

Perspectives.

Ready for Research but Don't Know Where to Start? 10 Fraternity/Sorority Related Research Topics

Dan Bureau, Indiana University
Fall 2007 *Perspectives*

Assessment. Evaluation. Qualitative and Quantitative Methods. Focus Groups. Interviews. Surveys. These are just some of the many words that can jumble together for a person nervous about conducting research. However, student affairs professions are expected to create a scholarly base to continue to document not only the characteristics of the students with whom we work, but also to gain insight into the outcomes based on engagement in activities both in and out of the classroom (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Jablonski et al., 2006). Fraternity and sorority practitioners and graduate students aspiring to serve in such capacities must accept their responsibility to support research. In addition, research may counter widely held perceptions about fraternities and sororities or at least confirm the speculation about these groups and provide a roadmap to shape programs to improve the fraternity and sorority experience (Hesp, 2005; Molasso, 2005).

In an effort to promote research on fraternities and sororities, I asked "experts" in higher education and the larger fraternal movement to offer potential topics that answer the question: what key topics need to be considered by higher education researchers studying fraternities/sororities? Their responses are compiled into ten general categories. This article focuses predominantly on research related to undergraduate members of fraternal organizations. This emphasis is important due to an overall impression of how current research in student affairs is largely driven by an interest in the students served.

Suggested Research Topics

Impact of Culturally Based Organizations on Retention of Students of Color

The literature on how involvement impacts student retention is significant (Baird, 2003; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students who are involved tend to be more engaged. An area where the data is inconclusive is with students of color and first generation college students; two categories within higher education that frequently overlap (Choy, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005). Prior studies on retention and fraternity and sorority affiliation have produced mixed results for historically white fraternities and sororities with some inclination to support the contributing role these organizations play in retention and persistence (Debard, Lake & Binder, 2006; Kuh & Lyons, 1990; North American Interfraternity Conference & National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.) but research has not focused on organizations with a cultural affinity. This growing population of fraternal organizations must be studied to document their impact on student development and identity (Brown, Parks & Phillips, 2005).

Using existing campus databases, one could examine trends in organizational membership to institutional records of student matriculation. Examining overall retention of all students of color compared with those who gain membership into a fraternity/sorority may be a worthy research topic. In addition, qualitative approaches could include interviews of non-affiliated versus affiliated students to assess perceived institutional factors that contribute to why students persist. This topic has enormous potential to shape the future of how culturally based organizations are advised and increase the knowledge base of these organizations (Brown, Parks & Phillips, 2005; Kimbrough, 2003).

Character Building and Leadership Development

Fraternities and sororities often espouse leadership skills as a primary outcome of membership. Some research has connected leadership skills to membership (Harms et al., 2006; North American Interfraternity Conference & National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.), but determining the impact of fraternal organizations on leadership skills is widely anecdotal. Addressing the factors contributing to the development of leadership skills and whether leadership skills influence fraternal membership or vice versa may provide evidence to perceived benefits and help to shape intentional experiences to improve the emphasis on leadership development in these organizations.

Leadership inventories such as the Leadership Challenge (Kouzes & Posner, 1995) provide a compelling quantitative approach to assessing leadership development. In addition, recent literature on how students develop open and closed values systems may be worthy of review in order to replicate methods (Baier & Whipple, 1990; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2006). Examining the emerging research of Susan Komives and the Leadership Identity Development Model is a good place to start in considering qualitative research (National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs, n.d.). Using interviews and focus groups could aid in

the development of theories to explain how leadership is intentionally created in fraternal organizations. In addition, particular attention to council leadership may provide insight into qualities of these positional leaders as opposed to chapter leaders: do the best and brightest rise to the top or are there other reasons persons seek governing council positions?

Outcomes Assessment of Leadership Programs

Determining outcomes of student life programs is a growing area of assessment (CAS, 2003; Manning, 2006; Schuh, 2003; Tutt & McCarthy, 2006). As fraternity and sorority life professionals create leadership programs for students, understanding the need to accomplish clearly stated outcomes and determining their efficacy cannot be overlooked. This is true for both campus and inter/national organization programs. Assessing outcomes can provide data to share with potential donors justifying the need for funding, to increase the impact of marketing materials (i.e. recruitment brochure, website, parent's newsletters), and to strengthen the relationship between the fraternal movement and the academe.

Current and past participants leadership program participants could be surveyed or asked to provide feedback through focus groups. Quantitative assessment could be done by conducting pre-assessment of the students' ability in regard to program outcomes before the leadership program and then conducting a post-test analysis at a determined time after the experience. Qualitatively, focus groups can provide insight into experiences and could be conducted with students at any time following the experience (including after graduation to assess long term perception of the fraternity/sorority experience). Conducting ethnography, interacting with students during the experience and journaling your observations judge how you perceive the outcomes to be occurring in students, is a unique concept in assessing programs. This may be conducted during overnight retreats hosted for governing councils or chapter leaders. In addition, a focus on investment and financial "value" should be conducted by examining dollars spent with program impact; Kennedy, Moran and Upcraft (2001) provide a helpful perspective on financial investment and student life outcomes.

Identity Development and Membership

To support student development, we must examine how students shape identity and what factors contribute to the supportive environments where development happens (Evans, Forney & Guido-DeBrito, 1998; Strange & Banning, 2001). Existing research examined cognitive develop and fraternity/sorority affiliation, but lacks difference between organizational types and does not provide much examination of the experience from a qualitative perspective using a broad sample (Kimbrough, 1997; Mathiasen, 2005; Pascarella, Flowers & Whitt, 2001). Examining the potential for development, critical thinking, and decision-making based on personal and organizational values is an area in dire need of research.

Quantitatively, surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement are created to gauge student development, learning, and thinking (National Survey of Student Engagement, n.d.). Comparing fraternity and sorority respondents to unaffiliated students may provide insight into potential opportunities for improvement and document how members compare to institutional objectives of student development and learning. Various qualitative studies such as using ethnography are possible for graduate students who have long-term access to organizations. Focus groups and interviews are certainly viable options to gauge how students perceive organizational membership impacts their own development. Finally, issues of pluralism should be examined: diverse views on religion, inclusion of different ethnicities, and attention to sexual orientation and identity should all be considered a vast unexplored territory for research in the fraternal movement.

Deferred Recruitment/Intake Practices

Deferred recruitment in North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) and National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) organizations is widely contested. Research by Debard, Lake, and Binder (2006) indicate deferred joining may have a slight impact on academics, but the benefits derived from membership may improve retention. Other research initiatives have connected academic performance and involvement in larger campus activities both negatively and positively depending on organizational culture (McGuire, 1993). Conversely, no research has examined the impact of not recruiting first-year students of color by culturally based organizations: could this population of students have improved retention rates if they were quickly engaged in culturally based fraternal organizations? Research and assessment findings will help us all spend time on meaningful conversations rather than continuing to discuss our "gut feelings" or anecdotal information.

Tracking institutional retention rates of affiliated and unaffiliated students could demonstrate the effect of membership in the first semester. It is important to give voice to the conditions that contribute to retention and persistence; qualitative methods such as focus groups allow for insight into the conditions that kept students in college. Another unexplored area examines first-generation college students and involvement in fraternities and sororities. If this population becomes connected during the first-semester with a fraternal organization, what is the outcome? If they do not have the option to join, do institutions

miss an opportunity to help them build relationships and improve retention? Or does deferring recruitment help them avoid an experience for which they are not prepared?

Examining Hazing Culture

Due to a lack of research, more questions than answers often arise when considering hazing: What factors influence hazing culture? Why do some socially stratified organizations, such as fraternities and sororities, have an increased tendency to use hazing as indoctrination? Does the propensity to haze become stronger in an organization such as a fraternity or sorority or does the inclination come from the individual (Ellsworth, 2006)? Cultural relativism, a widely held view by anthropologists that culture is defined as "good" dependent on what is "socially approved" by the majority (Marchell & Bureau, 2007; Nathan, 2005) is an area for future research. Part of the challenge to studying hazing culture is the difficulty in getting victims and perpetrators to discuss their actions. Campo, Poulos and Sipple (2005) identify that victims are more likely to cite having been hazed than perpetrators accept their role as hazers. With this in mind, the challenge is powerful, however, both quantitative and qualitative research is possible.

Utilizing focus groups to inquire about perceptions of the role of new member education programs may give insight into potential characteristics of hazing organizations. Fraternity/sorority members can indicate their perceptions of hazing culture in other chapters on campus by filling out anonymous surveys. This may help in gathering information to intervene when there is a widely held perception of hazing culture in a particular organization. For example, the hazing culture of social fraternities and sororities is often characterized by alcohol misuse, but within culturally based organizations there may be less inclination to involve alcohol in hazing activities (Williams, n.d.). Finally, a review of the stophazing.org website provides a good overview of several research papers connecting hazing to student development (stophazing.org, n.d.). Any of these articles could be the foundation for future research grounded in quantitative or qualitative measures.

Sophomore Year Experience

The sophomore year brings several potential changes for many members: living in the fraternity/sorority facility, taking increased leadership roles, selecting an academic major, etc. The fraternity/sorority may become a learning community or, conversely, may become a deterrent to learning. With this in mind, research efforts could focus on environmental theory (Strange & Banning, 2001). As many students assume greater leadership within their chapters, leadership identity development models may help frame the process these students experience as they participate in decision making that often challenges and supports their development (Evans, Forney & Guido-DeBrito, 1998; National Clearinghouse on Leadership Programs, n.d.). Within culturally based organizations, the sophomore year is typically when an individual is invited to join. What does the process of anticipating intake and participating in these activities do to aid in the development of students of color (Kimbrough, 1997)? Despite the great deal of transition occurring during the sophomore year, most research has only examined the experience of students during their first and last years. This is an area inviting more attention to determine strategies to help students succeed in fraternities and sororities.

Registrar records and fraternity and sorority life membership can be examined for differences in retention and academic achievement depending on living environment. Additional targeted surveys may tease out specific concepts involving integration. Qualitatively, one could have exit surveys with a sample of those living in chapter facilities versus those who do not. Ethnography of individuals participating in the intake process (or those intending to do so) could be undertaken. Applying the Leadership Identity Development Model and conducting focus groups will determine appropriate training curriculum to help student leaders at the sophomore level maximize their performance: the conversations had with sophomore leaders is potentially very different than that with junior and senior leaders based on student development theory. Finally, efforts to assess the role the fraternity/sorority plays in the pivotal period of development from the sophomore to junior year will help practitioners create programs in partnership with chapters to improve long-term membership involvement and retention.

Senior Retention

Recent conversations among Big Ten fraternity/sorority advisors have focused on the widespread concern over the lack of senior engagement in NIC and NPC organizations, but few know what to do about this phenomenon. Anecdotally, I believe this is a newer phenomenon. Over the last ten years seniors have placed higher priority on internships and study abroad; these students also desire more freedom than some current fraternity and sorority policies permit. However, we lack data to support these notions.

There are basic anthropological underpinnings validating how people perceive transitions into any new phase of their lives known as liminality (Grund, 2006). It is natural to sever ties from one experience (undergraduate status) to engage in another experience (potential to enter the workforce, attend graduate school, etc). This concept is in conflict with the fraternal movement's goal of lifetime

membership. The development of successful strategies to counter disengagement and/or reshape the experience to provide a meaningful senior year for members could be a topic for research. Hosting focus groups with juniors to determine their perceived needs as they enter their final year may provide data to shape programs during their last year. In addition, focus groups with seniors may allow us to gain insight into current priorities, better understand their disconnect to the organization, and collect ideas to make the fraternal experience significant in this new phase life. All of this could also lead to potential development of theoretical frameworks to help guide practitioners develop programs to support student development at the senior level.

Fraternity and Sorority Community Risk Management

While risk management and awareness has gripped the fraternity and sorority community for the last 20 years, higher education has its own methods to manage risks and address liability. Mandates such as the Clery Act have shaped how practitioners conduct their work. In light of the spring 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy, all campus constituents' perceptions about safety are important (Rikleem, 2007). Using the fraternity and sorority community as a starting point, researchers may have an interest in learning the perceptions of students regarding the purpose and management of risk-related policies.

One place to start is to determine high and low performing chapters in the area of risk management. Conducting interviews allows the researcher to gain insight into participants' perceptions that may range across a spectrum based on membership in different organizations. While this is perceptive at times, remember that a researcher presents a theory – Chapter A has said qualities that leads one to view them as a chapter with a high level of risk awareness; Chapter B has qualities that lead one to view them as a chapter with a low level of risk awareness – that he/she aims to validate with data. In addition to qualitative work, instruments to assess risk knowledge may be helpful.

Mission and Values Congruence

Over the last three decades, documents have called for fraternities and sororities to “live their values” and make necessary changes to align with mission, purpose, and stated values (Franklin Square Group, 2002; North American Interfraternity Conference, n.d.; Schreck, 1976). Bureau, Schendel, and Veldkamp (2006) outlined the importance of assessing actions and mission congruence in fraternal organizations. As mission based groups, examining the efficacy of fraternal organizations' ability to accomplish espoused goals is an important research area to create credibility in student affairs as well as impact student development (Bureau, 2007; Bureau, 2006; Sullivan, 2007).

Qualitatively, replicating the processes outlined in the Bureau, Schendel & Veldkamp (2006) article could be done across one organization on different campuses or across multiple campuses for comparative data. The process alone may be conducted on a single campus to guide practice as well as create a body of work connecting student perceptions and perceptions of peers. A mixed methods approach that uses a quantitative tactic to segue into qualitative interviews could use a values inventory such as that provided by the Hardee Center for Leadership and Ethics in Higher Education (n.d.) to assess fraternity and sorority members' individual values. This should be compared to unaffiliated students. The inventory could be used to shape discussions about how individual values are reflected in or shaped by fraternal values by reviewing organizational missions in interview forums. Finally, a simple idea is to review fraternity and sorority community statements, often prominently placed on Web sites and compare to each organization on that campus: What is unique? What is the overlap? A simple document analysis would yield exciting data about what words most often appear. This would highlight common values across fraternal organizations.

Conclusion

I highly encourage practitioners wishing to hone research skills, masters' level students beginning student affairs research, and doctoral students considering dissertation work or smaller research projects related to fraternities and sororities to use the ideas presented here to guide their research. In addition to these topic ideas, AFA provides several resources to assist member in research endeavors. AFA's Research Mentors can provide guidance and advice in research initiatives. The editorial team of Oracle: the Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors is accessible to support researchers in working through ideas, writing, rewriting and the entire process of taking research and creating an article. In addition, Perspectives has become incredibly focused on research-based articles. Examining the last four years of issues brings about visions of research projects, theses, and dissertations. These guidelines and support structures can help increase your comfort with assessment and research while providing key information for the promotion of the fraternal movement.

This list was compiled by Dan Bureau with the help of Charles Eberly, Marilyn Fordham, Dennis Gregory, Malinda Matney, Eric Norman, and Brian Tenclinger.

References

- Association of Fraternity Advisors (n.d.) Research assistance. Retrieved August 19, 2007 from <http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/KnowledgeCenter/Research.aspx>
- Baird, L.L. (2003). New lessons from research on student outcomes. In Komives, S.R., Woodard Jr., D.B., & assoc. (2003). *Student services: A handbook for the profession*. (4th ed.). 595-617. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Baire, J.L. & Whipple, E.G. (1990). Greek values and attitudes. A comparison with independents. *NASPA Journal*, 28(1). 43-53.
- Brown, T.L., Parks, G.S., Phillips, C.M. (2005, Spring). Setting the research agenda for African American Fraternities and Sororities. *Perspectives*, 20-21.
- Bureau, D. (2007, Summer). Beyond the rhetoric and into the action of the fraternal values movement. *Perspectives*, 20-22.
- Bureau, D. (2007, Winter). Barriers to greatness: Using the concept of fraternal relevancy to create urgency for change. *Perspectives*, 8-11.
- Bureau, D., Schendel, K. & Veldkamp, S. (2006, Summer). Values and action congruence. *Perspectives*, 16-17.
- Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) (2003). *The book of professional standards for higher education*. Council for the Advancement of Standards: Washington, D.C.
- Campo, S., Poulos, G. & Sipple, J. (2005). Prevalence and profiling: Hazing among college students and points of intervention. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 29(2), 137-149.
- Carpenter, S. & Stimpson, M.T. (2007). Professionalism, scholarly practice, and professional development in student affairs. *NASPA Journal*, 44(2). Retrieved August 21, 2007 from <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol44/iss2/art4>
- Center for the Study of the College Fraternity. (n.d.). List of suggested research topics and questions. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from <http://www.indiana.edu/~sao/cscf/site/>
- Choy, S. P. (2001). Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment. (NCES 2001-126). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- DeBard, R., Lake, T., & Binder R.S. (2006). Greeks and grades: The first-year experience. *NASPA Journal*, 43(1), Retrieved August 20, 2007 from <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol43/iss1/art4>
- Duffy, R. and Sedlacek, W.E. (2006). Correlates of open and closed value systems among university students. *NASPA Journal*, 43(4) Retrieved August 22, 2007 from <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol43/iss4/art2>
- Ellsworth, C. (2006). Definitions of hazing: Differences among selected student organizations. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, 2(1). 46-60. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/uploads/PublicDocuments/Oracle_vol2_iss1_Ellsworth.pdf
- Evans, N.J., Forney, D.S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college. Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Franklin Square Group (2003). A call for values congruence. Retrieved August 21, 2007 from <http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/uploads/PublicDocuments/CallforValuesCongruence.pdf>
- Grund, N. (2006, Spring). My freshman year: An interview with author Cathy A. Small. *NASPA Leadership Exchange*, 4(1). 20-23. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from http://www.naspa.org/membership/leader_ex_pdf/Vol_4_Iss_1_Spring2006.pdf
- Hardee Center for Leadership and Ethics in Higher Education (n.d.). Character values scale. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from <http://collegevalues.org/pdfs/Character%20Values%20Scale.pdf>
- Harms, P.D, Woods, D. Roberts, B. Bureau, D. & Green, A. (2006). Perceptions of leadership in

- undergraduate fraternal organizations. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, 2(2). Retrieved August 20, 2007 from http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/Default.aspx?action=ViewFile&file=Oracle_vol2_iss2_Harms.pdf
- Hesp, G. (2005). Defining a new identity through the rational and logical. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, 1(1). Retrieved August 21, 2007 from http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/uploads/PublicDocuments/Oracle_vol1_iss1_Hesp.pdf
- Jablonski, M., Mena, S.B., Manning, K., Carpenter, S., & Siko, K.L. (2006). Scholarship in student affairs revisited: The summit on scholarship. *NASPA Journal*, 43(4). Retrieved August 17, 2007 from <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol43/iss4/art11>
- Kennedy, K., Moran, L. & Upcraft M. L. (2001). Assessing cost effectiveness. In Schuh, J.H. & Upcraft, M. L. (2001). *Assessment practice in student affairs: An applications manual*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kimbrough, W. M. (2003). *Black Greek 101: The culture, customs and challenges of Black fraternities and sororities*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press.
- Kimbrough, W.M. (1997). The membership intake movement of Historically Black Greek-letter Organizations. *NASPA Journal*, 34(3). Retrieved August 22, 2007 from <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol34/iss3/art7>
- Kouzes, J.S. & Posner, B.Z. (1995). *The leadership challenge* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., Andreas, R., Lyons, J., Strange, C. C., Krehbiel, L. E., & MacKay, K. A. (1991). *Involving colleges: Successful approaches to fostering student learning and development outside the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D., & Lyons, J. W. (1990). Fraternities and sororities: Lessons from the College Experiences Study. *NASPA Journal*, 28(1), 20-29.
- Manning, K. (2006, February 8). Student engagement, Project DEEP, and models of student affairs practice. Retrieved June 14, 2007 from <http://www.naspa.org/membership/mem/nr/article.cfm?id=1521>
- Marchell, T. & Bureau, D. (2007, Summer). A bystander framework for hazing prevention. *Perspectives*, 8-11.
- Mathiasen, R.E. (2005). Moral development in fraternity members: A case study. *College Student Journal*. Retrieved August 18, 2007 from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCR/is_2_39/ai_n15338062/pg_1
- McGuire, J.J. (1993). *The effect of deferring fraternity and sorority rush upon scholastic achievement, satisfaction, and quality and quantity of involvement among students small, private liberal arts university*. Dissertation Abstracts International 54(02), 436.
- Molasso, B. (2005). A content analysis of a decade of fraternity/scholarship in student affairs research journals. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, 1(1). Retrieved August 21, 2007 from http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/uploads/PublicDocuments/Oracle_vol1_iss1_Molasso.pdf
- Nathan, R. (2005). *My freshman year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. Cornell University Press.
- National Clearinghouse of Leadership Programs (n.d.). Multi-Institutional study of leadership. Retrieved August 20, 2007 from <http://www.nclp.umd.edu/resources/general.asp>
- National Survey of Student Engagement (n.d.). Homepage. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from <http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>
- North American Interfraternity Conference (n.d.) *Living your ritual*. Indianapolis, IN.
- North American Interfraternity Conference & National Panhellenic Conference (n.d.) 2002 report on research results: NPC/NIC initiative. Retrieved August 20, 2007 from

http://www.nicindy.org/about_us/public_relations/results.php

Pascarella, E.T., Flowers, L. & Whitt, E.J. (2001). Cognitive effects of greek affiliation in college: Additional evidence. *NASPA Journal*, 38(3). Retrieved August 20, 2007 from <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol38/iss3/art2>

Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P. (2005). *How college affects students (Vol. 2): A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rikleen, L.S. (2007, May 11). Virginia Tech: The challenge of assuring safety. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53(36). Retrieved August 20, 2007 from <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i36/36b01402.htm>

Schreck, T.C. (Ed.) (1976). *Fraternity for the year 2000*. American College Fraternity Bicentennial Commission.

Stophazing.org (n.d.). Hazing and student development: selected papers. Retrieved August 22, 2007 from <http://www.stophazing.org/studentpapers.htm>

Strange, C.C. & Banning, J.H. (2001). *Educating by design*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sullivan, T. (2007, Summer). Bringing your "A" game: Your 8-step game plan for varsity professional development. *Perspectives*, 4-6.

Tutt, B.R. & McCarthy, S. (2006, March/April). Assessing learning outside the classroom. *Assessment Update*, 18(2).

– Dan Bureau is a doctoral student in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University. He served AFA as the 2004 President, is currently a board member of the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, and has been actively involved in the fraternal movement for over 10 years.