

2010

Why Undergraduates Aren't "Going Greek": Attraction, Affiliation, and Retention in Fraternities and Sororities

Kristin S. Fouts
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/oracle>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fouts, Kristin S. (2010) "Why Undergraduates Aren't "Going Greek": Attraction, Affiliation, and Retention in Fraternities and Sororities," *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25774/67mj-sz44>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/oracle/vol5/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

WHY UNDERGRADUATES AREN'T "GOING GREEK": ATTRACTION, AFFILIATION, AND RETENTION IN FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES

Kristin S. Fouts

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

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

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

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

Conceptual Framework

Innovation-Decision Model

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

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

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

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

Member Acquisition and Retention Model

Like the Innovation-Decision Model, the Member Acquisition and Retention Model (Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003) describes the process by which individuals are converted from non-members

to members in formal groups like fraternities and sororities or academic clubs. According to the model, individuals pass through four stages over an unspecified amount of time, encountering a group on different occasions in different ways.

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

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

Method

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors influencing a student's decision to *not* pursue membership in a fraternity or sorority. The following research questions were posed:

1. What are the specific reasons why students do not find membership appealing or beneficial?
2. At what point do the majority of students who participate in recruitment or intake processes choose to withdraw or reject the process?
3. How can fraternity/sorority recruitment, intake, and publicity/public relations be improved and/or supported?

Sites

The following studies were conducted at separate Midwestern institutions, using a quantitative survey methodology. IRB approval was granted at both institutions. Institution A was an urban, public university with approximately 14,000 students, with 17 fraternity/sorority chapters

ranging in size from 5-70. According to the public data set for the 2006 academic year, approximately 80% of students were White, non-Hispanic; 3% were African American; and 6% were Asian or Pacific Islander. Institution B was an urban, public university with approximately 25,000 students, with 27 fraternity/sorority chapters ranging in size from 5-75. According to the public data set for the 2009 academic year, approximately 91% of students were White, non-Hispanic; 3% were African American; and 2% were Latino. Both institutions recognized chapters affiliated with the National Panhellenic Conference, North-American Interfraternity Conference, National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc., and National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, Inc.

Participants

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

Instrument

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

Procedures

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

Results

Reasons Membership Was Not Appealing or Beneficial

Awareness or knowledge is the first phase or stage in both Rogers' (1995) and Zuckerman and Kretovics' (2003) models. Respondents were asked to identify the extent of knowledge they had about fraternities and/or sororities prior to arriving at either university. A significant number of

respondents at both institutions (53% at Institution A, 48% at Institution B) indicated having "some knowledge." When asked whether they had ever participated in a membership recruitment or intake activity or process, over 85% of students at each institution ($n = 496$ at Institution A, $n = 796$ at Institution B) responded "No."

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

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

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

When Interest or Participation Discontinued

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

Duration of Experience. With regard to those students who did participate in recruitment ($n = 200$, 15%), the length or duration of their experiences may also be telling as to the processes and the interactions prospective members have with current members during that time. Questions were asked about the point at which students withdrew or otherwise left the recruitment process;

the majority responses at the two institutions were slightly different. At Institution A, 47% of participants withdrew from the recruitment process prior to its end. Students stated that they withdrew from recruitment for the following reasons: time commitment required was not feasible (38%), the organization's values did not match their own interests (30%), or they did not feel comfortable with the members of the chapter (18%). Students at both institutions also cited concerns about the potential for forced alcohol use and the possibility of hazing and sexual assault as deterrents to membership.

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

Reasons Respondents Might Have Participated

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

Discussion

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

Focusing on the "Peer Factor"

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

can be reduced by building interest and understanding about the organization's values and reputation.

Emphasizing Community, Leadership Development, and Social Activity

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

Cleaning up Perceptions by Cleaning up Members

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

Highlighting the Benefits of Membership

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

Partnering to Address Misperceptions

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

Asking the Chapter the Right Questions

Campus professionals can support chapter members and volunteers by asking some critical questions, spurring conversation about their non-affiliated population, and *how* and *why* chapters

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

Understanding Men and Women

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

Limitations and Future Research

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

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

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that current members, advisors, campus-based professionals, and inter/national organization staff have more work to do, on a consistent basis, to address the questions and uncertainties of non-affiliated students. Students are no longer attracted to involvement opportunities by passive advertising or word of mouth alone, and chapters can no longer expect droves of students to attend informational meetings or recruitment events, eager to

become members. Some persuasion is needed, for both students who are mildly or completely interested, and those that have rarely or never considered membership.

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

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

References

- Boschini, V., & Thompson, C. (1998). The future of the Greek experience: Greeks and diversity. *New Directions for Student Services*, 81, 19-27.
- Heida, D. (1986). Greek systems on predominantly commuter campuses. *NASPA Journal*, 24(1), 48-50.
- Kimbrough, W. M. (1995) Self-assessment, participation, and value of leadership skills, activities, and experiences for Black students relative to their membership in historically Black fraternities and sororities. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 64(1), 63-74.
- Kuh, G. D., & Lyons, J.W. (1990). Fraternities and sororities: Lessons from the College Experiences Study. *NASPA Journal*, 28(1), 20-29.
- McCannon, M., & Bennett, P. (1996). Choosing to participate or not: A study of college students' involvement in student organizations. *College Student Journal*, 30(3), 312-315.
- Montgomery, R. L., & Haemmerlie, F. M. (1993). Undergraduate adjustment to college, drinking behavior, and fraternity membership. *Psychological Reports*, 73, 801-802.
- Pascarella, E., Edison, M., Whitt, E. J, Nora, A., Hagedorn, L. S., & Terenzini, P. (1996). Cognitive effects of Greek affiliation during the first year of college. *NASPA Journal*, 33(4), 242-259.
- Pratt, P.A., & Skaggs, C.T. (1989). First generation college students: Are they at greater risk for attrition than their peers? *Research in Rural Education*, 6(2), 31-34.
- Reisberg, L. (2000). Fraternities in decline. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 46(18), A59-A62.

- Rogers, E. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations*. New York: The Free Press.
- Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(1), 1-22.
- Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflection on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), 438-455.
- Zuckerman, R. A., & Kretovics, M. A. (2003). Member Acquisition and Retention Model. *NASPA Journal*, 41(1), 149-166.

Kristin Fouts serves as the Assistant Director for Registered Student Organization (RSO) Development and Fraternity/Sorority Life in the Office of Student Activities and Leadership Programs at Western Michigan University.