason to differentiate? Our solution was first to evaluate whether distinguishing was warranted. Next, we involved multiple perspectives – a critical step in building credibility. Our third step was to formulate a possible compromise, then to discuss this option with the researchers. The final step was to publish the solution, and to collaboratively work with the aforementioned stakeholders to revise our style guide, offering future researchers guidance on the issue. We advocate a roundtable discussion as next step where we visit (and revisit) topics such the language of our profession with the constituent represented in this discussion. We certainly also welcome and value your thoughts.

In closing, we realized that working to address this question was ultimately one of the most important things Oracle could contribute to the larger field. Articles that spark debate and controversy – whether by content or in this case, by title – are ultimately those that lead us to the really important questions we face as a scholars, practitioners, and advocates. This case was a powerful reminder that sometimes it is important to consider the journey, not the outcome, as ultimately where we find the most powerful learning lessons. Even if, as in this case, we haven’t quite reached the end.

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DIFFERENCES IN SELF-AWARENESS RELATED MEASURES AMONG CULTURALLY BASED FRATERNITY, SOCIAL FRATERNITY, AND NON-AFFILIATED COLLEGE MEN

Tricia R. Shalka and Susan R. Jones

This study examined differences among men affiliated with culturally based fraternities, men affiliated with social fraternities, and non-affiliated men on measures of consciousness of self and congruence. Data were collected in the spring of 2006 from 1,698 undergraduates, representing 46 different higher education institutions, as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL). Analysis of data was conducted using MANCOVA to compare independent variable group differences across the two dependent variables, while taking quasi pre-test measures for both items into account as covariates. Significant differences among culturally based fraternity men, social fraternity men, and non-affiliated men were found on the combination of dependent variables. Further analyses revealed culturally based fraternity men scored lower than social fraternity men and non-affiliated men on both consciousness of self and congruence.

In the absence of conclusive research about the value-added aspects of fraternal organizations, negative stereotypes associated with fraternity men abound. The unfavorable outcomes associated with fraternity membership, from heavy and binge drinking patterns (Danielson, Taylor, & Hartford, 2001; Eberhardt, Rice, & Smith, 2003; Hennessy & Huson, 1998; Riordan & Dana, 1998) to negative impacts on academic outcomes (DeBard, Lake, & Binder, 2006; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001) to the dangers of hazing, which continue to be prevalent within these fraternal organizations (Allen & Madden, 2008; Hennessy & Huson, 1998; Nuwer, 1999; Sweet, 1999) are well documented in numerous studies.

Sparse research-based evidence supports claims of positive outcomes made by professionals who support fraternities (Strayhorn & Colvin, 2006). A faculty member in Strayhorn and Colvin’s qualitative study remarked,

While I intuitively ‘know’ that Greek affairs [sic] makes a difference in student outcomes, I am not aware of specific research that details that difference by focusing on just the contribution of Greek [sic] involvement separately from other influences on student outcomes. (p. 101)

This study examined differences between culturally based fraternity men, social fraternity men, and non-affiliated college men on measures of consciousness of self and congruence – desirable student development outcomes indicative of a positive and supportive learning environment.

1 The terms “culturally based” and “social fraternity” are used by the authors in this article as a way of distinguishing between fraternities for the purposes of the study. These terms have not been officially adopted or sanctioned by AFA, NIC, NPHC or any other organization. In this case, they reflect the wording used for a demographic question on the survey instrument. For a discussion on the use of distinguishing terms in research, please see the editorial in this issue of Oracle.
Conceptual Framework

Researchers have noted the historical canon of research in human development was already about men (Davis, 2002; Edwards & Jones, 2009). As a result, research to examine men through a gendered lens has been slow to start (Davis). As Davis explained, “Although researchers have begun to investigate how gender affects women’s identity development, there has been relatively little written about such impact on the psychosocial development of college men” (p. 508). Male gender development represents an area of identity development that must be further explored (Edwards & Jones).

The need for increased understanding of male student involvement experience is evident, and this is of particular importance for men in fraternities. Fraternity culture harbors many aspects that have the potential to negatively impact fraternity men, including fear of rejection by peers, secrecy, a deep sense of loyalty that can impede proper judgment, and a history of perpetuation of traditions that can take away from a man’s ability to think independently (Davis, 2006). The root of addressing such problems, in Davis’ estimation, rests in understanding and challenging masculinity, as opposed to “simplistic anti-hazing, alcohol abuse, sexual assault prevention programs” (p. 1).

To operationalize these concepts, the current study explored aspects of male self-awareness. Primarily, data were collected to evaluate consciousness of self (i.e., an understanding of one’s motivations, beliefs, values), congruence (i.e., the ability to act consistently with one’s beliefs and values), and the role fraternity membership may play in the development of one or both.

Method

This study explored differences among men affiliated with a culturally based fraternity (fraternal organizations with a historically racial minority foundation), men affiliated with a social fraternity (historically White fraternal organizations), and men not affiliated with a fraternity. Data were drawn from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) in an ex post facto design to investigate two primary research questions.

1) Do differences exist between male culturally based fraternity members, male social fraternity members, and non-affiliated males on consciousness of self?

2) Do differences exist between male culturally based fraternity members, male social fraternity members, and non-affiliated males on congruence?

Instrument

The theoretical grounding of the MSL was the social change model of leadership development (SCM), developed through the Higher Education Research Institute (Wagner, 2006). The social change model of leadership development is a values-based model, including consciousness of self and congruence among the values, the two dependent variables in the current study.

The primary scales that were used to study the research questions were the Consciousness of Self and Congruence Scales that appeared in the MSL survey instrument. These scales are part of a revised version of the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale, originally developed by Tyree (1998). Both dimensions were measured in the MSL using a 5-point Likert-type scale. In the
current study, reliability of the Consciousness of Self Scale was calculated as .79, while the Cronbach alpha result for the Congruence Scale was .82.

Sample and Procedure
Of the 52 campuses participating in the MSL, 46 had male students and maintained an institutionally recognized fraternity community. Data drawn from these institutions resulted in an overall student sample size of 45,175, which criterion sampling reduced to 1,698 cases \((n = 566)\) in each of the three independent variable groups. This number resulted from the small number of men in the culturally based fraternity affiliation group \((n = 566)\). A random number generation technique was employed to randomly select cases for each of the other two groups, men who were affiliated with a social fraternity and men who were unaffiliated.

For the purpose of this study, the culturally based fraternity men could be identified in two different ways. First, they may have selected that they were part of a culturally based fraternity, but not a social fraternity, on the MSL instrument. Second, they may have selected that they were part of a culturally based fraternity and also selected being affiliated with a social fraternity on the MSL instrument. Meanwhile, social fraternity men were identified in only one way. They were only considered social fraternity men for the purpose of this study if they had selected membership in a social fraternity on the MSL instrument and not selected membership in a culturally based fraternity on the MSL instrument.

Analysis
Due to the correlation potential of the Consciousness of Self and Congruence Scales, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used for data analysis. Covariates were used to account for differences that may inherently exist between the three independent variable groups due to their self-selecting nature. The MANCOVA was used to explore possible differences across the combination of dependent variables between the three independent variable groups. Significance of the MANCOVA test was further investigated using univariate level ANCOVA tests to ascertain specific between group differences on each dependent variable. Post-hoc analyses using a Bonferroni test were used to understand significance of pairwise comparisons.

Results
MANCOVA revealed statistically significant differences among the three independent variable groups (men affiliated with a culturally based fraternity, men affiliated with a social fraternity, and men not affiliated with a fraternity) across the combination of two dependent variables (consciousness of self and congruence), \(F(4, 3,384) = 5.654, p = .000\); Wilks’ Lambda = .987; \(\eta^2 = .007\) (Table 1). Covariates used in this design included quasi pre-test items for the two dependent variables.
Further investigation of the results of the MANCOVA showed a statistically significant difference between independent variable groups on both dependent variables when considered as univariates. Consciousness of self showed significance $F(2, 1,695) = 11.100, p = .000; \eta^2 = .013$, as did congruence $F(2, 1,695) = 7.030, p = .001; \eta^2 = .008$ (Table 2).

### Table 2
**Univariate ANOVA Summary Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,798.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congruence</td>
<td>2,306.86</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-Test Consciousness of Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>146.49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congruence</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-Test Congruence</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>259.38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congruence</td>
<td>397.85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>11.10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congruence</td>
<td>7.03</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A comparison of adjusted and unadjusted means for both dependent variables by independent variable group revealed the nature of these differences (Table 3). Investigation of adjusted and unadjusted means revealed a similar pattern on both dependent variables after adjusting for both covariates. Means for all independent variable groups were higher than the mean scores for those groups on the quasi pre-tests. The Consciousness of Self quasi pre-test mean scores for the culturally based fraternity group, social fraternity group, and non-affiliated group were 3.71, 3.74, and 3.66. The Congruence quasi pre-test mean scores for the culturally based fraternity group, social fraternity group, and non-affiliated group were 3.79, 3.89, and 4.01.
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation Group</th>
<th>Consciousness of Self</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjusted M</td>
<td>Unadjusted M</td>
<td>Adjusted M</td>
<td>Unadjusted M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Based</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-affiliated</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pairwise comparisons using a Bonferroni test were used to further establish specific, significant differences between groups. On the consciousness of self dependent variable, the culturally based fraternity group showed a significant difference in the negative direction from both the social fraternity group (mean difference = -.132, SE = .028) and from the non-affiliated group (mean difference = -.079, SE = .028) (Table 4). On the congruence dependent variable, the culturally based fraternity group also showed a significant difference in the negative direction from both the social fraternity group (mean difference = -.103, SE = .028) and from the non-affiliated group (mean difference = -.071, SE = .028).

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation Group</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Significance a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Based</td>
<td>- .132*</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-affiliated</td>
<td>- .079*</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Based</td>
<td>.132*</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-affiliated</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-affiliated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Based</td>
<td>.079*</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>-.053</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level

a Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

**Discussion**

The results of this study are partially consistent with previous research noting differences between fraternity men and their non-affiliated peers on a number of outcome variables (DeBard, Lake, & Binder, 2006; Eberhardt, Rice, & Smith, 2003; Hayek et al., 2002; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2001; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996), though in the current study only culturally based fraternity men were significantly different from the non-affiliated population. Of particular note was the disparity on consciousness of self and congruence existing not only between men who were affiliated with a culturally-based fraternity and those who were not, but also between men affiliated with a social fraternity and men affiliated with a culturally based fraternity. Previous research has often failed to view the social fraternity and culturally based fraternity experiences as discrete (McClure, 2006).
Factors Influencing Culturally Based Group Scores

It is concerning that men affiliated with a culturally based fraternity scored significantly lower than non-affiliated men and social fraternity men on both dependent variables. In part, this phenomenon may be connected to the nature of the fraternal experience in culturally based organizations. In the case of historically Black fraternities (one example of a culturally based fraternity), in particular, membership functions in a way that helps to lower members’ feelings of isolation on predominantly White campuses by linking members to the college community and the larger Black community (McClure, 2006). This linkage to a wider community is something that may be less necessary for White students in historically White fraternities. The latter group may have less need for an organization to diminish feelings of isolation, as they are already the majority group on the campuses of which they are a part (McClure). In essence, those students who feel racially isolated may need identification with a group as opposed to focusing on the self in order to feel grounded on the campus.

On predominantly White campuses, in particular, it may be the case that men of color gravitate toward culturally based fraternity affiliation as an anchor to same-race connections. According to McClure (2006), male members of historically Black fraternities expressed feelings of disorientation and alienation on predominantly White campuses that resulted in what one respondent characterized as causing a general sense of “weariness” (p. 1,047). These feelings, however, were transformed through the historically Black fraternity experience, which often left members feeling more connected to the campus and less isolated (McClure).

This is, perhaps, where a parallel can be drawn to the current study and the lower scores of culturally based fraternity men on consciousness of self and congruence measures. Though numerically the current study suggests social fraternity men are more developed on these measures than their culturally based fraternity peers, this may be more due to the complexities of privilege (Tatum, 2003) given the variation of backgrounds in men of color composition in these three independent variable groups. In other words, the culturally based fraternity group represents a much more racially diverse sample than does the social fraternity group. Given the greater proportion of men of color in the culturally based fraternity group in the current study, it is reasonable to expect that many more of these men than in the other two groups would experience the challenges of adapting to campus environments organized around the White mainstream, as described by respondents in the McClure (2006) study. Thus, there would be an increased need for these men for the anchoring offered by a culturally based group experience.

Students frequently do not experience their campus cultural climate in the same way. Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) confirmed findings of previous research by demonstrating that students of color were much more likely than their White peers to feel pressure to conform to racial stereotypes of their academic performance and behavior, and attempted to minimize racial group characteristics in order to be accepted. This underscores students of color feeling pressures of conformity, which could certainly influence aspects of the ability to act congruently with their internal sense of self in the face of these external demands.

For college men of color, these external demands are ever-present. As hooks (2004) explained of Black men, “To build the self-esteem that is the foundation of self-love black males necessarily engage in a process of resistance, during which they challenge existing negative stereotypes and
reclaim their right to self-definition” (p. 142). A constant struggle exists for Black men in the tension of an internal definition of self that is not consistent with what the macro society has imposed (Marable, 2001). This could also contribute to an explanation of the results of the current study.

A construct related to self-awareness, particularly to congruence, is that of self-authorship. In Baxter Magolda’s (2002) study of college students, self-authorship was often not something that students were able to achieve during their college years, the process of which requires the ability to develop an internal sense of self. Baxter Magolda connected this to the fact that college students do not frequently receive messages in their collegiate experience emphasizing the need to develop an internal definition of self. This may be even more the case for men of color, as they face the constant challenge of externally defined conceptions of their role in society (hooks, 2004; Marable, 2001). The results of the current study may be tied to the fact that men of color have this increased hurdle to overcome in confronting the external before they can come to terms with their internal definitions of self.

Considerations Related to Survey Items

Considering adjusted mean scores for both Consciousness of Self and Congruence by affiliation showed that all groups maintained aggregate scores that were in the high 3-point to low 4-point range on a 5-point Likert-type scale rating. A neutral response was indicated as 3. Thus, the average response for all three independent variable groups suggests all of these men thought of themselves as possessing a reasonably good sense of self and ability to act congruently with their values and beliefs.

Nonetheless, caution should be exercised with the interpretation of these results as being not so much caused by shortcomings on the part of the culturally based fraternity group, but at least also in part due to the nature of the frame through which Consciousness of Self and Congruence were conceptualized. It is important to keep in mind that the scale used in this study was derived from the MSL, which was a leadership study. This, in particular, could have influenced the frame through which respondents were considering either of these dimensions.

The results of this study may be less reflective of discrete differences among groups and more a product of proxy measures used to evaluate differences. For example, one of the questions on the Consciousness of Self Scale asked participants to respond with their agreement to the statement “I can describe how I am similar to other people.” Another question on this same scale asked respondents to indicate their agreement with the statement “I am comfortable expressing myself.” The argument can be made that these questions are biased towards those in a majority identity group. For those men who are in an underrepresented racial group, the possibility exists that their experience of difference from others is more salient than that of how they draw similarity. In a related way, men of color who experience their campus environment as one requiring conformity (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000) may not feel as comfortable expressing themselves, not because of a lack of Consciousness of Self, but rather because of a climate that sends messages to restrict such authenticity for these men.

Similar concerns can be drawn for the Congruence Scale items. One of the questions on this scale asked respondents to indicate their agreement with the statement “It is easy for me to be..."
truthful.” This question for men of color may not be as easy as whether or not their values are congruent with their actions. With the increased pressures resulting from external definitions of identity expression for men of color (hooks, 2004; Marable, 2001) and campus environments inherently demanding conformity to dominant paradigms (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000), men of color may act congruently, but may not be as at ease as the above question would suggest.

Implications

Anson and Marchesani (1991) noted that, “fraternities and sororities offer today’s students opportunities for personal development unmatched in most campus organizations” (p. ix). The results of this study suggest fraternity affiliation, uniformly, does not account for positive outcomes on personal development. This was evidenced by the discrepancy in which culturally based fraternity men fell below their social fraternity and non-affiliated peers on Consciousness of Self and Congruence. Campus-based professionals need to understand that previous research on fraternity experiences has not considered culturally based groups as a separate entity, although in practice, culturally based and traditional social fraternities are often treated the same (Kimbrough, 1995; McClure, 2006).

Participants in Davis’ (2002) qualitative study responded to the question of what it was like for them to be a man on campus with some difficulty in conceptualizing their experience. A common theme was that while many services existed to support and affirm women’s identities, there was a lack of corresponding services for men (Davis). If this crisis in affirming men’s identities exists, it seems from the findings of the current study that there exists a corresponding concern within subgroups of college men. Davis’ findings suggested an inequity in terms of services for men on college campuses, and the current study gives reason to consider further whether the services presently provided to men, as in the case of fraternity advising, are reaching all men in the ways that would be most beneficial to their development. Student affairs practitioners must continue to help men probe their sense of self and ask questions that encourage men to become more self-aware. In particular, practitioners must be sensitive to the societal pressures at play that may make an internal definition of self even more difficult for men of color to explore (hooks, 2004; Marable, 2001).

Conclusion

The discrepancy between two types of fraternity experiences, culturally based and social, suggests a need for crafting the fraternity experience for all groups into one that can be connected to personal growth. Several questions remained unanswered. Are those who work with fraternities missing an opportunity for enhancing personal development and growth within the fraternal experience in ways most beneficial to particular kinds of fraternal experiences? Or are practitioners already interfacing differently with these two distinct fraternal groups in ways that contribute to the differences noted in this study?

Critical research examining the nature of culturally based fraternal experiences has been sparsely accomplished in the past. The different experiences of fraternity members needs to be captured in greater depth and accuracy in research, and campus professionals need to be more culturally aware as they work within and among the members of such groups.
References


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FRATERNITY/SORORITY MEMBERSHIP: GOOD NEWS ABOUT FIRST-YEAR IMPACT

Robert DeBard and Casey Sacks

Much has been written about the importance of student involvement for building a sense of belonging on college campuses. Fraternity/sorority membership, as a form of undergraduate involvement, frequently invokes perceptions of misbehavior more often than positive outcomes. This study considered the impact of fraternity/sorority membership on the academic performance of more than 45,000 first-year students, from 17 different institutions. Quantitative analysis involved grades, credit hours earned, and retention. Findings offer a comprehensive view for judging the efficacy of maintaining fraternal organizations on college campuses and encouragement to individual institutions to use this methodology to inform institutional policy, particularly the potential benefits of deferring recruitment.

Much of what is perceived by the public about fraternity/sorority membership is reported in the popular media and usually begins and ends with accounts of undesirable behaviors ranging from binge drinking to acts of discrimination (Maisel, 1990; Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996). In addition, peer-reviewed studies have cast a negative pall on the impact membership in a fraternal organization has had on student behavior, citing aberrant social behavior as a negative effect on achieving desired learning outcomes (Jakobsen, 1986; Maisel, 1990).

The current study aimed to discover whether student academic records would be a more reliable source for determining differences between non-affiliated students, students who joined a fraternal organization during the fall semester of their freshman year, and students who joined a fraternal organization in the spring semester of their freshman year. Furthermore, it sought to determine if there were gender differences in the above factors.

A key motivation of this research was that stakeholders (e.g., institutional faculty/staff, alumni/ae volunteers, organization staff) might not be aware of the academic performance of fraternity/sorority members, beyond previous research focusing on poor first-year performance (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Insofar as membership has been correlated with a negative impact on first-year academic performance, a more complete record focusing on additional measures such as grade point average (GPA), credit hours earned, and retention to sophomore year, is essential for informing campus policy toward membership practices and the provision of student services.

It is not advanced that this study represents a comprehensive examination of academic performance with regard to causality. Findings demonstrate positive first-year academic performance among fraternity/sorority members, contrary to previous perceptions demonstrated in the following review of literature.
Review of Literature

Researchers have brought into question the impact fraternity/sorority membership has had on the achievement of educational outcomes in general and attitudinal orientation in particular (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These findings are most provocative for first-year students who join fraternal organizations. In analyzing National Study of Student Learning data, Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (1996) found fraternity members, compared to non-members, had significantly lower levels of reading comprehension and mathematics during the first year of college, as well as significantly lower levels of critical thinking in an end-of-first-year measurement. The same study found sorority members also had significantly lower levels of reading comprehension, when compared to non-members. The researchers acknowledge that these negative learning effects diminish in magnitude after the first-year, a finding also confirmed by Pascarella, Flowers, and Witt (2006).

Summarizing the various findings aggregated in How College Affects Students (2005), Pascarella and Terenzini stated, “fraternity membership would appear to inhibit growth in general knowledge acquisition and critical thinking for men during the first year of college” (p. 616). Though acknowledging some positive but small net effects on fraternal organization members’ interpersonal skills, community orientation, and commitment to civic engagement, the researchers further concluded:

The research is clear, however, that fraternities and sororities have a net and negative influence on members’ racial-ethnic attitudes and openness to diverse ideas and people. The post-1990 research is notably silent, however, on the net impact of fraternity or sorority membership on educational attainment (p. 617).

This study was intended to determine the effect of fraternity/sorority membership on academic achievement and progress during college. Instead of relying on perceptional surveys of affiliated and non-affiliated students on issues such as moral development as determined by measures of academic honesty (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), this study used academic records to determine outcomes.

Pike (1996) cautioned that outcomes-based research should not rely on self-reported levels of attainment. In addition, using a single campus as the basis for attainment data limits the researcher’s ability to generalize findings, and resulting data often suffers from confounding differences in socialization and recruitment effects (DeBard, Lake, & Binder, 2006). Given the importance accorded to the issue of educational attainment by federal and state policy makers, the use of actual student academic records as a reflection of educational attainment and the incorporation of multiple institutions in such a study are critical.

Method

The researchers attempted to recruit a representative sampling of institutions having fraternal organizations, because this study required the ability to separate members from general student populations. Selection and inclusion was impacted by the capability of the various institutions’ offices of fraternity/sorority affairs to provide accurate new membership lists. One of the
assurances provided was that confidentiality would be maintained. Data collection began in 2008, following IRB approval at the host institution.

**Sample and Sampling Procedure**

Table 1 provides an overview of the participating institutions. A total of 17 institutions participated in the study. Though half of the participating institutions were private, the vast majority of records came from state-affiliated institutions. This was due to the variances in size of enrollment among the private and public institutions. Only one of the nine public institutions has less than 15,000 students, while only one of the 8 private institutions has more than 15,000 students.

Table 1  
*Overview of Participating Institutions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
<th>Fall 2004 Enrollment</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Number of Fraternal Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Master's L</td>
<td>10,001-15,000</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>DRU</td>
<td>20,001+</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>RU/H</td>
<td>15,001-20,000</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>RU/H</td>
<td>5,001-10,000</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>RU/H</td>
<td>15,001-20,000</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>20,001+</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>15,001-20,000</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>20,001+</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>RU/H</td>
<td>20,001+</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>20,001+</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Master's L</td>
<td>5,001-10,000</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bac/A&amp;S</td>
<td>under 5,000</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>10,001-15,000</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Master's L</td>
<td>under 5,000</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Master's L</td>
<td>5,001-10,000</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>20,001+</td>
<td>Great Lakes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Master's L</td>
<td>under 5,000</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was a cross-section of admissions selectivity among the participating institutions. Of the public institutions, three were classified as highly selective, three selective, and three non-selective. Private institutions were more selective than the public institutions, with ACT averages ranging from 22 up to 29. There was no attempt to compare highly selective institutions against other institutions, but only between members of fraternal organizations on a given campus versus non-affiliated students during their first year.

Since the purpose of this article was to demonstrate how membership impacted academic performance, and because the issue of “deferred membership” has policy implications, an important component of the research design was to be able to compare the performance of those
who joined a fraternity/sorority during the first semester on campus versus those who deferred until their second semester.

Overall, 39,983 students were identified as first-year non-members, whereas 4,242 students were identified as having joined a fraternal organization in the fall semester of their freshman year, and 1,873 students were identified as having joined a fraternal organization in the spring semester of their freshman year.

The sample included in this study was similar to national statistics of men and women first-year students who join fraternal organizations. In terms of gender, 52.5% of the records analyzed were from women compared to 47.5% from men, only slightly different than the national average for first-time freshmen at public and private four-year institutions as reported by the *Chronicle Almanac* (2008). Of the total first-year students whose records were included in this study, 12.8% were members of fraternal organizations compared to 87.2% who were not. Again, this is similar to national survey data reported elsewhere (Barefoot & Siegel, 2000).

**Procedure**

An email cover letter and directions for participation were sent to the designated fraternity/sorority campus professional at 86 institutions. Professionals were asked if they could produce membership records sorted by semester or quarter students joined. Up to three follow up phone calls were used after the initial email solicitation. When professionals indicated they could participate, they were asked to provide information from their campus’ office of institutional research about all first-year, first-time, full-time students who entered school in the fall of 2004. If fraternity/sorority professionals could not provide data about members or if the offices of institutional research would not release student information, the institution was excluded from participation in the project.

Data collected included student identification number, high school GPA, ACT or SAT score (all scores were converted to ACT scores using a chart developed by the ACT), sex, fall 2004 GPA and credit hours earned, spring 2005 GPA and credit hours earned, cumulative first year GPA and credit hours earned, and first year to sophomore year retention information. Student identification numbers were used to differentiate records by fraternity/sorority membership. The fraternity/sorority professional verified students were coded as members or non-members and noted the semester joined. Once this was complete, all student identifiers were removed.

**Analytical Methods**

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to determine if joining a fraternal organization had an impact on student GPA or credit hours earned (controlling for ACT score and high school GPA). This analysis was conducted on the overall dataset and also for men and women separately to examine possible differences. Logistic multiple regression was used to identify which independent variables (ACT score, high school GPA, and membership status) predicted retention. Independent variables were tested for possible multicollinearity. Tolerance and VIF collinearity values were within the acceptable range for all variables.
Results

**Overall Academic Performance of First-Year Students**

An important caveat in analyzing the data involved the level of pre-college academic preparedness of the sample. Table 2 suggests each of the three groups (non-affiliates, fall joiners, and spring joiners) performed equivalently in terms of high school GPA. However, fraternity/sorority members obtained higher ACT scores than non-affiliated students. This significant difference was controlled for in analyses that compared groups using ACT score as the covariate in ANCOVA. For all group comparisons, the same difference pattern was found – fraternity/sorority members earned higher ACT scores than non-affiliated students. As a result all ANCOVAs use ACT score as the covariate variable. However the difference was quite small and would not have impacted the outcomes of first-year academic performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Affiliated Students</th>
<th>Joined Fall 2004</th>
<th>Joined Spring 2005</th>
<th>ANCOVA P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT Score</td>
<td>25.42</td>
<td>25.87</td>
<td>26.65</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>n</em> = 39,983</td>
<td><em>n</em> = 4,242</td>
<td><em>n</em> = 1,873</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS GPA</td>
<td><em>n</em> = 31,835</td>
<td><em>n</em> = 3,065</td>
<td><em>n</em> = 1,467</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evidenced in Table 3, after controlling for high school GPA and ACT scores with an ANOVA, students who joined fraternal organizations during their first year earned significantly higher grade point averages than non-affiliated students. Members who joined both in the fall and spring semester were retained to their sophomore year at significantly higher rates than their non-affiliated peers.

In terms of credit hours earned, there was a mixed result. Students who joined in the spring earned more credit hours in their first year (*m* = 32.27) than non-affiliated students (*m* = 28.53) and more than students who joined in the fall semester (*m* = 27.68). The number of hours earned by spring joiners in the spring (*m* = 14.68) compared to the number of hours earned during their fall semester (*m* = 17.41) was significantly lower. There was a significant difference in the number of credit hours earned for all three groups (non-affiliates, fall joiners, and spring joiners); *F* (2, 35,231) = 94.59, *p* < .001, η² = .005.
Table 3

Fall and Spring GPA, Credit Hours, and Retention Rate, Controlling for ACT Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Affiliated Students</th>
<th>Joined Fall 2004</th>
<th>Joined Spring 2005</th>
<th>ANCOVA P-value</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall GPA</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 39,453</td>
<td>n = 4,222</td>
<td>n = 1,861</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring GPA</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 38,621</td>
<td>n = 4,194</td>
<td>n = 1,863</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Year Cum GPA</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 39,022</td>
<td>n = 4,220</td>
<td>n = 1,863</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Hours Earned</td>
<td>15.36</td>
<td>13.92</td>
<td>17.66</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 39,449</td>
<td>n = 4,224</td>
<td>n = 1,860</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Hours Earned</td>
<td>13.63</td>
<td>13.94</td>
<td>14.79</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 38,783</td>
<td>n = 4,198</td>
<td>n = 1,963</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Year Hours</td>
<td>28.53</td>
<td>27.68</td>
<td>32.27</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 39,674</td>
<td>n = 4,235</td>
<td>n = 1,871</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention to Fall 2005</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 39,983</td>
<td>n = 4,242</td>
<td>n = 1,873</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Academic Performance of First-Year Women

Sorority women (shown in Table 4) had slightly higher fall, spring, and cumulative GPAs than their non-affiliated peers during their first year of college, after controlling for high school GPA and ACT score with an ANCOVA, $F(2, 18,157) = 21.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .002$. The difference between affiliated and non-affiliated GPAs ($m = 3.05$) was more pronounced for spring joiners ($m = 3.27$) than for fall joiners ($m = 3.13$). After the first year, non-affiliated women earned an average cumulative GPA of 3.01 ($n = 15,710$); women who joined in the fall semester earned an average 3.08 ($n = 1,751$); and women who joined in the spring earned a cumulative 3.26 ($n = 701$). Women who joined in the spring semester earned significantly more credit hours ($m = 33.60$) than both fall joiners ($m = 28.29$) and non-affiliated students ($m = 28.96$); $F(2, 18,468) = 72.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .008$, after controlling for both ACT score and high school GPA. However, it should be noted that non-affiliated women had a slightly higher rate of earned credit hours compared with their sorority member counterparts who joined during their first semester. All women were retained to the participating institutions at high rates, well over 90%, for all groups. However, women who joined in the spring semester were retained at 98%, a significantly higher rate than the other two groups (96% for non-affiliated students, and 94% for fall joiners).
### Table 4
**Women’s Aggregate Results, Controlling for ACT Score**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Affiliated Students</th>
<th>Joined Fall 2004</th>
<th>Joined Spring 2005</th>
<th>ANCOVA P-value</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall GPA</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 20,516)</td>
<td>(n = 2,461)</td>
<td>(n = 834)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring GPA</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 20,041)</td>
<td>(n = 2,441)</td>
<td>(n = 837)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Year Cum GPA</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 20,238)</td>
<td>(n = 2,456)</td>
<td>(n = 837)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Hours Earned</td>
<td>15.49</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>18.29</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 20,513)</td>
<td>(n = 2,461)</td>
<td>(n = 834)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Hours Earned</td>
<td>13.90</td>
<td>14.25</td>
<td>15.48</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 20,119)</td>
<td>(n = 2,443)</td>
<td>(n = 837)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Year Hours</td>
<td>28.96</td>
<td>28.29</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 20,567)</td>
<td>(n = 2,465)</td>
<td>(n = 839)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Retention to Fall 2005</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(n = 20,746)</td>
<td>(n = 2,467)</td>
<td>(n = 840)</td>
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</table>

**Academic Performance of First-Year Men**

Academic performance for both fraternity and non-affiliated men was below that of their female counterparts. Fraternity men in both groups (fall = 2.92, spring = 3.09) had a higher cumulative first-year GPA than non-affiliated men (\(x = 2.86\)). In fact, fraternity men who joined during the spring semester earned significantly higher GPAs than non-affiliated men and men who joined in the fall semester, after controlling for high school GPA and ACT score; \(F(2, 16,437) = 19.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .002\). After the first-year, non-affiliated men earned an average cumulative GPA of 2.78 (\(n = 14,434\)), men who joined in the fall semester earned an average 2.80 (\(n = 1,267\)), and men who joined in the spring earned a cumulative 3.03 (\(n = 741\)). In overall credit hours earned, men who joined in the spring semester earned the most credits (31.91) followed by non-affiliated men (28.07), and then by men who joined in the fall (26.84). After controlling for ACT score and high school GPA each of these differences was found to be significant; \(F(2, 16,752) = 37.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .004\). Fraternity men (fall = 92%, spring = 97%) were retained at higher rates than non-affiliated men (85%).
Table 5  
*Men’s Aggregate Results, Controlling for ACT Score*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Affiliated Students</th>
<th>Joined Fall 2004</th>
<th>Joined Spring 2005</th>
<th>ANCOVA P-value</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fall GPA</td>
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<td>Spring GPA</td>
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<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Year Cum GPA</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall Hours Earned</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring Hours Earned</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Year Hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retention to Fall 2005</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
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**Discussion**

*A Case for Deferring Recruitment*

As relatively impressive as the fall 2004 membership aggregate numbers were, compared to non-affiliated students, there is some evidence to support an argument for instituting a policy to defer membership to the spring semester. The significant difference between first semester grade point averages for fall and spring new members, the total number of hours earned during the course of the first year that favors spring membership, and the higher retention rate for spring members all suggest allowing students to settle into a campus environment before going through recruitment has beneficial results with regard to first-year academic achievement.

Regarding the number of hours earned when examining results for women alone, the argument for deferring recruitment is even more compelling. Because of the strong start women who deferred membership to the spring achieved during their first semester, there was a significant difference between the cumulative hours earned ($x = 33.60$) during their first year compared to sorority women who joined during their first semester ($x = 28.29$). In fact, sorority women who joined during their first semester accumulated fewer credit hours over their first year than non-affiliated women (28.29 hours compared to 28.96). It is acknowledged that membership is only one variable possibly impacting academic outcomes, but given the number of records involved, these findings provide some impetus to institutions for conducting a study to judge whether a deferred membership policy would help academic progress of their students.

Similar to what was found for sorority members, men who deferred membership to the spring semester also earned significantly more hours during the fall semester than men who joined in the fall. Furthermore, the number of hours earned in the spring for new members was
significantly less than they had earned in the fall before joining. Fall membership did have a negative relationship with regard to hours earned as compared to non-affiliated men, particularly during the fall membership semester. Overall, the men who deferred membership accumulated significantly more hours at the end of their first year compared to both non-affiliated men and those who joined in the fall.

**Positive Effects on Retention**

The most notable difference in both aggregate analysis and by sex, concerned retention. These findings support previous retention research concerning the importance of building a sense of belonging within the institution of higher learning. Lounsbury & DeNeui (1995) demonstrated fraternity/sorority membership contributed to a student’s sense of community on a college campus, and other research by Pike & Askew (1990) demonstrated increased social involvement. This research was further corroborated by Pike (2000) supporting the positive effect of fraternity/sorority membership on building a sense of belonging on campus, resulting in greater attachment to the institution. All of these studies support the more general proposition posited by Astin (1985) concerning the importance of campus involvement in retaining first-year students.

What this study adds to the discussion is that such affiliation is not simply associated with social acceptance and pleasure. If membership in fraternal organizations is to be an institutional priority, the emphasis should be to promote academic success. In an age where the creation of revenue streams is essential to institutional well-being, these numbers are compelling. If the non-affiliated student retention rate had been equal to the rate for fraternity/sorority members who joined in the fall (93%), this would have resulted in an increase of 2,745 students, or 9.2% of the non-affiliated students, being retained to their sophomore year.

**Differences by Institution**

Of course, as interesting as these aggregate findings are, the truly relevant statistics for an institution formulating membership policy concern what is occurring locally. Differences in academic preparedness of first-year students, by institution, are a better policy informant than these aggregate figures. Although part of the agreement with institutions that participated in this study was that no comparative institutional data would be shared, it was observed that the least selective of institutions had the most academic problems with students, especially males, joining a fraternal organization in the fall of the first year. By contrast, the most selective of institutions had the greatest difference in grade point average, hours earned, and retention rates between members who joined fraternal organizations and those who remained unaffiliated.

**Implications**

At the 2006 meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Dr. Clifford Adelman leveled criticism at educational researchers for failure to use reliable data in drawing conclusions that can impact institutional and public policy (Glenn, 2006). One of the desired outcomes of this study was to persuade educators to gather, analyze, and disseminate their own institutional data regarding the impact of various variables, including membership in fraternal organizations, on first-year academic performance. Unfortunately, a number of institutions expressing an interest in participating in this study were unable to gather the necessary membership records to differentiate students based on involvement. This suggests that even
though data may be revealing, formatting it for analysis on some campuses may require substantial effort. Certainly, this evidences Dr. Adelman’s point.

The net positive effect joining a fraternity or sorority can have on academic performance during the first year of college informs the debate about the value of fraternal organizations on college campuses. Student affairs professionals and advocates of affiliation are in need of research-based evidence. Many times, fraternity/sorority supporters find themselves facing research demeaning affiliation, armed only with “good deeds” tied to sponsored service projects a few times per year. A more substantive approach needs to be taken that addresses specific educational outcomes, a language more powerful to decision-makers, verifiable by institutional research and records.

This study should not be viewed merely as a point of advocacy for fraternity/sorority membership. For all the positive aspects this study uncovered, results also inform policy regarding the efficacy of limiting or restricting first-year involvement. Establishing a policy of deferred membership or placing a grade point average requirement before new members receive active status, as indicated by the findings, might improve first year academic performance. Certainly, such decisions must rest with institutional data rather than national findings.

Future Research

Data collection from multiple institutions should be conducted in a longitudinal study. This longitudinal approach would be beneficial to help researchers examine possible trends in fraternity/sorority membership performance over time. A second suggestion for future research is to carry data collection beyond the first year. There are still many unanswered questions about students who join fraternal organizations after their freshman year. Research has also yet to address graduation rates of affiliated students.

Conclusion

In reporting the results of their National Survey of First-Year Co-Curricular Practices (2000), Barefoot and Siegel stated:

We believe that the central issue for campuses to consider is whether Greek life [sic] supports or is a deterrent to the academic mission of an institution and whether the institution is able to effectively monitor and control the activities occurring within or sponsored by these organizations. (p. 6)

In contrast, this study demonstrated a positive effect of membership on various measures of academic performance during the first year of college. Women who joined sororities their freshman year earned higher grades, completed more credit hours, and were retained in slightly higher numbers than their male counterparts. What was most revealing was that membership was positively aligned with academic success when compared to those students who decide to remain unaffiliated. This was true at public universities and private colleges, for both women and men.
References


Robert DeBard is an Associate Professor at Bowling Green State University. Casey Sacks was previously the research assistant for the Gamma Sigma Alpha national study and is currently Career and Technical Manager with the Colorado Community College System.
WHY UNDERGRADUATES AREN’T “GOING GREEK”:
ATTRACTION, AFFILIATION, AND RETENTION IN FRATERNITIES
AND SORORITIES

Kristin S. Fouts

Declining interest in fraternity/sorority membership on many campuses has led advisors, campus-based professionals, and inter/national organization staff to consider reasons why some students choose not to join. This study sought to identify the factors that influence attraction, affiliation, and retention in fraternities and sororities. Results from this multi-institution, quantitative study (n = 1,432) indicated time, financial obligations, and lack of perceived personal benefit deter many students from pursuing membership. Discussion focused on recommendations for addressing myths, stereotypes, and other uncertainties, using clear and explicit information about the obligations of membership, and encouraging members to engage potential members in positive interactions throughout the year.

Student affairs practitioners who oversee student programming are often charged with providing co-curricular experiences that support students’ classroom experiences and developmental needs (Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003). As the number of these opportunities grows, whether staff- or student-driven, students become more particular about how they spend their time. Several years ago, studies sought to determine why undergraduates chose not to join certain clubs and organizations. Primary responses included job responsibilities or lack of awareness (McCannon & Bennett, 1996), type of campus or campus culture (Heida, 1986; Pascarella et al, 1996), inconsistencies with the institution’s mission and presence of other, stronger subcommunities (Kuh & Lyons, 1990).

Some, but certainly not all, fraternal organizations have struggled to stand out from these other involvement options, although the popularity of values-based recruiting, business-like models of recruiting and marketing, and the boom of multicultural and niche-market organizations has breathed new life into many organizations. “Relevance” is a buzz word harkening Kimbrough’s (1995) proposal for modernizing fraternal organizations by focusing on legitimacy, both to the contemporary college student, as well as to the academic mission of higher education. The challenge to identify potential members and explain to them the tangible and intangible benefits of fraternity/sorority membership is daunting for many.

The answer to the question “Why aren’t students ‘going Greek’?” is a complex one that has not, within the past twenty years, been researched or published. Attracting students to the fraternity/sorority experience, particularly those who may not initially intend to join, involves knowing the target audience, including the stereotypes and misperceptions non-members may hold, and what internal and external influences keep them from pursuing membership. This study sought to identify the factors that influence attraction, affiliation, and retention in fraternities and sororities.
Conceptual Framework

Innovation-Decision Model
At the heart of Rogers’ (1995) research is the concept of innovation, or an “idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual” (p. 11). Information about ideas or innovations is diffused or transmitted through a culture through conversation, media, technology, and other channels of information-sharing (Rogers). An innovation may be adopted if a user/individual finds it favorable or beneficial. However, the innovation may be rejected (or not used) if a better alternative exists, or if there is little perceived value to its use. The process by which an individual becomes aware of an innovation and either adopts or rejects it is described in Rogers’ Innovation Decision Model, which consists of five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation.

With regard to fraternity/sorority communities, the innovation (i.e., the idea of becoming a member) can be diffused (i.e., promoted or otherwise made visible) through the campus community by recruitment and intake activities, public programs conducted by a chapter, and information from friends and family, from which students learn of the benefits and drawbacks of membership. For first-generation students, in particular, the decision to join a fraternity or sorority may be made with little to no prior knowledge or support, which might impede their ability or interest to even become aware of the opportunity. As such, students’ pre-existing knowledge of fraternities and sororities might affect how easily they may be persuaded to pursue membership, and their decision may also later depend heavily on interaction with current members, information and communication about membership, or how successfully recruiting members reduce potential members’ uncertainty about fraternity/sorority life.

Applying Tinto’s (1988) concepts, Pratt and Skaggs (1989) found that the only difference between first-generation and continuing-generation students with regard to social integration was the propensity to join a fraternal organization. First-generation students often come from families with lower incomes and lower levels of engagement in high school; furthermore, they are often less likely to join clubs and organizations, live on campus, or be satisfied with their overall campus experience (Terenzini et al., 1996). Even for continuing-generation students, experiences their parents may have had with fraternal organizations during their college years, or expectations they might set for academic achievement or participation in athletics and other clubs, can significantly influence what co-curricular activities they engage in.

Rogers (1995) acknowledged rejection could occur at the decision phase, but did not focus on the possibility of rejection prior to the persuasion phase. In some instances, for example, a student might know fraternities and sororities exist on campus, but due to internal or external influences, may resist any further thought or action toward membership in those organizations. Active rejection, according to Rogers, involved considering adoption of the innovation, but deciding otherwise at some point. On the other hand, individuals who passively reject an innovation never really consider use or adoption at any time.

Member Acquisition and Retention Model
Like the Innovation-Decision Model, the Member Acquisition and Retention Model (Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003) describes the process by which individuals are converted from non-members
to members in formal groups like fraternities and sororities or academic clubs. According to the model, individuals pass through four stages over an unspecified amount of time, encountering a group on different occasions in different ways.

Zuckerman and Kretovics (2003) described progression through the four stages as being significantly influenced by both internal and external factors. Individuals become aware of organizations primarily through external media, including newspaper advertisements, brochures, and flyers. As they begin to consider affiliation, however, the impetus is internally-driven. Individuals form “psychological contracts,” which state, for instance, if an organization’s purpose is incongruent with personal values, or if the time commitment needed for membership interferes with coursework, they will not pursue membership. In these stages, different media and types of engagement between the organization and prospective member are needed. Group activities and personal contact, which help individuals determine whether the organization is congruent with personal values and personal identity, help encourage affiliation and retention (Zuckerman & Kretovics). With regard to fraternity/sorority communities, the examples may be similar: Web sites, flyers, and banners may be effective for getting prospective students’ attention prior to a recruitment or intake event, but to result in affiliation and member retention, group engagement and personalized attention is critical.

The issue of disaffiliation is addressed, but only at the point after an individual has affiliated with a group and decides that his or her values, goals, or interests are no longer congruent with the organization. Just as the point of rejection in Rogers’ (1995) model may be contested, so may be the point of disaffiliation in the Member Acquisition and Retention Model. Awareness and attraction may be achieved, but rejection may occur before or just after affiliation takes place. There are a number of reasons for this decision, including the format of the activity or event; personal biases or influences; or time, personal, or financial conflicts (Tinto, 1988). All of these might be a part of a student’s psychological contract, which can be violated at any point in Zuckerman and Kretovics’ (2003) four stages. These frameworks were used to construct a survey instrument to address a series of research questions related to fraternity/sorority membership.

Method

Research Questions
The purpose of this study was to determine the factors influencing a student’s decision to not pursue membership in a fraternity or sorority. The following research questions were posed:
1. What are the specific reasons why students do not find membership appealing or beneficial?
2. At what point do the majority of students who participate in recruitment or intake processes choose to withdraw or reject the process?
3. How can fraternity/sorority recruitment, intake, and publicity/public relations be improved and/or supported?

Sites
The following studies were conducted at separate Midwestern institutions, using a quantitative survey methodology. IRB approval was granted at both institutions. Institution A was an urban, public university with approximately 14,000 students, with 17 fraternity/sorority chapters
ranging in size from 5-70. According to the public data set for the 2006 academic year, approximately 80% of students were White, non-Hispanic; 3% were African American; and 6% were Asian or Pacific Islander. Institution B was an urban, public university with approximately 25,000 students, with 27 fraternity/sorority chapters ranging in size from 5-75. According to the public data set for the 2009 academic year, approximately 91% of students were White, non-Hispanic; 3% were African American; and 2% were Latino. Both institutions recognized chapters affiliated with the National Panhellenic Conference, North-American Interfraternity Conference, National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc., and National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, Inc.

Participants
Electronic surveys were sent to 4,282 non-affiliated undergraduate students at Institution A, and 10,042 at Institution B. At both institutions, the sample was intentionally designed to include only students aged 18-23, with a GPA of 2.5 or better. These parameters were set to achieve a pool that most closely represented the ideal target audience many fraternity/sorority chapters sought for membership. Of the 1,432 combined respondents from both sites, 71% were female, 35% male. With regard to ethnicity, over 90% of all respondents reported as being White, non-Hispanic. Nearly half of all respondents were seniors (46%); interestingly, very few first-year students (4%) filled out usable surveys.

Instrument
An original survey was used in both studies and featured two tracks of questions, one for students who had participated in membership recruitment or intake activities, and one for students who had not participated in membership recruitment or intake activities at the institution. For instance, respondents who had participated in recruitment or membership intake activities were asked about their reasons for wanting to participate and the result of their experience. Respondents who had never participated were directed to a series of questions regarding the factors that influenced, or could have influenced, their decision not to participate, as well as what factors influenced their current attitude toward fraternities and sororities. The instrument was developed through a series of conversations with students, chapter advisors, and campus-based professionals, and incorporated themes related to both Rogers’ (1995) and Zuckerman and Kretovics’ (2003) models.

Procedures
The survey was distributed in electronic format using SurveyMonkey at the first institution and Select Survey, an institutionally-based program, for the second. Correlations and descriptive statistics were analyzed through the Web-based software to determine relationships between variables. All data from the two data collection phases, unless otherwise indicated as coming from one institution in particular, was merged.

Results

Reasons Membership Was Not Appealing or Beneficial
Awareness or knowledge is the first phase or stage in both Rogers’ (1995) and Zuckerman and Kretovics’ (2003) models. Respondents were asked to identify the extent of knowledge they had about fraternities and/or sororities prior to arriving at either university. A significant number of
respondents at both institutions (53% at Institution A, 48% at Institution B) indicated having “some knowledge.” When asked whether they had ever participated in a membership recruitment or intake activity or process, over 85% of students at each institution (n = 496 at Institution A, n = 796 at Institution B) responded “No.”

**Source of Knowledge.** Participants at Institution B were asked to share the source of their knowledge about fraternities and sororities prior to arriving at college. The question was added after analyzing data from Institution A and determining it would further clarify responses; more than one option could be chosen. Over half of the respondents at Institution B (n = 545, 59%) indicated they learned the most about fraternity/sorority life from affiliated friends and family members, while 57% (n = 524) derived information from television shows or movies. Furthermore, at Institution B, 39% (n = 358) respondents cited non-affiliated friends and family as their primary source of knowledge about fraternity/sorority membership, and 29% (n = 266) mentioned newspapers and other written media.

**Reasons for Participating.** The primary reason students participated in a recruitment or intake event at both institutions (54% at Institution A, and 43% at Institution B) was encouragement from friends in fraternities and/or sororities. Respondents also indicated the importance of participating in the process with friends or peers (both at approximately 37%). Interestingly, family influence was more significant at the knowledge and learning stage, but not at the participation stage; 2% (n = 27) of respondents, between both institutions, said family encouragement was a factor in choosing to participate in recruitment and intake events.

**Decision to Not Participate.** Nearly 1,300 respondents reported they had never participated in a recruitment or intake process or activity. Students at both institutions cited the same factors as decreasing their interest in fraternal organizations: stereotypes associated with members and/or chapters (n = 866, 67%), time commitment and obligations of membership (n = 788, 61%), lack of overall perceived benefit (n = 763, 59%), and financial obligations of membership (n = 715, 55%). Other reasons included influence from non-affiliated family and friends, concerns about academic goals, hazing, pressure to drink, and perceived conflict in personal and organizational values. Open-ended responses revealed negative perceptions of individuals/groups: falsehood, snobbery, racial and sexual orientation discrimination, sexual promiscuity, or harmful comments shared by athletic or other staff.

**When Interest or Participation Discontinued**
Both Rogers (1995) and Zuckerman and Kretovics (2003) suggested disaffiliation, or questioning one’s level of commitment to an idea or process, occurs most frequently after the decision has already been made to affiliate. Findings from this study suggested, however, that individuals may make that decision long before the persuasion or attraction stage. They may have knowledge and be aware of the opportunity to join fraternities or sororities, but quickly discontinue interest before they can be persuaded further. This will be discussed in more detail later.

**Duration of Experience.** With regard to those students who did participate in recruitment (n = 200, 15%), the length or duration of their experiences may also be telling as to the processes and the interactions prospective members have with current members during that time. Questions were asked about the point at which students withdrew or otherwise left the recruitment process;
the majority responses at the two institutions were slightly different. At Institution A, 47% of participants withdrew from the recruitment process prior to its end. Students stated that they withdrew from recruitment for the following reasons: time commitment required was not feasible (38%), the organization’s values did not match their own interests (30%), or they did not feel comfortable with the members of the chapter (18%). Students at both institutions also cited concerns about the potential for forced alcohol use and the possibility of hazing and sexual assault as deterrents to membership.

Interesting differences between genders were noted at this stage of the survey. For instance, at Institution A, where most students who participated in recruitment eventually withdrew from the process before it ended, women more often cited the time commitment required or a perceived discomfort with the chapter. Men, on the other hand, cited a mismatch between personal and organizational values and interests. Of those at Institution B who declined invitations for membership, 76% \((n = 19)\) were women. In most cases, women who chose not to continue did so at a very late phase, most frequently mentioning a push by recruitment counselors to “maximize their options,” or attend every event possible, despite their comfort with only one group. Open-ended responses suggest that women responded to this push by revisiting chapters they little desire to join, and then ultimately declined invitations for membership from falsely-encouraged chapters.

**Reasons Respondents Might Have Participated**

One question sought to discover what could have changed the opinions and/or actions of students who chose not to participate in recruitment or intake activities. We called these “game changers.” At Institution A, students indicated they might have decided to participate if the obligations of membership were more clearly conveyed (40%), if such events were better-advertised (36%), or if the benefits of membership were more clearly conveyed (35%). At Institution B, respondents gave many of the same reasons: better advertising of events (40%), clearly-conveyed benefits (36%) or obligations (29%), or if chapter’s programs were more clearly values-based (28%). At both institutions, one-third said nothing would have changed their minds.

**Discussion**

Results have highlighted a number of positive and negative characteristics that must be addressed for fraternal organizations to remain truly relevant, both to the mission of the institution, as well as to contemporary college students. The results also provide some direction for fraternity/sorority professionals and volunteers in areas where enhanced programming and advising might benefit from targeted attention.

**Focusing on the “Peer Factor”**

On the positive side is what we termed the “peer factor,” or the influence of currently-affiliated friends and family members on a student’s decision to participate in recruitment or intake activities. In instances where students had a negative pre-college perception of fraternity/sorority membership, affiliated friends often proved to be the necessary push to encourage their “trying on” of the idea of membership (Rogers, 1995). Many also had other friends participating in the process. The influence of peers, both inside and outside the community, can go a long way toward addressing uncertainty, as well; Zuckerman and Kretovics (2003) added that uncertainty
can be reduced by building interest and understanding about the organization’s values and reputation.

**Emphasizing Community, Leadership Development, and Social Activity**

Respondents’ reasons for considering membership should also be encouraging to those committed to fraternity/sorority life: Students primarily wanted to expand their circle of friends and to feel a sense of belonging on the college campus. Students also cited a desire for increased leadership development, as well as wanting an outlet for social activity with peers. While academic support and community service opportunities were not among the top responses, these are nonetheless critical services chapters must continue to provide all members, and benefits of membership that might distinguish chapters from one another in the recruitment process.

**Cleaning up Perceptions by Cleaning up Members**

In their open-ended comments, some respondents told stories of students whom they knew to be members of fraternal organizations arriving to class hung-over, sloppily dressed in chapter-related apparel, addressing faculty or other students rudely on campus, or talking freely of wild weekend parties and sexual encounters—all contributing to their personal stereotypes and poor images of the fraternal community in general. Similarly, students who chose not to participate in recruitment processes were turned off by stereotypes associated with certain chapters or membership in general, by a perceived conflict in values, or were not comfortable with members in the chapter, including experiences in the classroom. Chapters must focus on making sure each member understands her or his role in the everyday maintenance of the organization’s image, as well as holding accountable those whose behavior do not uphold the values of the organization.

**Highlighting the Benefits of Membership**

Zuckerman and Kretovics (2003) claimed that external and indirect communication to potential members was most effective in the awareness and attraction phases. What these results suggest, however, is that potential members of fraternal organizations may need much more direct, informative, and transparent communication from chapters to fully understand the obligations and requirements of membership. Students may find it difficult to put into words those intangible benefits of membership found in ritual, brotherhood and sisterhood experiences, and a sense of belonging and community. Prospective members yearn to have the “what’s in it for me?” question answered early in the process and these aspects of membership should be highlighted and emphasized early and often.

**Partnering to Address Misperceptions**

Students’ pre-college perceptions also indicate a potential “tipping point” opportunity for current members. Students at both institutions indicated they arrived at college with some knowledge of fraternity/sorority life and a negative perception. Although fraternity/sorority members cannot control all of the ways fraternal organizations are portrayed on television and in films, members, advisors, and professional staff can do a better job dispelling common myths by providing counter-examples that show the true benefit and realistic obligations of membership.

**Asking the Chapter the Right Questions**

Campus professionals can support chapter members and volunteers by asking some critical questions, spurring conversation about their non-affiliated population, and how and why chapters
recruit or promote themselves the way they do. Why are students dissatisfied or turned off by the recruitment processes? If a mismatch exists between perceived benefits (or perceived values) and actual benefits (or enacted values), why is this the case? What are some campus norms, in terms of involvement, and is fraternity/sorority membership one of them? Why or why not? How can campus-based professionals, inter/national headquarters staff, and chapter volunteers more clearly articulate the financial and time obligations of membership? Are each of these groups as concerned about retention during active membership as they are with retention during recruitment (or vice versa)?

**Understanding Men and Women**

Results showed men and women approached both the decision to participate in recruitment activities and the decision to affiliate with different rationale. Men who withdrew from recruitment processes before they ended most often cited a lack of perceived congruence between personal and organizational values. In open-ended comments, many of those students said that they did not want to be a “frat guy,” who (stereotypically) consumes alcohol in great excess, lazes around with little concern for community and academics, and is sexually promiscuous. Women were also averse to the common (similar) stereotypes of sorority women. These reasons for not joining, or for considering one chapter over another in the recruitment process, are largely based on misinformation and poor public relations. Some of the image disparity comes from the media, but also from unclaimed opportunities by chapters to redefine what it means to be part of a fraternal organization based on values and benefits of membership.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study would benefit from replication, particularly at institutions with more diverse student populations, such as smaller and larger institutions, and private and other public universities not represented by this sample. Also, campuses with deferred recruitment processes, or where other unique restrictions on the time and manner of membership recruitment are imposed, may also have interesting results.

Richer qualitative data would further enhance the quantitative findings of the survey. In-depth perspectives might provide valuable complementary information to help students, advisors, campus-based professionals, and inter/national organization staff gain a better understanding of the target audience for recruitment and intake programs. Being able to provide effective customer service to potential members, particularly those with a negative perception or little initial intention to pursue membership, might help minimize uncertainty about the immediate and long-term benefits of fraternal membership.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study indicate that current members, advisors, campus-based professionals, and inter/national organization staff have more work to do, on a consistent basis, to address the questions and uncertainties of non-affiliated students. Students are no longer attracted to involvement opportunities by passive advertising or word of mouth alone, and chapters can no longer expect droves of students to attend informational meetings or recruitment events, eager to
become members. Some persuasion is needed, for both students who are mildly or completely interested, and those that have rarely or never considered membership.

Once students are persuaded to consider “trying on” membership through a recruitment or intake process, conversations must have depth and specificity and convey the mutual benefits received through membership. Prospective members have indicated in this study that more specific information is needed, not only to distinguish one chapter from another, but to show a return on investment, a connection between financial input and emotional or tangible output.

Even high-achieving chapters with successful recruitment or intake programs must continuously evaluate their procedures. Complacency will only lead to extinction. Communication about the benefits of membership must meet the diverse and distinct needs of various populations of students; messages about chapter life must be tailored to address the unique questions and concerns of students of different ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ethnicities, as the literature and this study demonstrate are influential in a student’s decision to get involved.

References


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FRATERNITY MEMBERS’ VIEWS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES

Craig Tollini and Beate Wilson

The purpose of this study was to have fraternity members identify the negative stereotypes they believed other members of the university community had of them and the extent to which these stereotypes were both accurate and/or damaging to their chapters. To gather these perspectives, which provide administrators, faculty, and staff members with a better understanding of how fraternity members view themselves and why they act as they do, a qualitative study consisting of five focus groups was conducted with 30 men from five Interfraternity Council (IFC) member fraternities at a medium-sized, Midwestern, public university. The seven most common negative stereotypes discussed among participants were drinking, womanizing, hazing, poor academic performance, paying for friends, being arrogant, and not performing community service. Each group held slightly different views on which stereotypes were true, untrue, or most damaging. Implications of these findings along with recommendations for practitioners and researchers are provided.

Researchers in both academic and professional journals have pointed out various issues or problems attached to fraternity membership. In a direct analysis of two professional journals, Molasso (2005) found the majority of articles addressing fraternal organizations addressed drinking, hazing, or sexual assault. Other recently studied problems include cheating (Storch & Storch, 2002), poor academic performance (Pike, 2003), low cognitive and emotional development (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001), racism (Rubin, Ainsworth, Cho, Turk, & Winn, 1999), alcohol abuse (Caron, Moskey, & Hovey, 2004), and misogyny (Bleeker, 2005). In short, research provides a predominantly negative view of fraternity membership, one reminiscent of the glorified misbehavior portrayed in such popular films as American Pie: Beta House (2007) and Old School (2003).

Two topics that have been largely neglected by researchers are how fraternity members view these issues and the generally negative stereotypes of fraternities. Information on these topics may help explain members’ resistance to certain policies, as well as identify potential ways to overcome this resistance and work with members to address these issues. The current study begins to address this gap by having members of social fraternities identify the negative stereotypes they believe other members of the university community have of them, as well as the extent to which these stereotypes are both accurate and harmful to their chapters.

Review of Literature

When presenting the results of her research on a rape culture in fraternities, Sanday (1996) found some fraternity members argued that her results did not reflect their individual chapter experiences. Similarly in a study of hazing behaviors, Baier and Williams (1983) found fraternities believed hazing was a problem, though few of the respondents believed it was a problem for their particular chapter. The idea that chapters differ has some empirical support; members of different chapters have been found to vary in their level of alcohol abuse (Larimer, Irvine, Kilmer, & Marlatt, 1997), sexual assault (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Humphrey & Kahn,
2000), and academic performance and moral development (Winston, Hutson, & McCaffrey, 1980).

Such differences may impact fraternity members’ acceptance of their portrayal in research and the media. For example, members of a chapter with low levels of alcohol abuse may not believe research findings that fraternity men have higher levels of binge drinking than non-affiliated college men. Variation by chapter may also affect members’ support for programs and regulations. One implication from Baier and Williams’ (1983) findings is that the fraternity members who viewed hazing as a problem indicated they are likely to support anti-hazing policies. Goodwin (1989) provided more direct evidence for this idea when he found a negative correlation between the amount of alcohol fraternity members drank and their support for policies intended to curb alcohol abuse.

Gaining a better understanding of how members perceive themselves and the issues they face (or are believed to face) will allow student affairs professionals to better understand fraternity member behavior. It may also reveal issues of which administrators, faculty and staff members, and non-affiliated students are unaware, but which fraternity members believe are particularly pressing. This information may be particularly useful to both campus- and organization-based fraternity/sorority professionals and volunteers and consultants working to help members address perceptions and highlight the positive aspects of affiliation. This project was an initial attempt to address the gap in the literature.

Method

Sample and Procedure
Focus groups were conducted with members of five Interfraternity Council (IFC) member fraternities at Western Illinois University (WIU), a medium-sized, Midwestern, public university (spring 2009 full-time enrollment = 13,400) with an affiliated population of approximately 6.6 percent of students. Following IRB approval, chapter presidents from 11 chapters were sent an email soliciting participation. Five chapter presidents agreed to allow the researchers to attend a chapter meeting to explain the goals of the study and request focus group participation. Separate focus groups were conducted with each of the participating chapters. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours. Two research assistants recorded and took notes at each focus group.

Table 1
Focus Group Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Spring 2009 Chapter Size</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
<th>Participants who were Initiated Members</th>
<th>Participants who were Chapter Leaders</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambda</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omicron</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phi</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Chapter size is categorized generally to maintain confidentiality.
group. To protect confidentiality, each chapter was assigned a Greek letter that was not used by any of the IFC chapters. Chapter focus group demographics are summarized in Table 1. Chapter size is categorized generally to maintain confidentiality.

**Data Collection**
Focus groups were semi-structured to allow for additional questions to be asked based on the participants’ comments. The first question for every group was “What do you believe is the most commonly held negative stereotype of the fraternities at WIU?” Participants were then asked to define and describe each stereotype, to discuss the accuracy of each stereotype, and to discuss whether each stereotype was more applicable to some chapters than to others. Toward the end of each focus group, participants were asked which stereotype they believed was most damaging to the fraternities at WIU.

**Data Analysis**
Recordings were transcribed, and any information that could potentially identify a person or chapter was removed or substituted with more general language to protect confidentiality. The assistants’ notes were used to check and clarify the recordings, and the recordings and notes were destroyed once the transcription process ended.

Each focus group was analyzed separately using an approach suggested by Maxwell (1998), whereby responses were organized first by the major topic they addressed and then by the content of the responses. A summary was created for each focus group, and participants were asked to check the summary for errors and to provide any additional comments. Four participants (two from Beta and one each from Lambda and Mu) stated the summary of their group was satisfactory, while a participant from Phi removed one word from and added another word to a sentence. The reviewed summaries were combined to create the outline for this paper.

Since there did not appear to be any systematic differences in the opinions of the non-initiated and initiated members, their statements were presented together. The results section does not designate how many participants made or agreed with a given statement; this number could not always be determined, in part because there was no systematic recording of body language. In general, at least one other participant echoed each statement, and the few disagreements occurred were noted.

**Limitations**
The participants could have provided socially desirable results given the sensitive nature of the topic. For instance, it is possible that a participant might feel pressured by the other members of his chapter to state that a particular stereotype is not true or does not apply to his chapter. In addition, at least one participant appeared to be self-conscious because of the recorders. Furthermore, some of the participants spoke often and at length, while others were largely silent. Each participant interacted, even if only by nodding. Each was also asked for input at multiple times during the focus groups and all provided at least a few substantive comments. The participants also disagreed with and contradicted each other and referred to specific negative behaviors in their chapter. Therefore, it would appear that the participants largely felt free to express themselves and contributed as they saw appropriate.
Results

Results are presented in narrative format, differentiated by which stereotypes members believed were most common, which they believed were most accurate, and which they believed were most damaging. Readers are referred back to Table 1 to aid in interpretation of member comments.

**Most Commonly Held Negative Stereotypes Members Perceived**

**Alcohol abuse.** Participants from all five focus groups said alcohol abuse was one of the most commonly held stereotypes. A new member from Beta stated, “People anticipate us to drink heavily all the time.” Participants from Lambda, Omicron, and Phi added that people believed fraternity members did not engage in other activities (e.g., community service and attending classes) because of their alcohol consumption. Participants from Beta said underage drinking was another part of this stereotype, and an initiated member from Omicron also mentioned the belief that fraternity parties were, “…your wild and crazy parties where you’re doing all these crazy things […] like] hanging from a balcony.”

**Womanizing.** Participants from every chapter except Omicron, the largest fraternity in the study, mentioned a stereotype that centered on fraternity members’ attitudes toward and treatment of women. At least one participant from each of the four chapters stated mistreating women (i.e., treating them as objects or taking advantage of them sexually) and using Rohypnol in women’s drinks were the most common characterizations. Participants from Mu, one of the smaller fraternities in the study, described two aspects of this stereotype that support the perception of sexual conquest. The first, as stated by a new member, is that a fraternity man “move[s] through one sorority or one organization or just a group of women just as fast as he can, as many as he can.” He similarly described the second as the perception that “fraternities share people, that they just say, ‘OK, it’s your turn with this person.’” Participants from Beta and Lambda said date rape was another aspect of this stereotype, and participants from Beta also mentioned the belief that members had sexually transmitted diseases.

**Paying for friends.** Participants from four chapters discussed the stereotype that fraternity members pay for their friends. Phi, one of the smaller fraternities in the study, was the exception. Participants from each of the other chapters said that fraternity members were viewed as “paying for their friends” or “paying to hang out.” Participants from Beta and some of the participants from Lambda agreed that this stereotype also included the belief that members were too pathetic to make friends on their own. According to participants from Beta, Lambda, and Mu, another aspect of this stereotype was the belief a new member from Mu articulated as, “you’re not going to associate with anyone else because they’re not paying to be with you.”

**Arrogance.** Participants from Mu, Omicron, and Phi said arrogance was another commonly held stereotype. According to participants from Mu and Omicron, people viewed fraternity members as mean, rude, unapproachable, and uninterested in or incapable of interacting with other students. Participants from Mu added the terms “elitist” and “judgmental” to their description of this stereotype. An initiated member from Omicron echoed this statement, expressing, “just because you’re in one chapter, you think you’re better than somebody else or better than all the other chapters.” The participants from Omicron also included the perception
that members were rich and did not have to work. Phi participants repeated this last idea, and also included the beliefs that fraternity members were “macho,” lifted weights, and had been the “popular kids” in high school.

**Hazing, poor academic performance, and community service.** Only participants from two of the smaller fraternities, Beta and Mu, mentioned hazing as a prevalent, negative stereotype. Participants from both Beta and Mu defined hazing as a ritual or activity involving elements of pain and/or humiliation. An initiated member from Beta added hazing was “anything that a new [uninitiated] member would have to go through [that] an active [initiated] member would not.” Poor academic performance was only mentioned by Mu and Lambda, a medium-sized fraternity. Participants from Lambda defined this belief as members having low grades and not going to class, while the participants from Mu agreed that it included not being interested in grades, cheating, and having academic problems due lack of focus or persistence. Only participants from Omicron, the largest fraternity, listed the stereotype that fraternity members did not perform community service. Participants described this stereotype as the belief that fraternity members either did not perform community service or only did so out of obligation.

**Accuracy of the Perceived Stereotypes**

Overall, the participants indicated that the stereotypes were false or only reflected a minority of fraternity members or activities. In most cases, members expressed beliefs that other fraternities, not their own, exhibited the stereotypical behaviors. With regard to the womanizing stereotype, participants from Beta contended that members of other fraternities were disrespectful to women. Participants from Mu accused members of other fraternities of using the promise of sexual access to women as a recruitment tool. Participants from Omicron said most fraternities have members who believed they are better than the members of other chapters. Finally, participants from both Beta and Mu stated that the hazing stereotype accurately described other chapters. An initiated member from Mu stated, “I don’t even know if you could call it a negative stereotype because it’s true.” The participants from Mu added that members of other chapters made it known that that they haze and that there has been an escalation in the number and potential danger of hazing activities.

At least some of the participants indicated at least parts of the stereotypes were accurate, however. While some participants from Beta agreed that fraternity members did consume more alcohol than non-affiliated students, others from this group challenged this claim. In addition, at least one participant from Beta, Lambda, and Omicron admitted that joining a fraternal organization provided him with friends. An initiated member from Omicron contended that, “I’ve probably met more people because I’m Greek [sic] than I would have if I wasn’t.” Participants from Phi believed the alcohol consumption stereotype was common to all chapters, and the participants from Omicron had the same belief in regards to the “paying for friends” stereotype.

The participants from Omicron stated they could not determine if the community service stereotype was truer for certain chapters, because they did not know enough about other chapters’ service activities. At least one participant from Mu made similar arguments regarding the academic and “paying for friends” stereotypes, as did at least one participant from Beta.
Regarding the alcohol consumption stereotype. The other members of both groups believed they could make a determination, however.

**Most Damaging Negative Stereotypes Members Perceived**

**Alcohol abuse.** When asked which stereotype was the most damaging, participants from Beta, Mu, and Omicron noted alcohol abuse. An initiated member of Omicron, supported by his chapter brothers, stated, “no matter what, people are still gonna [sic] see [drinking] as being a negative thing.” Participants from both Omicron and Mu contended that this stereotype was the most damaging because it negatively affected recruitment. For example, an initiated member of Mu, mimicking a potential recruit’s parents said, “No, we’re not gonna [sic] give you money for that cuz [sic] all you’re gonna do is drink.” Participants from Beta believed this stereotype was damaging, because alcohol abuse is seen as a “gateway” to the other stereotypical behaviors. Although the participants from Lambda did not select this stereotype as the most damaging, they echoed the last two arguments when asked if this stereotype could be damaging in any way.

Participants from Beta and Mu believed having a reputation for drinking could actually increase the number of recruits. Further, participants from both groups stated that alcohol abuse did not damage fraternities because it was a common behavior for college students. Participants from both Lambda and Phi echoed this argument and added that a reputation for drinking could be beneficial because it made the chapter seem “more fun.” Lambda members agreed with one initiated member’s comment that a negative reputation for alcohol abuse was only mildly damaging because “you could lose [it] in a year or two. Just stop having parties.”

**Womanizing.** Of the four groups whose participants said womanizing was a commonly held stereotype, Lambda and Mu members listed this stereotype as the most damaging. Participants from Lambda said they selected this stereotype because sexual assault and the use of date rape drugs, common characteristics of this stereotype, were criminal acts. Participants from both Lambda and Mu also said this stereotype was damaging because it created a reputation that was difficult to overcome. Participants from Phi, who ranked womanizing as the second most damaging stereotype, echoed this justification. That said, the members of Phi also stated that womanizing wasn’t as prevalent a negative stereotype as the other negative behaviors and that some aspects of the stereotype, namely perceived sexual access to women, may actually be the reason why some men join a fraternity.

**Arrogance.** Participants from Omicron and Phi selected arrogance as the most damaging stereotype. Participants from both groups said this stereotype was damaging because it negatively affected recruitment. For instance, a Phi new member stated, “you’re not even gonna [sic] consider Greek life if you’re like, ‘Man, all these guys are assholes or cocky.’” The participants from Phi also contended that this stereotype was damaging because people will believe arrogant members will engage in other stereotypical behaviors.

**Hazing.** Participants from Beta and Mu believed hazing was among the most damaging stereotypes because of its negative effect on recruitment. More specifically, an initiated member of Beta said, “I think we would have the possibility of getting . . .more possible pledges [sic] that are of higher quality if they weren’t afraid of hazing.” A participant from Mu mentioned the results of a research project discussed in one of his classes that indicated both affiliated and
independent students believed hazing discourages men from joining a fraternity. Participants from both groups indicated they were initially personally wary about joining a fraternity because of this stereotype.

**Multiple Stereotypes.** As the aforementioned results indicated, participants from Beta, Mu, and Omicron selected more than one stereotype as most damaging. More specifically, participants from Mu named three stereotypes as the most damaging, while the participants from Beta, Omicron, and Phi each selected two stereotypes. In addition, participants from Beta and Mu asked if they could select more than one stereotype, and participants from Mu and Omicron asked to select all of the stereotypes they listed. Lambda participants only discussed one stereotype as most harmful.

**Perceived Characteristics of Fraternities Who Exhibited Negative Stereotypes**

When the participants agreed that a given stereotype was truer for certain chapters, they were also asked to describe characteristics of the fraternities whose members were more likely to engage in these stereotypical behaviors. The participants from multiple groups separately described three common characteristics that fit certain stereotypes, though they often referred to those related to alcohol consumption.

**Having a fraternity house.** Among the most prominent characteristics was having a fraternity house, which participants from all groups correlated with alcohol consumption. Not all fraternities at WIU have chapter-owned or managed houses, though all had “unofficial” houses, rented by individual members, where several chapter brothers lived together. Regarding the latter, a Lambda initiated member stated, “you don’t need a fraternity house to have a party, but you need [a] satellite house to have a party and be social and stuff.” A Beta initiated member believed that the condition of the fraternity house was related to the way members treated it. He remarked that “nicer” houses “probably don’t have as many problems with their members.”

Another initiated member from the Beta focus group discussed campus policies governing chapter house occupation that may indirectly contribute to behavioral issues. He reasoned that the pressure to fill a house caused chapters to “lower their standards” during recruitment to bring in members who would be willing to live in the facility. He noted, “it becomes less of a selection [process]. . .You just want to get the numbers. So that’s when you start to let the partiers and the people who really aren’t in it for the right thing.” The other participants in the Beta group agreed with this conclusion.

**Fraternity size.** The second characteristic participants used to describe fraternities who exhibited negative behaviors related to the size of the chapter. Most focus group participants shared the sentiment summarized by an initiated member of Lambda (a medium-sized fraternity), who stated, “if you have more people, a [larger] percentage would drink and party.” Some members of Beta (a smaller fraternity) disagreed.

**Fraternity age/resources.** The final characteristic related to how long a fraternity had existed at WIU. Participants in the Beta focus group agreed with one initiated member who stated, “the newer chapters. . .really adhere to the core values of the fraternity and stick closer to the rules.” In contrast, the participants from Omicron agreed with an initiated member of their
group who argued that “if [a chapter’s] been on the campus for 40-60 years, there’s a good chance that it’s got a stronger foundation to be a better chapter” since it is “well established” and has “more resources from alumni.” Related to the resources mentioned in the previous quotation, participants from Beta, Lambda, and Mu all emphatically believed that chapters with more resources were more likely to drink.

**Summary**

**Fraternity Members Perceived Seven Negative Stereotypes**
The participants listed the following as commonly held negative stereotypes of fraternities: drinking, womanizing, hazing, having poor academics, paying for friends, being arrogant, and not performing community service. The groups varied in how many and which stereotypes were mentioned. These differences, which cannot be fully tied to the size of each group, indicated that chapters differed in their views of which stereotypes were the most commonly held. In addition, three of the listed stereotypes (arrogance, community service, and paying for friends) have not been the focus of previous research.

**Fraternity Members Believed Stereotypes were Untrue or Only True for Other Chapters**
The participants from each focus group generally argued that the commonly held stereotypes they listed were untrue or exaggerated, with the exception of hazing. Participants were divided over the paying for friends stereotype, and some participants indicated that specific aspects of the drinking, womanizing, and arrogance stereotypes were true. In addition, the majority of the participants believed the stereotypes were more descriptive of some chapters than others. The participants described the traits of the chapters they believed were more likely to match the stereotypes.

**Fraternity Members Viewed Four Stereotypes as the Most Damaging**
At least some participants believed the drinking, womanizing, hazing, and arrogance stereotypes were damaging for all fraternities at WIU. In general, the participants (even those who did not rank these stereotypes as the most damaging) believed these stereotypes negatively affected recruitment by giving fraternities a bad reputation, though other members argued that a given stereotype could benefit a chapter and its reputation. The hazing and arrogance stereotypes were selected as the most damaging in almost all of the groups that listed these stereotypes, while the drinking and womanizing stereotypes were selected in about half of the groups that listed them. Finally, the participants from three focus groups selected more than one stereotype as the most damaging. The participants from two of these groups selected all of the stereotypes they listed, because they believed these stereotypes were all interrelated and thus affected each other.

**Implications**
Campus- and organization-based fraternity/sorority professionals and volunteers should seek the perspectives of fraternity members on their campus, perhaps by replicating the present study and/or holding public forums and online discussions. One benefit of obtaining this information is that programming could be designed based on whether members would classify a concern as major or minor. For instance, educational programs could be created to inform members about
the concerns they do not seem to view as major concerns (e.g., hazing), while programs regarding the issues about which they are aware (e.g., drinking) could focus on strategies for addressing these concerns.

Another benefit is that practitioners may learn that members believe they face issues of which the practitioners are unaware. As noted above, the participants listed three stereotypes, one of which was ranked as the most damaging by the members of one group, which have not been the focus of previous research. Gaining this knowledge may lead professionals to develop new programming and to work with members to address these “new” concerns, which may encourage additional positive interactions between fraternities and university personnel.

Insight as to members’ beliefs about the accuracy of negative stereotypes enables fraternity/sorority professionals to (1) identify those concerns about which members need more information in order to perceive them as legitimate (for all chapters and/or for their chapter specifically) and (2) work with members to formulate policy to address the concerns (or the specific aspects of these concerns) they already believe are legitimate. Members may also be likely to address the concerns they believe are the most damaging to them, so having this information would also be beneficial. Determining why members believe a particular stereotype is damaging can also be useful in that fraternity/sorority professionals could incorporate this reasoning into policies and discussions with members.

During the focus groups, participants found the stereotypes damaging predominantly because they affected recruitment. If fraternity/sorority professionals focus on how certain actions may negatively impact recruitment results and/or provide evidence regarding how sharp the decline in numbers may be, fraternity members may be particularly likely to change their behaviors. In addition, knowing that some members view concerns as interrelated, as was the case in the focus groups, could also be useful as these members would be more likely to support more systemic changes.

Campus- and organization-based fraternity advisors and volunteers should also be aware of differences between chapters. The participants in each focus group did not list the same stereotypes. In addition, participants in some groups ranked a single stereotype as the most damaging, while other groups put forth two or three. Furthermore, the participants from each group that mentioned a given stereotype did not necessarily agree on why the stereotype was damaging or even if it was damaging. Participants from some groups even provided reasons to believe that a stereotype could have positive consequences. All of this indicates that there is variation between and within chapters. As a result, a “one-size-fits-all” approach is unlikely to be well received. This is particularly true since members may be likely to view other chapters as problematic, which was the case with the sample.

Suggestions for Future Research

Additional research on how fraternity members view the negative stereotypes of them is needed, in no small part because the research described above is preliminary. This study needs to be replicated at other universities, from which a larger percentage of the chapters are sampled. Future research should also address each commonly held stereotype in more detail and determine
the extent to which fraternity members (1) are aware of the various stereotypes of them, (2) would rank the same stereotypes as damaging, and (3) have the same definition of the stereotypes.

Additional research is also needed to determine the extent to which the participants’ beliefs regarding which fraternities are most likely to match the stereotypes reflect reality or are simply stereotypes held by the members themselves, as well as how widespread these views are among fraternity members. It would also be beneficial for more research to be conducted regarding the stereotypes mentioned by the focus groups but that have not been the focus of previous research (arrogance, paying for friends, and community service).

References


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