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Robert DeBard
Bowling Green State University

Casey Sacks
Colorado Community College System

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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 perceptual 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

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

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 2
Mean ACT and High School GPA

	Non-Affiliated Students	Joined Fall 2004	Joined Spring 2005	ANCOVA P-value
ACT Score	25.42 <i>n</i> = 39,983	25.87 <i>n</i> = 4,242	26.65 <i>n</i> = 1,873	<.001
HS GPA	3.54 <i>n</i> = 31,835	3.51 <i>n</i> = 3,065	3.58 <i>n</i> = 1,467	0.01

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); $F(2, 35,231) = 94.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .005$.

Table 3

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

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

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

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

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

	Non-Affiliated Students	Joined Fall 2004	Joined Spring 2005	ANCOVA P-value	Effect Size
Fall GPA	2.87 <i>n</i> = 18,937	2.91 <i>n</i> = 1,761	3.15 <i>n</i> = 1,027	<.001	0.003
Spring GPA	2.80 <i>n</i> = 18,580	2.89 <i>n</i> = 1,753	2.99 <i>n</i> = 1,026	<.001	0.001
1st Year Cum GPA	2.86 <i>n</i> = 18,784	2.92 <i>n</i> = 1,764	3.09 <i>n</i> = 1,026	<.001	0.002
Fall Hours Earned	15.22 <i>n</i> = 18,936	13.52 <i>n</i> = 1,763	17.16 <i>n</i> = 1,026	<.001	0.007
Spring Hours Earned	13.34 <i>n</i> = 18,660	13.51 <i>n</i> = 1,755	14.22 <i>n</i> = 1,026	<.001	0.001
1st Year Hours	28.07 <i>n</i> = 19,103	26.84 <i>n</i> = 1,770	31.91 <i>n</i> = 1,032	<.001	0.005
Retention to Fall 2005	0.85 <i>n</i> = 19,233	0.92 <i>n</i> = 1,775	0.97 <i>n</i> = 1,033	<.001	0.005

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.

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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.