

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF A DECADE OF FRATERNITY/SORORITY SCHOLARSHIP IN STUDENT AFFAIRS RESEARCH JOURNALS¹

William R. Molasso

The author used content analysis research methodologies to investigate the discourse on fraternities/sororities in the two primary journals of the student affairs profession, the Journal of College Student Development and the NASPA Journal. In research published in these student affairs journals over the last decade, fraternities/sororities were underrepresented. Additionally, the published research was of insufficient depth, and focused on narrow issues. This content analysis allows us to understand better the nature and scope of fraternity/sorority research in the primary student affairs literature over the last decade.

For some time, professionals working with fraternities/sororities have articulated a need for expanded research on the students and communities with which they work. Establishing this research agenda has been the topic of conversations and workshops at annual conference meetings and discussed in strategic planning sessions of professional associations working with fraternities/sororities across the country. However, before a productive research agenda can be established, it is important to assess the scholarship on fraternities/sororities already available in the prominent research journals of the student affairs profession.

In their introduction of *The Impact of College on Students*, Feldman and Newcomb (1969) noted that the periodic assessment of scientific endeavor is essential for any profession. Practitioners often reflect on the nature of research in their chosen field, but generally only during conferences or in other informal ways. Feldman and Newcomb believed, however, that the reflection on research in a profession should be more systematic. Methodically analyzing the discourse about fraternities/sororities assists practitioners and scholars in better understanding the nature of discussions about this subculture of American higher education. Additionally, it identifies future areas of needed work.

Love and Yousey (2001) defined discourse as “the expression of thoughts or feelings and the exchange of thoughts or feelings through speech, writing or other forms of communication” (p. 431). One of the primary ways in which professional discourse occurs is through literature – namely the research journals. Barritt (1992) believed that the role of research literature “has become so pervasive and expected that it has become a ritualized part of the written and spoken discourse” (p. 234). Literature plays a critical role in the student affairs profession, as evidenced by professionals “who cite what ‘we know’ on the basis of what is known via ‘the literature’” (p. 236). Our research journals are the primary venue through which the discourse of the student affairs profession transpires.

¹ The findings of this study were presented by the author at the 2004 Association of Fraternity Advisors Annual Meeting in Hollywood, CA in an educational session titled *What do we know? What do we need to know? A content analysis of a decade of research in the JCSD and NASPA journals.*

Hood (1984) and Kuh and Bursky (1980) identified the *NASPA Journal* and the *Journal of College Student Development (JCSJ)* as primary venues in which the dissemination of research on the preparation of student affairs professionals, theoretical development in our field, and analysis of contemporary issues on college and university campuses occurred. "If student affairs journals emphasize certain topics and issues, and not others, staff members inadvertently may be shielded from potentially valuable information" (Kuh, Bean, Bradley, & Coomes, 1986, p. 292). The purpose of this study was to identify the major themes and trends in fraternity/sorority scholarship in the student affairs research literature. Feldman and Newcomb's "stocktaking" through the analysis of the discourse on the fraternity movement allows practitioners and scholars to understand better the nature and scope of available work. This research also allows us to realize our own shortcomings as a profession.

Method

Scholars have used content analysis for over half a century in the fields of communications, sociology, business, and education and it is "perhaps the fastest growing technique" in research (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1). Similar to traditional surveys of individuals, content analysis uses the same systematic objective analysis of issues. However, in content analysis the unit of measurement is not the individual but a document or record. A researcher individually reviews and codes these existing documents based on the particular area of content being explored. For this study, content analysis provides the empirical method needed to explore the profession's discourse on fraternities and sororities by examining the unit of analysis of a research article.

I selected the *NASPA Journal* and *JCSJ* as the two primary journals representing the field of student affairs. I identified articles from Fall 1994 through Summer 2004 to represent the last full-decade of research. *JCSJ* makes available a PDF file for each article that appears in the publication for this period. The *NASPA Journal* provides PDF copies beginning in Fall 1996. This file format, and the journals' respective search engines, allowed for a full-text keyword search in the entire article (title, abstract, body, reference list). I conducted a full-text keyword search within the search engines of each journal when possible, using the following key words: Greek, fraternity, sorority, fraternities, and sororities. A full-text keyword search is more extensive than using available search engines, such as the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), which typically search for the keywords only in the title or abstracts of the article. I manually searched the four *NASPA Journal* issues not available in electronic format for this period.

The benefit of a full-text keyword search is that it identified articles that may not be entirely focused on fraternities/sororities, but provided a substantive finding about this community. One of the disadvantages to a full-text keyword search is that it identified every article that used one of the keywords, despite the degree that article contributed to our understanding of fraternity/sorority members. The initial step in this study was to categorize the identified articles according to the extent they provided relevant information about fraternities/sororities. In this study, I used only articles that made a substantive contribution to our knowledge of fraternities and sororities. The selected articles were then individually reviewed and coded in the following categories: (a) the major issue of the article, (b) tone of the article, (c) names of the authors, and (d) year of publication. This information formed the basis of the content analysis to determine

what was studied in relation to the fraternity movement, who studied it, and when the study was completed. Additionally, I completed crosschecks by reviewing each analyzed article a second time to ensure accuracy of coding. Finally, I reevaluated those articles not analyzed to ensure they should not be included in the content analysis.

Data Analysis

In the initial full-text keyword search, 184 articles published in the *NASPA Journal* and *JCSD* in the specified period included the five keywords: fraternity, sorority, Greek, fraternities, sororities. Of those articles, 13% (24) were articles primarily focused on fraternities/sororities, and another 21% (39) had a significant finding or discussion point related to this community (Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of Keyword† Use in Articles

	#	#	Total
	<i>JCSD</i>	<i>NASPA</i>	
Primary Focus	17	7	24
Substantive Finding	30	9	39
As Examples	32	20	52
Methods Section	16	2	18
Literature Review	15	6	21
Book Reviews & Editorials	11	3	14
Other Meanings	4	4	8
Reference List Only	3	5	8
Total	128	56	184

† Keywords used: Greek, fraternity, sorority, fraternities, sororities.

The remaining articles did not make a substantive new contribution of knowledge about fraternities/sororities. The greatest bulk of these articles (28%, 52) included fraternities/sororities simply as examples of how the implications applied to subpopulations of the campus communities. In these articles, the keywords were most often used in a list (e.g., athletes, Greeks, students of color), but did not provide any specific data or discussion about the community. Other articles that were identified with the keyword search but didn't provide substantive contributions included 11% (21) of the articles in which earlier published research about fraternities/sororities were included in the article's literature review only, 4% (8) in the reference list only, and 8% (14) in book reviews or editorials. Other meanings of the word Greek, notably as it relates to architectural design or statistical symbols, accounted for 4% (8) of the articles. Finally, fraternity/sorority members were included only in the methodology section of 10% (18) of the articles. These articles typically identified the percentage of affiliated students who participated in the study, or simply that study participants were recruited from chapter houses as one of several ways of identifying participants.

Of the 184 articles that included one of the five keywords, 34% (63) provided some degree of new data, findings, or discussion about the fraternity/sorority community and were used in the content analysis. While the remaining articles used the keywords, they did not provide new information or discussion of the fraternity/sorority community. Over the last decade of research articles reviewed for this study, 6.46% of the 727 total articles in *JCSD* and a slightly greater percentage of 7.11% of the 225 articles published in the *NASPA Journal* focused on or provided a substantive finding about fraternities/sororities.

I first categorized the 63 articles analyzed based on the issue of focus in the article. Almost 27% (17) of the articles addressed alcohol and other drug issues, followed by 14% (9) articles about students of color that often included reference to affiliation with National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) member organizations. Articles that explored socio-developmental issues accounted for 11% (7) and 10% (6) investigated cognitive development and/or academic achievement. I categorized the remaining 38% (24) of the articles as “other issues” without a natural theme in which to categorize them. Table 2 includes more specific details about the issues addressed.

Table 2
Summary of Issues Addressed in Articles

	n	%
Alcohol	17	27%
Students of Color/NPHC	9	14%
Psycho-Social Development	7	11%
Cognitive/Academic Achievement	6	10%
Sexual Assault Education	4	6%
Homogeneity	4	6%
Adjustment Issues	4	6%
Recruitment	3	5%
Advising Professionals	2	3%
Gay Men	2	3%
Athletes as Members	2	3%
Hazing	1	2%
Gambling	1	2%
Eating Disorders	1	2%

An analysis of the contributors of these articles indicated that 139 individuals authored or co-authored an article about fraternities/sororities during this period. Of those, 92% (128) authored or co-authored only once, 5% (7) authored or coauthored twice, and 3% (4) authored or co-authored three to six articles.

Over the 10-years included in this study, 5 articles each year on average were published primarily on or provided substantive findings about fraternities/sororities. However, a significant spike in articles published occurred in 2003, with 16 individual articles included in that year alone. Table 3 provides a breakdown in the numbers of articles published by year.

Table 3
*Number of Fraternity/Sorority
 Articles Published By Year*

	# JCSD	# NASPA	Total
1994†	5	0	5
1995	3	0	3
1996	5	2	7
1997	3	4	7
1998	4	0	4
1999	4	0	4
2000	5	0	5
2001	3	1	4
2002	4	2	6
2003	10	6	16
2004†	1	1	2

† Not a full calendar year.

Finally, I evaluated the tone of each article. Coding tone is subjectively based on the experiences of the coder. In this study, I coded the tone of the article based on my years of professional experience working with fraternities and sororities, and as a faculty member in adult and higher education. Of the 63 articles used in the content analysis, 30% (18) were coded as positive because they generally showed fraternities/sororities as being “better than” their comparative group (residence hall students, the student body, etc.) or contributing positively to a student’s experience. Almost half (46%, 30) of the articles negatively portrayed the fraternity/sorority community. In these articles, fraternity/sorority members were “less than” their comparative group, or the article issue itself would be considered a negative matter. Of the remaining articles, 11% (7) showed no difference between fraternity/sorority members and the reference group, and 13% (8) articles were neither positive nor negative.

Discussion

Based on this study, the frequency of representation of fraternity/sorority related discourse of the student affairs profession is troubling. Over the last decade, only 2% of those articles published in *JCSD* and 3% of *NASPA Journal* articles focused primarily on the fraternity/sorority community. Even when including those articles about another issue that provided a substantive finding about fraternities and sororities, only 7% of the articles published in these two journals over the past decade contributed to our understanding of fraternity/sorority members.

Generally, fraternity/sorority membership has been estimated as somewhere between 10% to 15% of undergraduate students. The impact these communities have (both good and bad) on their host campuses is also significant, beyond the actual percentage of affiliated students on the campus. Based on these considerations, there is a significant under-representation of research on fraternities/sororities relative to their prevalence in the campus community. Additionally, most of

the substantive findings about fraternities/sororities are actually hidden in articles about other issues. This means that students, scholars and staff who explore the research on fraternities/sororities through common search engines (e.g. ERIC), identify only those articles in which keywords were used in the title or abstracts, or the author self-selects fraternities/sororities as identifiers when submitting the article for publication.

It was also interesting to explore the frequency with which an author contributes a fraternity/sorority related article. With other areas in student affairs literature, scholars often explore a specific area of interest over an extended period. These authors then contribute numerous articles in research journals about their research interest. I expected to find several authors who generally contributed to the bulk of research on fraternities/sororities, and was surprised to find that almost all (93%) only authored or co-authored a fraternity/sorority article once in the entire decade. Consequently, scholars who explore this community on a longer-term basis may yield more in-depth, and therefore more useful, findings.

This lack of published research and investigators on fraternities/sororities may be caused by several factors related to this community's place in higher education. While scholars ask students to identify their affiliation with a fraternity/sorority and may statistically analyze fraternity/sorority members compared to nonmembers, they may choose to focus on broader issues or other segments of the campus community in the articles they submit for publication. These authors may believe that their articles should appeal to a broader audience, and if they do, they will be more likely accepted for publication by *JCSD* or *NASPA*.

Another factor contributing to the lack of published research may be the perception of power and wealth attributed to this community, and a desire among scholars to spend their time and expertise exploring less advantaged students. This perception may also influence the availability of external grant opportunities, meaning the basic funding for fraternity/sorority research is not commonly available. Finally, the relative difficulty for scholars to gain access to and participation from this somewhat closed-community may also be a factor discouraging research at the very early stages of investigation.

However, the data from this study cannot definitively determine why more authors are not exploring fraternity/sorority research and submitting articles for publication. A specific research study of faculty in student affairs and higher education would more clearly identify what barriers exist to submitting fraternity/sorority research for publication. Why are faculty scholars less interested in analyzing the impact of fraternity/sorority affiliation in their areas of interest? What do investigators believe are the specific methodological challenges in studying this community? What incentives or benefits could be established to make this research area more attractive to faculty? Exploring these kinds of questions with faculty in student affairs and higher education could assist the profession in directly addressing those issues that currently limit scholars' likelihood of completing fraternity/sorority related research.

The range of issues explored related to fraternities/sororities was not very surprising. The very public challenges of alcohol use and abuse on college campuses generally, and among fraternity/sorority members specifically, made the almost one-third of the articles on this community related to alcohol an expected finding. In fact, a majority of the articles that were

primarily focused on fraternities/sororities tended to be about the triumvirate of campus problems—alcohol, sexual assault, and, to a lesser degree, hazing. Clearly, we have a great deal more to learn about these issues on campus in general, and among fraternity/sorority members in particular. It is important that researchers continue to explore these issues until more effective prevention programs can be developed.

While exploring alcohol and other drug abuse prevention is important, research on this topic should not preclude research on other issues relevant to fraternity/sorority membership. Psychosocial, cognitive and identity development issues are as important for this community as they are for the broader campus student body. Additionally, the culture of fraternity/sorority life may actually prove to be a significant factor (both good and bad) on these areas of development. Without this research, professionals working with fraternities/sororities will not have the knowledge they need to accentuate the positive aspects of fraternity/sorority culture, and minimize or alter the negative aspects. Additionally, these lessons could be valuable to other identifiable segments of the campus community, such as residential colleges, theme houses, and small-group living situations.

One unexpected outcome of this study related to the overall tone of articles published about fraternities/sororities. In initial conversations with colleagues about this study, an underlying assumption would be that the only research published about fraternities/sororities would be negative and focused exclusively on alcohol and hazing. The data from this study found most of the articles published in the last decade were either positive, indifferent, or did not place a value judgment on the fraternity/sorority experience. This finding will be particularly important in reducing the hesitation of leaders of the community in allowing scholars access to the membership to continue exploring fraternity/sorority related research.

The nature and scope of the research on fraternities and sororities in the two primary journals of our field, *JCSJ* and *NASPA Journal*, are generally very discouraging. Fraternities/sororities are under-represented in the journals compared to their prevalence on college campuses. Scholars are not generally exploring fraternities/sororities beyond one study or research article. A large percentage of the published research was focused on the heavily publicized negative aspects of the campus community. However, overall, the research published was more positive about the fraternity/sorority community than expected.

Implications

The implications for the field of student affairs, and particularly those focusing their time in professional positions that support the fraternity/sorority community, relate to increasing the range, frequency, and depth of research related to fraternities/sororities. Sound empirical research is needed to successfully address the negative aspects of affiliation with the community and accentuate and extend the positive influences of this experience.

The most significant endeavor that would increase the availability of research and information on fraternities and sororities relates to the venues in which this type of research is actively solicited, published, and provided to the profession. Editorial boards of student affairs journals should actively recruit and publish fraternity/sorority related research. This may include more frequent

“focus issues” of the journals focusing on fraternity/sorority concerns, or inviting authors to submit articles on fraternities/sororities for inclusion in regular editions. Additionally, the size and scope of the field of professionals working with fraternities/sororities supports the need for a journal such as *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, exclusively focused on this community. Professionals working with fraternities/sororities need regular access to a greater amount and depth of research on those students with whom they regularly interact.

Funding sources become critical for scholars. Professional and interfraternal associations, most notably the Association of Fraternity Advisors, National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, National Panhellenic Conference, National Pan-Hellenic Council, North-American Interfraternity Conference, should explore ways in which they could provide the financial resources necessary for conducting research. This could be through the allocation of research funds through the annual operating budgeting process or through research grants from associated foundations. Additionally, individual inter/national organizations could provide funding to scholars to evaluate the impact of their new initiatives on their undergraduate chapter members or to explore specific issues in which the organization is interested. However, high quality research involving multiple locations may be cost-prohibitive for an individual professional association or inter/national organization to finance independently at this time. These organizations could work together to pool limited resources and identify specific areas in which high quality, empirical exploration is needed. By pooling resources and identifying specific areas of needed information, these organizations can take a greater leadership role in accumulating the research needed for the future.

Finally, continued conversation related to the importance of research in the evolution of the fraternity/sorority movement is needed. As leaders of this movement better understand the benefits of, need for, and usefulness of research addressing fraternities/sororities, access issues will begin to become much less discouraging to future scholars.

It is clear from this study that the discourse related to the fraternity/sorority movement in the student affairs literature is limited in its nature, scope, and depth. As a result, its ability to improve the lives and experiences of students who are affiliated with this community is limited. Without a significant expansion of research, professionals working with this community on college campuses and within inter/national organizations will have inadequate information and ability to guide the movement to a more positive future.

References

- Barritt, L.S. (1992). The literature in the crafting of a profession. *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 10, 233-242.
- Feldman, K.A., & Newcomb, T.M. (1969). *The impact of college on students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hood, A.B. (1984). Knowledge dissemination and the role of professional journals. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25, 17-18.

Kuh, G.D., Bean, J.P., Bradley, R.K., & Coomes, M.D. (1986). Contributions of student affairs journals to the literature on college students. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 27, 292-305.

Kuh, G.D. & Bursky, M. (1980). Knowledge dissemination by publication in student affairs: Who publishes what where? *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 21, 387-93.

Love, P.G., & Yousey, K. (2001). Gaps in the conversation: Missing issues in the discourse of the student affairs field. *Journal of College Student Development*, 42, 430-446.

William R. Molasso, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University. He served as a fraternity/sorority advisor for over ten years prior to becoming a faculty member in student affairs and higher education. William may be contacted via email at BillyM@niu.edu.