

The Effects of Fraternity Involvement

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The article illustrates the findings of a study assessing the effects of fraternity involvement on the academic performance of the members of two all-male social fraternities. The fraternities studied are both Greek letter organizations at a large Midwestern research institution. One of the fraternities was selected based on its high chapter-wide academic achievement. The other fraternity examined in this study was selected on the basis of its poor chapter-wide academic performance. The current study found results that are consistent with previous literature. Specifically, relationships were found to exist between the academic performance of the chapters and such measures as alcohol usage and a peer environment that was supportive of academic performance by the individual members.

There has been significant literature in higher education regarding the effects that the campus environment has on the development of college students. In recent years, many articles (Parker & Gade, 1981; Pennington, Zvonkovic & Wilson, 1989; Winston, Hutson & McCaffrey, 1980) have focused on the Greek system as a sub-environment of colleges and universities. This sub-environment has been studied in order to assess the effects that fraternity involvement has on members.

Assessing the effects of the peer environment, as well as alcohol use in fraternities, is important because of the number of colleges and universities that maintain active Greek systems. In recent years, the Greek systems at many colleges and universities have been criticized for having a negative effect on their members (Kuh & Lyons, 1990). However, the Greek system should not be generalized as having only negative effects. The results of this study support previous literature, which asserts that fraternities do positively affect their members (Parker & Gade, 1981; Pennington, et al., 1989).

The purpose of this study is to examine the peer environments of two fraternities and how the environments affect members' academic performance. The objective of this paper is to discuss aspects of the fraternity peer environments that have both positive and negative effects on the academic performance of its members, as measured by grade point average (GPA). This paper will begin with a literature review discussing the peer environment, as well as the relationship between alcohol use and grade point average. The method section will then provide information regarding the sample and the procedure used for this study. Next, the results section will provide information obtained through this study. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion and implications section that will tie information in the literature review to the results of this study.

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

Peer Environment

The study will assess components of the fraternity peer environment to determine potential effects on members' academic performance. Astin (1993), in noting the influence of the peer environment in regard to the behavior of individual students, stated, "the student's peer environment is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398).

Peer interaction in the fraternity environment is different from most other peer environments on a college campus. In order for potential fraternity members to become fully involved, they must first engage in an initial pledging period. Engaging in pledging has been cited as having a negative effect on the academic performance of the participants. Bowker (1994) noted, because pledging is a time consuming activity, "students undergoing the pledge process perform at lower academic levels than their non-pledging colleagues" (pp. 268-269). In addition, students pledging take fewer credits during the pledging semester than their non-Greek peers and "have higher drop rates for the classes that they do take" (Bowker, p. 269).

Despite this potential for negative effects associated with pledging, Butler (1959) found that fraternities where current members (actives) gave a large amount of support and encouragement to the pledges were more likely to experience increased academic achievement. Butler also found that pledges of high achieving fraternities considered the expectations of the actives to be reasonable and that pledges were provided with an opportunity to closely observe academically successful members. Based on this finding, it was noted, "if the active demonstrated an intellectually curious attitude and an interest in supporting group activities, then the pledge would tend to imitate this behavior" (Butler, p. 139).

A study by Winston, Hutson and McCaffrey (1980) also lent support to the belief that the relationship between active and pledge held significant influence in regard to the academic performance of new members. They offered that fraternities which value academic achievement have pledges who "tended to adopt that attitude and contribute to maintaining relatively high grades for the whole group" (Winston, et al., p. 450). Conversely, fraternities that did not value academic achievement "tended to remain at the bottom of the list of fraternity grade point averages and to transmit those attitudes from student generation to generation" (Winston, et al., p. 450).

Another study which specifically addressed involvement in the Greek system and the impact of peer influence on academic achievement was conducted by Binder, (as cited in Lord, 1997), who examined factors that shape the first-year GPA of fraternity members. He found three significant variables — one of which was the chapter GPA. As Binder states, "If the chapter has high grades, the student's grades will go up, but if he joins a group where people don't give a flip about scholarship, his grades go down" (as cited in Lord, p. 96). Binder's findings reinforce previous research, which supports the notion of peer group influ-

ence on academic achievement.

Relationship between Alcohol Use and Grade Point Average

Much research (Engs & Hanson, 1989; Hill & Bugen, 1979; Maney, 1990) has indicated that students who drink alcohol, particularly heavy drinkers, earn lower GPAs than students who do not consume alcohol. Alcohol use is of particular importance when assessing the Greek environment, in light of Tampke's (1990) finding that Greeks, in general, experience higher consumption levels of alcohol in comparison to non-Greek students. Additionally, Maisel (1990) noted that alcohol abuse was a problem frequently associated with Greeks.

Rapaport and others (1984) utilized a sample of 927 undergraduate students in a study that examined the frequency of alcohol consumption and the negative consequences of students' drinking. The results indicated that higher GPAs tended to be associated with lower amounts of drinking.

The study holds two hypotheses. The first is that a positive correlation will exist between the importance that a fraternity places on the academic performance of its members and the fraternity-wide performance as measured by the chapter's GPA. Second, it is held that a negative relationship will exist between the use of alcohol by fraternity chapters and their academic performance.

Method

Sample

The sample size for this study consisted of 85 males from two predominately White fraternities at a large, public research institution in the Midwest. The fraternities were chosen based on their academic ranking as determined by a list of self-reported GPAs compiled by the Office of Student Activities at the institution. The rankings on this list were based on each fraternity's overall college GPA. Fraternity A was selected from the seven fraternities on the list having the highest average GPAs and Fraternity B was selected from the seven chapters on the list having the lowest average GPAs.

The president and scholarship chairman from each chapter were interviewed. These men were selected to be interviewed due to their leadership positions within the house. The remaining participants in our sample population (the general membership of Fraternity A and Fraternity B) completed a survey.

Procedure

The presidents from both fraternities were contacted and asked for their cooperation. The researchers met with each president and explained the purpose of the study and the methods to be employed. After receiving confirmation from each fraternity president regarding their willingness to participate in the study, appointments were made by the researchers to visit and observe the physical and peer environment of the fraternity, to distribute the survey at a chapter meeting, and to interview the presidents and scholarship chairmen.

The interviews with the president and scholarship chairman from each fraternity lasted approximately 30-45 minutes each. The main purposes of the interviews was to clarify information gathered from the survey and to assess the

interests and values of the individuals who have a significant influence on the fraternity environment.

Survey responses were compiled in an effort to gain an understanding of the perceptions held by the general membership in regard to academics in the fraternity. Survey response rates for Fraternity A and Fraternity B were 60% and 58% respectively. This instrument helped to assess the academic behavior of the fraternity members. The survey also helped researchers gain a better understanding about the peer environments of the two fraternities. The peer environment was important to assess based on Astin's (1993) assertion that peer group has a strong influence on college students' growth and development. The survey instrument contained yes/no questions and questions using a Likert scale about academics and alcohol use, and open-ended questions about academics.

Analysis

Data gathered from the surveys were analyzed using SPSS. T-tests were used to compare means from the surveys of Fraternity A to means from the surveys of Fraternity B. This enabled the researchers to compare the views of members from the two fraternity houses regarding how they perceive the effect of their physical and peer environment on their academic performance.

Chi-square analyses were used to determine whether physical and/or peer environment bear a statistically significant relationship to academic performance, as measured by GPA. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages and means, were also used to analyze the data. Correlations were used to try to identify relationships between certain variables and GPA.

Open-ended responses were tallied and categorized into themes. Percentages were then calculated from this information. The percentages were then used to further support quantitative data.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The timeframe in which the study was conducted served as a limitation because there was not time to gather additional data as additional questions arose. The majority of data in support of the hypotheses was obtained from the surveys and interviews. In addition, open-ended questions concerning alcohol use were not used in the survey due to an oversight by the researchers compiling the instrument. Without this, researchers were limited in the data that could be obtained concerning the relationship between alcohol use and academic performance. Finally, some of the results may have revealed a weakness — fraternity members' not having a clear understanding of the chapter's expectations or unclear wording of the items contained in the survey.

Results

Peer Environment

Fraternity A members tended to perceive that their fraternity placed a higher priority on academic success, therefore suggesting that a peer environ-

ment which places value on academic performance will result in the high academic performance of individuals in that environment. Since Fraternity A had a higher GPA and placed a significantly higher priority on academic success, this provides support for our hypothesis that a peer environment which placed value on academic performance will have a higher GPA. Table 1 shows the fraternity GPAs. Chi-square analyses indicate that the GPAs for members of Fraternity A are significantly higher than the GPAs for members of Fraternity B at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 2 displays the mean differences and standard deviations between Fraternity A and Fraternity B. Illustrating a peer environment that values high academic performance, the members of Fraternity A tend to engage in academically related activities in the fraternity house to a greater degree than Fraternity B. In addition, the members of Fraternity A were more likely to have mandatory and designated study hours, receive tutoring from their peers, and spend more hours outside of class studying. The mean differences for these factors were found to be statistically significant and resulted in higher means for Fraternity A.

Responses obtained from the open-ended questions of the Fraternity Survey were also analyzed in order to gain a more thorough understanding of issues regarding fraternity peer environment. This information was used to further support the quantitative results and the hypotheses of this study.

When asked, "What has been the effect, both positive and negative, for your fraternity experience on your academic performance?" the responses varied with members replying that their fraternity experience has been both positive and negative. A large majority of Fraternity A respondents, 98%, indicated that their fraternity experience has had a positive effect on their academic performance, while 19% of them indicated that their fraternity experience has been negative. One way in which the fraternity experience had positively affected members' academic performance was that 18% of them indicated that their experience had helped them to develop their study skills. One aspect of their fraternity experience that 16% of Fraternity A respondents listed as having a negative effect on their academic performance was that the house provided distractions.

In contrast, the majority of Fraternity B respondents, 89%, indicated that their fraternity experience had a negative effect on their academic performance while 35% of respondents stated that their fraternity experience had no effect. Of the respondents, 12% listed distractions as having a negative effect on their academic performance.

This information may be tied to the t-test analysis, which showed that Fraternity A had significantly higher means for fraternity priority on academic success. In addition, the findings illustrate that there is a positive correlation, .39 ($p \leq .01$), between member perception of fraternity priority on academic success and GPA. This relationship indicates that members of Fraternity A perceived that their chapter places a high priority on academic performance, resulting in higher individual GPAs for the members of this fraternity.

Another question from the survey asked, "How have your fraternity mem-

bers impacted your academic performance?" The response rate for Fraternity A was 100% and the majority of these members, 88%, responded that fellow fraternity members had a positive impact on their academic performance. One way in which fraternity members positively influenced each other included peer tutoring. Results of the Chi-square analyses show that the percentage of men who receive peer tutoring in Fraternity A is significantly higher than the number of men who receive peer tutoring in Fraternity B. Fraternity A reported that 87.5% of the members received peer tutoring, while only 16.4% of Fraternity B respondents received peer tutoring. In addition to peer tutoring, 6% of Fraternity A members reported that studying in groups had a positive influence on their academic performance.

The response rate for Fraternity B, to the question above, was also 100%. It was reported by 21% of the respondents that fellow fraternity members had a positive impact on their academic performance while 42% of the respondents indicated that their fraternity members had a negative impact on their academic performance. There was not a measurable percentage of responses which specified the factors that cause Fraternity B members to have a negative impact on each other's academic performance. For example, several members simply stated, "negative," "very negative," "bad," or "poorly." An additional 42% of these members stated that their fraternity brothers had little or no impact on their academic performance. These results may be used to further support the hypothesis that a fraternity, which places a higher value on academic performance, thus having a positive impact on its members, will have a higher house GPA. In contrast, a fraternity that does not place value on academic performance has a negative impact on its members, resulting in a lower GPA.

The final question that provided responses regarding peer environment asked, "What could you or your fraternity do to improve your academic performance?" In Fraternity A, 11% reported that mandatory study tables for everyone would improve academic performance. In addition, 8% stated that more mandatory quiet hours would improve academic performance while more tutoring was recommended by the same percentage of respondents. For Fraternity B, 32% of the respondents reported that incentives would improve academic performance. In addition, the suggestion of "simply studying more" was recommended by 26% of the members, while going to class was recommended by 16% of Fraternity B respondents.

In addition to responses obtained from the general membership by the survey, the presidents and scholarship chairmen of both fraternities were interviewed in order to obtain specific, detailed information regarding the peer environment. When asked, "Are there rewards or sanctions for academic performance?" both fraternities indicated that there were no sanctions for poor academic performance. Fraternity A explained that rewards given for high academic performance included a bulletin board listing members with a 3.0 or above GPA, a special dinner each semester for members holding a 3.0 or above GPA, nine \$1000 scholarships for members with high GPAs, one \$1000 scholarship for the member

with the most improved GPA, and preferred housing assignments. Fraternity B simply noted that they offered the reward of preferred housing for members with high GPAs.

Alcohol Use

Table 2 also reflects the mean differences and standard deviations between Fraternity A and Fraternity B in regard to alcohol use. In general, Fraternity B respondents did not attend class, missed assignments, and were underprepared for tests, as a result of alcohol use, more often than Fraternity A respondents. The means for these factors were found to be statistically significant.

The findings also illustrated that there was a statistically significant correlation, $-.23$ ($p \leq .05$), between current GPA and missed class as a result of alcohol use. Fraternity B respondents missed significantly more classes as a result of alcohol use; therefore it may be inferred that the low chapter GPA of Fraternity B could be a result of this behavior. Because Fraternity B members missed significantly more classes as a result of alcohol use and have a lower chapter GPA than Fraternity A, this data may support our hypothesis that there is a negative relationship between alcohol use by a fraternity chapter and academic performance, as measured by GPA.

Discussion and Implications

The results lend support to the study's two main hypotheses. First, it was believed that academic performance would be positively correlated with the importance placed on academic performance by the given chapter. Second, there would be a negative correlation between alcohol use by members and academic performance.

Peer Environment

As with the physical environment, the findings appear to be consistent with existing research. The correlation between member perception of fraternity priority on academic success and GPA is addressed by several sources (Butler, 1959; Winston et al., 1980). Butler (1959) discussed the relationships which exist between actives and pledges in the context of active members giving academic support to new members, which influenced the positive academic performance of the chapter.

Winston et al. (1980) also supported the relationship that existed between fraternity value placed on academics and academic performance. Like Butler (1959), the authors noted that new members who were exposed to an environment which valued academics tended to maintain a high level of academic performance throughout their undergraduate careers. They then became members who were responsible for the transmission of the fraternity's value on academics to future members, thus this value continued to remain a priority from year to year within the chapter.

Our research found that importance placed on academic performance by fraternities was visible in many programs designed to assist members in their

academic pursuits. This is apparent in the usage of chapter mandated and designated study hours, as well as hours spent studying. These programs are addressed in Barker's (as cited in Walsh, 1978) notion of behavior settings. Barker noted that a behavior setting imposes its behavior pattern on the individuals interacting in the setting. In regard to chapter mandated and designated study hours, for example, the behavior setting of study hours serves as an impetus for individual members to engage in academic preparation.

Peer tutoring can also be considered an indication of the importance placed on academic performance by the fraternity and has been addressed specifically in existing literature. Astin (1993) noted, "General education outcomes are thus enhanced ... when they (peers) serve as tutors for each other" (p. 425).

Based on our research, as well as existing literature, fraternities who wish to facilitate the academic performance of their members should be cognizant of the following suggestions related to the peer environment: place a chapter-wide priority on academic performance of members in which this priority should be recognized by all members of the chapter; provide an opportunity for peer tutoring; promote the value of out-of-class study; and mandate chapter study hours.

Alcohol Use

The study found that a negative correlation existed between missing class as a result of alcohol use and academic performance as measured by GPA. Additionally, our research found statistically significant mean differences in other alcohol-related academic concerns, such as missed class, missed assignments, and being underprepared for a test. These findings are consistent with existing research which noted the negative impact that alcohol has on academic performance (Engs & Hanson, 1989; Hill & Bugen, 1979; Maney, 1990). Based on these findings, the implications for fraternities attempting to improve the climate for academic performance is quite clear. First, fraternities should decrease the number of social functions that utilize alcohol as a principal component. Additionally, the chapters should decrease the alcohol consumption by the members.

This study focused on the effects of the peer environment and alcohol use within two fraternities. Based on the literature review and results section of this study, it is clear that being a member of a fraternity has an impact upon the college experience. There is potential for fraternity membership to have both a positive and negative effect on academic performance.

Table 1. Percentages of GPA Distribution

| Variables | Fraternity A N=66 | Fraternity B N=19 |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1.5-2.0 | 2% | 6% |
| 2.0-2.49 | 5% | 11% |
| 2.5-3.0 | 30% | 66% |
| 3.0-3.49 | 28% | 11% |
| 3.5-4.0 | 35% | 6% |

All are significant at the $p \leq .05$ level for chi square analysis.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviation of Variables by Fraternity

| Variables | Fraternity A N=66 | | Fraternity B N=19 | |
|--|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------|
| | Mean | St. Dev. | Mean | St. Dev. |
| Physical Environment | | | | |
| Chapter-owned Computer | 1.00*** | .00 | 1.83*** | .38 |
| Study Rooms Available | 1.00*** | .00 | 1.17*** | .38 |
| Study in Library | .67 | .92 | .47 | 1.23 |
| Study in Personal Room | 1.31 | 1.99 | 1.15 | 1.07 |
| Study in Friend's Room | .13 | .34 | .12 | .33 |
| Study in Chapter Study Room | 2.39*** | 1.71 | 5.882E-02 | .24 |
| Study in Academic Building | 2.04*** | 1.63 | .68*** | .88 |
| Study in Chapter House | 2.54** | 3.13 | .50** | .79 |
| Peer Environment | | | | |
| Designated Study Hours | 1.22*** | .41 | 1.89*** | .32 |
| Mandatory Study Hours | 1.44*** | .50 | 1.88*** | .34 |
| Peer Tutoring | 1.13** | .33 | 1.39** | .50 |
| Out-of-class Study (reading, group projects, etc.) | 4.14** | 2.82 | 2.11** | 2.19 |
| Fraternity Priority on Acad. Success (self-perceived) | 1.03*** | .17 | 2.61*** | .50 |
| Alcohol | | | | |
| Social Functions Attended | 2.68* | .87 | 2.17* | .51 |
| Social Func. Attended W/ Alcohol | 1.77 | .56 | 1.94 | .42 |
| Drinks Consumed | 15.75 | 11.34 | 21.59 | 13.06 |
| Missed Class as a Result of Alcohol | 2.78*** | .80 | 3.78*** | .55 |
| Missed Assign. as a Result of Alcohol | 1.98** | .87 | 2.83** | 1.09 |
| Underprepared for Test as a Result of Alcohol | 2.25*** | .79 | 3.44*** | .86 |

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$ for t-test analyses

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