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SENSE OF BELONGING OF NEW MEMBERS WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SINGLE-INSTITUTION QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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While there is research to suggest that first-generation college students benefit from and have a greater sense of belonging as a result of involvement in student organizations, there is limited research on how first-generation college students develop a sense of belonging specifically through their involvement as new members of a fraternity or sorority. This study, constructed within a single-institution qualitative case study framework, highlighted the unique role that organizational involvement, mentorship, emotional support, and first-generation status and identity can play in the development of sense of belonging for fraternity and sorority new members that are first-generation college students.

First-year college students, both first-generation and continuing-generation, who are involved in on-campus organizations have higher levels of social and academic integration into their campus communities, resulting in greater institutional connections and commitments from students (Elkins et al., 2011; Hausmann et al., 2007; Tovar & Simon, 2010). Upon their arrival to campus, first-generation college students often feel that they belong on campus less than their continuing-generation peers, which in turn is related to dissatisfaction with their collegiate experiences and low persistence and graduation rates (Braskamp et al., 2015; Horowitz, 2017; Katrechik & Arguete, 2017; Stebleton et al., 2017). Encouraging first-generation college students to become involved with on-campus organizations, such as fraternities and sororities, can increase these students' sense of belonging and feelings of connectedness, thereby influencing both their commitment to the institution and the likelihood that they will be retained until graduation at their college or university.

Fraternity and sorority membership has specifically been linked to high levels of student engagement and success amongst first-generation college students, which can

translate to high levels of student retention and persistence (Ahren et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Students who join a fraternity or sorority and successfully integrate the organization's culture during their first year of college tend to have a more positive perception and be more engaged in their campus's academic environments—specifically cultivated through organization-based meaningful activities—and have higher grade point averages than their unaffiliated peers (Armstrong & Grieve, 2015; Asel et al., 2015; Long, 2012; Pike, 2000). While there may be social and academic advantages to joining a fraternity or sorority, first-generation college students may have limited to no knowledge of or exposure to the culture and expectations of fraternity and sorority membership, making the decision to join a fraternity or sorority uniquely difficult (Fouts, 2010).

Utilizing this information of first-generation college students and fraternity and sorority involvement as foundational knowledge, this single-institution qualitative case study explored the lived experiences of first-generation college students who were new members of fraternities and sororities at a Midwestern college. In doing so, valuable insight was gained in understanding

the ways in which organization involvement, mentorship, and emotional support serve in first-generation college students at a given institution developing a sense of belonging through their involvement with and identification as new members of their fraternity or sorority.

The purpose of this single-institution qualitative case study was to better understand the role that student involvement as new members in fraternities or sororities can service in the formation of a sense of belonging in first-generation college students within their organizations at a small, private university. To explore this purpose, this study was guided by one primary research question: How do first-generation college students develop a sense of belonging as new members in a fraternity or sorority at a small, private university?

Theoretical Framework

Two theories provided the conceptual framework for this study: Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and social identity theory. When utilized together, these theories highlight the important role that organization involvement can play in the socialization process as students navigate the various paths of their collegiate environments and begin to formulate their identities as individuals, as students, and as members of their respective student organizations (Tierney, 1997). The time, effort, and energy that college students invest in their on-campus involvement directly relate to their personal, social, and scholastic development and in turn relate to identity formation, connecting students' on-campus involvement with their social identity development, and ultimately to their sense of belonging (Astin, 1984; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Theory of Student Involvement

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement provides a lens through which new membership in a fraternity or sorority, and the subsequent benefits of that membership, can best be understood and appreciated. Student involvement on a college or

university campus provides connections, shared values, and objectives on which students, faculty, staff, and administrators at an institution can utilize to build positive educational and social relationships (Richmond, 1986). High student involvement is related to impactful student benefits, including greater educational aspirations, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, more developed leadership and interpersonal skills, and overall growth in learning both inside and outside the classroom (Astin, 1984; Foreman & Retallick, 2013). Astin emphasizes the role that fraternity and sorority membership can have on student retention and persistence, creating a clear connection between students' curricular and co-curricular involvement. Students often perceive both their curricular and co-curricular involvement, which directly relates to their feelings of belonging amongst peers, faculty, staff, and administrators, to be one and the same (Jorgenson et al., 2018).

While Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement explains the importance of involvement in organizations in general—including fraternities and sororities—for students in higher education, coupling social identity theory with this theory of involvement supplies a greater and more in-depth appreciation for how student identities and sense of belonging are affected and shaped by their group memberships.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory provides a social-psychological perspective to understand organization socialization and integration practices (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). Socialization occurs when recognized members of an organization act as role models and guides for new members, conveying expectations, responsibilities, benefits, and drawbacks of membership (Gruman et al., 2006). As individuals integrate into a particular group, their values and day-to-day practices begin to emulate and reflect those same group attributes as both the sense of self and sense of belonging are shaped by their social identification

with the group (Guan & So, 2018).

When an organization's socialization process of new members is clear, structured, and formalized, new members are more likely to engage in positive behaviors with the organization, whereas when their socialization process is less developed and loosely structured, new organization members are less likely to interact and build relationships with or seek guidance from organization members (Gruman et al. 2006). The development of a social identity—the understanding that an individual belongs and possesses membership to a specific group—can provide a deeper understanding of self and the multiple identities associated with group membership. The development of a social identity can increase an individual's perception of self-worth as individuals associate significant emotional value and meaning in sharing a personal identity with a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Nason et al., 2018; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social identity theory provides insight into how feelings of connectedness through shared identities can foster a sense of belonging (Jorgenson et al. 2018). When related to the fraternity and sorority experience, social identity theory provides a framework for understanding how through organizational involvement, new members of a fraternity or sorority are educated about the expectations of their respective organizations, how they begin to feel a connection to their fellow members, and how they ultimately develop, or do not develop, a sense of belonging to their respective organizations (Bureau et al., 2021).

Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted for this study and was divided into three constructs: first-generation college students, sense of belonging, and fraternity and sorority life. These three themes allow exploration into the universal challenges and issues that first-generation college students generally encounter when they navigate their respective institutional environments and seek to build connections with

campus community members.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students are those students whose parents or guardians have not earned a bachelor's degree (Alvarado et al., 2017; Banks-Santilli, 2015; Carpenter & Pena, 2017; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Stebleton et al., , 2014). Contrasting with their first-generation peers, continuing-generation students are those students with at least one parent or guardian who has earned a bachelor's degree (Forbus et al., 2011; Jenkins et al., 2013; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). The first-generation college student experience is complex and influenced by an individual's race, gender, sexual identity, ability, socioeconomic status, and a variety of other personal identities that interact with a student's new collegiate environment (Carpenter & Pena, 2017).

First-generation college students not only experience the typical stressors and anxieties associated with college entry and acclimation to a new environment, they can also experience unique social, cultural, and academic stressors that make their transition and success in higher education particularly difficult (Forbus et al., , 2011; Jenkins et al., 2013; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

As a whole, first-generation college students are considered to be a student population at high risk of discontinuing their education on college and university campuses (Ahren et al., 2014). First-generation college students have several differences compared to their continuing-generation peers that influence their individual persistence towards graduation. These include lower persistence rates in returning to campus for a second year of college, taking a longer amount of time to complete their degrees, and having overall higher rates of academic withdrawal and lower rates of degree completion and graduation (Alvarado et al., 2017; Petty, 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Social integration is important for retaining first-generation college students; if they feel they do not fit in so-

cially, their chances of leaving their college or university significantly increase (Sana-core & Palumbo, 2016). Social integration for first-generation college students tends to have stronger positive benefits from involvement than with continuing-generation students (Katrevech & Arguete, 2017; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Involvement and engagement in campus activities, events, and organizations, as well as classroom involvement, can have significant positive influence on first-generation college students' overall college success and persistence. Fraternity and sorority membership has specifically been linked to high levels of student engagement and success amongst first-generation college students, which can translate to high levels of student retention and persistence (Ahren et al., 2014).

Sense of Belonging

Entry into a college or university can mark a difficult period of insecurity and instability for first-year students, particularly first-generation, first-year students. During this time, many first-year students move away from home to pursue higher education and are often separated from their families and their known support networks (O'Keeffe, 2013). A student's pre-college characteristics, background traits, and upbringing can serve a significant role in their decision to enroll in a college or university, to become academically and socially involved at that college or university, and ultimately to commit to earning a degree from their college or university (Hausmann et al., 2007;; Strayhorn, 2012). Social class and socioeconomic background, in particular, can be related to a student's formation of a sense of belonging in college, which can predict their adjustment to their new environment, perception of quality of social and academic experiences at their institution, and academic achievement (Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

Sense of belonging on college and university campuses can be unevenly distributed amongst various student populations, but it plays a critical role in retaining all students

at a given institution (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Glass, 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The development of a sense of belonging is particularly important for underserved, marginalized, and underrepresented student populations since they encounter a higher number of roadblocks and greater levels of systemic discrimination than their more privileged peers (Tovar & Simon, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). If students feel as though they do not belong or that they have been rejected by members of the campus community, this can affect their ability to adjust to the academic and social challenges of college life (O'Keeffe, 2013). Both explicit and implied community and structural biases can generate and reinforce beliefs of who does and does not belong on campus (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Students who feel that their belonging needs are met by their institution are much more likely to feel at home and valued at their institution and thus form a stronger and committed bond to said institution (Schreiner, 2013; Tovar & Simon, 2010).

The greater that a student perceives and feels a sense of belonging to their campus community, the greater the likelihood of their success as a student at that campus (Stebleton et al., 2014). The extent to which students do not feel a sense of belonging—that they do not feel as though they are members of the campus community—the more likely their academic performance will suffer, and thus the more likely they are to withdraw and exit the institution (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Fraternity & Sorority Life

Fraternity and sorority membership is positively associated with the development of a student's sense of belonging, which can be observed through easier integration into the campus community, greater amount of student involvement in on-campus organizations, higher levels of academic achievement, increased institutional satisfaction, greater likelihood of retention and persistence, and significant growth in personal identity development (Tovar & Simon,

2010; Hartley & Eberly, 2016; McCreary & Schutts, 2015). Additional benefits of fraternity and sorority membership include the development of skills and abilities specifically related to communication and interpersonal relationships, critical thinking, and leadership (Armstrong & Grieve, 2015; DeBard & Sacks, 2010; Johnson et al., 2015).

More so than unaffiliated students, fraternity and sorority members tend to be highly engaged in their learning processes and environments—both social and academic—and generally connect more to campus resources and are thus more satisfied with their personal development while at their college or university (Bureau et al., 2011; Perkins et al., 2011; Pike, 2000). These social and academic benefits, which are essential components to the development of a student's sense of belonging, are closely associated with membership in a fraternity and sorority and tend to manifest in a less significant manner and to a lesser degree with unaffiliated students (Asel et al., 2015; Hartley & Eberly, 2016; Pike, 2000).

Fraternity and sorority membership can contribute directly to a student's sense of community and feelings of belonging on a college or university campus by fulfilling students' needs to form close interpersonal relationships with peers in a group to which they belong and are supported (Long, 2012; DeBard & Sacks, 2010; Woodward et al., 1996). The function of a fraternity or sorority is to serve as a unified family unit, an environment in which members experience a deep and unique level of trust and support, making the terms fraternity and sorority interchangeable with brotherhood and sisterhood (Cohen et al., 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015).

These close relationships, built through supportive and reciprocal peer interactions within their respective fraternities and sororities, help members feel supported by their greater campus community and feel personally connected to other members of their organization; these relationships help members to feel that they belong (Cohen et

al., 2017;; Long, 2012; Pike, 2003; Woodward et al., 1996). This sense of belonging, of feeling a part of a brotherhood or sisterhood, is a predictor of student retention and persistence to graduation at a college or university, solidifying fraternities and sororities as value-added components to college and university missions (Hartley & Eberly, 2016; McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Strayhorn & Colvin, 2006).

Research Assumption

Based on the literature reviewed, this study asserted one primary research assumption: active involvement in a fraternity or sorority is beneficial to new members who are first-generation college students in their development of a sense of belonging within their organizations at a small, private university (Ahren et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2017; Katrevich & Arguete, 2017; Long, 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Context

This was a singular institutional study in which the host university was "Midwestern College." It was founded in the early 1900s and is a small, private university, located north of downtown in a large, urban city. Total campus enrollment at Midwestern College consists of approximately 1,800 undergraduate students and 1,200 graduate students. Calculating for tuition, fees, textbooks, room, and board, the annual cost to attend Midwestern College as an undergraduate student is just above \$40,000 a year, with the undergraduate student population being predominantly white, female, protestant, and affluent.

The fraternity and sorority community at Midwestern College consists of eight organizations, involving just over 400 students, constituting 22% of the total undergraduate student population. Midwestern College hosts two North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) fraternities, four National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sororities, one National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternity, and one National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) sorority.

Methodology

This single-institution qualitative case study sought to explore and gain information that provided understanding and meaning to the process by which first-generation college students develop a sense of belonging as new members within their fraternities and sororities at Midwestern College.

Data Collection

Framing this study's research within a case study methodology allowed for the study of a specific phenomenon (in this instance the formation of a sense of belonging by first-generation college students who are new members of a fraternity or sorority) within a specific context (in this instance Midwestern College) within a specific time frame (in this instance the 2018-2019 academic year) so that the findings of this study might influence and be utilized in evidence-based decision making within professional practice (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Data Sources

A key component of case study design is the use of various sources of data collection to thoroughly explore and illustratively explain the phenomenon that is being studied (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Data were collected from four sources: an anonymous qualitative survey shared with new members of the Midwestern College fraternity and sorority community who indicated that they are first-generation college students on their admissions applications; a focus group conducted with fraternity and sorority chapter presidents, recruitment chairs, and new member educators; artifacts collected that related to the recruitment of new members in the Midwestern College fraternity or sorority community, and documented observations of behaviors and experiences of new members at Midwestern College.

Participants

The anonymous qualitative survey was sent to 65 potential participants, with 24 participants beginning the survey, but only nine participants met the eligibility requirements and completed the survey. Two of the survey participants were new members

of NIC fraternities and seven of the participants were new members of NPC sororities at Midwestern College. Thirty-five fraternity and sorority leaders were invited to participate in the focus group, with seven fraternity and sorority leaders participating in the focus group. Two of the focus group participants belonged to NIC fraternities and five participants belonged to NPC sororities at Midwestern College. Although invited to participate, no members of either an NPHC fraternity or sorority participated in this study. The questions utilized in both the survey and focus group can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively.

Positionality

The Dean of Students oversees all Fraternity and Sorority Life operations at Midwestern College and was the primary researcher and doctoral student responsible for designing and facilitating this study. Given Midwestern College's size and the researcher's professional role and responsibilities at the institution, pre-existing relationships between the researcher and study participants were present in the study. While the primary researcher has direct and regular contact and connection with the Midwestern College student body, neither of the other researchers involved in this study have contact with or connection to the Midwestern College student body. This study was purposefully designed to have negligible risk or harm to participants, regardless of their relationships with the researcher or the information that was provided to the researcher. Approval to conduct this study was granted by both the Vice President for Student Affairs at Midwestern College and the Institutional Review Board from the primary researcher's doctoral studies institution to provide an audit trail to support trustworthiness of the study.

To mitigate the concern that pre-existing relationships may have contributed to the study, the qualitative survey that was utilized preserved participant anonymity between the researcher and the participants. The pre-existing relationships present in the

focus group were acknowledged in both the participant informed consent form and were also directly verbally addressed by the researcher prior to any questions in the focus group being asked of the study participants.

Analysis

To explore sense of belonging in first-generation new members, the researcher used elemental coding methods (Saldana, 2021). The researcher coded each of the four data sources separately and then concurrently collapsed all the themes. The coding cycles involved open and focused coding. Open coding included descriptive, in-vivo, and process coding methods (Saldana, 2021). Focused coding involved categorical coding, where open codes are grouped into more abstract categories. Selective coding was used to collapse themes (Saldana, 2021). Themes from each of the data sources were organized from focused codes through code charting (Saldana, 2021). All notes and findings of this study were peer reviewed to support the trustworthiness of the study (Jones et al., 2014).

Findings

In analyzing the submissions given by new members in the anonymous qualitative survey, the responses of the focus group participants, and the field notes collected from institutional observations three themes emerged in understanding how first-generation college students develop a sense of belonging as new members in a fraternity or sorority at Midwestern College. Specifically, these themes were organization involvement, mentorship, and emotional support. The researcher noted that these three themes, and the experiences included therein, are similar to the “four pillars” of scholarship, leadership, community service, and brotherhood/sisterhood that are advertised on the Midwestern College Fraternity & Sorority Life website and in a variety of recruitment materials targeted towards new members. The negative experiences, which are perhaps counter to the aforementioned themes, were also explored

as important lived experiences of the study participants. The participants of the anonymous qualitative survey are referred to as “first-generation new members” and the participants of the focus group are referred to as “active members” throughout the findings of this study.

Organization Involvement

These first-generation FSL members discussed the extent to which they were invested in their chapter or organization. These included attending chapter meetings, philanthropy events, social gatherings, and holding a leadership position were all consistently important to the first-generation new members in this study as they sought to develop a sense of belonging within their respective organizations. In particular, the new members described a process of social integration which helped them better navigate their organizational and chapter culture.

One first-generation new member mentioned that it was the initial warm welcome from active members and the explicit invitation of their presence into the organization that helped them feel accepted as a new member in their organization. Invitations to join in social outings and to actively participate in the organization were also important factors increasing first-generation new members’ willingness and eagerness to become involved with their fraternity or sorority. These points of connection related directly to their social integration into the organization and the new members suggested that this influenced their ability to feel supported by their organization.

Casual social and bonding events, such as game nights or movie nights, were mentioned multiple times as important points of connection for first-generation new members. It was shared by both first-generation new members and active members that these types of events allow for individuals to interact more authentically than in more structured formal events, and they provide opportunities for all new and active members to get to know one another more

earnestly. These relationship-building opportunities are also forms of social integration which aided in the first-generation new members navigate their uncertainly and disorientation with their chapter and organization.

One first-generation new member shared that they felt connected with their organization because active members “treat me as a well-educated, respected woman. They are always there for me and I never feel left out of anything. Everyone is given the chance to participate in every activity or event.” An active member stated:

I believe that by making sure that [new members] have a voice from the moment they enter the chapter, whether that is through elections or decisions that the chapter is making that’s putting out for chapter members to vote on, just making sure that they realize their opinion is valued from the get-go and just after they’re initiated.

Another active member echoed this notion when sharing “we, as a chapter, want to make sure that [new members’] thoughts are relayed to the chapter.” Having a leadership position within the fraternity or sorority, being given responsibilities and tasks within the organization, serving on a committee, and possessing a voice within the chapter were also important areas of involvement to new members as they developed their own sense of belonging within their organization.

The researcher noted that on campus at Midwestern College those new members, regardless of first or continuing generations status, who held positions such as new member class president, junior panhellenic delegate, assistant social chair, and intramural chair appeared to have the strongest outward passion for and affiliation with their respective organizations. These new members who held a leadership position indicated they had a deeper feeling of connection and belonging, not only to their specific organizations, but to both their institutions and their academic activities.

Mentorship

A consistent comment relating to sense of belonging by first-generation new members and active members alike was the role of the family structure within fraternities and sororities. These family structures help new and active members feel connected to both individual members and their larger organizations as a whole. The concept of the organization as a “home” was expressed multiple times by first-generation new members throughout the data collection process. This reiterated the notion that the basic function of a fraternity or sorority is to serve as a family, a brotherhood or sisterhood, wherein members can feel deeply supported by one another. One first-generation new member shared:

There are people who are very consistent in checking up on you in an intentional manner. For instance, when I received my family, we instantly created group chats and things of that nature to engage with each other nearly on a daily basis. This helps me feel at home in my particular organization.

An active member shared similar sentiments in expressing:

I really think the difference between a Greek organization and...and I hate to use the word regular, but just a regular student organization is the ability to really feel like a family. I think that’s something you hear a lot of is the sisterhood. I don’t really think that is a term that I understood until I joined a sorority. So, I really think it has the ability to not only be your home on campus but also your family throughout your four years or however many years when you’re at an institution.

Furthermore, another active member relayed that when building these relationships and family-like dynamic:

The expectation is that older members will reach out to the [new members]. It is never the job of the younger member to have to do anything because they’re new to our organization, and we do want them to feel that they matter.

This familial connection was also observed by the researcher in the use of the

term “forever home” in Panhellenic Formal Recruitment, seeing “big” and “little” embroidered on a wide-array of clothing worn by both new and active members, and in viewing numerous “family stack” photographs of Midwestern College students on various social media platforms.

The new member education process was also an important element of the mentorship between first-generation new members and active members. The new members suggested that their education process placed emphasis on personal and organization-based leadership development which may have promoted their social integration. The importance of new member education appeared in the responses of several of the first-generation new members in which they indicated that their new member education experience created a deeper bond between the first-generation new members and active members of the respective organizations.

Active members in particular highlighted the importance of the new member education process to them and, in their belief, to all of their new members. This notion connected the first-generation college students who suggested that such structured educational experiences helped them develop social relationships with peers.

Each member of the focus group shared that their respective new member education processes, which may range from 4-10 weeks based on the specific organization, involved educating new members on the history of the inter/national organization, local facts, traditions, philanthropic and community service information, cost of membership, and qualifications for continuing membership. Elements of bonding with active members—allowing for mentorship—were also highlighted as a significant component of new member education. One active member highlighted the in-depth process surrounding new member education, sharing

our [new members] are taken under advisement by our education committee,

which consists of a big brother coordinator or a fraternity education coordinator as well as our ritualist. With that, each week they meet with different big brother potential members until halfway through the education process so that they’re getting a sampling of all that our brothers have to offer and the diversity that they bring.

Similarly, another active member provided insight into the various components of new member education within their organization, explaining

Our new member education program is a 60-day probationary membership where we learn about the history of the organization, the core values, the philanthropy of the mission, [and] important people both nationally and locally. We are also assigned certain hours, whether that be hanging out with an older brother, a pledge brother, study hours, ritual hours where we are exposed to part of the ritual which we have already seen along with tests each week of things we were supposed to come prepared knowing such as the history, core values, [and] important people.

While several participants agreed upon the important mentor/mentee role that is fostered

between new and active members during the new member education process, one active member offered a different perspective when stating

In our organization, it is actually the younger new member’s responsibility to reach out because it is our belief that if they want to feel belonged [sic] and accepted and welcomed, it is their responsibility to reach out and invest their time because the initiated members are already invested and already there. We want to make sure that our new members feel that same way. So, we don’t have members that are not attending events, organization’s meetings, not paying dues. We want to make sure that they are invested. It teaches them how life is going to be, that you’re going to get what you ... get out what you put in.

A first-generation new member, who

shared a particularly negative experience of being a first-generation college student, expressed the difficulties they have encountered in attempting to navigating their college experience with little to no mentorship or guidance

As a first-generation college student, it is often difficult to relate to other students. I think that we often feel a far greater burden on our shoulders during the semester and therefore choose to focus more on academics and less on the social aspect of university. We also are forced to navigate the “college experience” with little guidance or direction and we are also overlooked by the universities themselves. Even at a small university there is no one asking us if we found a sense of community or helping us get involved into campus life. Pair these problems with being an introvert and the odds of succeeding socially are stacked against you.

Another first-generation new member with little mentorship discussed their difficulty in navigating their fraternity experience and because of this, they have restricted their own participation:

Upon joining I had little to no understanding of how meetings were structured and organized. I wasn’t even told when meetings were conducted. I also had no knowledge of when other events were conducted and I didn’t understand my place in the organization. I never go to events because I feel uncomfortable doing so or if I am even allowed to as I am still an “associate” and not a fully initiated member.

Without mentorship some participants suggested they struggled to navigate their own fraternity or sorority experience and fully integrate into their chapter or organization. However, for these first-generation new members, there was an importance of organization identification and membership. The researcher also observed that as these individuals integrated into their particular chapter, their values and day-to-day practices began to emulate and reflect those same group attributes, as both the sense of

self and sense of belonging are shaped by their social identification with their chapter. This was a form of social identification which provided a sense of belonging and connectedness to their group. The highlighting of the new member experience by these first-generation students demonstrated its importance to them because they suggested it provided active members who can assist the development of a social identity within a fraternity or sorority.

Emotional Support

Similar to the concept of mentorship, emotional support of new members by active members was important to the development of a sense of belonging for first-generation new members within their respective chapters. Feeling as though that they are allowed to act like themselves, to show their unique personalities, to feel accepted and to not be judged for being who they are were all important experiences shared by multiple new members that led to their feeling as though they matter, that they are supported, and that they are cared for by active members of their organizations. Feeling they belong amongst and are accepted by their peers helped these new members build important connections with their peers and with their institution.

Several first-generation new members in the study also mentioned that being checked on, being asked about their emotional well-being, being asked if they need anything, being told “hi” by active members outside of a chapter meeting, and having their names remembered by active members were also ways in which they felt they belonged as members of their organizations. An active member added:

If [new members] haven’t been attending something, or if they’ve been missing new member meetings, reaching out to them and making sure they’re okay instead of saying, ‘Hey, you’re not here. You’re a bad member,’ just putting their own well-being first so that they understand that being a member is not contingent upon just showing up but living their truth through the organization.

Recognizing potential in first-generation new members and providing guidance to them was also an important element of emotional support connected to the development of a sense of belonging. To this end, a first-generation new member shared:

I feel valued by my sisters because of the way they see skills in me that I do not even see. For instance, I had several members nominate me for a position as an officer this semester, and I never would have applied for it without their help.

An active member further expressed the need to uplift new members and their potential by sharing:

I think an important thing is recognizing and celebrating the success of new members when they're in their first few weeks of college because that is a different environment and a kind of scary environment.

While the vast majority of the thoughts and feelings shared by first-generation new members and active members relayed generally positive feelings of emotional support in the development a sense of belonging within their fraternities and sororities at Midwestern College, one first-generation new member provided a counter narrative in sharing "I only have a close relationship with maybe ten sisters in my sorority, but overall I do not really know or speak to my other sisters, so I do not feel connected to them."

Many participants did not connect their social identity as a first-generation student to emotional support because they did not feel the identity mattered to them. Those first-generation new members who did not feel that being a first-generation college student affected their support shared comments such as "this is all new to me, so I've kept a pretty open mind, so it didn't really affect me." Similarly, another participant shared:

I don't often tell people I'm a first-generation student, and I get treated exactly the same no matter what... most people don't know that I am a first-generation college student. Even if they knew, I feel like I

wouldn't have been treated any differently.

One first-generation new member elaborated on the difficulty they face as a first-generation college student seeking to find emotional support within their chapter:

I feel like being a first-generation student has made me feel more shy and cautious about being away from home. It is difficult for me to be so far from home, and so I am not really feeling like myself yet and like I am able to spend time with others. I am hoping within the next semester I will be able to reach out to other sisters I don't know very well and spend time with them, but this is difficult for me right now because I don't necessarily feel like myself, and I am feeling shy.

Another first-generation new member, who shared consistently negative experiences about being both a first-generation college student and a new member of their chapter, expressed:

I am only acquainted with a few people in the fraternity. None of the members reach out to me to discuss life in the organization or how they could help me feel connected. The only time they ever contacted me was during rush and to come in and sign the [new member] papers after I accepted my bid. They only cared about me as a [new member] and not as a person.

Including these negative experiences is necessary in sharing the often challenging lived experiences of first-generation new members. These first-generation students specifically reflected on their social identity and connected it to their negative experiences. However, it appeared that these new members did not give primacy to their first-generation status when discussing emotional support. Rather, it was a secondary factor in their perceptions of socialization into their chapter and organization.

For these first-generation new members, it seemed that being a first-generation college student was neither a hindrance, nor a benefit to their collegiate experience. Two first-generation new members did consistently, and specifically, elaborate on how

being a first-generation college student has made their early collegiate and new member experiences more difficult. While being a first-generation college student did not significantly affect the development of a sense of belonging in all of the first-generation new members who participated in this study, it was a deeply felt and othering experience for several of these new members.

These negative experiences also highlight how they felt they were lacking emotional support because they had little connection to other active members within their own chapter. These first-generation new members experienced belonging uncertainty. They indicated they were looking for support from their respective organization to eliminate doubt and to help ensure that they feel they belong as members of those organizations

Discussion

This was a singular institutional study using a case study design which sought to better understand the role of student involvement for first-generation new members in fraternities and sororities in forming a sense of belonging at a small, private university. Three themes emerged from data analysis which directly answered the research question exploring how first-generation new members gain a sense of belonging. These new members as first-generation students gain a sense belonging in three distinct ways: (1) organization involvement, (2) mentorship, and (3) emotional support.

What was particularly salient was that first-generation new members' relationship with their first-generation student status and identity did not necessarily converge with their status and identities as new members of a fraternity or sorority. For some participants, they internalized their first-generation status because they perceived it as negative in which it may have inhibited their integration to promote sense of belonging. Those first-generation new members who did not feel that being a first-generation college student affected their sense of belonging as new members, because they felt

they were treated the same regardless of their social identity. There was a range of first-generation identity salience across the participants in this study.

Others did not want to be treated differently or felt it did not affect them in any way, because there would be no difference or benefit for them. Participants were nearly evenly divided on whether or not being first-generation college students affected their sense of belonging as new members in their fraternity or sorority. Their own identification as a first-generation student may not directly influence how they develop this sense of belonging for fraternity and sorority members.

Bureau et al. (2021) noted that there is a significant gap in the literature about first-generation students in fraternities and sororities. However, no extant research specifically highlights the new member experience and process for these students. Overall, this study suggests that first-generation student as new members may develop a sense of sense belonging, but their social identity may not necessarily heavily influence their thoughts on the phenomenon of socialization. These findings as the three forms of developing sense of belonging for first-generation new members in fraternities and sororities found in this study, extend the boundaries of the existing literature.

Organizational involvement was salient for new members who were more involved. The new members in this study who assumed leadership positions or assume any responsibility cited a greater sense of belonging. These findings support Astin's (1984) stance that higher involvement in an organization is related to greater personal, professional, and educational benefits. New member education generally places concentration on personal and organization-based leadership development, which can contribute to new members' personal growth, social integration, and academic success (Hartley & Eberly, 2016; Perkins et al., 2011). As found in the literature, new members who take on leadership positions and

opportunities within their chapter have a deeper feeling of connection and belonging not only to their specific organizations but to both their institutions and their academic endeavors as well (Elkins et al., 2011; Schreiner, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012).

Mentorship for first-generation new members was salient, particularly for sorority women. When new members have consistent and positive interactions with active members of their organizations and believe their fraternity or sorority to be a caring, considerate, and accepting environment, their need to belong is met (Freeman et al., 2007; Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). This notion connected the first-generation college students who suggested that such structured educational experiences helped them develop social relationships with peers. These are critical for the development of belonging (Carpenter & Pena, 2017; Petty 2014).

Emotional support was cited as important for several new members who had negative experiences at Midwestern College or within their chapter and organization. The experiences of first-generation college students can be complex and are often influenced by personal identities and when a sense of belonging cannot be developed within a given group, students have difficulty making connections and meaningful experiences (Carpenter & Pena, 2017; Lambert et al., 2013). A lack of emotional support may reduce a sense of belonging which can significantly affect a first-generation college student's ability to feel supported within the organization and amongst its members (Katreovich & Arguete, 2017; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Limitations

There are limitations associated with the study and its findings. This study featured a heterogeneous sample drawn only from a singular institution in the Midwest. This may limit the transferability of the sample. The researcher of this study is a campus-based professional at the host institution of the study and may have *a priori* participant

knowledge which may have influenced the responses of the participants. Also, some participants may have selectively disclosed because of fear of stigma. Given these considerations, the results are not necessarily transferable across all first-generation new members and their experiences in forming sense of belonging. Future research should address the limitations of this research study and explore sense of belonging in first-generation fraternity/sorority members, particularly among students of color.

Implications for Practice & Future Research

Several implications for future research and practice can be gleaned from this study as related to first-generation new members in fraternities and sororities. First, new members who identify as first-generation college students may have stronger positive benefits related to social involvement with a fraternity or sorority than their continuing-generation peers, but they may also find mastering the understanding of organizational culture and expectations more challenging than those same peers (Katreovich & Arguete, 2017; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2016; Woosley & Shepler, 2011; O'Keeffe, 2013). Therefore, as new members of a fraternity or sorority, first-generation college students may experience belonging uncertainty, and as a result, these first-generation new members may need customized education and support from their respective organization to eliminate doubt and to help ensure that they feel they belong as members of those organizations (Banks-Santilli, 2015; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Winograd & Rust, 2014).

Second, campus-based professionals and active fraternity and sorority members should work closely together to explicitly provide first-generation new members with full expectations of membership. This is an intentional, necessary effort to help those new members feel a connection and sense of belonging not only to their chapter but also to the larger college or university community as a whole. This information would

certainly be of benefit to all new members, first-generation new members can face unique challenges in navigating organizational, social, academic, and financial obligations, and as a result, may feel less of sense of belonging with their fraternity and sorority or campus community than their continuing generation peers (Ahren, Bureau, Ryan, & Torres, 2014; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014).

While this research addresses the call for additional research on first-generation fraternity and sorority members by Bureau et al. (2021), this study is nuanced to new members at one Midwestern college. Therefore, further exploration is needed to more deeply understand how first-generation status and identity can affect new members of fraternities and sororities. This study explored the understanding of first-generation status and identity from a specific institutional perspective, providing an opportunity for similar studies to be conducted on campuses of varying sizes and cultures.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlighted the roles that organization involvement, mentorship, and emotional support can serve in the development of sense of belonging for the new members who identify as first-generation college students at Midwestern College. While these findings generally reaffirmed extant research about first-generation college students, it highlighted that such experiences occur in nuanced and complex ways for fraternity/sorority new members. While not all the participants foregrounded their first-generation status as a social identity, as educators we should help them better reflect because we know that identity is expressed in different ways. This study also emphasized the need for future research to explore a more universal understanding of the lived experiences of this student population across demographic and institution types.

Future studies should seek to more fully

understand and appreciate the lived experiences of not only first-generation fraternity/sorority members, but to members who may have other marginalized or underrepresented identities. These should include first-generation from fraternities and sororities across different councils such as National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc. (NPHC), National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), the National AP-IDA Panhellenic Association (NAPA), and the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC).

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Jason Castles, Ed.D., is a member of Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity and is the program director and assistant professor in the Higher Education Leadership doctoral program at Maryville University. He specializes in a number of areas related to higher education leadership, including theory, research, frameworks, and intercultural competence. Prior to Maryville University, Dr. Castles worked for 14 years in various areas of higher education, including: Undergraduate Admissions, New Student Orientation, Fraternity & Sorority Life, Leadership Programs, Student Organizations, Student Government, Judicial Affairs, First-Year Experience, and Community Service.

Pietro A. Sasso, Ph.D., has over fifteen years of professional and teaching experience in postsecondary education. As an administrator, his experience is exceptionally diverse, spanning several educational administrative functional areas. In each of these functional areas, Dr. Sasso has been provided with increasing levels of responsibility which demands various levels of leadership. He has provided significant culture change and improvements to each of his areas of accountability. He is also a research-scholar with significant experiences as an educator and academic advisor to both undergraduate and graduate students. His research interests include the college experience (student involvement, multiraciality, masculinity), student success (academic advising, student persistence), and educational equity across co-curricular spaces.

Appendix A

Qualitative Instrument Questions

- Q1. Are you between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age? Yes or No
- Q2. Are you currently an undergraduate student at Midwestern College? Yes or No
- Q3. Are you currently enrolled in at least 12 credit hours of coursework at Midwestern College? Yes or No
- Q4. Are you a first-generation college student? *First-generation college students are those students who are enrolled at a college or university but whose parents or guardians have not earned a bachelor's degree.* Yes or No
- Q5. Are you a new member of a fraternity or sorority? *New members are those students who have been extended a bid or membership to join their fraternity or sorority within the current academic year.* Yes or No
- Q6. In which type of Greek organization are you a new member, a fraternity or a sorority? Fraternity or Sorority
- Q7. Including this semester, how many semesters have you been a new member in your fraternity or sorority? 1 or 2
- Q8. Do you feel accepted by the other members of your fraternity or sorority? *Accepted can be interpreted as feeling that other members of the fraternity or sorority view you as a part of the organization.* Yes or No
- Q9. What makes you feel accepted (or not accepted) by the other members of your fraternity or sorority? Accepted can be interpreted to mean
- Q10. What could your fraternity or sorority do to help you to feel more accepted by other members of the fraternity or sorority?
- Q11. Do you feel connected to your fraternity or sorority? *Connected can be interpreted as having a close relationship with the other members of the fraternity or sorority.* Yes or No
- Q12. What makes you feel connected (or not connected) to your fraternity or sorority?
- Q13. What could your fraternity or sorority do to help you feel more connected to the fraternity or sorority?
- Q14. Do you feel you matter to the other members of your fraternity or sorority? *Matter can be interpreted as feeling though you are significant to the other members of the fraternity or sorority.* Yes or No
- Q15. What makes you feel that you matter (or not matter) to the other members of your fraternity or sorority?
- Q16. What could your fraternity or sorority do to help you to feel that matter to the other members of the fraternity or sorority?
- Q17. Do you feel valued as a member of your fraternity or sorority? *Valued can be interpreted as feeling appreciated and considered to be an important part of the organization by other members of the fraternity or sorority.* Yes or No
- Q18. What makes you feel valued (or not valued) by your fraternity or sorority?
- Q19. What could your fraternity or sorority do to help you to feel more valued by the fraternity or sorority?
- Q20. Did being a first-generation college student affect your responses to the previous questions? Yes or No
- Q21. Why did being a first-generation student affect (or not affect) your responses to the previous questions?

Appendix B

Focus Group Semi-Structured Open-Ended Questions

- Q1. Please describe the new member process you experienced in your fraternity or sorority?
- Q2. How does your organization help new members feel accepted by the initiated members of your fraternity or sorority?
- Q3. How does your organization help new members feel connected to the initiated members of your fraternity or sorority?
- Q4. How does your organization help new members feel that they matter to the initiated members of your fraternity or sorority?
- Q5. How does your organization help new members feel that are valued as members of your fraternity or sorority?
- Q6. Does your organization struggle with helping new members to feel that they are accepted/connected/matter/valued?