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THE NECESSITY FOR RESEARCH ON FRATERNITY/SORORITY CULTURE

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The authors in this issue of Oracle ask us to consider the organizational and cultural contexts of fraternity/sorority involvement. Park challenges us to examine historical practices and norms within the larger fraternity/sorority community and how those shape the demography of student organizations. Reuter, Baker, Hernandez, and Bureau assess programming at the international organization level to demonstrate the potential benefits of aligning new member education programs with broader developmental outcomes. Long focuses on the involvement of alumni volunteers and campus-based professionals in helping create chapter environments conducive to study, deemphasizing alcohol use, and valuing academic achievement. Mize and Valliant call attention to chapter level changes that could improve healthy eating behaviors.

Highlighting the complexity of affecting change within these organizations (Biddix, 2004, Summer), each of the researchers offer recommendations for various levels of stakeholders. Each suggestion focuses on a distinct aspect of cultural influence mediated by organizational structure and behavior. Each offers applicable, direct, and implementable advice. Yet, this collection of recommendations underscores the need for research on how culture influences the fraternal environment – a consideration that can ultimately benefit our work to understand opportunities and challenges associated with involvement.

The study of fraternity/sorority culture is not a new theme in the literature, though it seems infrequently visited. Book-length considerations include Nuwer's (2001) treatment of hazing as a cultural problem in fraternal organizations, Robbin's (2005) portrayal of the new member socialization process in a sorority, DeSantis' (2007) look at privilege perpetuated by fraternal organizations, and more recently, Fink's (2010) consideration of the gender roles accentuated by single-sex fraternal organizations. Examples from peer-reviewed journals include Rhoads' (1995) examination of power and oppression in a fraternity chapter, Bev's (1998) analysis sorority women's decorating choices as an indicator of socialization and personal identity development, and Workman's (2009) look at drinking stories as a cultural artifact.

Certainly, there are other examples, though these represent a variety of perspectives on various cultural elements affecting the fraternity/sorority membership environment. Each of the previous studies enlightens a singular aspect of fraternity/sorority culture, suggesting the need for a more holistic, conceptual framework for standardizing how we approach research as well as evidence-based recommendations. Tierney (1988) suggested that a better understanding of organizational culture could allow us to:

- Consider real or potential conflicts not in isolation but on the broad canvas or organizational life;
- Recognize structural or operational contradictions that suggest tensions in the organization;
- Implement and evaluate everyday decisions with a keen awareness of their role in and influence upon organizational culture;

- Understand the symbolic dimensions of ostensibly instrumental decisions and actions; and
- Consider why different groups in the organization hold varying perceptions about institutional performance (p. 6)

The value of understanding culture between, within, and among fraternal organizations suggests meaningful value for researchers. As we strive to understand how these organizations "work," it seems increasingly critical that we gain a better understanding of the multifaceted influences that can shape organizational culture. This would benefit researchers in structuring inquiry and interpreting results, as well as practitioners hoping to more directly relate results to their individual context. Tierney (1988) noted, "the most persuasive case for studying organizational culture is quite simply that we no longer need to tolerate the consequences of our ignorance" (p. 6).

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