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## THE IMPACT OF VISION STANDARDS ON FRATERNAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

**Sarah E. Schooper**

*At the University of Maryland, four governing councils oversee 57 chapters within the fraternal community. For over 10 years, each chapter has been obligated to fulfill Vision Standards, set by the University, to be considered in “good standing” status. The influence of the Vision Standards on a chapter beyond “good standing” status is unknown. This preliminary study uses discriminant function analysis to document the impact of the Vision Standards on chapters’ learning environments. Exploring the impact of the Vision Standards on chapters’ learning environments is consistent with the value of scholarship held by fraternal organizations and would allow chapter environments to be intentionally structured for academic success. Finally, understanding the impact of the Vision Standards on chapters’ learning environments would allow the fraternal community to articulate how it contributes to a positive learning environment.*

Fraternal organizations were originally formed upon a set of values or principles. Since the turn of the century, both inter/national organizations and colleges and universities have increasingly emphasized both adherence to and congruence with founding principles and values (Drath, 2003; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007; Lee & King, 2001). Emphasizing congruence between the chapter, its international organization, and the collegiate institution “connects hearts, minds, and the collective work of the organization” (Brandes & Stuber, 2004, ¶ 3) and supports flexibility, cohesion, and trust (Vogelsang, 1998), all of which benefit fraternal organizations. When chapters are congruent with their espoused values, dangerous practices such as hazing and other negative behavioral issues are seen by members as out of place and unacceptable (Bureau, 2007a, 2007b; The Franklin Square Group, 2003).

Today, international organizations and chapters are marketing their positive values congruence, as evidenced by Web pages and commitment statements ([www.jointke.org](http://www.jointke.org); [www.pibetaphi.org](http://www.pibetaphi.org); The Franklin Square Group, 2003; [www.greekmovement.com](http://www.greekmovement.com)). There is also an increase in the desire to close chapters that do not follow their founding values (Jordan, 2008). Further, campus administrators have worked with chapters and their volunteers to establish institutional congruence programs, often resulting in the creation of recognition policies, required programming, and award systems intended to help chapters align with not only their values, but also the mission and policies of the institution. Taken together, this has resulted in a congruence movement meshing chapter, organizational, and institutional values in an effort to align local organizations with their founding values.

Such emphasis on values congruence as a means of organizational change is occurring at the same time that higher education is being asked to demonstrate what students are learning as a result of their college experience (ACPA–College Student Educators International [ACPA], 2007; Fischer & Hebel, 2007; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004; U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2006; Woodard & Komives, 2003). This study examines

the impact of an institutional fraternal values initiative on the learning environment for fraternity and sorority members.

### **Context for the Study**

In 1994, the University of Maryland created a document designed to help its fraternities and sororities align themselves more consistently with the values upon which they were founded (Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life [OFSL], 2004). This document became known as the “Vision Statement” and was composed of 19 standards. Each of the 19 standards was identified for purposes of chapter enhancement, with the idea that through the realization of the 19 standards, undergraduate members within chapters would have a greater chance of behaving in congruence with their espoused values and missions. The Vision Statement was also created in an effort to increase accountability among undergraduate fraternity and sorority members after two decades of behavior inconsistent with espoused chapter values and the University’s educational mission. Finally, the standards within the Vision Statement were created to improve the relationship between undergraduate chapter members and the University. Specifically, the Vision Statement was designed so that through the fulfillment of the standards the chapters’ collective behaviors would “complement the institution’s academic mission; develop leadership in members; serve the community; foster character development; promote personal development; build community; and encourage lifelong friendships” (OFSL, 2004, p. 1).

The Vision Statement required fraternal organizations at the University of Maryland to participate in a performance assessment. Each spring, all chapter executive committees are required to submit an annual report documenting their efforts to complete the 19 Vision Standards. The professional staff within the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life receives the annual report and additional program documentation from each chapter. The professional staff then recommends chapters to be placed in one of four categories. This categorization provides an incentive for chapters to complete all standards and document their efforts thoroughly.

Fulfillment of all 19 Vision Standards places a fraternal chapter into category one. Placement into category one means that the chapter is in “good standing” with the University and receives all the benefits of a recognized student organization at Maryland, including the opportunities to reserve room space for free and participate in campus-wide activities such as Maryland Day. Chapters ranking within category one can also participate in fraternal community activities such as Greek Week and Homecoming.

A chapter receives a category two standing when there is evidence of violating the social host event policies and other minor infractions or failure to meet the all-men’s and all-women’s grade point average (GPA). Chapters receiving category two standing are viewed as having demonstrated “good faith effort”. While these chapters receive the same University benefits as those chapters assigned the category one ranking, category two chapter leaders are required to schedule a meeting with an advisor from the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, during which a plan will be created so that all 19 Vision Standards are achieved during the next year.

Placement into category three occurs when a sufficient number of standards have not been reached and major infractions have occurred, or if the chapter has not met at least the all-men’s and all-women’s GPA and has failed to increase the chapter GPA by 0.10. Chapters receiving a

category three ranking are placed on probation for one semester, which may result in the loss of events such as Greek Week or Homecoming.

If a chapter demonstrates little to no effort to complete a minimal number of Vision Standards, it receives a category four ranking from the University. Chapters receiving a category four ranking are granted one year to comply with all of the standards before University recognition is revoked. This ultimate consequence is intended to create motivation for all 57 chapters at the University of Maryland to fulfill all of the Vision Standards.

Each of the 57 chapters at the University of Maryland is governed by one of four governing councils. The Interfraternity Council (IFC) governs 23 North-American Interfraternity Council fraternities, the Panhellenic Association (PHA) governs 14 National Panhellenic Conference women's fraternities and sororities, the Pan-Hellenic Council (PHC) governs 7 historically African American fraternities and sororities and one Latina sorority, and the United Greek Council (UGC) governs 12 multicultural fraternities and sororities. While it is not the responsibility of these Councils to administer the Vision Statement, their leaders do coordinate programs that meet Vision Standards and educate chapter members about the standards with help from staff members within Maryland's Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life.

Despite the "fundamental purpose" of the Vision Statement to "compel chapters to return to the founding values central to the development of fraternity and sorority men and women" (OFSL, 2004, p. 1), no research has been conducted on the impact of the Vision Standards on Maryland's fraternal organizations. At the same time staff in the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life are challenging fraternal organizations to fulfill the Vision Standards at the category one level, they are being challenged to demonstrate the outcomes of their programs and services. Specifically, within the student affairs division a learning outcomes committee is working to operationalize outcomes-based practice among all departments (ACPA, 2007; ACPA & NASPA, 2004; Keeling, 2006; Love & Estanek, 2004). The learning outcomes movement is a response to various stakeholders within higher education asking what students are learning while in college that successfully prepares them for life after college (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007; USDE, 2006). This questioning of what students are learning, as well as efforts designed to help chapters align the actions of undergraduate members with their fraternal values, leave the fraternal community to struggle with documenting the benefits of membership. This challenge to specify the value-added learning outcomes associated with fraternity and sorority membership is especially difficult for those professionals within fraternity and sorority life offices, because it means they must provide evidence for the learning occurring through a myriad of experiences, while at the same time accounting for complementary movement toward values congruence.

### **Vision Standards and Chapter GPA**

One way for University of Maryland fraternity and sorority life professionals to demonstrate learning within the fraternal community is to examine the impact of their policies on fraternal chapters. This can be done by exploring the impact of the Vision Standards on chapters' grade point average (GPA) by council. Such an examination provides insight into how the expectations to comply with the Vision Standards impact a chapter's movement toward values congruence, as

well as how the Vision Standards impact the academic learning environment. GPA has been established as an indicator of student learning (Astin, 1993), so it is therefore reasonable to use GPA as one variable for indicating the impact of Vision Standards on the learning environment. Furthermore, examining the chapter GPAs by council is logical considering that the organizations within each council have agreed to the policies and mission of that council. Examining the impact of the Vision Standards on chapter GPA is practical, because all of the chapters in existence at the University of Maryland demonstrate their value of scholarship by requiring a minimum GPA for membership, thus chapter GPA should be of interest. Lastly, many university-based fraternity and sorority life offices explicitly state the enhancement of academics as a purpose of membership (DeBard, Lake, & Binder, 2006).

Through the exploration of the Vision Standards, insight into how the University of Maryland's Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life enhances academics can be transferred to other institutions.

If the Vision Standards are to be examined for their impact on chapter GPA, then research regarding the impact of the fraternal experience on GPA is worth exploring. Unfortunately, there is minimal research regarding the impact of membership in fraternal organizations on GPA or other academic outcomes. Gardner (1991) studied academic outcomes of new members and was not able to find significantly higher academic outcomes for new members of fraternal organizations. Marji (1994) found no difference between affiliated and non-affiliated members in regard to their academic achievement.

A bit more helpful in understanding the impact of the fraternal experience on GPA was Jelke's (2001) research seeking to identify characteristics of high-performing fraternal systems on two campuses. One of the characteristics Jelke identified was academics, and he found several contributing factors. First, both the chapter and individuals within the chapter were seen to have responsibility for academics. Second, information regarding grades was posted and distributed to chapters, advisors, and the media. Third, institutions had high expectations for academic performance, the guidelines designed to reach those expectations were enforced, and there was recognition for high academic achievement. Finally, DeBard et al. (2006) found that academic outcomes were greater when fraternity and sorority organization membership was deferred until second semester.

While all of these findings are informative, missing from the conversation is an examination of the institutions' policies upon the academic achievement of fraternal organizations. Norman's (2003) study of the Five Star Chapter Evaluation Program at the University of Delaware included an exploration of the impact of institutional policies on chapter GPA. Norman found that chapter GPAs increased significantly after implementation of the Five Star Chapter Evaluation Program when compared with chapter GPAs prior to the implementation of the Program. The present study continued that same line of inquiry in regard to the influence of institutional requirements on chapter GPA by exploring the impact of the University of Maryland Vision Standards upon chapter GPA.

## Method

### *Data*

The data used in this study was originally collected by the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life during the 2006-2007 academic year for purposes of Vision categorization. Data was collected from all 57 fraternal chapters and one colony recognized by the IFC, PHA, PHC, and UGC. A colony is the designation of a fraternal chapter prior to becoming an officially recognized fraternal chapter by one of the governing councils. Consequently, the sample size was the entire fraternal population. Permission to do a secondary analysis of the data was obtained through the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board.

In this study, all of the independent variables were Vision Standards (Table 1) and were entered simultaneously, since it was unknown how they affected chapter GPA. GPA was established as a categorical variable using a common grading scale and served as the outcome categories (Table 2). Transforming GPA into a categorical variable also served as the method for coding each of the chapters.

### *Procedure*

Each council has unique polices which govern its chapters, and these policies impact the chapters' environments in concert with the Vision Standards. Thus, the fraternal chapters at the University of Maryland were studied based on council affiliation (IFC, PHA, PHC, UGC).

**Table 1**

*Independent Variables Vision Standards*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Code</b>
Faculty Advisor	FA
Chapter Advisor	CA
Physical House	PH
Membership Development Plan	MEMDPL
Chapter Management Plan	CHMANGPL
Annual Report	ANLRPT
Outreach Program	OTRCHPRG
Diversity Program	DIVPRG
Non-Greek Evaluation	NGEVAL
Alumni Program	ALUPRG
Alumni Newsletter	ALUNWSLR
Outline of Internal Judicial System	OTLNEJSY
Membership Activity List	MEMACTU
Community Service Learning	COMMSERL
Campus Service	CMPSSRVC
Third Party Vendors	BYOB
Number of Chapter Members	NM

**Table 2**  
*Dependent Variable GPA Categories*

GPA	Code
3.75-4.0	1
3.5-3.75	2
3.25-3.5	3
3.00-3.25	4
2.75-3.00	5
2.5-2.75	6
2.25-2.5	7
2.0-2.25	8

### ***Analysis***

Discriminant function analysis was used to determine the fit of the Vision Standards in predicting the chapter GPA by council. Discriminant function analysis explains how specific independent variables relate to the outcome categories to which cases belong (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Therefore, discriminant function analysis helped explain how specific Vision Standards related to GPA categories by chapters within each council. The nonparametric Wilks' Lambda was used since the variable of interest, GPA by chapter, meant that sample sizes, although composed of the entire population, did not meet requirements for the analysis of variance.

### ***Results***

For IFC, three discriminant functions were created. None of the discriminant functions were significant (Wilks'  $\lambda$ :  $D_1= 0.546$ ;  $D_2= 0.871$ ;  $D_3= 0.869$ ) indicating that the relation between the GPA categories the IFC chapters fell within and the Vision Standards was not consistent. Results for UGC chapters, where two discriminant functions were created, were also not significant (Wilks'  $\lambda$ :  $D_1= 0.419$ ;  $D_2= 0.743$ ), indicating an unreliable relation between the GPA categories the UGC chapters fell within and the Vision Standards.

For two of the councils, PHA and PHC, a relation between chapter GPA and the Vision Standards was identified. For PHA two discriminant functions were created. The first discriminant function was significant (Wilks'  $\lambda$   $D_1= 0.126$ ), and the second was not significant (Wilks'  $\lambda$   $D_2= 0.880$ ). The significance of the first discriminant function indicated a reliable relation existed for each chapter between its GPA group and the Vision Standards. The discriminant analysis used 12 of the Vision Standards as predictors to classify the chapters into their GPA categories. The loading matrix of correlations between the Vision Standards and the discriminant functions is depicted in Table 3. The discriminant analysis for PHA showed that Third Party Vendor (BYOB), Community Service Learning (COMMSERL), Alumni Newsletter (ALUNWSLR), Membership Development Plan (MEMDPL), Diversity Program (DIVPRG), and the Number of New Members (NM) were the significant predictors and correctly classified 86.4% of the chapters. The classification results presented in Table 4 indicate that all but two of the 12 chapters were classified correctly.

**Table 3**  
*PHA Structure Matrix of Correlations Between Predictor Variables and the Discriminant Function*

<b>Task</b>	<b>Function 1</b>	<b>Function 2</b>
BYOB	.426	.103
COMMSERL	.345	.213
ALUNWSLR	.345	.213
MEMDPL	.177	-.073
DIVPRG	.177	-.073
NM	.152	.080
OTLNEJSY	-.077	.605
CMPSSRVC	.025	.482
ANLRPT	.051	.335
MEMACTLI	-.038	.295
NGEVAL	.149	.294
OTRCHPRG	.088	.174

**Table 4**  
*PHA Classification Results of Discriminant Function Analysis*

<b>GPA Group</b>	<b>Predicted Group Membership</b>			<b>Total</b>
	<b>2.00</b>	<b>3.00</b>	<b>4.00</b>	
2.00	2	1	0	3
3.00	1	7	0	8
4.00	0	0	3	3

For PHC, there were also two discriminant functions created. The first discriminant function was significant (Wilks'  $\lambda$   $D_1 = 0.096$ ), while the second explained .5% of the between-group variability and was not significant (Wilks'  $\lambda$   $D_2 = 0.810$ ). The significance of the first discriminant function indicated that a reliable relation existed between the GPA categories into which the chapter fell and the Vision Standards. The discriminant analysis used 12 of the Vision Standards as predictors to classify the chapters. The loading matrix of correlations between the Vision Standards and the discriminant functions is depicted in Table 5. The discriminant analysis for PHC showed that Campus Service (CMPSSRVC), Non-Greek Evaluation (NGEVAL), Alumni Program (ALUPRG), and Number of Members (NM) were the significant predictors and correctly classified 100% of the chapters. The classification results presented in Table 6 indicate that all eight chapters were classified correctly.

**Table 5**

*PHC Structure Matrix of Correlations Between Predictor Variables and the Discriminant Function*

<b>Task</b>	<b>Function 1</b>	<b>Function 2</b>
CMPSSRVC	-.643	-.449
NGEVAL	.576	-.540
ALUPRG	.539	-.115
NM	.073	-.061
OTLNEJSY	.021	.313
OTRCHPRG	-.003	.286
FA	-.036	-.073
ANLRPT	.036	.073
CA	-.036	-.073
MEMDPL	-.036	-.073
CHMANGPL	-.036	-.073
COMMSERL	-.036	-.073

**Table 6**

*PHC Classification Results of Discriminant Function Analysis*

<b>GPA Group</b>	<b>Predicted Group Membership</b>			<b>Total</b>
	<b>4.00</b>	<b>5.00</b>	<b>6.00</b>	
4.00	4	0	0	4
5.00	0	3	0	3
6.00	0	0	1	1

### Discussion

The results of this study were inconclusive regarding the impact of the Vision Standards on chapter GPA for IFC and UGC. The inconclusive findings may be due to factors such as the limited range of GPA classification categories for the chapters within those councils or sensitivity to sample size of discriminant function analysis. Further analysis should be conducted to determine if a relation does exist between the Vision Standards and the IFC and UGC. For the PHA and PHC a relation was found between specific Vision Standards and chapter GPA. Identifying specific Vision Standards as GPA predictor variables for PHA and PHC chapters was a useful finding for each respective council, the chapters composing each of the councils, as well as the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life.

The Vision Standards identified as predictor variables were especially useful for the PHC and its chapters, because the discriminant function analysis correctly classified 100% of the chapters. The 100% classification means that the significant predictors can be used to determine a PHC chapter's GPA category correctly. It also means that the significant predictors can be used for planning interventions by having a chapter's members focus specifically on completing criteria to attain specific Vision Standards if they are attempting to increase the chapter's GPA. For example, the Vision standard of Campus Service was identified as a significant predictor variable for PHC. Programming for PHC chapters to fulfill the Vision Standard of Campus Service might include volunteering during Family Weekend, Maryland Day, Maryland's Leadership

Conference, or at the recycling center. A recommendation would be to compare equivalent requirements to the Vision Standards required by other institutions to see if the significant predictor variables for PHC chapters were universal. The results of the PHA analysis can be used similarly, although 100% classification should not be expected.

Many fraternity and sorority life professionals express the enhancement of scholarship as a purpose for their campus office (DeBard et al., 2006). This study demonstrated that the policies promulgated by fraternity and sorority life professionals could indeed have an impact on a chapter's learning environment. Furthermore, the Maryland Vision Standards are often similar to programming inter/national organizations require of their chapters. For example, one of Maryland's Vision Standards is conducting a diversity program, while Pi Beta Phi fraternity has a parallel programming requirement for its chapters titled Cultural Horizons ([www.pibetaphi.org](http://www.pibetaphi.org)). Thus, insight about the Vision Standards that were found to be significant predictor variables impacting chapter GPA may transfer into insight about the impact of similar requirements originating from inter/national organizations on chapter GPA. A next step would be to assess how multiple policies established by fraternity and sorority life officials on campuses and within fraternity/sorority inter/national organizations impact chapter GPA, because often more than one policy exists at a time.

Finally, given that this study indicates that fraternity and sorority life policies impact chapter members' learning, it is recommended that fraternity and sorority life officials continually assess the impact of their policies with a focus on student learning. Indeed, for the University of Maryland this study served as a preliminary study into the impact of institutional policies on chapter learning. Assessment of institutional policies on chapter learning will allow for intentional adjustment to be made to the policies, so that the desired learning outcomes can be reached. It also allows fraternity and sorority life officials to participate in the greater learning outcomes movement occurring within student affairs, while simultaneously providing feedback about efforts designed to help move chapters and their members toward values congruence.

### **Limitations**

Discriminant function analysis is sensitive to the ratio of sample size to the number of predictor variables. It is suggested that for each predictor variable there are five observations (Hair et al., 2006). In this study, there were 17 predictor variables. Based on the recommended ratio, 85 observations would be needed for each council. In this study, samples were not taken, but rather the entire population was used for data analysis. Unfortunately, the council with the greatest number of chapters was IFC with 23 chapters, which is well short of the 85 recommended. Therefore, those using the results of this study should be mindful of potential instability in the analysis. In order to meet the underlying statistical assumptions of the discriminant function, an analysis could be conducted after cumulating GPA data by chapter within governing council across several years. Across time enough data would be available to use the discriminant function without violating its statistical assumptions.

Another limitation of the present study is in the use of chapter GPA as the only learning outcome criterion. The concept of values congruence has at least as much if not more to do with character, integrity, and leadership as it has to do with academic performance. Other measures of college

learning outcomes, such as data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the University Learning Outcomes Assessment (UniLOA), may offer more meaningful criterion measures than cognitive academic performance (NSSE, 2008; UniLOA, 2008).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, while significant Vision Standards predictor variables were not identified for each council, it was still useful to conduct this study. Both the PHA and the PHC now have Vision Standards predictor variables that can help guide their strategic decision-making. Furthermore, these prediction models can be stabilized over time, and results can be used as a starting place for future research about the impact of fraternity and sorority life on the learning environment. Institutional fraternity/sorority life policies focusing on values congruence can impact individual chapter GPAs and should be explored for their effectiveness. Undergraduate members of individual chapters can be encouraged to move toward a place where they are more congruent with their organization's espoused values using Vision Standards as guidelines, while campus-based fraternity and sorority life officials will be simultaneously participating in their institution's outcomes-based learning goals assessment.

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