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Pietro Antonio Sasso

*Delaware State University, psasso@desu.edu*

Kimberly R. Davis

*The Pennsylvania State University, kzd5561@psu.edu*

Cindy Cogswell

*New York University, cc8142@nyu.edu*

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## Using Focus Groups to Understand Sorority and Fraternity Life and Inform Survey Design

**Pietro A. Sasso**, Ph.D., Delaware State University

**Kimberly R. Davis**, Ph.D., Penn State University

**Cindy A. Cogswell**, Ph.D., New York University

### Abstract

Fraternity and sorority experiences can support or challenge the undergraduate student experience related to student learning and development (Sasso et al., 2020a, 2020b). There are concerns that researchers, advisors, and practitioners can pay attention to enhance healthy chapter cultures or intervene when concerns arise. The article explores the process of revising the Fraternity and Sorority Experience Survey (FSES) using focus group findings to inform survey revision and practice. The FSES is organized around five themes (Learning, Values, Alcohol/Social Issues, Operations, and Community) and measures student perceptions and experiences. Implications for practice are included about instrument revision and how it informs assessment decision-making.

*Keywords:* Sorority, fraternity, focus groups, assessment, survey

Research about fraternity and sorority experiences has been centered on two prongs. The first has been alcohol use and hazing (Biddix, 2016), and the second explores how student involvement experiences such as service-learning or leadership influence learning and development (Sasso et al., 2020a, 2020b). Before intentional efforts through professional associations, research about sororities and fraternities was uncommon.

A coordinated response to membership declines in sororities and fraternities led many national fraternal organizations and their associations, such as the National Interfraternity Conference, to call for a greater understanding of their student member experiences (Bureau & Barber, 2020; Sasso, 2015). The first major claim was in 1976 with the American College Fraternity Bicentennial Commission, which suggested improving the congruence of institutional and fraternity/sorority values and led to the creation of a national research center focused on the American college fraternity to help guide chapter improvement efforts (Cogswell et al., 2020).

This research center was created in 1979 at Indiana University, named the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, and coordinated the progenitor national benchmarking survey, which became the Fraternity and Sorority Experience Survey (FSES) (Cogswell et al., 2020). In 2019, the center transitioned to Penn State University as the Timothy J. Piazza Center for Fraternity & Sorority Research and Reform (Piazza Center) and continues to coordinate the FSES. The Piazza Center was expanded to address calls for increased assessment of undergraduate-constructed student culture, specifically at the chapter level (Cogswell et al., 2020; Sasso et al., 2020a). The FSES sought to assess student chapter experiences and student learning.



sorority. Deliberations produced *A Call for Values Congruence* (Franklin Square Group, 2003). The document called for an assessment of chapters and campuses using a common set of values. In 2007, the American Association of Colleges and Universities ([AAC&U], 2007) hosted a conference that culminated in the creation of a report emphasizing the importance of preparing students for twenty-first-century challenges, and the Council for the Advancement of Standards ([CAS], 2007) revised the fraternity/sorority advising functional area standards. Also in 2007, the FSES was revised to align with changes in these national professional frameworks.

This second version was comprised of 93 questions across 12 subdomains which measured 12 specific constructs running from new member experiences to personal development (Cogswell et al., 2020). The Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors provided a subject matter expert review of criterion validity to integrate more inclusive terms to represent the growth of multicultural fraternities and sororities (Cogswell et al., 2020). The revisions were intended to help practitioners improve programs, advise, and reform policies to enhance chapters. The revised instrument aligned with student learning in college but was not grounded in sorority and fraternity research. The third version of the FSES (presented in this study) measures student learning experiences and uses focus groups to further refine the construct validity (Cogswell et al., 2020). In this study, student focus groups were used to explore the five themes of the FSES (Learning, Values, Alcohol/Social Issues, Operations, and Community).

### **Research Informing Survey Design**

The FSES is a response to address the need for more research about chapter experience outcomes related to student learning and development. However, extant research

informed the focus group protocols. For example, the focus groups examined several topics covered in existing research about fraternity and sorority life.

Student learning is often latent and fully emerges in professional contexts after the completion of an undergraduate experience. Barber et al. (2015) noted that sorority/fraternity members construct their own culture at the microsystem level in which they share their own group norms and engage in student learning at the individual level. Biddix et al. (2014) highlighted fraternity and sorority members' high levels of involvement across various contexts compared to their unaffiliated peers. Additional research suggests the primary outcome of these experiences is leadership development (Goedereis & Sasso, 2020). However, the development of these leadership competencies is often limited to those who have been elected to select positions (Sasso et al., 2020a). Through fraternity/sorority participation, there are more early first-year leadership development outcomes and gains in critical thinking compared to their unaffiliated peers (Hevel & Bureau, 2014; Hevel et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2012).

Other research has demonstrated that fraternity/sorority members have lower intercultural competence levels compared to their unaffiliated peers (Pascarella et al., 1996), but members and unaffiliated students were not different with regards to openness (Martin et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2015). These attitudes suggest a connection to a lack of acceptance of diversity using colorblindness or post-racial attitudes (Martin et al., 2015). Membership has a conservatizing effect, which influences attitudes toward social activism or political participation (Hevel et al., 2014).

Fraternities and sororities have been noted to provide a sense of belonging, which increases institutional affinity for alma mater (Harrel-Hallmark et al., 2022) and

encompasses where a student is connected and integrated into a community and cared for and supported by its members (Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). A welcoming and safe environment facilitates students' sense of belonging (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Sororities and fraternities provide a sense of belonging for Students of Color (Strayhorn, 2012) as well as first-generation students (Harrel-Hallmark et al., 2022).

Hazing is another critical issue facing fraternities and sororities, although it is not well understood (Biddix et al., 2014). Compared to other student populations, fraternity/sorority members and athletes often report more frequent exposure to or experiences with hazing (Allan et al., 2019; Allan & Madden, 2012). Further, fraternity and sorority members may view hazing as fun rather than harmful (Campo et al., 2005). Definitions of hazing vary but typically encompass activities or behaviors expected of newcomers to obtain full membership or status in a group (Cimino, 2011). These activities can be degrading and harmful, and they may detract from college students' development and success (Allan et al., 2020).

Other research indicates that these norms cede social status to alcohol use (Sasso & Schwitzer, 2016). Fraternity and sorority members generally engaged in greater alcohol use before coming to college, experienced significant increases in alcohol consumption after arriving at college, and were significantly more likely than non-members to engage in binge drinking (Capone et al., 2007; Soule et al., 2015).

Chapters usurp national risk management policies to include their own informal policies about alcohol and drug use (Myers & Sasso, 2022). Other chapters construct their own rituals and rites of passage (Sasso, 2015). Alcohol interventions have had little or no effect on reducing alcohol consumption in fraternity and sorority members (Scott-Sheldon et

al., 2016). However, other critical research has also called for a deeper, nuanced understanding of how alcohol and other experiences contribute to the overall sorority and fraternity experience within chapters (Biddix et al., 2014; Biddix, 2016; Sasso et al., 2020a, 2020b). Assessment of surveys through student evaluation and feedback, in working towards construct validity, is one approach to gaining a deeper understanding of undergraduate sorority/fraternity experience and perceptions and it was implemented in the methodology of this study (Barber et al., 2020).

## **Methods**

### **Design**

This was a phenomenological qualitative multi-site case study. It tethered a multi-site case study approach to better understand the nuances between governing councils and phenomenology to describe sorority/fraternity experiences in relation to the five FSES themes. Phenomenology “examines how a participant experiences and later describes a particular phenomenon” (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 146). The researchers sought to identify the different and many ways that sorority and fraternity members understand their chapter experiences in relation to the five constructs or themes of the FSES (Learning, Values, Alcohol/Social Issues, Operations, and Community). Phenomenology was selected because it centers participant experiences and voice by emphasizing the words expressed by the participants. This allowed the researchers to understand how these perceptions and experiences relate to the phenomenon rather than basing case study findings on their own interpretations (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021)

A multi-site phenomenological approach was selected because the student focus groups were organized across different governing council identities which included



Interfraternity Council (IFC), Multicultural Greek Council (MCGC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), and Panhellenic Council (PHC) at different institutions. A multi-site case study was also used “to gain an in-depth knowledge of an organizational phenomenon that had barely been researched . . . it involves the observation and analysis of several sites using namely cross-case comparisons and explanation building techniques to analyze data (Audet & d’Amboise, 2001, p. 3). The study teams chose this design because it allows researchers to gather different rich descriptive interpretations of participant experiences. Examining multiple cases provides a broader description of experiences and social issues facing student communities (Audet & d’Amboise, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2018).

Additionally, this research design challenges generalizations about the phenomenon and how participants experience it using multiple case studies drawn from focus groups (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). To mitigate the influence of predetermination and guide the study by naturalistic inquiry, multi-case study phenomenology does not begin with a hypothesis about the phenomenon of study (Jenkins et al., 2018; Sokolowski, 2000). This inquiry was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do undergraduate students describe their fraternity/sorority chapter experience? and (2) How do undergraduate students conceptualize broader social issues facing their student community including hazing, diversity, alcohol, and sexual assault?

This study followed the research design of similar previous studies that examine college subculture using focus groups (Frederick et al., 2018; Myers & Sasso, 2022). Similar qualitative approaches using focus groups have been applied to develop a nuanced understanding of sorority and fraternity student culture (Myers & Sasso, 2022) and have been used for construct validity for assessment instruments (Ouimet et al., 2004).

Focus groups were appropriate for this multi-case study, as they can be conducted with a small group of participants to examine a specific topic (Patton, 2014). Billups (2012) recognized focus groups as a methodology to use to consider college student characteristics and preferences. Macnaughten and Myers (2004) recommend that “focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives - but don’t” (p. 65). Using focus groups allowed for item generation and refinement for the FSES, which is a critical step in instrument development (Ouimet et al., 2004). In conducting survey research, the psychometric literature focuses on reliability and validity of items, rather than how the items emerged or evolved (Nassar-McMillan et al., 2010; Rowan & Wulff, 2007).

### **Sampling Procedure and Participants**

In congruence with multi-case phenomenology, this study used a maximum variation strategy to construct a multi-site sample across institutional and governing council types (IFC, MGCG, NPHC, and PHC) using selection criteria as outlined by Jones et al. (2013). A large public research institution, mid-size urban public institution, and small private institution were selected to represent a maximum variation of institutional missions and sizes of fraternity and sorority communities. Council types are historically and socially constructed across gender and segregated across ethnicity (Sasso et al., 2020b). Thus, focus groups were organized according to these different student communities at each research site at the study host institutions (Jones et al., 2013). This stratification of institutional type was included to examine the differences in student experiences and social issues across governing councils.

Participants were recruited through gatekeepers at each host institution; these campus-based professionals communicated and shared a standardized recruitment

solicitation (Jones et al., 2013). Gatekeepers were identified through professional networks using a process identified by Jones et al. (2013) in which their participation was solicited to organize initial communication to potential participants. The gatekeepers did not receive any compensation or incentives, and they did not select participants.

**Table 1**

*Participant Summary Table*

	Large Public Research	Mid-Size Urban	Small Private
NPHC Men	X	X	X
NPHC Women	X	X	X
MCGC Men	X	X	X
MCGC Women	X	X	X
IFC Men	X	X	X
PHC Women	X	X	X

**Data Collection**

During the focus groups, researchers used a semi-structured interview guide with probing questions. With probing, participants were asked a general question followed by more specific follow-up questions to elicit further information about their responses. Researchers used clarification of meaning when the participants used vague language, institutional-specific vernacular, or undergraduate colloquialism. During each focus group, students reviewed the FSES, answered specific questions from the survey, and described

how they interpreted the questions. Facilitators asked students their opinions, encouraging students to highlight uncomfortable, confusing, or inapplicable questions.

Four facilitators individually led each focus group and were trained on group processes and the use of the interview protocol. Each session lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and the focus group facilitator took notes and shared those with the research team. Interviews took place on each campus in a location arranged by the gatekeeper on each campus to facilitate increased authenticity of responses. Participants received a standard informed consent form during each focus group.

The topics explored through the interview guide were informed by previous research related to sorority and fraternity issues. Although uncommon in phenomenology, focus groups were selected because previous research suggests the interconnectedness of sorority and fraternity members, which allowed the researchers to preserve the individual lived experience within a group context (Myers & Sasso, 2022). Previously, focus groups have been conducted to uncover the process respondents used to answer survey questions (Drennan, 2003). Focus groups have also been used in other studies about undergraduate college students to refine content or explore the construct validity of an assessment instrument (Frederick et al., 2018; Ouimet et al., 2004).

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Findings were conceptualized through the interpretive relativist ontology paradigm. In this, epistemology assumes that the researcher cannot separate themselves from what they know (Patton, 2014). Phenomenological data analysis was selected to explore how sorority and fraternity members co-constructed meaning about their chapter experiences and social issues across the multiple case studies. This method was selected to analyze the data from

the cognitive focus groups because its “purpose of psychology as a human science is precisely the clarification of the meanings of phenomena experienced by human persons” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 98).

Case study boundaries were defined by governing council and institutional setting (see Table 1). Using these boundaries helped the researchers to better understand the differences across councils, particularly related to culturally-based sororities and fraternities. This also allowed the researchers to identify patterns across student experiences and nuances between different council types to ensure the FSES can be culturally inclusive (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Giorgi, 2009).

To begin analysis, the researchers used memoing to bracket assumptions and “sensitize to potential pattern of the data” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 82). During focus groups, the researchers took observation notes and memos about focus group participants’ voice tone, behavior, and affect. These were included in the multiphasic coding process. Researchers met and reviewed recordings and notes to synthesize focus group responses into coded themes.

The researchers used the constant comparative method, which involved data comparison through each stage of analysis to advance coding development. The researchers engaged in memo-writing to elucidate categories, clarify their properties, and define relationships between categories. A team of five developed the codebook and analyzed the data through a consensus coding approach. Data coding followed the iterative process of Saldaña (2021) by using open and focused coding. After the codebook was finalized through the iterative process, a final phase of coding began.

Each researcher independently coded the transcripts before the team met to compare coded transcripts. There were high levels of agreement after the independent coding phase. A resolved and fully coded transcript was considered when all team members reached a consensus. The codes were then used in comparison to the survey questions. Then, coded transcripts were entered into qualitative analysis software to assist with collapsing final codes into themes using code mapping as an organizing heuristic. A number of trustworthiness strategies were used, including: (1) consensus coding; (2) member checking using the interview transcript data; (3) observation notes from focus groups, (4) reviewing and questioning the main themes and questions to clarify researcher bias; and (5) a review by subject matter experts (Jones et al., 2013).

### **Findings**

Student focus groups were applied to inform survey redesign in which students were presented with the FSES thematic subsections (Learning, Values, Alcohol/Social Issues, Operations, and Community). Participants revealed concerns and perspectives about what is meaningful for them as fraternity and sorority members. These include student development and learning, how their organization provides belonging or community, and social issues related to substance misuse. There were also differences between culturally-based organizations.

### **Student Learning**

Participants shared their experiences and other individual learning outcomes. They indicated that their sorority/fraternity experiences provided them with learning through networking, campus involvement, and friendship. Further, they suggested these experiences facilitated their personal growth and leadership development. One student stated, “It helped me

grow as a person, I can see it within the other girls in the house that have grown more sure of themselves . . . it puts a spark in them.”

Culturally-based organizations in the MCGC focus groups specifically highlighted that networking helped them connect to others who shared their identities. They suggested these connections increased racial salience to reinforce their identity development. NPHC members and MCGC chapters added that their experiences instilled the concept of time management and taught them that having an active voice on campus was essential. They felt their smaller chapter sizes and identities were often overlooked, so having a voice also connected to their sense of leadership development in a nuanced way from their IFC and PHC peers.

The students also suggested that while there was an expectation to achieve “good grades,” there was no consensus about whether their academic standing was positively or negatively affected by their fraternity/sorority experience. One student stated, “At a school like mine, where the academics are difficult, I have my chapter who is my support group despite the competitive atmosphere.”

Students commented on the support they received from their fellow brothers and sisters. They highlighted examples of academic tutoring and discussions about course material. However, they indicated that more active involvement within their chapter sometimes led to tensions or conflict with their academic obligations. Working through these tensions was often an individual decision. Some students felt they learned more from their chapter involvement, as one participant reflected, “I learn more in my extracurricular activities than I do in the classroom; we have to multi-task.”

NPHC and MCGC members shared that they had improved their time management skills since joining. IFC and PHC members said that they felt academically supported and assisted by

their organizations. There were no institutional distinctions regarding the effects of academic progress.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Students added notions about the campus sorority/fraternity community. They described this community in terms of social networks, engagement with community service, a sense of community, friendship, and campus involvement with other organizations or chapters. Students discussed their sense of belonging only within their chapter. They did not discuss interactions with faculty or peers outside of their organization. Rather, they described their chapters as largely reflecting others like themselves, which they indicated provided them a safe space and belonging. One student stated:

When I first came my sophomore year, I was perfect and already very involved, but when I got into [my fraternity] my grades slipped. Females throw themselves at you and you have to deal with school, family, girls, [the fraternity], and I had a hard time saying no.

All of the councils and schools reported a need to express or share specific examples about the racial/ethnic diversity within their councils/chapters. One student said, “I didn’t define diversity beyond race until the sisterhood. I define diversity differently now that I am part of [sorority].” The focus groups at the small private institution were the only focus group to discuss international diversity. IFC/PHC councils framed diversity as personal differences, social backgrounds, and geographical differences. One student stated, “Geographically-only from [one state].”

Across councils, diversity impacted students’ experiences in their fraternity or sorority differently. Overall, IFC and PHC members did not cite racial and ethnic diversity as an area where their chapter excels, and they were more likely to frame diversity as personal differences



and social backgrounds. MCGC and NPHC members embraced ethnic and racial diversity as priorities for their organization. While some IFC men commented on examples of racial diversity within their chapters, they also recognized that the pool of potential new members is typically racially homogeneous. The PHC women in the focus groups described their sororities as environments where they collaborated with women of diverse backgrounds, majors, and personalities, though several participants expressed concerns about the lack of ethnic diversity within their chapters. However, MCGC women spoke about how their sorority helped them appreciate diverse cultures, which would ease the transition of stepping into environments with people from varying cultures and backgrounds beyond college.

NPHC members reported that their fraternity or sorority affiliation became intertwined with who they were. As a result, NPHC members spoke about how they could not separate themselves from their chapter, though one NPHC woman acknowledged that her organization's high status on campus inspired her to succeed more. At times, however, members' affiliations eclipsed their individual identities. For example, one White NPHC member explained that he was known more as "the White Kappa" than by his own personality and accomplishments.

Finally, fraternity and sorority members described how their chapter experiences provided a smaller community within the larger university context. One MCGC sorority member felt that as a first-generation student, she was living in two worlds between her college and home communities. Through her sorority, she found a home at her university.

## **Social Issues**

### ***Alcohol***

Across each council, members admitted to regular alcohol use but did not consider alcohol abuse to be a chapter or campus problem. Often, members attempted to separate their fraternity

or sorority membership from their alcohol use. For example, one member explained, “Drinking happens. We’re college students, but it is not a part of our chapter. You can’t wear your letters and [be] drinking.” While members viewed drinking as typical college student behavior, they did not want this behavior to be associated with their chapter.

Members also described how alcohol use manifested differently across councils. For example, one MCGC sorority member observed, “Since we don’t have houses, it’s not as big of a problem as it is for IFC/PHC. I wouldn’t say it’s not a problem for us, but not anywhere close to the extent.” Other members felt that students’ alcohol use was difficult to regulate. One NPHC sorority member said, “People come to our parties intoxicated, but it is out of our control.” PHC members felt knowledgeable of preventative measures and accountability systems to use when necessary.

### ***Hazing***

Students from all councils stated that hazing is a problem for fraternities and sororities. However, students also stated that it was not an issue for their chapter or council. Members described institutional policies and programs related to hazing prevention on their campuses and indicated that hazing was worse in the past than the current era. One IFC member said,

Our organization has been clamping down, there has been some national incidents and small incidents are being taken out of hand, our national organization is really taking those things serious and implementing a process to not allow those things to happen. Enforcement of hazing prevention policies by inter/national organizations as well as their campuses decreased the perceived prevalence of hazing. Participants indicated that informing members of the policies against hazing and the reasons for those policies has contributed to a decrease in hazing.

Notably, PHC sorority members conceptualized hazing differently between fraternities and sororities. Specifically, the PHC members suggested that fraternities implement hazing that is physically intense, whereas sororities tend to use emotional hazing on their members. In the focus groups, several IFC fraternity members expressed that the definition of hazing is broad, which leads to a spectrum of behaviors classified as hazing.

Further, students from the different campuses had varying experiences with hazing in NPHC organizations. NPHC members at both large research and urban campuses admitted to allegations of hazing or acknowledged that hazing has occurred. One student said, “Our chapter has had allegations of hazing semester after semester; it’s caused attention from the national chapter to cause us accountability internally. It’s hard to stop something that’s not in your control.” NPHC members also indicated that their institutions treated hazing allegations in NPHC fraternities and sororities more sternly than in IFC fraternities. However, NPHC focus groups at the private institution stated that hazing does not happen because they are too regulated by the institution.

### *Sexual Assault*

Finally, fraternity and sorority members discussed their perceptions of sexual assault as a social issue on their campuses and in their fraternity and sorority communities. Sorority members recognized the association between alcohol use and sexual assault. Additionally, members indicated that environmental differences impacted sexual assault in fraternities and sororities. One MCGC sorority member observed that many IFC and PHC organizations have their own facilities that make it easier for sexual assault to occur.

IFC men believed that sexual assault was a campus issue rather than a chapter issue and perceived that sorority members have a culture of looking out for each other to reduce sexual

assault incidents. At the small private institution, PHC members suspected that sexual assault may be a more prevalent issue than people realize due to the stigma behind reporting the assault. One PHC member from the small private institution commented, “Sexual assault has probably taken place at every fraternity house here. It happens everywhere, and as much as people try to ignore it; it happens.” Further, PHC members felt that the threat of students hurting each other was more serious than strangers coming on campus; they indicated that many reports of sexual assault within the institution had not received proper attention and response.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this student focus group study informed the design of the FSES instrument by exploring questions from the five thematic constructs of the FSES (Learning, Values, Alcohol/Social Issues, Operations, and Community). Participants shared their perspectives about their lived experiences and concerns about their chapters, which elucidated several themes. Participants in the focus groups expressed individual desires for belonging and learning. The findings from this study also suggest that sorority/fraternity members are concerned about three primary social issues: hazing, substance abuse, and sexual assault.

The revision process involved two phases using the framework by Saldaña (2021). The first was concept and construct mapping using the focus group findings, and the second phase was the use of subject matter experts. Initially, each of these themes was mapped for survey revision for increased criterion and content validity to focus the survey into a 33-item survey within the five main thematic areas. The findings from student learning influenced the reconceptualization of the Learning and Values sections, which measure cognitive and moral development. The Operations and Community sections measure chapter performance and community development to include diversity questions. These sections were influenced by the

sense of belonging findings. In particular, the social issues findings were connected to create more robust questions related to substance misuse, hazing, and sexual assault.

The second phase involved the use of subject matter experts to check for reliability in two separate groups. The initial check was the FSES advisory board, which represents 14 campus professionals, scholars, and fraternity/sorority headquarters staff. The last check was with a feedback session hosted at the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors annual conference in which attendees represented a continuum of campus-based professionals and national organization headquarters staff. Attendees at both sessions were asked to validate and or suggest gaps in the responses. Like the student focus groups, they suggested clarity with substance abuse, cultural competence, and values questions, such as clarifying between legal and illegal drugs and differences in environments between chapter houses (on-campus or off-campus).

The findings from this study can be replicated to inform validation of constructs for a quantitative survey using focus groups. Specifically, the FSES findings results can be used to strengthen data-informed discussions, planning, and decision-making. Applying these results will lead to more confident assessment practice and strides in improving fraternity/sorority communities. Developing a culture that promotes data-based decision-making requires strong leadership from campus administrators and headquarters leaders. Fraternity and sorority environments influence individual behavior (McCabe et al., 2005). As fraternities and sororities are among the most cohesive peer groups on campus, understanding their individual experience is a complex undertaking.

Historical research on fraternities/sororities has been limited, shallow, or not highly contextualized (Cogswell et al., 2020), but the FSES offers a promising new data set. With a broad and large sample, the survey results offer insights into current fraternity/sorority

membership, behaviors, and outcomes as well as promising insights on members' perceptions of their experiences. These results also provide a new baseline into what we know about fraternities and sororities and suggest areas for further investigation.

Campuses and headquarters that use the FSES may disaggregate the data in meaningful ways. For example, segmenting the data by chapter, council, and community for new and active members, as well as leaders and non-leaders, provides colleges and universities an opportunity to compare their results to those of peer institutions. As Hevel and Bureau (2014) noted, assessment data, "allow advocates to promote these organizations as a value-added experience at least in terms of these educational outcomes" (p. 29). For fraternity or sorority headquarters staff, survey results are segmented by chapter, region, and organization for comparison purposes. Both perspectives provide fraternity and sorority professionals with a comprehensive picture of the health of their communities and provide the necessary assessment data to improve and transform fraternity/sorority life.

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study used findings to inform the revision of a quantitative instrument. Thus, there are some boundaries to the transferability of the salient themes and methodology. Different interviewers conducted focus groups, which all may have influenced the responses of participants. Previous research also notes the social desirability of sorority/fraternity members (Sasso & Schwitzer, 2016) which may have influenced participant responses in focus groups. However, focus groups have been effective for sorority/fraternity members specifically within phenomenology, but may limit participant responses due to time or the limited phenomenological foci constraints (Myers & Sasso, 2022). Individual interviews may yield even more in-depth data and findings, particularly for construct validity survey validation.

This study used an interactive process for consensus coding but did not use specific intercoder reliability protocols. Additionally, the nuances of race and culture may not have specifically represented all culturally-based organizations and the esoteric nature of sororities and fraternities. A final limitation of this study was that while it focused on race and ethnicity, the research did not tease out gender identity and sexuality. The final instrument includes questions on these topics so that results can be disaggregated, but they were not isolated during the focus groups, or the work presented here. Future research should consider these transferability boundaries and utilize individual semi-structured with narrative inquiry approaches to gain even deeper, nuanced understandings to revise future instruments about college student experiences.

### **Implications For Practice**

There are a number of implications for practice that can be gleaned for student affairs professionals related to the utility of focus groups and from the findings of this study. First, focus groups can be a useful methodology for gaining insights from students about their co-curricular experiences. Focus groups enable a researcher or practitioner to explore a topic where little is known. Interviewers can speak with a small group of students about their experiences with specific questions, and in real time, probe with follow-up questions to hear how multiple responses evolve across a discussion (Billups, 2012). Student affairs practitioners can use focus groups to explore how or why questions, solicit feedback on new ideas, and contextualize survey findings (Morgan, 1997). In this instance, the researchers used focus groups to identify dimensions of the collegiate experience, understand values and priorities, and calibrate findings from earlier focus groups to confirm reliability.

Findings from this study clustered into three categories: student learning, sense of belonging, and social issues. Insights about each of these could lead to new understandings and actions for advisors, campus policies and structures, and headquarters staff. For example, student learning findings from these focus groups reinforce earlier work on the positive impacts of the sorority/fraternity experience as accountability groups for academic performance and time management (Sasso et al., 2020a). In the sessions, students shared that the support they received from their fellow brothers or sisters motivated them and held them accountable for their academic performance. Advisors could use this insight to create structure for chapter study tables, affording time for discussion at the start or the end of session to ask for help, get inspiration, and connect.

With sense of belonging, students described dimensions of community and how their chapters reflected others like themselves, providing a safe space and the feeling of belonging which supports previous research (Harrel-Hallmark et al., 2022). Further, examples of differences were named in the fraternity and sorority context. Campus staff could consider these findings as inspiration for structured conversations on inclusion and differences. Further, within programming that is centrally organized, staff can model or encourage students to speak about differences across contexts.

This research's findings affirm earlier studies' findings about alcohol and hazing amongst undergraduate students (Myers & Sasso, 2022; Sasso, 2015). Students, advisors, and headquarters should act in response to the dissociation and named issues: hazing, alcohol use, and sexual assault. Advisors can coach leaders and members on bystander intervention. Organizations and campuses can review policies and intervene to stop unwanted behaviors, and



more deeply, use data and partner with students to create social models where these behaviors are less apt to flourish.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this student focus group study informed the design of the FSES instrument in which they interfaced with the five thematic constructs of the FSES (Learning, Values, Alcohol/Social Issues, Operations, and Community) as a part of this multi-site phenomenological case study. Participants shared their perspectives from their lived experiences and concerns about their chapters, which elucidated several themes which included sense of belonging, learning, and social issues. Sorority/fraternity members were most concerned about hazing, substance abuse, and sexual assault as issues which limit their experiences. The implications of this study demonstrate the value of continuing the FSES and confronting the broader national fraternity and sorority community to measure and address these challenges.

Revisions to the FSES from these student focus groups also added new, additional constructs including belonging and learning as well as revision to other questions. Both the literature and student focus groups informed researchers of experiences not fully captured by the previous versions of the survey. Further research should examine the criterion validity of the revised instrument. The data generated with the FSES will advance a fraternity and sorority culture that promotes informed decision-making with students, campus professionals, and inter/national headquarter leaders.

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