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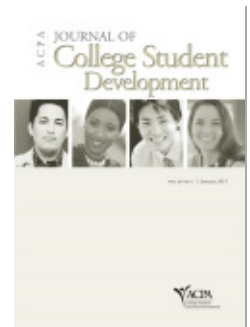
Do Fraternities and Sororities Inhibit Intercultural Competence?

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Do Fraternities and Sororities Inhibit Intercultural Competence?

Georgianna L. Martin Gene Parker Ernest T. Pascarella Sally Blechschmidt

This study explored the impact of fraternity and sorority affiliation on students' development of intercultural competence over four years of college at 11 institutions. Prior research admonishes fraternities and sororities for being largely heterogeneous organizations that detract from institutional efforts to create a culturally competent student body. In the present study, fraternity and sorority members did not differ from their unaffiliated peers on their development of intercultural competence during college. Implications for higher education and student affairs practice and intercultural competence among fraternity/sorority communities is discussed.

The presence of fraternities and sororities on college campuses has been questioned since these organizations emerged in the 19th century (Rudolph, 1962). Researchers have overwhelmingly established that fraternity/

sorority members consume alcohol more often and in larger quantities than do nonaffiliated students (Pace & McGrath, 2002) and exhibit higher levels of academic dishonesty than do nonaffiliated students (McCabe & Bowers, 2009). In the past 10 years, fraternities and sororities have been called to task for nationally publicized incidents of cultural insensitivity. For example, at multiple institutions, fraternities have been put on probation, suspended, and fined for sponsoring racially themed parties where members have dressed in offensive attire (Bartlett, 2001). However, supporters of these organizations taut the positive impact of fraternities/sororities on volunteerism, civic responsibility, involvement in other student organizations, a willingness to donate to charitable causes, engagement in educationally effective practices such as student–faculty

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interaction and collaborative learning (Hayek, Carini, O'Day, & Kuh, 2002), and student retention (Nelson, Halperin, Wasserman, Smith, & Graham, 2006).

Given recent episodes of cultural insensitivity among fraternity/sorority members, one might conclude that fraternal membership may inhibit intercultural competence. The evidence addressing this issue, however, is mixed. Several studies report findings that support the notion of a negative influence of fraternal affiliation on dimensions of intercultural competence (e.g., Antonio, 2001; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996). However, other investigations suggest that fraternal affiliation is essentially unassociated with gains during college on measures of intercultural competence (e.g., Martin, Hevel, Asel, & Pascarella, 2011; Rubin, Ainsworth, Cho, Turk, & Winn, 1999). Still other research has suggested the possibility that fraternity/sorority membership may be positively linked to gains in intercultural competence. For example, Bureau, Ryan, Ahren, Shoup, and Torres (2011) analyzed data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and found that fraternity/sorority members reported higher gains on the Enriching Educational Experiences Scale, a measure that focuses on cocurricular involvement, community service, and interacting with diverse others, than did nonmembers. Further complicating this evidence is the fact that existing research has yet to determine the impact of fraternity/sorority membership on dimensions of intercultural competence over 4 years of college. Drawing on the operational definition used in the Wabash National Study on Liberal Arts Education, we conceptualized intercultural competence as “knowledge of cultures and cultural practices (one’s own and others’), complex cognitive skills for decision making in intercultural contexts, social skills to function effectively in diverse groups, and

personal attributes that include flexibility and openness to new ideas” (King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay, & Van Hecke, 2007, p. 5).

The inconsistent findings on the impact of fraternity/sorority membership on issues related to intercultural competence suggest the importance of continued inquiry in this area. In addition, King and Baxter Magolda (2005) articulated the importance of considering intercultural competence holistically and as students develop over time. The purpose of this study was to estimate the impact of fraternity/sorority membership on students’ development of intercultural competence over 4 years of college using data from a longitudinal, national study.

METHOD

Sampling and Data Collection

The individuals sampled in this study were undergraduate students attending 11 four-year institutions participating in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS) between 2006 and 2010. The WNS is a longitudinal, multi-institutional exploration of liberal arts educational outcomes. The breadth and depth of information gathered on educational outcomes in a longitudinal pretest–posttest design made the WNS an ideal data source for the present study. The institutions in the sample consisted of two comprehensive research universities, three regional universities that did not grant the doctorate, and six liberal arts colleges.

In fall 2006, the WNS collected data for 4,501 students from 19 institutions lasting approximately 90 minutes. Collected data included a precollege survey that gathered information on student background characteristics as well as a series of instruments that measured aspects of students’ cognitive and psychosocial development including intercultural competence. Follow-up data

collection was conducted in spring 2010 at the end of 4 years of college and lasted approximately 2 hours. We collected two types of data during the follow-up: (a) data on students' college experiences and (b) posttest data using the series of instruments measuring aspects of students' intellectual and personal development.

Of the original sample of 4,501 students participating in the initial data collection, 2,212 students participated in the 4-year follow-up data collection in spring of 2010, for a response rate of 49.1%. In the present study, we used student responses from 11 of the original 19 institutions, resulting in usable data for 1,263 students. We selected these 11 institutions because each reported the presence of a fraternity and/or sorority community on campus. Of the 11 institutions, 7 had multicultural fraternities and sororities on campus. Using information supplied by each institution, we weighted the sample to adjust for response bias by institution, sex, race, and ACT score. Additional details of sampling, data collection procedures, and instrumentation used in the WNS can be obtained online (Pascarella, 2007).

Dependent Variables

We measured our dependent variable, intercultural competence, using two scales: the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (MGUDS) and the Openness to Diversity/Challenge (ODC) scale. The MGUDS consisted of 15 items measuring one's universal-diverse orientation (Miville et al., 1999). This orientation is characterized by an attitude of awareness and acceptance of differences among people. The reliability measure for the MGUDS total scale score was .80 to .85 in the present study. The second measure used to assess intercultural competence, the ODC scale, contains seven items assessing an individual's openness to racial and cultural

diversity and the degree to which an individual enjoys being challenged by a variety of perspectives, ideas, and values (Pascarella et al., 1996). Reliabilities for the ODC in the present study were .83 to .86.

Independent Variables

The independent variable of interest in this study was membership in a fraternity or sorority. We collected information on this variable using the NSSE that all students completed in spring 2010. This item asked if students were a member of a social fraternity or sorority (coded as 1 = *member*, 0 = *not a member*). Approximately 24.1% of students ($n = 304$) in the study sample reported membership in a fraternity ($n = 135$) or sorority ($n = 169$). Of the 304 students reporting membership in a fraternity or sorority, 20.4% identified as students of color ($n = 62$) and 79.6% identified as White students ($n = 242$).

A particular methodological strength of the WNS is its longitudinal, pretest–posttest design. This design permitted us to introduce a wide range of statistical controls for demographic and precollege characteristics (e.g., sex, race/ethnicity, parental education, ACT [or equivalent], high school involvement in extracurricular activities and community service, precollege academic motivation, high school binge drinking, precollege political views, institutional type, and, perhaps most important, a parallel pretest of each dependent measure). We also employed statistical controls for other experiences students may engage in during college (e.g., participation in athletics, living on campus, number of hours worked on or off campus, and college binge drinking).

Analyses

We conducted analyses in two stages using ordinary least squares regression procedures. In the first stage, we estimated the total effect of

fraternity/sorority affiliation on both measures of intercultural competence. We regressed each intercultural competence measure (MGUDS and ODC) on the dichotomous variable representing fraternity/sorority affiliation versus nonaffiliation plus institutional type and all the control variables previously described. In the second stage of analyses, we estimated the direct effect of fraternity or sorority affiliation on intercultural competence. We regressed each intercultural competence measure on fraternity/sorority affiliation and all predictors included in the total effect model plus select college experiences including place of residence, work responsibilities, athletic involvement, and college binge drinking.

We also conducted additional analyses to explore conditional effects of fraternity/sorority membership. We created three cross-product terms between (a) fraternity/sorority affiliation and sex, (b) fraternity/sorority affiliation and race/ethnicity, and (c) fraternity/sorority affiliation and institutional type to determine if the magnitude of the effect of fraternity/sorority affiliation on each dependent measure was different for different groups of students. We added the cross-product terms to the direct effects model specified above. Because the cross-product terms were not significant across either dependent measures, we report only those results based on the total and direct effects models. We report standardized regression coefficients, or effect sizes, for all analyses. All analyses we report are based on the weighted sample estimates adjusted to the actual sample size to obtain correct standard errors.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the regression analyses for the net effects of fraternity/sorority affiliation on both measures of intercultural competence. Fraternity/sorority affiliation does not appear

to have any significant unique impact on either measure of intercultural competence over 4 years of college. After applying statistical controls for a host of precollege confounding influences, our total effects model revealed slightly negative, although not significant, total effects of fraternity/sorority membership on both intercultural competence measures (MGUDS $b = -.010$, ODC $b = -.040$). It is not surprising that, taking into account precollege characteristics and several confounding college experiences in the direct effects model, we found no significant effects on either measure (MGUDS $b = .000$, ODC $b = -.058$). In other words, fraternity and sorority members are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged in their development of intercultural competence over 4 years of college.

We ran additional analyses to explore the possible conditional effects of sex and fraternity/sorority membership, race/ethnicity and fraternity/sorority membership, and institutional type and fraternity/sorority membership. We found no significant cross-product conditional effects.

DISCUSSION

Overall, these findings suggest that membership in a fraternity or sorority does not have a significant impact on students' development of intercultural competence over 4 years of college. Our findings contradict prior research that demonstrated a negative impact of fraternity/sorority membership on students' diversity-related attitudes, values, and competence (Antonio, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1996). In contrast, the findings in the present study are consistent with those of Martin et al. (2011), who also found no significant differences between members of fraternities and sororities and nonmembers during the first year of college. Martin et al. used the same measures of intercultural

TABLE 1.
Estimated Effects of Fraternity or Sorority Affiliation on Intercultural Competence
Over 4 Years of College

Independent Variables	Intercultural Competence			
	MGUDS ^a (n = 1,263)		ODC ^a (n = 1,263)	
	Total Effects	Direct Effects	Total Effects	Direct Effects
Male (vs. Female)	.074	.075	.014	-.008
Students of Color (vs. White)	.267**	.268**	.295**	.301**
Parental Education ^a	.030	.035	-.051	-.058
ACT Score ^a	.004	.009	.047	.036
Precollege Academic Motivation ^a	-.066*	-.067*	.000	.002
High School Involvement ^a	.109**	.107**	.080*	.079*
Precollege Conservative Political Views ^a	-.031	-.028	-.080*	-.079*
High School Binge Drinking ^b	.007	.009	-.016	-.015
Pretest ^a	.601**	.599**	.484**	.486**
Liberal Arts College (vs. Other Institutions)	.134	.088	.162*	.133
Fraternity or Sorority Member	-.010	.000	-.040	-.058
Lives On Campus (vs. Lives Off Campus)		.140		-.031
Hours Worked On Campus ^a		.007		.008
Hours Worked Off Campus ^a		.025		-.052
Athlete (vs. Not an Athlete)		-.013		.112
College Binge Drinking ^b		.015		.042
R ²	.439	.443	.330	.335

Note. The values presented here are effect sizes, or the metric regression coefficient divided by the pooled standard deviation of the dependent variable outcome. Thus, the effect size indicates that fraction of a standard deviation that affiliated students are advantaged or disadvantaged (depending on the sign) relative to unaffiliated students. The effect sizes for fraternity/sorority affiliation are bolded as this was the independent variable of interest in the present study. MGUDS = Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale; ODC = Openness to Diversity/Challenge scale.

^a Indicates variable has been standardized.

^b Reference group is students who reported they did not binge drink.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

competence (i.e., MGUDS and ODC) and the same group of students used in the present study to explore fraternity/sorority effects on intercultural competence during the first year of college. Taken together, both of these studies may challenge prevailing assumptions that fraternal organizations inhibit efforts to

promote diversity experiences on campus.

It is also important to note the lack of significant conditional effects in the present study. Prior research on the fraternal experience suggests that different groups of students (e.g., men vs. women) may have significantly different experiences and outcomes from

membership in a fraternity/sorority (Pascarella et al., 1996; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001). In this study, however, we found no significant conditional effects, suggesting that regardless of a fraternity/sorority member's sex, race, or type of institution attended, any differences in growth on intercultural competence were likely due to chance, not membership in a fraternity/sorority. Given that the present study contradicts gender differences found in prior research on the fraternal experience, more research is needed to explore the role that gender may play in fraternity/sorority members' development of intercultural competence during college.

College and university educators should emphasize cocurricular educational experiences that focus on cross-racial interactions, multicultural training, and cross-cultural communication. Positive outcomes occur when fraternity/sorority members are involved in enriching educational experiences (Bureau et al., 2011). In a single institutional study, Edwards (2009) found that sorority members who participated in a multicultural training were more likely to diversify their chapter than their sisters who did not partake in the training. Requiring multicultural training of both fraternal leaders and general membership

may increase these students' interest in creating diverse organizations. Furthermore, opportunities for fraternity/sorority members to engage in activities outside of their chapter may connect students to the institution and community beyond their organization.

In sum, these findings paint a different portrait of the impact of fraternity/sorority membership than prior research. The benefits of developing culturally competent citizens continue to be an undeniable educational interest. Supporters of the fraternal experience may be quick to view these findings as a positive endorsement of these organizations. However, it is worth remembering that fraternities/sororities are organizations whose rhetoric purports to hold members to high standards. Although no significant difference is perhaps a better result for fraternity/sorority supporters than a negative impact, the value and contribution of these organizations to students' development of intercultural competence may still be in question.

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