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EXPLORING FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITHIN THE GREEK LIFE SYSTEM

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**EXPLORING FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITHIN
THE GREEK LIFE SYSTEM**

By

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B.A., Communication Studies, 2021

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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In the Graduate School
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The members of the Committee appointed to examine
the Thesis of Clare Fiore
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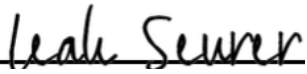
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ABSTRACT

Being a first-generation college student (FGCS) can be intimidating. Being involved in an organization that involves the student in a community of similar minds with different backgrounds can help acclimate the student to college life while giving opportunities for different social and academic growth. Greek life could be that organization. This study aims to learn from FGCS, who are a part of Greek life, what their experiences are like being in both groups. The interviews conducted found that FGCS who are a part of Greek life experience an ease in transition to college life, adjusted expectations, impacted first-year experiences, are in search of a community, and use their connections and experiences in Greek life to lessen the labels that are sometimes attached with being a FGCS.

Thesis Advisor 
Dr. Leah Seurer

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Introduction

Finding one's place during college is tough no matter what kind of background one comes from. When a freshman makes the transition to higher education, regardless of the size or type of institution, they may struggle with any number of challenges such as increased academic workload, learning to understand and navigate their own emotions, or creating new social groups or communities (Srivastava et al., 2009). While these challenges are arguably faced by all students, the transition into college can be extremely taxing for first-generation students whose parents did not attend a four-year university as they are unable to rely on parents to help them develop the social understanding of what college is going to be like. In order for first-generation college students (hereafter FGCS) to build a strong foundation of support, many higher education institutions have worked to create offices that connect students to resources and assistance (Whitley et. al., 2018).

Colleges have put into place a few ubiquitous sources for students like welcome week activities and first-year experience courses for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or demographics. These programs are a step in the right direction, but they may not fully address the needs of FGCS. Campuses across the country have events and organizations devoted to helping students assimilate to college. "Welcome Week" for freshman students is a popular way to get students acclimated and excited for college. For example, the University of Indiana's Office of First Year Experience Programs outlines a welcome week full of campus and academic exploration, learning campus traditions like the fight song, and meeting fellow students (Welcome Week, 2023). They also have an event series created to connect students with resources and activities in categories that range from equity and inclusion to academics and careers (Hoosier Experience, 2023). While programs like welcome week and event series are

helpful to all students, they may not be the best way to help a FGCS because welcome week is only one weeklong and event series may only happen once or twice a month.

First Year Experience courses have also become an option on many campuses. For example, the University of South Dakota offers ASC 100 First Year Experience, or *USD 101* as it is referred to, a course that helps students acclimate to college life and culture both academically and socially. The course also makes sure that students have the needed skills to be successful in and out of the classroom (University of South Dakota Catalog, 2023). The course meets twice a week during the first eight weeks of the fall semester. These courses are designed to help familiarize students with campus, faculty, and the college lifestyle, and to learn more about themselves (First Year Experience, 2023). Some of the sections of the course are created for specific majors or interests like pre-med students, student-athletes, and even FGCS. While this course covers many of the topics that FGCS needs supplemental help in, it is only to meet for one hour, two times a week, for the first eight weeks of the semester. While this timeline may be acceptable for students who are not first-generation and are more familiar with what to expect from college, FGCS may need more immersion, like taking part in a student-led group or organization that connects them with students who are further in their college careers. While welcome weeks and first-year experience courses are vital to general student success, resources that are less researched but potentially viable for FGCS are student-led groups like Greek life.

Organizations on campus, specifically Greek life, could be an answer to FGCS's desire to assimilate into the college culture and the structure of Greek life could give recommendations to FGCS programs, like TRIO, wanting to better support their students. TRIO is a federally funded outreach and student services program, “designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022). However, there

are barriers to FGCS wanting to be a part of Greek life and there seems to be no researched connection between FGCS programs and Greek life (Rodríguez, 2013).

The general goal of Greek life is to provide leadership opportunities, focus on philanthropic and community service, and give students a community of other students looking to gain the same experiences in college as themselves (Hohman & Moody, 2019). Each sorority and fraternity have positions within the group such as managing social media accounts, planning events, overseeing students' grades, and financial management. Each sorority and fraternity have a designated philanthropic partner that they work with to raise money and awareness for that cause. Sororities and fraternities also aim to bring like-minded students together to get an education and also create long-lasting friendships and a "home" for students at that specific university. The three goals of Greek life organization can change how a student navigates college and helps them establish a base of knowledge about college life.

The purpose of this study is to establish a better understanding of FGCS's experiences in Greek life. More specifically, the study seeks to understand potential barriers to entry or success in Greek life in addition to exploring the potential benefits for FGCS students in navigating their college experience. By speaking to students who are part of both communities, we can learn the FGCS perspective on Greek life, where it is strong, where it lacks, and what can be done.

As a FGCS and member of Greek life during my own undergraduate experience, I believe I have a unique vantage point to conduct this research. I entered college unsure of what to do or what my four years would look like but through friends who had gone to college at the university I was going to attend I was told the benefits of being a part of Greek life. I went through formal recruitment in August 2017. I went on to hold multiple positions including Chapter President in 2020. I was also a member of TRIO support services when I started college

in 2017. I did not fully understand what TRIO was or how it was built to help me until it was too late to use its resources to their full potential. It was not until the end of my third year that I took advantage of the resources that I felt I needed like counseling services and academic advising.

The reason I may have not needed TRIO services as heavily as other FGCS is that I had gotten involved in another community with similar goals before classes had started. When reviewing TRIO's mission there is a clear link between TRIO and things I also got out of Greek life. When joining a sorority, I gained a group of people in a similar position to myself, a group of people who were older than myself and knew how to navigate college specifically at the institution I was at, and opportunities to lead and grow my leadership in positions that have led me to greater confidence in my abilities. I'm interested in seeing if there are others in a similar position to myself that experienced the same benefits and how both communities can learn from each other to make college less intimidating for FGCS who have the potential to make differences within their organizations. By these communities learning from each other there can ideally be a significant positive impact for both FGCS and Greek life.

This study seeks to enhance our knowledge of the experience of FGCS at large with a specific goal of understanding their experiences as FGCS also experiencing the Greek system. Ideally, the study can provide useful information to those who work with both groups by providing useful insight into the strengths and/or weaknesses of the intersection of FGCS and Greek life experience. In order to provide information to FGCS and Greek life, background information on FGCS, FGCS programs, Greek life, and Student Involvement theory is needed.

Literature Review

First Generation College Students

There is not just one definition of what constitutes a student to be categorized as “first-generation”. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1998), first-generation students are students whose parents never enrolled in post-secondary education. The U.S. Department of Education as quoted by the University of Washington (2022) defines first-generation as:

An individual, neither of whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree; or an individual who, prior to the age 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree. Or an individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or adoptive parent. If your parent(s) and/or guardian(s) attended college but do not have a bachelor’s degree (i.e., did not graduate), you are considered to be first-generation (University of Washington, 2023, sec. 2).

Since the wording of the common definitions are not completely clear there is conflict around who qualifies as a first-generation student and who does not. However, research has shown that the amount of college the parent or guardian has received impacts how the student experiences college (Choy, 2001). If a parent has not been in a college setting or received a degree, it can lead to their child facing some challenges in college that students whose parents did receive a degree may not face.

Preparation for college starts in high school and FGCS tend to struggle in that preparatory stage. FGCS typically have lower GPAs, lower reading, math, and critical thinking skills, are less likely to take SAT or ACT exams, are less likely to take Advanced Placement courses, and

overall, are less academically ready to take on college (Choy, 2001; Patch, 2020; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2005). Without many of these steps taken at the end of their high school career, FGCS may tend to struggle academically if they choose to go to college. This is the most obvious disadvantage, but a successful college experience is not just defined by academic success.

Along with academic disparities, FGCS may experience struggles socially. FGCS tend to be less likely to engage in extracurricular activities but are the ones who need them the most. (Pascarella et. al., 2004). FGCS coming from low-income households are more likely to work part-time on top of academic pursuits, pushing time and motivation to take part in social activities lower on the list of priorities. According to Nomi (2005), FGCS tend to be, “women, older than traditional college age, employed full time, and to support dependents living at home” (p. 1). According to Astin’s (1999) Theory of Student Development, the more a student is involved in the academic atmosphere which can include extracurricular activities, time spent on campus, and time spent interacting with faculty, the more likely they are going to be satisfied and successful in college. The unfortunate situation is that FGCS may not have that time or see the benefits beyond a social community that some extracurriculars may bring to them. Despite the struggles that FGCS face in trying to integrate extracurriculars into their schedules, there are both nationally funded and campus-specific programs that are specifically created for FGCS.

FGCS Programs and Common Resources

One of the most common and well-known FGCS resources at the national level is TRIO. Within TRIO there are eight programs designed to help FGCS with a range of support services such as helping them receive funding, get connected with counseling services, navigate the college admission process, and navigate information about higher education as well as a high

school preparatory program, Upward Bound, and one designed to train directors and staff of TRIO (Federal TRIO Programs, 2022).

TRIO started with a program called Upward Bound in 1964 after the Economic Opportunity Act was created. Upward Bound provides academic assistance and instruction in specific subjects like mathematics, laboratory sciences, composition, literature, and foreign languages. Upward Bound was created specifically for students who have limited English proficiency, are disadvantaged, underrepresented, unhoused, or are about to age out of the foster system (History of the Federal Trio Programs, 2020).

In 1965, Talent Search was created and in 1968 a program called Special Services for Disadvantaged Students was created. This program changed its name to Student Support Services and the term TRIO was created in the late 1960s (History of the Federal TRIO Programs, 2011).

Talent Search is another popular TRIO program that is designed to identify and assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education. They provide academic, career, and financial counseling and work with students to help them graduate high school and continue into postsecondary education (Federal TRIO Programs, 2022). The demand for these kinds of programs is growing. These programs are in high demand. In 2009–10 and 2013–14, the total number of SSS participants exceeded the amount of money allocated, or granted, to each program (Fast facts report for the Student Support Services Program, 2016).

The programs within TRIO are designed to help connect services to students who may come from disadvantaged backgrounds or need the extra support (Federal TRIO Programs, 2022). Disadvantaged backgrounds can include low-income, FGCS, and students with academic

disabilities. Students only need to identify with one of those categories to potentially receive services. The major goals of TRIO are to increase retention, increase graduation rates, increase transfer rates from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, and create a supportive environment for low-income, FGCS, and students with disabilities (Thomas, et. al., 1998).

These goals are reached by programming in the eight different TRIO programs. Student Support Services Program (SSS) projects provide academic tutoring, academic advising, information on financial aid and resource location, and help filling out financial aid applications. Financial literacy programs, graduate school preparations, and assistance in transferring from two-year institutions to four-year institutions (if applicable) are also required topics that must be provided to students (Federal TRIO Programs, 2022). SSS programs may include a variety of programming ranging from exposing students to career options, cultural events and education, and mentoring programs.

Programs like Upward Bound, Talent Search, and SSS exist, but are they successful? Research conducted by the Pell Institute (2009) says yes, these programs are helping students remain in school to graduation. Upward Bound students, when compared to an “equally qualified group,” are more likely to enroll in college, complete a degree, and apply for financial aid (Pell Institute, 2009). Students who were active in Talent Search, another TRIO program serving low-income students 6th grade through 12th grade, were found to be more likely to apply for financial assistance and enroll in post-secondary education (Pell Institute, 2009). Applying for, going to, and graduating from college is only one part of the experience. Student support should target two different areas: Academic and non-academic. While there is adequate research about academic support such as tutoring and writing centers (Archer, 2011; Bell & Frost, 2012; Hamrick et. al., 2002), there is less research about non-academic resources like psychological services, financial

aid, and community involvement. Are students in TRIO programs just getting through college or are they successful at getting through college, and what does being successful in college look like?

TRIO gives FGCS a community to belong to the moment they step on campus. These programs were created for students who are systemically set up to not succeed in college and give them a chance to level the playing field and achieve a college degree. However, TRIO students may benefit from other organizations offered around a college campus. However, as noted above, there are a few barriers to FGCS taking full advantage of these organizations. One large barrier is limited knowledge about what organizations can offer a student. Greek life is one of those groups that could be extremely beneficial to FGCS.

Greek Life

The term “Greek life” has different connotations depending on the person's experiences and knowledge of the terms. Sororities and Fraternities have a history of being not accurately represented in popular culture and narratively taken out of context in news media. There are two sides to defining sorority starting with the National Panhellenic Conferences definition.

According to the NPC Manual of Information (2023), “The National Panhellenic Conference is an organization composed of 26 inter/national Greek-letter women’s-only sororities. Each member organization is an autonomous social group consisting of women who are college and university undergraduates and alumnae” (p.7) This means that there is a group of 26 sororities in the United States and Canada who all have membership in NPC. The purpose of NPC is stated in the purpose and mission statement but can be summarized in saying that NPC was created to maintain partnerships, academic, and social standards for the 26 Greek-letter, women’s only sororities.

The seeds of NPC were planted in 1891 when Kappa Kappa Gamma invited all women's only fraternities (seven groups at the time) to a conference to discuss "interfraternity courtesy, fraternity (sorority) jewelry and stationery and fraternity/sorority journalism" (NPC, 2023). By 1902, Alpha Phi, Pi Beta Phi, Kappa Alpha Theta, Kappa Kappa Gamma, Delta Gamma, Gamma Phi Beta, Delta Delta Delta, Alpha Chi Omega and Chi Omega met in Chicago on May 24. The conference changed names many times, but ultimately landed on the National Panhellenic Conference in 1945.

NPC oversees many of the policies and practices of all 26 sororities and at the heart of those policies and practices are outlined in the NPC Manual of Information (2023):

Sororities exist because they offer a good, democratic social experience, provide lifelong value, create, through their ideals, an ever-widening circle of service beyond membership, develop an individual's potential through leadership opportunities and group effort, and fill the need of belonging. Sororities continue because young women feel a continuing need to belong and parents appreciate sorority values and standards and cooperate to make membership possible. College administration recognizes the values of sororities and continues to welcome them on their campuses and to invite them to establish new chapters (p.11).

These are the ideals that each sorority is to uphold in their policies, practices, and daily life. However, for those who are not familiar with NPC, their tenants, and the policies put in place it can be easy to see sororities as something that focuses less on leadership, academics, and friendship and focuses more on the social aspect of college.

One of the largest, overarching fraternity organizations is the North American Interfraternity Council (NIC). NIC oversees 56 fraternities and "represent a diverse range of

fraternity men and interfraternal interests, including fraternities founded for leadership and business interests as well as faith-based, multicultural, historically black, and new or emerging fraternities” (Member Fraternities, 2021, para. 2). The purpose of NIC is to advance fraternities on each college campus and provide leadership for each organization. NIC provides support through staff, advisors, and leadership training for members who are part of the InterFraternity Council (IFC).

The IFC Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) cover nine topics: academic enrichment, accountability, finances, governance, health and safety, public relations, recruitment, reporting, and responsible growth. (Shelton, 2022). Along with SOP, there are NIC Standards that cover guidelines for 10 topics:

Academic Enrichment, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion, Establishment and Enforcement of Policy on Minimum GPA Requirements to Join Undergraduate Chapters, Establishment And Enforcement of Policy on Minimum Undergraduate Chapter Annual Cumulative GPA Requirement, Establishment and Enforcement of Policy Supporting Opportunities for New Fraternities and Responsible Growth, Establishment and Enforcement of Policy Supporting Student Choice, Health And Safety, Inter/National Support for Chapter, Interfraternalism, and Membership Data Submission (NIC Standards, 2021, sec. 3).

Common and valid critiques of Greek life is a heightened drinking culture, normality of sexual violence, and accusations of racism (Fowler, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Rahman, 2020; Wright, 2022; Lanktree, 2017; Barrera, 2022; Tanner, 2022). These critiques may not be true about certain members, specific chapters, and practices; the impacts of popular culture and social media have helped to draw more attention to the negative aspects of a fraternity and sorority than the positives.

It is not new information that drinking, substance use, and abuse is common among traditional college-age people (Hingson et al., 2005). This “ritual” is seen by many as a right of passage and binge, or high-intensity drinking is an every weekend event (NIAAA, 2022). Between lower body fat and fluctuating hormones, women are at a greater risk for experiencing alcohol-related issues (NIAAA, 2002). Greek-affiliated students tend to drink more than non-greek affiliated students (NIAAA, 2022). This may be due to the traditional expectations of “the college experience” or that it is seen as more acceptable if a large group is doing it together.

Another popular stereotype that has been proven true too many times is that being part of a fraternity or sorority involves bullying and hazing. According to *Hazing: The Issue* (2022), an organization that, “promotes safe and inclusive school, campus, and organizational environments through research, resource sharing, and the development of data-driven strategies for hazing prevention and the promotion of positive group climates” (para. 1). Fifty-five percent of college students experience hazing while being a part of clubs, teams, and taking part in activities (Hazing: The Issue, 2022, sec. 3). It can take many forms ranging from intimidation to violence. Fraternities and sororities are notorious for their association with hazing since it is one of the largest college-age extracurricular activities that students can take part in.

There are organizations and programs that are devoted to using policy to bring harsher punishments for hazing and hazing-related incidents. Hazing is something that organization leaders will never be fully able to get rid of but different policies and acts, like the *End All Hazing Act* that was introduced on March 13th, 2021. The bill requires, “institutions of higher education (IHEs) that participate in federal student-aid programs to collect information and publicly report on hazing-related misconduct” (End All Hazing Act, 2021). By collecting data universities and institutions can be more aware of hazing incidents to ensure organization

responsibility. The Anti-Hazing Coalition has been created by family members who have lost loved ones in partnership with Greek organizations. The coalition is devoted to pursuing anti-hazing legislation like the End All Hazing Act (2021), expanding awareness through education, and educating high school students to recognize and confront bullying and hazing (Starks-Corbin, 2018). Of course, these rules may not be followed but the repercussion of not following these rules is harsh and may end in the chapter of that sorority being dissolved.

Another stereotype that rings true to many organizations is that traditional fraternities and sororities are overwhelmingly white. Members of NPC sororities have recently spoken out about the racial discrimination they have faced within these organizations. Through social media, news platforms, and word of mouth, people of color have shared their experiences in predominantly white Greek organizations. Systemic racism is built into sororities and fraternities and can be seen in the smallest of places. When buying shoes for sorority recruitment a student at a California state school experienced microaggressions as she was told to have “nude” shoes as part of an outfit. Her “nude” was different from most of the other women and was told to purchase shoes that matched the lighter nude than the color of her own skin (Tingley, 2020).

Kappa Alpha, one of the oldest fraternities, claims Robert E. Lee, the confederate general as their “spiritual founder.” The fraternity has been the focus of protests and scandal and that was put on display during the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. Just as many sororities and fraternities have taken the events of 2020 as a time to reflect on their beginnings and traditions, members of Southwestern University chapter of Kappa Alpha also used that opportunity to demand that the fraternity disassociates with Robert E. Lee. No change has been made from the national level. (Harmon, 2020). Kappa Alpha also came under fire when a member of the University of Mississippi chapter posted an Instagram picture of three members posing with guns

in front of a bullet-ridden commemorative plaque where the body of Emmett Till was found. The three members were suspended from their chapter. (Mitchell, 2019).

We know about Greek life in terms of how it can be harmful but that is not everyone's experience. Despite past harmful practices and systemic issues, many members have left sorority life with positive experiences. While negatives are evident and there is no excuse for the shortcoming of fraternities and sororities in recent years, there are benefits to becoming a member and investing in the Greek life experience.

The first priority of many fraternities and sororities mission statements is devoted to academic pursuits and scholarship. All sororities have an academic requirement to remain in good standing and active membership within the group. These requirements come from the university's Greek life council and the sorority's national headquarters. Scholarship is an important part of the sorority experience and 22 of the 26 organizations have awarded a total of \$4,817,949 in scholarships awarded to members (NPC, 2022).

The academic requirements are supported by each chapter in a different way. Many chapters have leadership positions created to help and motivate members with their studies. Some chapters have scholarships available or rewards for having high GPAs or completing the academic requirements of the sorority (University of Alabama, 2023; University of Albany, 2023; University of Mississippi, 2023).

Fraternities have similar systems in place to sororities when it comes to academic standards. According to the NIC SOP (NIC, 2023), "An IFC will implement academic policies and programming, striving for the all-fraternity GPA to be above the campus all-men's average and the IFC will establish policies with remediation plans when chapters do not achieve the minimum new member class GPA and chapter GPA. IFC works with NIC to make sure that

academic standards are in place for each of the chapters on campus and that guidelines and plans are in place when chapters don't meet those standards.

A common benefit of being part of a fraternity and sorority is the opportunity to hold leadership positions. The experiences from holding a leadership position within an organization can transfer to experiences that are valuable for future career opportunities. While being involved in Greek life may have negative connotations it is not always the case and can lead to greater cognitive abilities among those involved (Pike, 2000). Not every Greek life member is going to leave a changed person, but it is more likely the member will grow cognitively during their experience if they are in a leadership position than if they are not.

Another aspect of Greek life is the opportunity for further development of social skills. The social aspect of college is important to personal growth and overall health and wellness of students (Christianson, et. al., 2019). Fraternity and sorority members are given those opportunities to grow socially through different functions and events put on by the organization. This growth can be through alumni events, events with other sororities and fraternities, philanthropic events, and holding positions within the fraternity or sorority.

One of the other largest takeaways of Greek life is the importance of service. Each fraternity and sorority is partnered with a philanthropic cause and holds events to raise money or awareness for their cause. Greek life members learn the value of service and it is more likely for them to care about the cause if others around them are also attending events and they are getting to see the outcomes of their events or fundraisers firsthand. Those students who do take part in service projects or philanthropy, like all fraternity and sorority members are required to do, can receive different outcomes from their experiences but most importantly in the case of a student,

develop an understanding for others, take part in a social activity, and enhance their growth psychologically (Clary et. al., 1998).

Academic standards, opportunities for leadership, an increased opportunity to develop social skills, and engagement in service activities are all a part of being a well-rounded student. Many former Greek life members, like me, experience the benefits of being part of an organization that values these things as well. Again, just because the organization as a whole values these things does not mean that each individual member values them as highly but they are going to be more likely to gain the values and skills which help them adjust to college better than those who are not a part of the organization (Astin, 1998). We know that Greek life can be beneficial in terms of academics, giving opportunities for social growth and leadership, along with valuing service. What we don't know too much about is FGCS experience within Greek life. Before the connection between FGCS and Greek life can be made, it is important to learn more about what being involved means and how it can impact students.

Student Involvement Theory

Astin's (1999) Student Involvement Theory is based on Astin's desire to define and clarify the implication of student involvement and the outcomes. Student involvement is defined as, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Examples of involvement can be the amount of time and energy put into studying, participating in campus organizations, interactions with faculty and peers, and the time spent on the campus. Astin based this theory off the Freudian concept *cathexis*, which states that people invest their psychological energy in people and objects other than themselves (Astin, 1999). Simply stated, people put time and effort into people and objects other than themselves and that impacts how successful they are with that person or object.

Astin (1999) created five postulates of Student Involvement Theory. The first postulate states the definition of involvement stated above. The second postulate clarifies that involvement happens on a spectrum or continuum, meaning that different students put in effort at different times and levels. The third postulate states that involvement is both quantitative and qualitative, meaning that it can be measured numerically or based on how the student feels about their success or lack thereof. The fourth postulate states the amount of student learning and personal development a student gets out of an organization depends on the quantity and quality of the organization. Finally, the fifth postulates state the effectiveness of educational policies and practices is directly related to how students can be involved in the policy or practice (Astin, 1999).

This theory can be applied to any kind of college student and involvement on campus has been shown to help students in their development, specifically in the areas of providing support when learning to maintain relationships, allowing for self-expression and discovery, and decision-making skills (Rosch & Collins, 2017). We know that involvement in student groups, for any kind of student FGCS or non, can be useful.

Student Involvement Theory has been used to study many different types of students and their college experience. Zhou and Cole (2016) compared American versus International student involvement and satisfaction in their college experience. This study looked at the combination of academic and social involvement and how it benefited students. Involvement theory has been used to look at learning communities (Bonilla et. al., 2013) and how being involved in a community that fosters both social and academic involvement benefited first-year and transfer students.

Research Question

Current programs put in place for students new to a college campus are helpful, but they may not be the best for FGCS. TRIO Student Support Services have different programs to help high school students prepare for college, new college students understand different aspects of college and give them a group of peers in similar situations to themselves. There are organizations of college campuses that give students a community of people to learn from and grow with. Greek life, in theory, stands for academic success and social activities that could help FGCS acclimate to college alongside those who are not FGCS. This is why it is of interest to learn more about FGCS experiences in Greek life and how TRIO can learn from Greek life practices and how Greek life can be more welcoming to FGCS.

RQ: What are the experiences of first-generation college students within the Greek life system?

Methods

Participants

To qualify for this study, participants needed to be a first-generation college student by the Department of Education as quoted by the University of Washington definition:

An individual, neither of whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree; or an individual who, prior to the age 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree. Or an individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or adoptive parent. If your parent(s) and/or guardian(s) attended college but do not have a bachelor's degree (i.e., did not graduate), you are considered to be first-generation (University of Washington, 2023, sec. 2).

They also needed to be a member of a Greek organization. The participant could be a current member of a Greek organization and must be in pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

Participants were found through email, chapter house announcements, and snowball sampling where the interviewer would ask if any of their friends fit the definition and would be willing to be interviewed. Participants were recruited through speaking at Panhellenic council meetings to chapter leaders and explaining the intent of the interview, visiting chapter houses during meetings, and explaining to the chapter the intent of the research, leaving flyers with information about the interviews and contact information at Greek houses, and asking chapter leadership to post and/or speak about the research opportunity to chapter members. A total of four participants were interviewed and three out of the four participants completed a demographic intake form after their interview was completed. The fourth participant did not decline to complete the demographic intake but was unable to return it to the researcher in a timely manner. Two identified as female, one identified as male. Two were in their third year of college, one was in their fourth. All names were changed in order to protect participants privacy.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted by one researcher, all four were face-to-face, none were over a virtual platform like Zoom. The face-to-face interviews were held on a college campus. The interview was 21 planned questions with follow questions for 11 of the questions. Some examples of questions used in the interview were, “When coming to college what were your expectations, what kind of things did you struggle with during your first few months of college, what was your impression of Greek life before joining a fraternity/sorority, what kind of advice would you give to FGCS going through recruitment or are interested in Greek life?”

The longest interview was 30 minutes and eight seconds long and the shortest interview was 18 minutes and 24 seconds long, making the average interview around 26 minutes long. The interviews were transcribed using the Otter app and edited for clarity by the interviewer. The longest interview was 12 pages, and the shortest interview was 9 pages making the average pages of data per interview 10.5 pages and the total 42 pages of data.

Analysis

The analysis of the interview data was done using Braun and Clark's (2006) method of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to find themes in data sets that are rich in detail (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is done through a set of steps or phases that end with the production of a report.

The first phase is familiarizing yourself with the data through reading and re-reading, and making notes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The data was read through at least 2 times to be familiar with the ideas from each interview. The second phase is generating initial codes through noting data relevant to each code (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This was done by highlighting words and ideas that were found across all interviews. The third phase is searching for themes through gathering and organizing codes into potential themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This was done by taking all the highlighted codes and grouping them together by their relation. The fourth phase is reviewing themes by making sure that the themes relate to the codes and the entire data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This was done by generating a thematic map of all the codes and themes to make sure they related back to each other. The fifth phase is defining and naming the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This was done by choosing a word or phrase that best describes the idea of the theme. Finally, the sixth phase is producing the final

report on which themes were the most compelling and best represent the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This report is the results of the research.

Verification Measure

The verification measure chosen for this study is member checking/informant feedback according to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007). Member checking can be done informally through questions while interviewing. It can also be done more formally through sending data, categories, interpretations, and conclusions of the research to the participants. Member checking was done throughout the interview by asking for clarification and restarting the understanding of their answers to questions. This gives the participants an opportunity to verify and clarify what they meant when answering questions. This was done to avoid misinterpretation on the researchers' part.

Results

Ease of Transition

In response to the research question, what are the experiences of first-generation college students within the Greek life system, four themes were found: ease of transition, expectations, first-year experiences, community, and lessening labels. The first theme is ease of transition.

A common similarity found among all interviewees was their outgoing nature and involvement that they had before they came to college growing up in their respective communities. All four spoke about how they were outgoing or independent or had a person they were close with who was outgoing and independent. Participant one, Betty, mentioned that “our parents really pushed us to really get involved with campuses and meet lots of people.” Her principal also stressed having big dreams and going to college even though they were from a small town. A positive and encouraging environment before college can help foster move

involvement and an ease of transition from high school to college even if the student is first generation.

All four participants also mentioned that they were involved in many activities in high school. Betty was in volleyball and had scholarship offers to play at a few universities. Participant two, Drew, was in football, basketball, track, and choir. Participant three, Abigail, was in a variety of activities, “softball volleyball, basketball, track, cheer all the sports. National Honor Society. My junior year is when I would have joined show choir and concert choir. I’m trying to think of something else. I was in the key club. I was a co-president for that...” She was not only involved but taking on leadership roles as well. Participant four, Mary, was volleyball, basketball, track, and key club. All participants were involved in high school which may make a difference in coming to college and the level of commitment.

Betty spoke about how he was self-motivated in choosing a school and in deciding to join Greek life. Drew spoke about meeting people on his floor freshman year. “I’m not shy or anything, I enjoy meeting people.” This was how he was persuaded to go through fraternity recruitment. If it was not for his outgoing nature, he would not have ended up joining a fraternity. Not only were the participants outgoing enough to join Greek life, but they were also willing to reach out and share their story.

Their experiences in high school and before college have shaped them into the people that they are today and affect their experiences in Greek life as well. If they were not involved and understood the value of being involved, they would have been less likely to seek out a similar experience in high school. These experiences made the transition from high school student to college student a little easier than if they had not been involved in high school at all.

Adjusted Expectations

Each participant had sets of expectations of college and of Greek life. By being a part of Greek life those expectations about college life were adjusted or met. Participant one expected that daily life in college would revolve around academics by stating, “I knew I would have to, like, do a lot with schoolwork.” Drew expected that college was going to be what he made of it. “So, what I thought was pretty much you just go to school. I guess you just get involved. If you really want to, or you can be pretty reclusive and not interact with anybody.” These expectations were set up by conversations with parents, guidance counselors, peers, and those who were older and more experienced in college.

Each participant had expectations or ideas about what Greek life specifically would be like. These expectations were mostly formed by social media and popular culture's depiction of Greek life. Betty brought up her experiences on Tik Tok with the viral videos from sorority chapters at the University of Alabama, but her expectations were not met but in a positive way. “You always see those big schools. I was like, Oh my gosh, I hope this is not what it's like.... this is going to be really overwhelming. And I just kind of walked in with an open mind and I'm very happy with how it went.” Mary said her expectations and only exposure to Greek life were movies. Drew said he did not have any kind of exposure to Greek life before coming to college, it was not talked about in high school.

First Year Experiences

All participants mentioned the challenges and experiences of being in their first year of college regardless of their first-generation status. No matter if a student is a FGCS or not there are differences when going from high school to college. “It's a lot different from back home, and you kind of have to apply yourself more,” said Betty when asked about what her first few months

on campus were like. Drew talked about his lack of time management skills and how he still struggles with it today. The only solution mentioned by Betty about the challenges of first year are, “You know, it takes time.”

Another challenge of the first year that may be more specific to FGCS is financial questions. Mary noticed that peers' parents were paying for things, and she did not have that luxury. “my parents never really made a ton of money. And it's just different to have to pay your own bill versus like your parents being like, oh, we will pay it for you.” This instance was one of the few times she felt different from others being a FGCS. Mary’s main concern was money and not having his parents feel like they were forced to pay anything.

Mary struggled with reaching out to others and creating a community. “I think most of it was just trying to go outside my bubble and try to see new people.” Not only did coming to school during COVID-19 make interactions difficult, coming from a smaller school and having a close friend come to college with her made passively going about college an easy option. Even after joining a sorority, the struggles of creating a community and introducing herself to new people were still present, “introducing myself to new girls was hard too because you never know how girls are going to react to a new person.”

However, some participants had positive experiences in their first few months. Betty talked about her recruitment experience and enjoying the process, “the whole rush week and everything, and I absolutely loved it,” she said when asked about her recruitment experience. Sorority recruitment can be overwhelming for certain students, but Betty found the process exciting.

Community

Each participant mentioned the community aspect of Greek life and how that helped them as FGCS. Betty spoke about the women she met during recruitment and how those women became her community for the first few weeks on campus. “We just went to Walmart yesterday. She and I were really close. She’s a Pi Phi. And so, we always talked about different stuff between the sororities.” Her being able to connect with a person going through the same experiences as she has led to a friendship that has withstood being in different houses.

Abigail spoke about her relationships with other Greek life members and how getting to know people regardless of their affiliation is positive. “Just building connections with people that you don't even know are going to be in your chapter. I think that's good, too” Having a larger community of being a part of Greek life within a small community of a specific house brings comfort to those who may not have had a larger community of support before coming to college.

Mary spoke about her comfort in finding people in the same position as herself. “I think that really helped us, someone else trying to figure out the same things as I did.” Being around peers figuring out college helped her figure out college as well. She also spoke about how joining her sorority helped her plan her academics because she could lean on the older members' experience to guide her. “I feel like I didn't struggle as much because the sorority obviously, whenever I had a question, I could just go and ask someone, which is really nice.” Not only did having a community of people in the same position as her help but having older members to look to help her as well.

Mary also spoke about leaning on peers and other members for an understanding of struggles. “I don't think they (parents) understand the amount of stuff I have to do and the amount of studying I have to do.” Since her parents did not attend a traditional four-year

university, it can be harder for them to understand the process and daily life. Having a group of people who do understand and are going through it at the same time can supplement for the inexperience of being a FGCS when parents can't fully understand.

Lessening Labels

Each participant noted that being in Greek life does not take away the fact that they are FGCS but being in Greek life does help lessen the label. Betty never felt judged for being a FGCS but people were curious about how she came to college. "It was like an icebreaker question. They're like, Oh my gosh, really? I'm like, yeah, and they're like, well, where'd you come from?" But she never felt like it was done in a negative way. "I wouldn't say it's like it has a negative connotation or anything like that doesn't have, like a negative tone. But it was like something that was like, kind of started conversation and that kind of thing" Being a FGCS is part of her background, but it is not everything that she is. Alison echoed Betty by saying, "I think it kind of made me forget that I'm a first gen like just because I have all those resources. And like I said earlier, like I've never really been like oh, I'm a first gen like it's so much harder for me like that's never really been the case." Greek life has supplemented her knowledge of the ins and outs of college.

Mary did say that the only time she felt out of place as FGCS in Greek life was when she would ask questions about different academic processes. "I feel like they have like their parents to go to and ask the questions about at least schedule-wise and everything like that. And I didn't really have that." However, no other members said anything to her about asking questions too often and she went on to encourage other FGCS's to ask questions.

From Abigail's perspective it seems like FGCS are getting away from the label like how Greek life is trying to dispel stereotypes. "I really don't associate myself with groups." Being a

part of one group or two groups does not make up a student's entire identity. This commonality between FGCS and Greek life can lead to the combination of identities that leads to richer experiences all around.

Discussion

The themes discussed before are ease of transition, expectations, first-year experiences, community, and lessening labels. The theme of ease of transition pertains to how the student grew up in terms of involvement in activities before college and their personalities. Each student was involved in various activities ranging from basketball and volleyball to service organizations and music groups. This involvement showed that even though they did not have a model of how to navigate college before each student had a desire to be involved and find a community which led them to Greek life as a FGCS. Each participant had their own kind of challenges and expectations of college during their first year. Many participants expressed struggling to find their group of people and struggling to set a schedule and manage their time. Some participants also talked about enjoying the first-year experience and its unpredictability. Community pertains to the idea that all of the participants were looking for community and found one in Greek life that helped them socially, emotionally, and academically. One of the biggest benefits from Greek life is, ideally, finding a community of people. Finally, there was a theme of lessening the FGCS label as time went on and through supplemental knowledge from Greek life peers and other members of their respective houses.

Theoretical Implication

Student involvement is defined as, “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Involvement can be done in many ways but joining a Greek house can get students involved in multiple ways. As stated by

participants, there are academic requirements, social requirements, and leadership opportunities which are all experiences that are part of being devoted to the academic experience.

The postulates state that involvement happens on a spectrum or continuum (Astin, 1999). A member can be involved in the organization as much or as little as they want to be within the guidelines of the organization. While dues and academic requirements may always be a part of membership, taking a position or talking to everyone within the organization is not required.

The amount of student learning and personal development a student gets out of an organization depends on the quantity and quality of the organization can be applied to Greek life as well (Astin, 1999). The more a member is involved, the more likely they can be to get higher quality experience if that is something they are looking for. The quality of the experience also depends on the guidance of a chapter's national headquarters and the commitment of the members currently in the organization. If the current members are not devoting energy to the organization, then the outcome of the experience of the younger members can't be expected to be high. A common saying is, "You get out what you put in." This means if you are committed and devoted to the experience, chances are you will receive more satisfaction from the experience than if you don't put time and energy into it.

The effectiveness of educational policies and practices is directly related to how students can be involved in the policy or practice means that the more a student can have agency in the decision-making process the more effective it can be (Astin, 1999). Outside of national headquarters staff, chapter advisors, and volunteers, a Greek organization is run by the members with current members serving in various positions. When members get to take the decision-making process into their own hands and make the chapter "their own" is when the organization is the most effective and members will receive the most satisfaction.

The only postulate that is harder to correlate to Greek life is that involvement is both quantitative and qualitative (Astin, 1999). It can be more difficult to quantify Greek life since a student is not getting a grade or rated on their participation in the group. Being part of Greek life is much more qualitative since a member can feel as though they have been successful but there is no true, quantitative way to prove they have been successful at Greek life. Success is defined by the individual members and what they want to get out of the organization.

Practical Implications

The goal of the study was to come up with recommendations for current FGCS and FGCS programs from the things that Greek life is doing right. The first recommendation to FGCS is to get involved in high school. Each participant was heavily involved in high school making the transition into college and the idea of getting involved there more feasible. The argument can be made that some FGCS may be financially driven to not do as many extracurriculars and need to work at part time jobs. This can also be considered being involved. Having a job in high school may take away from time in sports or music but it can also teach other life lessons that doing nothing would not. The important thing is to be pursuing interests and understanding how an organization works.

Another recommendation is to ask questions. One of the participants was embarrassed to ask so many questions because she thought it would set her apart from other students when in reality asking questions is beneficial to everyone, not just the person asking the question.

A recommendation to FGCS groups like TRIO is to create a community of more than just people like themselves. What makes Greek life successful is how older members can pass on knowledge to the younger members about multiple things. An older member can pass on knowledge about the organization itself in order to preserve its function. An older member can

pass on knowledge about certain academic topics and processes like an older member who is the same major as a younger member can pass on knowledge about courses and one member can help another member pick out classes if they do not understand the registration process. Older members can also help younger members emotionally. Mary said that her sorority sisters understand what she is going through even more than her parents are able to understand. Having the support of people who have already “been there, done that” and may have a different background can help the member look at situations in a way they may have not before.

Recommendations for Sorority and Fraternity Life programs at universities who are wanting to be more inclusive to FGCS is to first review recruitment processes. This is starting to happen across the country as many national headquarters are making changes to their legacy policy to be more flexible than it was before. In the past, a legacy, or a potential new member who’s relative was a member of a certain Greek organization, would automatically get a bid regardless of if the current members thought they would be a good fit. This meant that people who may not have been the right fit at a certain house would take up a spot from a potential new member who was not a legacy even though they may have been better suited at the house than the legacy. This leaves FGCS at a disadvantage since they don’t have relatives who were in Greek life.

Another situation to think about in regards to recruitment is when it is held. Two of the participants became members during COB, or continuous open bidding. This is a time after formal recruitment that an organization may have more open spots to fill and will find members a few weeks or months into the school year. This way of recruitment was beneficial to those two participants because they felt the need for a community in the first semester of college and were more open to joining a Greek house after experiencing that challenge. This can also be a way to

reach FGCS who may not have the most outgoing personality or who simply do not know that Greek life exists. More time on campus before joining any kind of organization can help a student notice what is missing in their college experience and see what benefits Greek life can bring by watching how they function without being in them yet. Moving recruitment can also give organizations more time to reach out to FGCS that may not know about Greek life.

Be clear on expectations, specifically money can help FGCS, and any student understand what they are truly signing up for. Money is an issue for any college student, especially FGCS who tend to come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Making Greek life free is unfortunately not an option due to the cost of the resources given to members but asking alumni who have graduated with college degrees to start a fund for financially disadvantaged potential members so that men and women who want to be a part of the community and would benefit from the resources the organization provides.

Limitations

The first limit to this study is the number of students interviewed. Only four students volunteered to be interviewed over a three-month period. This could have been due to a few factors. One factor could have been the time of year the study was conducted. This study was open for interviews from February through March, during the spring semester. Spring semester is a very busy time for students and finding time to sit down with an interviewer can be difficult. Three of the four interviewees were juniors or seniors as well which adds to the chaos of the time of year due to graduation or the start of senior year being a few months away. This study could be held during the summer semester or fall semester and may have a different result in how many participants volunteered to be interviewed.

General demographics could be considered a limitation for this study. Only one male volunteered to be interviewed and the other three were female. This presents more of a female perspective on Greek life and on FGCS status. Of the four participants one identified as Hispanic/Latino and the other three identified as white. FGCS tend to be more racially diverse than their collegiate peers. “The majority of Hispanic students (53%) are first-generation, whereas 43% of Native American and 41% of Black students are first-generation.” (Nomi, 2005, p. 3). This limitation can be caused by the type of university that the study was conducted at.

Future Directions

A future direction for those who want to recreate this study would be to focus on just sororities or just fraternities. Being able to focus just on one type of organization could develop richer data and more detailed themes.

Another direction could be to look specifically at the recruitment process and ask questions of FGCS about their feelings surrounding recruitment and the different types. Recruitment is one of the unique aspects to Greek life since other campus organizations may have an application process but rarely have a recruitment process as in-depth as Greek life. It could be of interest to focus on recruitment practices and how FGCS fair and feel about the recruitment process.

This study looked at members of sororities and fraternities that are a part of NPC and IFC. It could be of interest to look at FGCS which are a part of different overarching organizations like the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC) and the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). Doing research in a different council of Greek life may be of interest to researchers since the demographics of NMGC and NPHC are different than PHC and IFC.

This study looked at FGCS at one point in time, it could be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study that interviews FGCS who are a part of Greek life through their four years at a university. In order to understand their experiences at a deeper level, interviewing students before they go through recruitment, after they go through recruitment, and at the end of every academic year could lead to a deeper understanding and more recommendations from FGCS on how to make Greek life more welcoming for students like themselves.

It may be of interest to talk to FGCS who are not part of Greek life to understand why they did not want to participate in Greek life and if they found community elsewhere. Greek life may not be the best fit for everyone, but it would be of interest to see what other kinds of involvement or organizations have helped or are helping FGCS.

Conclusion

Defining a FGCS can be difficult but in order to be a FGCS neither of the student's parents or guardians can have obtained a four-year degree. These students come into college at a disadvantage since they tend to not do as well as their peers in high school academics and have limited prior knowledge of the “ins and outs” of college. FGCS may benefit from on-campus organizations in order to give them a community of peers to find support.

FGCS currently can get support through government-funded organizations like TRIO. TRIO can provide funding, counseling services, college admission and navigation information, as well as a high school preparatory program. While these programs are not to be discounted, FGCS may benefit from being part of a group with peers who are different from themselves.

Greek life is a campus organization that could give FGCS a community. Greek life is both men's and women's fraternities and sororities set up to give students social, academic, and service resources and opportunities. However, Greek life is not without its faults. With a history

of racist upbringings and traditions, hazing, and other problematic practices, Greek life may not always be the most welcoming. But with the recent desire to change comes the opportunity to welcome a newer demographic to the community. In order to be able to welcome new members, Greek life needs to think about how they will prepare and treat them in the future.

Another piece of the puzzle is the Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1999). The amount of success a student feels is dependent on the time and effort given to the academic experience. Having FGCS be involved in an organization like Greek life can help students put forth more effort to the academic experience since it is potentially a requirement of the organization, and a group of peers will also be putting forth that effort.

The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of FGCS who are involved in Greek life. Questions about their high school experience, FGCS identity, Greek life recruitment, and advice for both groups gave five overarching themes: growing up, expectations, first-year experiences, community, and lessening labels. From these themes the main takeaway is that students need community. Greek life could be the answer to that community. Since Greek life is made up of members who have different backgrounds, including more college knowledge, being part of it may help supplement inexperience from being a first-generation student. This can only be achieved if Greek life can prepare for FGCS the proper way.

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