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# **A review of research on fraternities: on balance, they're worth having**

by John D. Foubert

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It would be difficult to find any university administrator who does not have a passionate opinion about the existence of fraternities. The theme of this article is that administrators should supplement personal opinions with consideration of the relevant research. Although each university has a unique culture, there is ample evidence to support the view that fraternities at most colleges and universities do more good than harm.

## **Research on the difficulties**

The typical arguments made against fraternities are summarized by J. M. Maisel ("Social fraternities and sororities are not conducive to the educational process" *NASPA Journal*, 28, 8-12, 1990):

[n]ot only are the principles of fraternities and sororities anathema to the principles institutions espouse, but alcohol abuse, sexism, racism, destruction of property, and rape are the kinds of problems frequently associated with the groups today. Fraternal organizations demand a constant investment of money and staff time to deal with the problems that emanate from behind their walls.

Maisel's observation about fraternity alcohol abuse is on target. The research indicates that alcohol abuse is more prevalent among members of fraternities than among men not in fraternities, and among university women—sorority members and non-members. In addition, fraternity members perceive less risk than non-members for heavy alcohol assumption behaviors (Tampke, D. R., "Alcohol behavior, risk perception, and fraternity and sorority membership" *NASPA Journal*, 28, 71-77, 1990). Qualitative studies have reinforced the finding that alcohol abuse is widespread in fraternities (Kuh, G. D. & Arnold, J. C. "Liquid bonding: A cultural analysis of the role of alcohol in fraternity pledgship," *Journal of College Student Development*, 34, 327-334, 1993).

One of the strongest arguments against the existence of fraternities centers on the issue of sexual assault. The most damaging finding is by O'Sullivan, who discovered that 55 of the gang rapes reported between 1980 and 1990 on college campuses were committed by fraternity members (O'Sullivan, C. "Acquaintance gang rape on campus," in A. Parrot & L. Bechhofer eds., *Acquaintance rape: The hidden crime*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 140-156, 1991).

Although it appears that gang rape is more likely to happen among men in some fraternities, research has also shown that men in fraternities believed fewer rape myths (a variable associated with likelihood of raping), showed less acceptance of interpersonal violence and less sexual conservatism than a control group of men not in fraternities (Lenihan, G. O. & Rawlins, M. E., "Rape supportive attitudes among Greek students before and after a date rape prevention program," *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 450-455, 1994). This research suggests that the sexual assault awareness training conducted by many of the national fraternities may be having a positive impact, and that it would be wrong to conclude that fraternity members, on an individual basis, are more likely to endorse opinions more strongly associated with rape behavior than non-fraternity men.

An additional criticism of fraternities has been that membership is associated with ideals that undermine most colleges' academic mission. Some studies have shown, for example, that fraternity members have lower grade point averages than men who do not belong to a fraternity (Pike, G. R. & Askew, J. W., "The impact of fraternity and sorority membership on academic involvement and learning outcomes," *NASPA Journal*, 28, 13-19, 1990).

It is important to note, however, that this difference in grades amounted to only one tenth of a grade point. Other researchers have found no differences between the grades of fraternity members and non-members, and that fraternity members report studying the same number of hours and being as strongly motivated to achieve good grades as non-members (Cufaude, J., "Strategies from a Greek advisor: Maximizing the Greek cocurriculum's potential," *NASPA Journal*, 28, 82-89, 1990).

## **Research on the benefits**

Perhaps the clearest summary of the benefits of fraternities was reported by Hughes and Winston ("Effects of fraternity membership on interpersonal values," *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28, 405-411, 1987). Those benefits include "encouraging the formation of significant same-sex friendships, development of leadership skills, and refinement of social skills, for upholding high moral values, and for serving the college and local communities" (p. 405).

The influence of fraternities on a college campus depends partly on the nature of the institution. Kuh and Lyons found that while each of the predominantly residential colleges they classified as "involving colleges" did not have a Greek system, on large campuses the benefits of fraternities were more prominent. They found that on large campuses, fraternities "can be viable vehicles for personal development and community service opportunities for their members."

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They noted that having Greek organizations created additional opportunities for students to be leaders and connect with personally chosen subcommunities. Furthermore, colleges with strong residence life programs and other healthy subcommunities, Greek systems tend to be more compatible with the mission of the institution (Kuh, G. D. & Lyons, J. W. "Fraternities and sororities: Lessons from the college experiences study," *NASPA Journal*, 28, 2029, pp. 21, 24, 1990). It may follow then, that by developing strong residence life programs, and fostering other alternatives to the Greek system, an environment can be created in which the Greek community will work harder to become more compatible with the institutional mission, and the social norms supporting it.

When it comes to involvement in extra-curricular activities, research has shown that fraternity members, more than men non-members, report greater interaction with other students, are more involved in extra-curricular activities in general, and student professional organiza-

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### **A review of research . . .** [from p. 514]

tions in particular (Pike & Askew, *supra*; Baier, J. L. & Whipple, E. G., "Greek values and attitudes: A comparison with independents," *NASPA Journal*, 28, 43-53, 1990).

In addition to extra-curricular involvement, research has shown that fraternity members increasingly value leadership characteristics a year after they join a fraternity than other men their age who do not join (Hughes, M. J. & Winston, R. B., "Effects of fraternity membership on interpersonal values," *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28, 405-411, 1987). Years later when they graduate, research shows that alumni of institutions who were members of fraternities donate more funds to the university than alumni who were not in fraternities (Griffith, P.S., & Miller, T. W., "Economic uncertainty: Where do Greek alumni fit in?" *CSCF Update*, 2, 1, 1981).

Historically African-American fraternities play vital roles on our campuses by helping fulfill affiliation needs of African-American students, and connecting African-American students to the institution. The role these fraternities play must be considered in any discussion of whether universities should support the existence of fraternities. Whipple, Baier, and Grady, ("A comparison of black and white Greeks at a predominantly white university," *NASPA Journal*, 28, 140-148, 1991) note that "on most predominantly white college campuses, black Greeks provide the major social structure for most blacks on campus, both members and nonmembers alike . . ."

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The same authors also stress the strong service orientation of African-American Greek fraternities, and report that black fraternity men show stronger academic motivation, and a greater sense of independence and social conscience, than white Greek men.

### **Conclusion**

The difficulties some fraternity members create on our campuses are substantial, and must be confronted. University administrators and national fraternity representatives should work in concert to develop a broad range of responses—from taking advantage of "teaching moments," to revoking charters.

Most fraternities are worth keeping because they have been shown to promote the development of their members, provide opportunities to serve the community, and create numerous opportunities for members to enhance their leadership skills. Through fraternity involvement, members create their own connections to meaningful subcommunities—becoming more involved than other students in most campus activities. Their interest in the institution remains strong after graduation, as seen in their on-going financial support. Furthermore, historically African-American fraternities have been shown to offer substantial benefits to their members, their institutions, and their community. ■