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Exploring Relationships Between Fraternity and Sorority Membership and Socially Responsible Leadership

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EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FRATERNITY AND SORORITY MEMBERSHIP AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

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Membership in social fraternities and sororities provides a powerful platform for developing college students' capacity for leadership. The existing knowledge regarding the extent to which it fulfills this goal, however, is relatively sparse. Much of the research on college student leadership relies on definitions that are inconsistent with contemporary conceptualizations. This study addresses this gap by looking at the leadership development of fraternity and sorority members using data from a national study grounded in the social change model. Results indicated fraternity and sorority members scored highest on the leadership value of commitment and lowest on the capacity to navigate change. Findings also revealed statistically significant differences across seven of eight leadership measures based on membership in sororities versus fraternities.

Social fraternities and sororities have a long history in American higher education and were formed as a means to create community and a sense of affiliation while promoting leadership, service, and scholarship (Owen, 1991). Leadership development in particular has served as an instrumental dimension of the fraternity and sorority experience, with membership serving as a platform to learn and practice skills (Harms, Woods, Roberts, Bureau, & Green, 2006; Kelley, 2008; Strange, 1986). A substantial amount of research examines the relationship between membership in fraternities and sororities and leadership development. However, much of this research relies on atheoretical conceptualizations or those that are inconsistent with contemporary interpretations (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

Leadership Research and Fraternity and Sorority Involvement
Early research exploring undergraduate leadership development was conducted by Astin (1993), who found that the greatest gains were associated with high degrees of peer interaction, particularly in experiences such as social fraternity and sorority membership. Follow-up research by Kezar and Moriarty (2000) found membership in a sorority to be a significant predictor of leadership ability among White women. Membership did not emerge as a predictor among African American women or White or African American men. Antonio (2001) examined the influence of cross-racial interactions on leadership development by splitting his sample to compare students reporting significant cross-racial friendships from those that reported more racially homogenous friendship groups. Membership in fraternities and sororities emerged as a significant predictor of leadership development for students with racially homogenous friendships, but not for those with racially heterogeneous friendships.

The work of the above researchers suffers, however, from definitional and measurement limitations. Classification of students as leaders was reliant on variables reflecting more leader-

centric assumptions and behaviors (e.g., leadership as positional role attainment). More recent research attempted to compensate for limitations by supplementing analyses with leadership-related outcomes consistent with contemporary conceptualizations (e.g., multicultural awareness, civic responsibility, self-confidence). However, the research designs still relied heavily on leader-centric measurements (e.g., positional role attainment, popularity, social self-confidence, drive to achieve), further perpetuating a hierarchical and power-structured approach.

Contemporary research is often limited by the size and diversity of the student sample. A single-campus study using an instrument designed to examine students' perceptions towards leadership based on a hierarchical or systemic orientation collapsed social fraternities and sororities with political organizations and found students were just as likely to identify a hierarchical orientation as a systemic, process-oriented orientation (Thompson, 2006). In another single-site, correlational study examining perceptions of leadership among members of fraternities and sororities, researchers defined three forms of leadership (social influence, transformational, and positional) and examined them using predictors related to key personality traits, which included extraversion, agreeability, dominance, and hope for power (Harms et al., 2006). Predictors of positional role attainment were associated with more industrial paradigm values of hope for power and dominance, while both social influence and transformational leadership were related to more post-industrial values such as agreeableness and conscientiousness (Harms et al., 2006).

Theoretically grounded research on fraternity and sorority leadership is limited and typically uses the model posited by Kouzes and Posner (1987), which suggests five behaviors that individuals practice at times when they achieve their personal best as leaders. These include: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart. The authors later adapted this model for specific use by college students and added an assessment instrument designed for measurement purposes (Kouzes & Posner, 1998). Researchers have consistently found that perceptions of leader effectiveness within social fraternities and sororities is a function of the extent to which the individual exhibits the behaviors associated with the model and that there are not significant differences based on membership in fraternities versus sororities (Adams & Keim, 2002; Posner, 2004; Posner & Brodsky, 1992, 1994). The lack of significant differences based on gender is inconsistent with research on gender differences in leadership development outside of the fraternity and sorority context (Astin & Leland, 1991; Dugan, 2006a; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between fraternity and sorority membership and socially responsible leadership; a measure theoretically grounded using the social change model of leadership development (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996). The social change model was selected for its recognition as the most commonly employed theoretical model on college campuses and its congruence with contemporary conceptualizations of leadership (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). The model takes a values-based and process-oriented approach grounded in collaboration and a desire for positive social change (HERI). This is accomplished through the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes across three domains: individual (consciousness of self, congruence, commitment), group (collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility), and societal (citizenship). Interactions across the values in each domain lead to an eighth critical value of change.

The primary research questions in this study were:
1. How do fraternity and sorority members score nationally on eight, theoretically grounded measures of leadership?
2. Are there significant differences between sorority and fraternity members' scores across the eight leadership measures?

Method

Data reported in this article were collected as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), a national research project examining influences on college student leadership development. A cross-sectional, quantitative research design was used in combination with standard survey research techniques (Groves et al., 2004).

Sampling Strategy
A multi-level sampling process enhanced the ability to generalize the data across other populations. Purposeful sampling was used to select a group of 55 schools that best represented the diversity of higher education institutions in the United States. Schools were selected from over 150 that responded to a call for participation. Selection was based on criteria established by the research team including size, control, Carnegie classification, geographic location, and theoretical approach to leadership. Of the 55 schools, 52 completed data collection according to the parameters established for the study. Schools with less than 4,000 students submitted full population samples, while institutions with over 4,000 students drew a simple, random sample. The final sample size was 155,716 surveys. A total of 56,854 usable surveys were submitted, resulting in a 37% return rate, which exceeded the 30% typical for web-based research (Crawford, Couper, & Lamais, 2001). Standard data cleaning techniques resulted in the removal of 6,476 cases in which data were purposefully manipulated or the respondent did not complete at least 90% of the primary instrument (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). These cases did not differ statistically from those in the retained sample. The final number of cases was 50,378.

The sample was further reduced for this study by selecting only those cases in which the student identified as a member of a social fraternity or sorority. This resulted in a total of 8,700 cases with the following distribution across Carnegie classifications: 63% research institutions, 24% masters institutions, 12% baccalaureate institutions, and 1% associates colleges. Fourteen percent of institutions were classified as small based on their total undergraduate enrollment (under 3,000), 44% were medium (3,001 – 10,000), and 42% were large (over 10,000). A total of 45% of schools were public and 55% were private. The average age of fraternity and sorority respondents was 21. Slightly more seniors (31%) responded than juniors (26%), sophomores (23%), and freshman (20%). More women (60%) responded than men (40%). The racial composition of the sample was: 79% White, 7 % Multiracial, 5% Asian American, 3% African American/Black, 3% Latino, 2% Race not listed, and .2% Native American.

Instrument
The core of the MSL instrument consisted of the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS), a measure designed to examine each of the values associated with the social change model (Tyree, 1998). Respondents indicated their level of agreement with 68 Likert-like items using a response continuum ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Reliability levels

for the SRLS were previously established in a number of studies (Dugan, 2006a, 2006b; Rubin, 2000). Chronbach alpha levels for the overall MSL sample ranged from .83 on Commitment to .76 on Controversy with Civility. Reliability reflects the use of an instrument with a specific population and not the instrument itself (Krathwohl, 1998). Therefore, alpha levels were calculated for the fraternity and sorority sample and ranged from a low of .75 on Controversy with Civility to a high of .84 on Commitment. See Dugan and Komives (2007) for further details on the MSL instrument and research design.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to examine normative scores for fraternity and sorority members across the eight leadership measures. Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations for each leadership measure as well as a breakdown by sorority versus fraternity membership.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations for fraternity and sorority members across socially responsible leadership measures

Outcome Measure	N	Mean	SD
Consciousness of Self	8,685	3.98	.50
Fraternity Member	3,444	3.95	.52
Sorority Member	5,143	4.01	.48
Congruence	8,686	4.16	.47
Fraternity Member	3,444	4.09	.50
Sorority Member	5,143	4.22	.43
Commitment	8,691	4.24	.48
Fraternity Member	3,444	4.16	.51
Sorority Member	5,143	4.30	.44
Collaboration	8,692	4.01	.45
Fraternity Member	3,444	3.96	.48
Sorority Member	5,143	4.06	.43
Common Purpose	8,693	4.07	.43
Fraternity Member	3,444	4.01	.46
Sorority Member	5,143	4.11	.40
Controversy with Civility	8,678	3.84	.42
Fraternity Member	3,444	3.79	.45
Sorority Member	5,143	3.88	.39
Citizenship	8,689	3.88	.45
Fraternity Member	3,444	3.86	.49
Sorority Member	5,143	3.90	.42
Change	8,687	3.76	.46
Fraternity Member	3,444	3.79	.47
Sorority Member	5,143	3.75	.46

The presence of eight correlated ($r = .49$ to $.80$), dependent variables required the use of multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA). A MANOVA with gender as the independent variable identified statistically significant mean differences with a moderate effect size (Pillai-Bartlett trace = .06, $F = 63.44$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .06$). Follow-up analyses using independent sample

t tests indicated statistically significant mean differences on each of the dependent variables except for Change. Women reported higher mean scores than men across each of the statistically significant measures. Effect sizes suggested that the meaningfulness of differences between fraternity and sorority members' scores was most noteworthy for the following: Congruence ($F = 151.14$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .02$), Commitment ($F = 174.39$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .02$), Collaboration ($F = 94.42$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .01$), Common Purpose ($F = 129.11$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .02$), and Controversy with Civility ($F = 92.42$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .01$).

Discussion

An examination of mean scores indicated students are at or approaching a general level of agreement regarding their capacities across the social change model measures. They do not, however, feel strongly about their abilities in these areas. The fraternity and sorority experience, then, may play an important developmental role given scholars' identification of affiliation as a context for leadership learning (Antonio, 2001; Astin, 1993; Harms et al., 2006; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000).

Fraternity and sorority members scored highest on the value of Commitment ($M = 3.84$) and lowest on the value of Change ($M = 3.76$). These scores are generally consistent with norms reported for the total sample of college students in the national dataset (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Additionally, that fraternity and sorority members' capacities for engaging in Controversy with Civility, Citizenship, and Navigating Change were lowest was consistent with findings from the national sample.

Results from the second research question identified significant and meaningful differences across the leadership measures of Congruence, Commitment, Collaboration, Common Purpose, and Controversy with Civility based on fraternity versus sorority membership. These results differed from previous research that examined potential gender differences using the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) (Adams & Keim, 2000; Posner & Brodsky, 1992, 1994). The findings were consistent with research outside the context of fraternities and sororities that identified gender-based differences in leadership capacity, with higher abilities reported by women (Astin & Leland, 1991; Dugan, 2006a; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003).

Divergent findings could be a function of the different theoretical groundings employed in the research. The behaviors associated with the LPI, while consistent with the contemporary leadership paradigm, reflect transformational leadership theory (Northouse, 2007). This theoretical framework was among the first to differentiate between management and leadership, but is often criticized for retaining leader-centric elements (Northouse). The social change model, however, is grounded more in the family of reciprocal leadership theories that are often cited as being highly congruent with women's leadership approaches (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Kezar et al., 2006). What is unknown from this research is whether the differences in these scores are a function of gender or organizational context (i.e., participation in a sorority versus a fraternity).

Implications

Fraternity and sorority members' general levels of agreement in their capacities across the eight values associated with the social change model suggest there is substantial room for improvement should institutions wish to graduate students demonstrating strong levels of agreement in their abilities across these outcomes. Furthermore, the significant importance of developing students' capacities in this area cannot be understated. According to Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001):

> If institutions are serious about developing lifelong competencies in their students; if they value connecting academic learning with community concerns; and if they desire to graduate a legacy of leaders in businesses, organizations, governments, schools, and neighborhoods, then leadership development programs and activities must be given priority. (p. 23)

Fraternities and sororities have been cited as potentially powerful vehicles in shaping student leadership development (Antonio, 2001; Astin, 1993; Harms et al., 2006; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000), and as such should take a proactive and purposeful role in this process. This begins with the clear articulation of the importance of leadership development to fraternity and sorority missions. Furthermore, leadership development must be supported with intentionally structured experiences that promote leadership development and operate from a clear, theoretical foundation (Cress et al.; Dugan & Owen, 2007).

Educational interventions should target deficiencies in fraternity and sorority members' leadership development. Data from this study indicate these areas include Controversy with Civility, Citizenship, and Change. Students would benefit from training in which conflict is presented as potentially beneficial to learning when navigated in healthy and constructive ways. Positional leaders and older peers within organizations should be trained in how to structure situations in these ways and model behaviors that support and sustain meaningful dialogues across differences. These skills include social perspective taking, active listening, and the ability to demonstrate empathic concern.

The service orientation of fraternities and sororities should also be stressed and connected more directly to leadership. Educators should help chapters to understand the differences between philanthropy and community service, while pressing students to personalize their individual commitments to broader society. Previous research situates service as a powerful vehicle for achieving student leadership gains (Cress et al., 2001; Dugan, 2006b; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000), while theory positions it as an integral component of contemporary leadership (Greenleaf, 2002; HERI, 1996). When leadership and service are treated as two separate dimensions of the fraternity and sorority experience, students suffer. A disconnected approach fails to capitalize on the mutually beneficial and influential learning that can occur from an integrated pedagogy. Therefore, educators should assist students in engaging in meaningful service opportunities and interpreting experiences in the context of their leadership development.

Finally, fraternity and sorority members scored lowest in their abilities to successfully navigate and understand change processes. Educators are encouraged to establish structures that support

student transitions and aid them in their ability to navigate ambiguity. Training in these areas should not be reserved just for those in positional leadership roles, but for all members.

The significant, positive relationship between sorority membership and leadership also has implications for practice. Findings can be used to combat persistent negative stereotypes associated with women's leadership abilities (Eagly & Carli, 2003) and enhance women's aspirations for leadership (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003). Educators are encouraged to use this information as an educative tool to bolster women's self-efficacy to engage in leadership processes and positions. In situations where sorority women work directly with fraternity men, women's approaches to leadership, when reflective of the values associated with the social change model, should be validated. Women demonstrating these skills should also be positioned as role models and peer mentors within the fraternity and sorority system as a means to train and reinforce the importance of reciprocal leadership.

Limitations and Future Research
The analyses conducted in this study provide important baseline data. Results, however, are not causal, which contributes to uncertainty regarding whether they would persist in the presence of additional variables. Future research should expand on this work and examine the extent to which gender maintains an influence when studied in conjunction with other demographic variables and students' pre-college and collegiate experiences. This type of research could also point to important predictors that shape fraternity and sorority members' leadership development.

Further research on this topic is critical to develop a more comprehensive understanding of socially responsible leadership in the context of fraternity and sorority involvement. Analyses in this study treated fraternity and sorority members as a relatively homogenous population and did not differentiate between outcomes based on membership in historically White versus multicultural organizations. Multicultural fraternities and sororities differ across a number of key dimensions including a focus on community service and cultural heritage (Kimbrough, 1995; McKenzie, 1990). These organizations are relatively understudied, having traditionally been examined in the aggregate with traditionally White groups (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Future research should examine whether membership in these organizations produces different influences on student leadership development. Similarly, this study did not directly compare members of fraternities and sororities with unaffiliated students. This type of analysis could contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique contributions of membership on leadership outcomes.

Conclusion

The education and development of college students' leadership potential remains a critically important element of the social fraternity and sorority experience (Harms et al., 2006; Kelley, 2008; Strange, 1986). Membership in these organizations can provide an important developmental foundation and laboratory for practicing key leadership skills. This study addressed calls for an increased understanding of norms related to student leadership development as well as theoretically grounded research on the subject matter. Results provide important benchmarks from which to interpret student development, as well as areas

professionals working directly with students in fraternities and sororities might target for educational interventions. Findings also provide information useful in furthering sorority women's self-concepts as capable leaders.

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