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## **FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES SUPPORT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT! HOW DO WE KNOW?**

**Dan Bureau**  
*Oracle Guest Editor*

This issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* furthers our understanding of how fraternities and sororities help students develop and nurture leadership competence. Since the journal's inception, research on the leadership experiences of members, collegiate and graduate, has been a research priority (e.g. Dugan, 2008; Harms, Wood, Roberts, Bureau, & Green, 2006; Kelley, 2008). However, the reality is that the journal-published research on fraternities and sororities and leadership development is limited (Bureau, 2007). Also, much of the literature indicates that while fraternities and sororities may be forums in which one can practice leadership, some of the most important skills necessary to lead in today's global society, such as the ability to initiate change, are not necessarily developed in the fraternity/sorority context (Dugan, 2008; Gerhardt, 2008). However, we continue to say, without sufficient evidence, that these organizations support leadership development. The articles in this journal help advance the argument that leadership development occurs in and is a priority for undergraduate fraternal organizations.

Dr. J. Patrick Biddix and Ms. Rachel Underwood present evidence that a leadership program offered by an inter/national fraternity can provide tools students perceive as necessary for leading their chapters. The authors analyzed ten years of data. They found students who participated in the leadership program were likely to move into positions such as president and pledge educator: two roles that have wide influence in chapters. This may be attributed to another finding that participants felt they had developed the tools to enact change in their organization. Such findings serve as a response to Dugan (2008) who found that navigating change was the skill with which fraternity and sorority members struggled most.

Because consciousness of self, including knowing one's values and beliefs, is an essential part of being a leader (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996), Biddix and Underwood's finding that participants will use the principles and values espoused by the organization in their leadership roles is extraordinary. At least in this context, this research helps us to know that a leadership program helped over 2000 fraternity men, over a ten-year span, develop tools for enacting change and base their leadership approach on principles.

Dr. Genevieve Evans Taylor has examined the extent to which member organizations of the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) provide leadership education. Additionally, she reviewed perceptions of how such programs support the development of essential skills identified in women's leadership development theory. Of 18 NPC organizations reporting, all provided leadership education for members. While not surprising, the unanimity of the importance of leadership education and the numerous forums in which these organizations provide such training indicates leadership development is indeed an important objective for those who administer these organizations at the national level. The additional findings that there are specific attributes of women's leadership development that these organizations emphasized and

the efficacy of training in these areas also provide interesting insight into leadership development in sororities.

From Evans Taylor's research, we now know that NPC organizations emphasize cultivating values and perceive that their training is effective. We also know that there are other areas of women's leadership development that can be strengthened to help sorority members develop well-rounded leadership competence.

Dr. Eric Atkinson, Dr. Laura Dean, and Dr. Michelle M. Espino conducted a qualitative study of how leadership development occurs within culturally based organizations. A secondary question was the extent to which the competencies developed by these students were aligned with broad learning and development objectives of the Division of Student Affairs of The University of Georgia (the site of the study). The authors found that important leadership skills such as working with diverse others, handling adversity, balancing conflict and friendships, standing up for one's beliefs, event planning, delegation, and time management were skills students learned through their involvement in these organizations. It is known from other research that social identity influences leadership identity development (Dugan, 2006). It has also been determined that membership in culturally based organizations foster an increased sense of one's ethnic and racial identity (Guardia & Evans, 2008).

These factors in mind, the work of Atkinson, Dean, and Espino helps strengthen assertions that leadership development, social identity, and fraternity and sorority membership are integrated in very powerful ways. Additionally, this research provides evidence that such organizations advance the overall goals of divisions of student affairs including fostering learning, developing leadership competence, and strengthening multicultural competence. As we advocate for fraternities and sororities as relevant and meaningful contributors to higher education, findings indicate culturally based organizations may be some of the most meaningful and relevant organizations on a college campus.

It could be easy to view the article by Dr. Patricia Witkowsky as limited. Her qualitative study examines leadership in one institutional context with two sorority members engaged in a specific leadership practice: leading potential members through an NPC recruitment process. It certainly could not inform the leadership literature broadly right? Yes and No. Qualitative studies often aim to capture the specific experiences of some population and describe those experiences not to generalize but to allow the experiences to be understood in a specific context (Creswell, 2007). The research has limitations and should be read with an understanding of the researcher's methodology and overall study objectives; however, it is a beginning of our understanding of how students perceive this one leadership experience.

Many of us who work with NPC sororities during the formal recruitment process hope our recruitment counselors are not only positively impacting potential members but also developing skills they would not develop in other leadership roles. We hold these roles up with prestige and possibility: apply to be a recruitment counselor and change the lives of potential members and your own! We make big statements, based on anecdotal beliefs that these are roles in which students learn leadership skills. This is the first research, from what I can gather, on how counselors perceived these roles and leadership development as a result of such an experience.

Witkowsky exposed how two women felt the challenge of neutrality, often wanting to be loyal to their chapters: Conflict between organizational and sorority community good presented these women with challenges. Such challenges are real tests for student leaders. Witkowsky found that leadership skills that were developed as a result of serving as a recruitment counselor include integrity, mentoring and public speaking.

Personally, I am inclined to believe serving as a recruitment counselor IS a leadership development opportunity. For others who believe and who aim to provide evidence to back such assertions, Witkowsky is your starting point. Research begets research. Get to work.

To be clear, I BELIEVE fraternities and sororities are environments in which students who have been leaders already and those who may not have been placed into leadership roles can develop leadership competence. As any good researcher, I just hope that such claims are matched with evidence. This issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* adds to the empirical evidence about leadership development as a part of undergraduate fraternal experiences. This issue also presents as many questions as it does answers: we still do not know if the leadership program administered by Phi Fraternity in Biddix and Underwood would work if it was applied on a campus or by another organization. Would the same leadership program work with members of culturally based organizations or are the needs of these students distinctive from those who are members in historically White fraternities and sororities?

I continue to wonder if students who perceive themselves to be leaders and who have demonstrated leadership competence in high school organizations and teams come to us wanting to be members or if our organizations take students with low to average competence in leadership and help them improve their abilities. The environment of the fraternity/sorority community needs to be examined for the extent to which skills are developed, nurtured, improved, or even diminished (think of the challenges of integrity the women in Witkowsky's study had with sorority recruitment – if they are inclined to view the process as lacking integrity, then their previous exploration and development of this value may in fact be undermined by such leadership roles).

We close with a reprint of Don DiPaolo's (2009) article about barriers to student leaders fulfilling their promise. For those of you who have experienced Don, for example at the 2008 Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors Annual Meeting as the opening keynote, you will know he is anything but ordinary. His gift is to challenge people to be more. His article challenges us to be persons who help foster leadership in the fraternal movement. When you read his article, you will see he asks numerous questions that require us to think about how we tell the story of student leaders. One of the barriers he explains is that of the "hidden narrative," which is explained as how we fail to understand students' most intimate thoughts about leadership. I think the fraternal movement, to some extent, has failed itself by relying on our perceptions of students' leadership development as a result of membership. We have not captured students' distinctive and shared stories of how they come to learn how to demonstrate leadership and refine existing leadership skills in the context of these organizations. The good news for those of us invested in the fraternal movement is that this issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* increases our knowledge of these thoughts.

I commend the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors and the Editorial Team of this journal for focusing the first special issue on leadership development. Five years after *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* was launched, it is wonderful to see how one research forum has made a difference within the fraternity/sorority advising profession; specifically, how understanding leadership development in fraternities and sororities has been a priority. Enjoy the readings. I hope it sparks an interest in you to advance our collective knowledge about leadership development in the fraternal movement.

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## Author Autobiography

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