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Editorial: The History and Evolution of the Journal of Sorority and Fraternity Life Research and Practice

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EDITORIAL: THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THE JOURNAL OF SORORITY AND FRATERNITY LIFE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Origins and Initial Volumes

The initial conceptualization of a research journal on sororities and fraternities originated with the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity¹ (CSCF) under the CSCF presidency of Charles Eberly in 1997. Though empirical research on sororities and fraternities existed, its existence was piecemeal. Born out of his interactions within the sorority and fraternity industry, Eberly aspired to create a sorority and fraternity-specific research journal to include articles with rigorous research designs that focused on more than acts of negative group behaviors.

Within the Association of Fraternity Advisors² (AFA), the desire to create a research journal focused on sorority and fraternity life was first broached in the 2000 *AFA Strategic Plan* (AFA Board of Directors, 2000). However, financial constraints prevented the development and publication of a printed research journal, which was the hallmark of reputable research publications at the time. In addition, the Association leadership debated whether AFA was the appropriate home for a journal, and some identified CSCF as a better fit. However, CSCF was nearly dormant at the time of this discussion.

With the support and involvement of CSCF Board Members Chuck Eberly and Richard McKaig, the movement to create the initial volume of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* (*Oracle*) occurred under the leadership of then-AFA President Daniel Bureau in 2004. Bureau's desire for fraternity/sorority research and peer-reviewed publication was outlined in his inauguration speech as AFA President.

Grahaeme Hesp took the initiative to organize the journal and serve as the initial *Oracle* Editor. By 2004, the environment in higher education allowed for the creation of an entirely digital research journal. Hesp had worked to support the *Journal of College and Character*, one of the initial student affairs research journals, during his doctoral work at Florida State University. This experience provided him with the

1 The legacy of the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, later renamed the Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research is embodied in the Timothy J. Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research and Reform (Pennsylvania State University, 2019)

2 Prior to 2009, the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors was known as the Association of Fraternity Advisors (Whittier, 2009)

knowledge to found *Oracle*.

The success of the new journal required the submission and review of manuscripts. At the time of the first issue, the journal had enough content for only that issue. Hesp and others on the editorial board worked tirelessly to promote *Oracle* at conferences, to engage with potential authors, and to scour theses and dissertation databases for potential submissions. In doing so, they sustained the journal.

In addition, the editorial board instituted a developmental approach to support authors, particularly emerging scholars, to organize, write and revise their manuscripts from concept to publication in *Oracle*. These efforts were time and labor intensive. However, the current journal editorial leadership continues to value and retain this developmental approach in our review and publication process.

Transitions and Reflexivity

Several major developments took place under the editorial leadership of J. Patrick Biddix starting 2009. The editorial board continued to value the cultivation of scholarship using a developmental approach. Like the work of prior editorial boards, operationalizing these values took considerable effort. Research on sororities and fraternities continued to be limited and scattered across various disciplines (e.g., education, sociology).

To broaden exploration of topics as well as to ensure new writers were contributing, the editorial board implemented an outreach program with established researchers and hosted writer's workshops and preconferences. These efforts were fruitful as research in the field was extended. Impressively, several of the authors who got their start in fraternity and sorority research at this time are continuing to contribute to the field today.

A second major development was the start of a struggle to make *Oracle* an open access publication. Reflecting about this over a decade later, in a world where open access is ubiquitous for journals, may make it hard to understand the context. In 2009, *Oracle* was a member-benefit of AFA, which meant that to access the journal, an individual had to be an active member. Because *Oracle* was not available to public audiences, library search engines could not include issues or articles. So, the only way to read research published in *Oracle* was to be an AFA member. This led to some challenging discussions with the AFA Board of Directors at that time. However, the cause was championed by AFA presidents Jeremiah Shinn and Monica Lee Miranda. Ultimately, the decision was made to post *Oracle* for free distribution, which was celebrated in a 2011 editorial.

We have begun to make intentional efforts at getting *Oracle* into the hands of educators who may not be connected with AFA – including practitioners, graduate students, and program preparation faculty. These include an open access format for all issues, print editions

of Oracle, and continued progress toward indexing. Through these research connections, we look to expand our community of support for the college fraternal movement. (Biddix, 2011, p. v)

The final major development of this time, alluded to in the previous quotation, was to get the journal indexed. Indexing means that a journal is listed and available in library and other databases, and articles are searchable and can become attainable to a wider audience. The indexing process began with ERIC and expanded to related databases with full text once *Oracle* was assigned its own ISSN number. After several years of research, the final agreements with EBSCO Publishing were signed on December 12, 2011. Eventually, all former issues were loaded into the indexed databases. This gave *Oracle* the external legitimacy as a scholarly journal that its founders, contributors, and supporters had already recognized. Soon, as Google Scholar emerged as an accessible and later legitimate platform for identifying research, *Oracle* was automatically included thanks to its indexing. The realization of these efforts represents a major milestone for *Oracle* and more broadly for the growth, development, and proliferation of fraternity and sorority research.

Move to ScholarWorks & the Pandemic

As the journal became a more complex publication, the infrastructure for manuscript submissions, peer reviews, and the dissemination of research required upgrades. These processes were priorities for Jim Barber as he became editor in 2018. The first step was to find a solution for streamlining the manuscript submission and peer review processes. The existing practice of using email to exchange documents was cumbersome and required a great deal of coordination between authors, peer reviewers, associate editors and the editor to assure that the more recent versions of documents were available. In 2018, AFA invested in an online platform called Scholastica that served as a home for the submission and peer review process. This led to improvement in both organization and functionality for the review and editing process, speeding up the time from submission to decision.

The first *Oracle* Research Writers' Retreat was held that same year. To foster a sense of community among researchers focused on sorority and fraternity topics, Barber envisioned an in-person retreat to bring people together to offer programming, access to research resources, and most importantly time and space to write. The first retreat took place in July 2018 at the College of William & Mary. Research librarians in Swem Library provided not only space, but support and guidance to writers, including curating a viewing of some of the fraternity and sorority artifacts in the university's Special Collections. The relationship built between *Oracle* and William & Mary during the first Writers' Retreat provided a foundation for a closer partnership moving forward.

The next step in Barber's plans for upgrading in infrastructure was to assign digital object identifiers (DOIs) to all published articles and

find a platform to make *Oracle* more readily available to the public. The journal was already open access and indexed through ERIC, but the format in which it was available was outdated. Full issues were available as combined PDF documents on the AFA website, which posed challenges for both readers and the editorial and association leadership. It was not possible for a reader to download a stand-alone article; because of the way the issues were formatted, someone interested in a particular manuscript would have to download the full issue and then search within it for the article. This process was inconvenient for readers, as conventions in academic publishing had moved to a model where single articles were easy to find, download, and save using a DOI link. From the editorial and association perspective, the full issue format made it impossible to collect data on individual article downloads and overall reach of the publication. Metrics on the frequency and location of downloads, as well as citation and social media sharing were non-existent.

In early 2019, Barber pursued an agreement between AFA and William & Mary for William & Mary Libraries to become the academic home of *Oracle* and move the journal to the W&M ScholarWorks platform. Barber served as a faculty member at William & Mary, and envisioned the institution as the long-term home for *Oracle*, even after his time as editor was over. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between AFA and William & Mary on October 15, 2019 for W&M to host *Oracle*.

This agreement provided *Oracle* with many of the services and support it so badly needed: DOI minting for all articles (including the entire archive of issues), Search Engine Optimization (SEO, which ranked results toward the top in Internet search engines), free hosting of open access content, archiving, training on using the site, and the support of academic research librarians. Work began immediately to transition *Oracle* to its new home at William & Mary.

Despite the impact of COVID lockdowns and the onset of remote work, the migration of *Oracle* to William & Mary Libraries continued. Articles were divided into separate downloadable files, assigned individual DOIs, and indexed accordingly. The new site for *Oracle* went live on November 2, 2020, and had a soft launch while the back issues were added to the site. In that initial month online, there were 131 total article downloads in November 2020. Search engines and academic indexes quickly picked up the journal in its new format, and traffic increased sharply. In 2021, the first full year *Oracle* was hosted at William & Mary, there were 10,874 total article downloads.

Submissions of new manuscripts slowed during the pandemic, and to counteract this trend and center the social context of sororities and fraternities at that moment, the editorial board announced the first-ever special issue of *Oracle*, focused on fraternity and sorority life in 2020, to examine the effects of COVID-19, quarantine, Black Lives Matter and social justice movements, the pivot to online learning, the Abolish

Greek Life movement, virtual fraternity and sorority life experience (including recruitment and intake), and innovations in practice during the pandemic. This special issue was ultimately published in mid-2022 as the first issue of Volume 17.

Transition to JSFLRP

The sorority and fraternity movement and research germane to this topic have evolved drastically since the foundation of *Oracle* in 2004. More practitioners and scholars have come to recognize the diversity and complexity within and between these organizations, and to challenge assumptions embedded within these organizations and the sorority and fraternity life profession. In particular, there have been increased calls for research on culturally based sororities and fraternities to inform or challenge policy and practice (e.g., Biddix et al., 2014), and an increasing number of scholars have relied on the journal as a home for research on the experiences of members in these organizations (e.g., Duran et al., 2022). To reflect the diversity within sororities and fraternities and the sorority and fraternity life profession, the editorial board has worked to recruit and retain editors and peer reviewers who identify with minoritized identities or have membership in organizations affiliated with the National APIDA Panhellenic Association, National Pan-Hellenic Council, National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations or the National Multicultural Greek Council.

While the editorial board continues to employ a development approach to advancing research on sororities and fraternities, more authors are developing research agendas focused on these organizations. This trend is represented in the articles in the current issue, as the authors including doctoral students and candidates (e.g., George, 2023), sorority and fraternity life professionals and student affairs professionals from other functional areas (e.g., Sasso et al., 2023), consultants (Dalal & Wrona, 2023), research center team members (e.g., Baker et al. 2023) and clinical, early-career and tenured faculty from a variety of disciplines (e.g., Dalal & Wrona, 2023). The confluence of these elements has led to more manuscript submissions to the journal. In addition, the readership of the publication continues to increase, as over readers downloaded over 21,000 articles from ScholarWorks in 2022. Aligned with the vision for the journal to serve as the premier forum for academic discourse and scholarly inquiry regarding the college sorority and fraternity movement, it had become clear to the editorial leadership team that the journal was no longer limited in scope to AFA its name implied. With the approval of the AFA Board of Directors, the new name of the journal, the *Journal of Sorority and Fraternity Life Research and Practice (JSFLRP)*, was announced just prior to the 2022 AFA Annual Meeting.

Aspirations for Future of *JSFLRP*

Reflecting on our history and progress, the editorial leadership team of *JSFLRP* is excited by our growth and accomplishments over nearly two decades. However, we also recognize that our work is never finished as we aspire for the journal to serve as the central forum for research and scholarship on sororities and fraternities. As McCready (2022) noted in the final issue of Volume 17, it is our hope that future scholarship featured in *JSFLRP* will, "...examine and explore the assumptions underlying the sorority and fraternity movement, uplift the voices of members and other constituents with marginalized identities and experiences, or challenge the oppressive contexts within and external to these organizations" (p. vi). To achieve these ends, we must continue to reflect on our internal structures and processes, consider the composition of our editorial board, continue to engage with and support the development of emerging scholars and to identify opportunities to share and disseminate *JSFLRP* to audiences that will affect policy and practice related to sororities and fraternities and advance the scholarship relevant to these organizations.

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