GOING GREEK: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES WITH FRATERNAL AND SORORAL MEMBERSHIP TRADITIONS

by

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(Under the Direction of Richard H. Mullendore)

ABSTRACT

Utilizing a constructivist theoretical approach, this phenomenology sought to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations.

Eight members of collegiate Greek letter fraternities and sororities completed in-depth, semi-structured interviews and four themes were identified during the data analysis process: 1) Initiation Experiences as Purposeful Events, 2) The Importance of Traditions and Adherence to "Unwritten Rules," 3) Cultural/Societal Influences on Member Perceptions of Their Initiation Experiences, and 4) Expectations of and Preparation for Fraternity/Sorority Initiations.

Participants described their fraternal/sororal initiation experiences as being unique to each individual and influenced by factors such as race, gender, age, and personal experiences. Although the majority of participants described having some experiences with membership traditions in high school organizations before coming to college, it was often the influence of their background and their peers that shaped how they made decisions regarding those experiences (particularly in regards to participating in activities that could be defined as hazing),

and how they developed the values they associated with their fraternity/sorority initiation experiences.

Although some of the findings from this study supported existing literature on rites of passage, rituals, organizational culture, and risk management within contemporary Greek-letter organizations, the majority of the findings raised new questions for consideration when supervising student involvement in fraternal and sororal organizations. These findings presented three implications for student affairs practice and scholarship: the need to understand the diversity of student organizations and their memberships, especially in regards to the differences that exist across the membership traditions of various organizational types; peer and societal influences on how students view the membership traditions of their organizations; and the need to clarify the differences between "pledging" and "hazing" within student organizations.

INDEX WORDS: Fraternities, Greek Letter Organizations, Hazing, Membership Traditions, Phenomenology, Pledging, Qualitative Inquiry, Rituals, Sororities

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# DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, SFC Elree T. Smith, US Army (RET) and Mrs. Clara (Mebane) Smith, who have provided me with unconditional love and the support of all of my endeavors. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the loving memories of my great grandmother, Mrs. Addie (Hutchinson) Washington; my paternal grandparents, Mr. Mack E. Smith, Sr. and Mrs. Middie Pearl (Washington) Smith; my maternal grandparents, Mr. Eldwyn R. Mebane and Mrs. Mary (Tate) Mebane; and my surrogate grandmother, Mrs. Sarah J. McCullers who I wish were here to witness this accomplishment.

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God Bless, and GO DAWGS!!!

~Khrystal L. Smith

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

At most American colleges and universities, the first few weeks of the fall semester signal the beginning of a season filled with transition and tradition. During this time, first-year students begin to transition into new environments complete with new roles and new expectations. In addition to this transition, students also begin to learn a new set of traditions, those things held in high esteem by their various institutions. Whether the ritualistic (e.g., orientation activities), athletic (e.g., school fight-song and game day attire), or academic (e.g., fall convocation), these traditions are often long standing events or activities that represent what the college experience "looks like" at a particular institution. For some campuses, this season also represents a time of rush parties, interest meetings, bid nights, and the quest for lifelong friendships through participation in collegiate fraternities and sororities.

American college students continue to seek membership in fraternities, sororities and similar types of organizations and societies, whether social, community-service related, cultural, religious, or professional. According to the North-American Interfraternity Conference, membership in American college fraternities is higher now than at any point in the history of American collegiate fraternities (North-American Interfraternity Conference, 2008). Such participation is often encouraged by institutions due to the benefits participation in co-curricular activities have in the areas of psychosocial development, retention, and student satisfaction (Astin, 1993, 1999; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, it is often the student affairs-affiliated offices at institutions that aid in the facilitation of this involvement through the

allocation of resources, management of facilities, and development of policies to govern organizational activities.

## Student Involvement & Risk Management

Unfortunately, there are risks associated with involvement in student clubs and other organizations, potentially overshadowing the positive aspects of such involvement. As noted by Pearson and Beckham (2005):

> [I]ncreasingly, judges have recognized an institutional obligation to provide a safe learning environment both on and off the college campus. As student affairs professionals expand programs and services to meet the educational needs of students, they must anticipate that judges will recognize a special duty predicated on a foreseeable risk of injury and judicially imposed duty of reasonable care…. (p. 461)

Essentially, the more opportunities institutions provide for students to become involved, the more administrators should become aware of the potential risks that are associated with such involvement. These risks can come in the form of alcohol abuse by members, financial/budgetary issues faced by organizations, accidents that occur at organization-sponsored events, or injuries sustained as the result of hazing activities related to a group's initiation practices.

As discussed by Pearson and Beckham (2005), this "special duty" should prompt student affairs professionals and other institutional agents to provide the necessary resources meant to educate students about such risks. It is for this reason that risk management is of major concern to the field of student affairs, especially in regards to the management of the diverse forms of student activities and organizations. When discussed in relation to student organizations, *risk management* has been defined as "the process of advising organizations of the potential and

perceived risks involved in their activities as well as, supervising organization activities and taking corrective actions and proactive steps to minimize accidental injury and/or loss" (Texas A&M University Department of Student Activities, 2003, ¶ 2). In addition to advising students of potential risks, risk management is also about "student development and teaching students how to self govern" (Risk Management for Student Organizations, 2006, p. 1).

## Hazing

When discussing the risk management concerns faced by fraternities and sororities, issues with alcohol and hazing have been described as being the greatest threats to these organizations (Nuwer, 1999). Although hazing and other risky initiation-related practices have been found to occur in a variety of student organizations such as military groups, spirit clubs, intercollegiate and recreational athletic teams, and marching bands (Allan & Madden, 2006; Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005; Ellsworth, 2006; Hollmann, 2002; Hoover, 1999; Hoover & Pollard, 2000), no group or organization has received the same levels of attention or criticism as collegiate fraternities and sororities. These groups have had to face the negative publicity and lawsuits associated with injuries and/or deaths that have occurred as the result of hazing activities within their organizations. Historically, hazing cases surrounding traditionally White organizations have generally centered around the abuse of alcohol, while cases involving historically African-American organizations have centered around physical violence (Arnold, 2004; DeSousa, Gordon, & Kimbrough, 2004; Jones, 2004a; Nuwer, 2004a; Nuwer 2004b), so although the types of hazing that occur may vary within governance systems, no system has been able to eradicate occurrences and allegations of hazing.

As identified by Ellsworth (2006), Hennessy & Huson (1998), and Hollmann (2002), one of the main issues associated with the monitoring and prevention of hazing

behaviors is the lack of a common definition as to what hazing actually is and what activities or behaviors comprise it. This has been described as occurring due to the differences in laws that vary from one state or region to another. Similarly, institutions often base their definitions on those terms identified by the legal statutes that govern their location (Ellsworth, 2006; Hennessy & Huson, 1998; Hollmann, 2002). One of the most encompassing definitions of hazing has been provided by the Fraternal Information and Programming Group (2007) which considered hazing to be "any action taken or situation created, intentionally, whether on or off [organization or institution] premises, to produce or that causes mental or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule" (p. 32).

According to Hollmann (2002), "since 1990, more deaths have occurred on college and university campuses as a result of hazing, pledging, and initiation accidents, and fraternal alcohol-related incidents than all recorded history of such deaths" (p. 11). Similarly, Nuwer (2004c) found that most campuses faced 'isolated' hazing incidents prior to the 1970's; however, over the course of the following decades, allegations and documented incidents have continued to increase in local and nationally recognized fraternities and sororities.

## Rites, Rituals, & Values of Membership: A Framework for Qualitative Inquiry

Although it is possible to identify literature that discusses the occurrence of hazing in high school organizations, athletic groups, and collegiate organizations, there is a lack of literature exploring how the culture of hazing, and its associated values and behaviors, evolve from high school through college and beyond. According to Hank Nuwer, there is a "need to address the larger 'culture of hazing' – especially its manifestations in high school – to reduce hazing at the collegiate level" (National On-Campus Report, 2003, p. 1).

Similar studies on the influence of pre-college behaviors on college behaviors and/or perceptions thereof have occurred in regards to college students' binge drinking practices (e.g., Crawford & Novak, 2006; Hersh & Hussong, 2006; Reifman & Watson, 2003). In the case of these studies, it was found that pre-collegiate (e.g., high school) drinking behaviors often influenced students' participation in binge drinking practices once in college, in addition to their perceptions of the "expectations" surrounding the consumption of alcohol in college. If this is the case with alcohol, what similarities could exist with student perceptions of and/or participation in hazing or other risky behaviors on the collegiate level?

In order to best understand how participants make meaning of their experiences and form values in regards to the rituals and traditions associated with membership in Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, it would be beneficial to explore this topic using qualitative methods of inquiry. Qualitative research has been described as being naturalistic, descriptive, concerned with process and meaning, and inductive (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). To Denzin and Lincoln (1994), "[q]ualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry…[t]hey seek to answer questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning" (p.4).

Qualitative research can employ a variety of approaches; however, in order to address the concerns posed in this study, a phenomenological approach would be best suited. As defined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), "[r]esearchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations…[w]hat phenomenologists emphasize, then, is the subjective aspects of people's behavior" (p. 23). Merriam (2000b) further elaborated, noting that a phenomenological approach "is an attempt to

deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life" (p. 7). The use of a phenomenological approach would help the researcher understand how participants make meaning of their experiences as they relate to their quest for membership within fraternal or sororal organizations, in addition to providing a perspective that may be unattainable through quantitative methods.

Additionally, this study will occur within the inquiry paradigm of constructivism. According to Schwandt (1994);

> [C]onstructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experiences and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience. (pp. 125-126)

Essentially, rituals represent the physical manifestation of a group's adherence to a set of values and traditions specific to the culture of that organization (Bird, 1980; Scott, 1965; van Gennep, 1908/1960). The foundation of a constructivist approach allows the researcher to better understand how those values are constructed and modified over time.

## Statement of Purpose & Research Questions

Utilizing a constructivist theoretical approach, this phenomenology sought to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations. The following three research questions (RQs) guided this study:

> RQ1: What are participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ2: How did pre-collegiate experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ3: What aspects of identity or personal experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

## Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following terms and definitions apply:

*National Governing Body*

Although all national and international fraternal and sororal organizations have individual governing bodies specific to the individual organization, a majority of sorority and fraternities also hold membership with national governing bodies, which provide additional support and advocacy to their affiliate groups. To date, there are four nationally recognized governing bodies, which include the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), which was established in 1998 as the umbrella organization for 23 Latino fraternal and sororal member organizations (NALFO, n.d.); the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), which was established in 1930 as the umbrella organization for nine historically African-American fraternities and sororities (NPHC, n.d.); the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), which was established in 1902 as the support and advocacy organization for 26 sororities/women's fraternities (NPC, n.d.); and the North-American Interfraternity Conference (IFC), which was established in 1910 and serves as a confederation of 71 men's collegiate fraternities (NIC, n.d.) Membership in these organizations is voluntary; all collegiate fraternities and sororities are not necessarily affiliated with them. However, affiliation with a national governing body may represent similar practices and governance of the group's member organizations.

*Fraternity*

Following the traditions of Phi Beta Kappa and the Union Triad (Rudolph, 1990; Schwartz & Bryan, 1983; Torbenson, 2005), the term *fraternity* refers to those fraternal organizations with membership limited to males. Such organizations may be affiliated with the North-American Interfraternity Conference (IFC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), or National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO).

*Sorority*

Following the traditions of Alpha Delta Pi, Pi Beta Phi, Kappa Alpha Theta, and Gamma Phi Beta, the term *sorority* refers to sororal organizations with membership limited to females and includes organizations that classify themselves as women's fraternities, based upon the terminology in use at the time of the organization's founding (Schwartz & Bryan, 1983; Torbenson, 2005). Such organizations may be affiliated with the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), or National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO).

*Value*

For the purpose of this study, a *value* is, "…an individual's concept of an ideal relationship (or state of affairs) which he [or she] uses to assess the 'goodness' or 'badness,' the "rightness" or 'wrongness,' of actual relationships that he [or she] observes or contemplates (Scott, 1965, p. 3).

*Rituals*

*Rituals* have been defined as "culturally transmitted symbolic codes which are stylized, regularly repeated, dramatically structured, authoritatively designated, and intrinsically valued" (Bird, 1980, p. 19). Additionally, "rituals in general function to

regulate social interaction particularly in transitional settings" (p.27). For the purpose of this study, *rituals* can be considered the formal or nationally sanctioned activities associated with membership (e.g., ritual book, ritual protocol).

*Traditions*

Similar to rituals, *traditions* may also transmit the values and represent the culture of an organization. However, for the purpose of this study, *traditions* are defined as the informal activities associated with membership that may have significance to the particular chapter or region but are not officially part of the organization's sanctioned membership ritual. Such examples can be found in chapter bonding activities, pairing of older members with incoming members (e.g., "big/little" sisters and brothers), or an annual luncheon or dinner for newly initiated members.

*Initiation*

*Initiation* rites are those "rituals of admission into secret societies . . . as well as those [rites] which mark the passage between childhood and maturity" (La Fontaine, 1986, p.14). Such activities often occur when new members seek entry into an existing organization, and depending on the nature of the activities, may be considered hazing.

*Hazing*

For the purpose of this study, *hazing* is considered to be any intentional action taken or situation created as a tradition for the purpose of membership or group affiliation that produces or causes mental and/or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule. (Fraternal Information and Programming Group, 2007; Lipkins, 2006).

## Summary

Although a wealth of literature exists in the area of hazing within student organizations, athletic teams, and Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, there is a lack of research that explores the culture of hazing and how the beliefs and behaviors associated with this culture evolve as members of these organizations transition from one area of life (e.g., high school organizations) to another (e.g., collegiate student organizations, including fraternal and sororal organizations). In order to contribute to the study of risk management in fraternities, sororities, and other forms of student organizations, the purpose of this study is to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations.

# CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## Introduction

In Chapter One, the question was posed regarding how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities construct their values for membership rituals and traditions, and how previous experiences help shape those values. To best understand this question and review these concerns in depth, it is necessary to discuss literature from a variety of areas within and outside of the field of student affairs. In order to best provide an overview of the literature, this chapter will open with an overview of collegiate student involvement, followed by a discussion of the behaviors and beliefs associated with student involvement. At this point, literature specific to the population being studied, fraternities and sororities, will be explored, followed by a discussion of the risk management and legal issues typically associated with this population and similar organizations.

## Theoretical Perspectives of Student Involvement

The ability of an institution to create environments that encourage student involvement and foster interactions between students and members of the campus community can be considered one of the cornerstones of retention theory within student affairs and higher education scholarship. As with other student affairs related theoretical foundations, an understanding of the tenets of retention and college impact theory allows student affairs professionals and researchers to better guide the development of new models and theories, in addition to guiding one's practice. The following scholars have discussed the importance of such interactions and student involvement within their research, thereby establishing a framework as to why the interactions

that occur through involvement in co-curricular activities are not only an aspect of the college experience, but an important component of the matriculation equation.

### *Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984/1999)*

> *Student involvement* refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience . . . [t]he greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development. (Astin, 1984/1999, pp. 528-529)

According to Astin, such involvement can come in the form of participation in academic activities such as studying or interacting with faculty and student peers, or through participation in co-curricular activities such as student organizations, athletic activities, or social fraternities/sororities.

This theory of student involvement is based on Astin's (1975, 1977) previous research on retention and the factors that affect student persistence in college, in which he found the "factors that contributed to the student's remaining in college suggested involvement, whereas those that contributed to the student's dropping out implied lack of involvement" (Astin, 1984/1999, p. 523). In addition to academic and co-curricular involvement, Astin found that living in campus residence halls and having part-time employment on campus also aided in student persistence, due to the students' increased opportunities to interact with college faculty, staff, and other students (p. 523).

### *Tinto's Theory of Individual Departure from Institutions of Higher Education (1993)*

Similar to Astin's (1984/1999) theory of student involvement, Tinto's (1993) theory of individual departure is also grounded in the desire to understand student persistence and

departure from institutions of higher education. Influenced by Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide and van Gennep's (1908/1960) studies on rites of passage, Tinto's theory posits:

> [I]ndividual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution. (p. 113)

To Tinto (1993), these interactions and experiences either reinforce or weaken students' ability to persist within the college environment. According to Tinto:

> Interactive experiences which further one's social and intellectual integration are seen to enhance the likelihood that the individual will persist within the institution until degree completion, because of the impact integrative experiences have upon the continued reformulation of individual goals and commitments . . . . Conversely, the model posits that, other things being equal, the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure. (pp. 115-116)

In essence, the interactions that often come in the form of membership in student clubs or fraternal organizations help to create opportunities for such interactions, thereby contributing to students' abilities to persist to the completion of their academic degree.

## Elements of Involvement in Student Organizations

As discussed in the previous section, the interactions that occur through student involvement aid in the integration of students into the academic and social cultures of an institution. Such integration is an important variable that aids in students' abilities to successfully

work towards the completion of their undergraduate degree. It is not possible, however, to discuss student involvement without further exploration of the ways in which students can become involved on their respective campuses. Student clubs and organizations provide a multitude of opportunities for the students who choose to join them. Participation in these organizations affords students the ability to interact with other students who share common interests, as well as provides them with opportunities to become a part of the greater campus community. Depending on the institutional size and type, students may be able to select from hundreds of student organizations that cover a variety of interests. These groups can come in the form of student government associations, residence hall associations, fraternal organizations, academic department-affiliated organizations, intramural sports teams, special interest groups, honors societies, and military organizations (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). Additionally, "an institution's ability to attract and recruit new students is greatly increased by the visibility and involvement in student organizations" (Dunkel & Schuh, p. 11).

### *Understanding Organizational Affiliation*

In addition to the benefits of participation in student organizations as it relates to persistence in higher education, it is also possible to review how such participation shapes various aspects of an individual's life, including one's values, beliefs, or behaviors. Just as diversity exists among the types and sizes of organizations that are present on a campus, differences may also exist in regards to the cultural aspects of individual organizations. In order to understand why students get involved with particular organizations and why certain behaviors occur in relation to such membership, it is important to address various elements associated with organizational affiliation.

*Organizational Culture and Values*

Peterson and Spencer (1990) described *culture* as a construct that "focus[es] on the deeply embedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies that members have about their organization or its work" (p. 6). Scott (1965) provided an example of how an organization's culture influences the shaping of member values. In his study of values development in college, Scott viewed values as being shaped by interpersonal relationships. According to Scott:

> [A] *value* or *moral ideal* . . . is an individual's concept of an ideal relationship (or state of affairs) which he [or she] uses to assess the "goodness" or "badness," the "rightness" or "wrongness," of actual relationships that he [or she] observes or contemplates. (p. 3)

Essentially, a *value* is how an individual frames how he or she see the world, "not simply represent[ing] something that is preferred, but something that [a] person feels *ought to be preferred*" (Scott, p. 4). Within this study, Scott focused on ten chapters of local fraternities and sororities at the University of Colorado, finding that such groups form their own cultures which are created as a result of people spending a great deal of time in particular living groups. According to Scott, this may lead to members' becoming interdependent upon one another, which can result in the group having strong influences on individual members. As a result of these influences:

> [An individual's] values may be affected, first, because the group's members provide cues concerning what notions are "universally shared;" second, because they induce the person to engage in behaviors that he [or she] may subsequently be called upon to justify to [himself or herself] or to others; third, because the

> group members are in a position to punish serious deviation from their norms by withdrawing emotional support from the offender. (Scott, 1965, pp. 81-82)

Although this study occurred within the context of fraternities and sororities with live-in memberships, it is possible to assume that such influences can exist within any group of individuals brought together by a common purpose.

*Values in Action: Understanding Ritual Codes and Traditions.*

Just as an organization's values influence its culture, the values held by an organization also shape the rituals and traditions associated with that group. When attempting to understand the greater context of rituals and rites, it is necessary to look to the work of van Gennep (1908/1960), whose *Rites of Passage* has provided the foundation for scholarship in the areas of rituals and rites. According to van Gennep;

> [T]he life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupational groups, progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts, like those which make up apprenticeships in our trades. (pp. 2-3)

van Gennep's rites of passage can be classified in three subcategories: rites of separation, transition rites, and rights of incorporation (p. 11). According to van Gennep;

> [T]hese three subcategories are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern. . .although a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated. (p. 11)

According to Bird (1980), "phenomenologically considered, rituals may be defined as culturally transmitted symbolic codes which are stylized, regularly repeated, dramatically structured, authoritatively designated, and intrinsically valued" (p. 19). Additionally, "rituals in general function to regulate social interaction particularly in transitional settings" (p.27). These ritual forms occur within seven types, as identified by Bird: taboos, purification rites, spiritual exercises, rites of passage, worship, Shumanistic rituals, and etiquettes (Bird). When attempting to develop an understanding of the roles rituals play within an organization, Bird identified four ways ritual codes regulate human behavior:

1. Ritual codes are often used to regulate social behavior at times and places of transition between existing forms of social organization . . .[at] these times of transition, when persons may have uncertain feelings of identity or feel pulled by contradictory loyalties, ritual codes reduce the sense of uncertainty and conflict by prescribing particular ways of acting, and by re-affirming the identities of persons in relation to given positional and character definitions (p. 23);
2. Dramatic changes in social status and personal identity are often marked, occasioned and brought about by the utilization of ritual codes, which symbolically set forth these changes (p. 23);
3. Ritual codes serve also as a means of communicating a wide range of affections and sentiments (p. 23);
4. Rituals also function as a means of bringing into play intrapersonal and interpersonal energies and imaginations which otherwise frequently remain suppressed or dormant (p.24).

When discussing organizational rites within a collegiate context, Manning (2000) discussed seven additional types of rituals: reification, revitalization, resistance, incorporation, investiture, entrance and exit, and healing. Manning provided specific examples of institutional ceremonies and traditions that reflect an adherence to some of these rituals, such as freshman convocation (reification), fraternity/sorority hazing incidents (resistance), or campus remembrance ceremonies (healing).

One specific form of such rites and ceremonies can be found in rituals associated with initiations. La Fontaine (1986) considered initiation rites to be "rituals of admission into secret societies . . . as well as those [rites] which mark the passage between childhood and maturity" (p. 14). When using the term *secret societies* La Fontaine referred to an organizational type that can take many forms but share a set of characteristics, some of which can be found in "non-secret" societies or organizations (p. 38). According to La Fontaine, most secret societies are single sex organizations and have hierarchical structures where distinctions occur between new and senior members within the organization.

As the name implies, secret societies do value discretion when it comes to organizational rituals and symbols, especially those associated with one's initiation into the organization. As La Fontaine (1986) pointed out, although the rituals or secrets may be held in high regard by members of the organization, they may be of little value to non-members of the organization. These rituals are often grounded in the history of the organization, providing references to the context of that group (e.g., the who, the what, and the why), and are vital as a means of identifying members from non-members, for "membership *is* the common knowledge of secrets and the exclusion of them from outsiders" (La Fontaine, 1986, p. 41).

## Student Participation in Collegiate Fraternities & Sororities

American college students can become involved in a wide variety of student organizations, as discussed in previous sections of this chapter. One such form of organizations can be found in collegiate fraternities and sororities, which have a long history in American higher education. In 2005, there were over 200 national social fraternities and sororities in the United States, excluding professional and honors' societies that use Greek-letter names (Torbenson, 2005). In order to best understand this population of organizations, it is necessary to review the history of these organizations and some of their issues.

### *A Brief History of Greek Life in American Higher Education*

The history of American collegiate fraternities and sororities closely follows that of the United States and its systems of higher education (Schwartz & Bryan, 1983). Just as colleges and universities have evolved and transformed themselves to reflect the changing ideals and needs of American college students, so have the fraternal and sororal organizations that inhabit their campuses.

#### *Fraternal Foundations*

The American tradition of fraternal and sororal organizations can trace its roots to the secret literary societies that formed during the earliest days of American higher education. Contemporary fraternities and sororities can connect their usage of pins, badges, and secret initiation rites to the traditions and practices of those literary societies (Torbenson, 2005).

Phi Beta Kappa is often credited as being the first fraternity to exist in the United States (Rudolph, 1990; Schwartz & Bryan; Torbenson, 2005; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998; Winston, Jr., Nettles, III, & Opper, Jr., 1987). Founded at William and Mary College (now the College of William and Mary) in 1776 as a literary society, Phi Beta Kappa has been described as the

"prototype of the college fraternity" (Torbenson, 2005, p. 43). Exercising some of the same practices as other secret literary societies of that era (e.g., scholarship, secret signs, handshakes, passwords, mottos), members of Phi Beta Kappa were also interested in pursuing social involvement, unlike other literary societies whose purposes were strictly scholastic (Torbenson).

Following the expansion of fraternalism initiated by Phi Beta Kappa, new organizations began forming at other institutions. One example could be found at Union College (New York), where Kappa Alpha Society (1825, not to be confused with Kappa Alpha Order), Sigma Phi (1827), and Delta Phi (1827) were established forming what is known as the "Union Triad" (Rudolph, 1990; Schwartz & Bryan, 1983; Torbenson, 2005). Additionally, Psi Upsilon (1833), Chi Psi (1841), and Theta Delta Chi (1847) were also founded at Union College, and as the result of all of this activity, Union College is often referred to as the "Mother of Fraternities" (Torbenson, p.45).

*The Search for Sisterhood: Women's Fraternal & Sororal Organizations*

In order to understand the birth of the women's fraternal and sororal movement, it is first necessary to reflect briefly upon the history of access for women in American higher education. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, educational opportunities for women often took the form of academies and seminaries, with the first women's college, Georgia Female College at Macon (now Wesleyan College), not opening its doors until 1839 and coeducational opportunities not advancing until after 1860 (Rudolph, 1990).

Although records exist indicating varying levels of affiliation/membership with male fraternities such as Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Beta Theta Pi, and Pi Kappa Alpha, women were often excluded from full membership in such organizations (Schwartz & Bryan, 1983; Torbenson, 2005). As a result of this exclusion, female students were forced to begin their own secret

literary societies, the first of which, Adelphean Society (now Alpha Delta Pi), was established in 1851, followed by Philomathean Society (now Phi Mu), in 1852, both at Wesleyan College (Torbenson). It was not until the founding of I. C. Sorosis (now Pi Beta Phi), in 1867 at Monmouth College that the first national secret society for women was established (Torbenson). Although Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu were established before it, Pi Beta Phi is often credited as being the first fraternal organization established for women (Schwartz & Bryan, 1983).

Unlike the first three societies that originally used "classical" names before eventually changing to the use of Greek letters, Kappa Alpha Theta (1870, DePauw University) was the first women's fraternity to utilize Greek letters from its inception (Torbenson, 2005). Another first came in the form of Gamma Phi Beta, founded in 1874 at Syracuse University, when it became the first Greek-letter organization for women to use the term *sorority* in 1882, setting the stage for future women's Greek-letter organizations (Torbenson).

*Equal Opportunities for Sister/Brotherhood: Inclusive & Culturally-based Organizations*

Similar to the birth of Greek-letter organizations for women, historical events also influenced the establishment of fraternal and sororal organizations for people of color and members of non-Protestant Christian religions. As stated by Boschini and Thompson (1998), "historically [W]hite fraternities and sororities were established on predominately [W]hite campuses at a time when the student body was primarily [W]hite, Christian, and male" (p. 19), which often resulted in homogenous and exclusive membership policies. According to Torbenson (2005), "by 1928, more than half the national fraternities had membership rules based on race or religion" (p. 57). As institutions became more diversified, and as institutions for various populations such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were established, more fraternal and sororal organizations were established to meet the needs of a

changing student population. Such attempts included the establishment of interracial or nonsectarian fraternities such as Pi Lambda Phi (1895), Delta Sigma Phi, (1895), Phi Epsilon Pi (1904), and Sigma Lambda Pi (1915) (Torbenson, 2005), in addition to culture-specific groups.

*Jewish fraternal & sororal organizations.*

Between World Wars I and II, American institutions began enrolling increasing numbers of Jewish students for the first time. However, as the result of anti-Semitic sentiments on some college campuses, these students were often excluded from pursuing participation in campus activities, including membership in fraternities and sororities (Lucas, 2006). As a result, Zeta Beta Tau was established in 1903 at the City University of New York as the first national Jewish fraternity. Soon thereafter, Alpha Epsilon Phi (1909) was established at Barnard College (New York) as the first national Jewish sorority (Alpha Epsilon Phi, 2008).

*The birth of Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs).*

As the result of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Second Morrill Act of 1890 (Morrill-McComas Act), educational opportunities for African-Americans expanded, resulting in increased numbers of African-Americans enrolling in college (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). From these expanded opportunities were born fraternal and sororal organizations for African-American college students. The first of these organizations was Alpha Phi Alpha (1906), which was established at Cornell University as the first African-American collegiate fraternity. This organization was soon followed by Alpha Kappa Alpha (1908), which was founded at Howard University, becoming the first sorority established for African-American college women (Parker, 1990; Torbenson, 2005). Also established at Howard University were Omega Psi Phi fraternity (1911), Delta Sigma Theta sorority (1913), Phi Beta Sigma fraternity (1914), and Zeta Phi Beta sorority (1920), which has resulted in Howard University being considered the "cradle of

BGLOs" (Torbenson, 2005, p. 61). Three additional organizations join the previous list to comprise the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), the governing body for the nine historically African-American fraternities and sororities, or the "Divine Nine" as they are often called: Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity (Indiana University, 1911), Sigma Gamma Rho sorority (Butler University, 1922), and Iota Phi Theta fraternity, (Morgan State University, 1963) (Torbenson, 2005).

*Asian & Latino/a fraternal and sororal organizations.*

In 1916 at Cornell University, the first fraternity for Chinese-American men, Rho Psi, was established (Torbenson, 2005). Soon thereafter, the first Asian sorority, Chi Alpha Delta (1929), was established by a group of Japanese-American women at the University of California-Los Angeles (Chi Alpha Delta, n.d.).

In 1912 Sigma Iota, the first international Latino fraternity, was established at Louisiana State University (Torbenson). Soon thereafter, additional Latino fraternities were established, including Pi Delta Phi (1916) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Phi Lambda Alpha (1919) at the University of California- Berkley (Torbenson). In 1921, Pi Delta Phi, Phi Lambda Alpha, and la Union Hispano Americana merged under the name Phi Lambda Alpha. Ten years later in 1931, Phi Lambda Alpha merged with Sigma Iota to form Phi Iota Alpha fraternity, which considers itself be the "oldest Latino fraternity in existence" (Phi Iota Alpha, n.d.).

## *Contemporary Issues Facing Collegiate Fraternities and Sororities*

Although it is possible to see how historical events have shaped the presence and evolution of collegiate fraternities and sororities, the relationship between these organizations, the institutions that host them, and the greater society has not always been

positive. Fraternal and sororal organizations on American college campuses have experienced their share of changes and challenges. Whether appearing in magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*, or as fodder for television shows and movies, stories about the misbehaviors of fraternity and sorority members have begun to outshine the scholarship and community engagement historically valued by these organizations.

Some of the issues that have faced fraternities and sororities have included hazing, substance abuse, fires in chapter-operated houses, sexual assault, intolerance of difference, and poor community relations (Bryan, 1987; Hennessy & Huson, 1998; National Fire Protection Association, 1996; Nuwer, 1999; Wright, 1996), forcing these organizations to face additional burdens and the scrutiny that such incidents bring.

In *Wrongs of passage: Fraternities, sororities, hazing and binge drinking*, Nuwer (1999) examined alcohol abuse and hazing within fraternal and sororal organizations and social groups, in addition to chronicling deaths that have been the result of such behaviors. To Nuwer, this text was meant to serve as a wake-up call to college administrators, showing that "more student deaths, injuries, and post-traumatic stress disorder cases will occur unless internal and external pressures, the execution of well-intended organizational reforms, and educational awareness programs can change today's collegiate environment by creating taboos against hazing and alcohol abuse" (p. xiii). As troubling as his reports were, Nuwer's (1999) most surprising revelations about student misbehavior in fraternal and sororal organizations involved members of sororities. Although sorority members have not received as much attention in the media as their male counterparts, Nuwer revealed that during the 1990's, sorority hazing incidents were "numerous enough to make field representatives much more vigilant than they once were when they inspect individual chapter houses" (p. 152). Additionally, Nuwer noted an increase in

alcohol abuse among sorority women, which often played a role in hazing-related deaths and injuries.

Wright (1996) explored what she considered the "dark side" of Greek Life, discussing issues of sexual assault, promiscuity, hazing, discrimination, the stresses of maintaining the "proper" image, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs by fraternity and sorority members. Centering on her experiences as a sorority member, Wright believed that the contemporary Greek system was in major need of reform, which in her opinion should be led not only by the organizations' governing bodies, but by the campuses that house them, as well.

One of the most recent examples of misbehaviors involving sorority members can be found in Robbins' (2004) *Pledged: The secret life of sororities*, which provided an undercover look into the daily lives of four sorority members from two different National Panhellenic Conference organizations. Whether discussing issues of binge drinking during "pre-gaming" activities (where underage students consume large quantities of alcohol before going out to bars or clubs where they are unable to legally purchase alcohol), the use of fake identification cards to gain access to such activities, sexual assault, the financial demands of sorority membership, the culture of "Sorority Row," or the pressures and personal identity issues that surround Greek affiliation, Robbins confirmed some of the concerns that student affairs professionals and the general public (especially the media) have had about fraternities and sororities.

## Risk Management and Participation in Student Organizations

While involvement in student organizations can aid in student development and provide an outlet for students to cultivate their interests, participation in student organizations and their activities can also include some unexpected risks. Whether in the form of accidents that occur during an event, the abuse of alcohol by participants or guests, or in the hazing of new members,

various examples of what can go wrong when planning or attending an organization's event can be found not only in higher education and student affairs publications, but on the evening news, as well. A notable example of one such tragedy can be found in the Texas A&M University bonfire disaster. In 1999, the nation's eyes turned to the campus when a forty-foot, 7,000 log bonfire stack for the annual game against the University of Texas-Austin collapsed, killing eleven students and one alumnus, injuring 27 others ("Construction executive," 1999; Lowery, 2000).

Institutions of higher education are constantly evolving their practices and developing theories and models in an effort to meet the needs of a continuously changing student population. Whether rethinking the types of services that are offered on a campus or redefining what a "good" program should look like, most institutions pride themselves on their ability to follow the trends and understand the best practices in respective areas of academia and campus life. The same can also be said of administrators' desire to understand how the law affects their practice (Janosik, 2005).

However, unlike the desire to understand the "best practices" of programming, knowledge of how the law affects student affairs practice does not come from a need to compete against other institutions for students, but out of the necessity to ensure the safety of students who have put their trust in staff members and administrators. Such is especially true in regard to student activities and the management of student clubs and organizations. As the litigious nature of society continues to grow, it was only a matter of time before attorneys and families began to knock on the door of higher education. Pearson and Beckham (2005) noted:

> Increasingly, judges have recognized an institutional obligation to provide a safe learning environment both on and off the college campus. As student affairs professionals expand

programs and services to meet the educational needs of students, they must anticipate that judges will recognize a special duty predicated on a foreseeable risk of injury and judicially imposed duty of reasonable care…. (p. 461)

### *Defining Risk Management in a Student Organizational Context*

When attempting to understand this notion of "foreseeable risk of injury," it becomes necessary to recognize the role of risk management in student affairs. When applied to student organizations, the term *risk management* has been defined as "the process of advising organizations of the potential and perceived risks involved in their activities, providing education about the guiding boundaries established for organizations, and taking corrective actions and proactive steps to minimize accidental injury and/or loss" (Texas A&M University Department of Student Activities, 2009, ¶ 2). Although developed as a way of working with student organizations, this definition can be expanded to include not only student organizations and advisors, but the general student population and the administrators, faculty, and staff members who are involved in the daily lives of students as advisors, teachers, and mentors.

It is also important to note, however, that risk management is about more than just avoiding injuries, loss, and litigation. In "Risk management for student organizations: Putting it in a student development perspective," (2006) Kimberly Novak, Assistant Director for Student Affairs Risk Management at Arizona State University, noted that risk management "should also be about student development and teaching students how to self govern" (p.1).

### *Hazing & Student Organizations*

An example of risky behaviors observed in student groups can be found in the hazing incidents that have affected not only collegiate fraternities and sororities, but athletic teams, marching bands, honor societies, and other student organizations as

reported during phase one of the National Study of Student Hazing: Examining and Transforming Campus Hazing Cultures (Allan & Madden, 2006).

As identified by Ellsworth (2006), Hennessy & Huson, (1998), and Hollmann (2002), one of the main issues associated with the monitoring and prevention of hazing behaviors is the lack of one common definition as to what hazing actually is and what activities or behaviors comprise it. This is often the result of differences in laws that vary from one state or region to another. Similarly, institutions often base their definitions on terms identified by the legal statutes that govern their location (Ellsworth, 2006; Hennessy & Huson, 1998; Hollmann, 2002). One of the most encompassing definitions of hazing has been provided by the Fraternal Information and Programming Group (FIPG), which considers hazing to be "any action taken or situation created, intentionally, whether on or off [organization or institution] premises, to produce or that causes mental or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule" (Fraternal Information and Programming Group, 2007, p. 32). Additionally, Lipkins (2006) provided several characteristics of hazing:

1. Involves a repetition of a tradition (p. 13);
2. Is a process (p. 13);
3. Maintains hierarchy within a group (p. 13);
4. Intends to create closeness in a group (p. 13);
5. Involves psychological and physical stress (p. 13).

For the purpose of this study, and in order to best capture participant experiences with initiation activities, the following definition of hazing was developed by combining the definition provided by FIPG (2007) with the characteristics provided by Lipkins (2006):

> Hazing is considered to be any intentional action taken or situation created as a tradition for the purpose of membership or group affiliation that produces or causes mental and/or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule.

*Athletic organizations.*

Comparable to collegiate fraternities and sororities, the culture associated with athletics has a long tradition of hazing activities (Johnson & Miller, 2004). As with other types of organizations, hazing in athletics is considered to be about power and the perpetuation of hierarchy and patriarchy (Holman, 2004; Johnson & Miller, 2004; Trota & Johnson, 2004). According to Holman (2004), "athletic hazing is a system of control whereby rookie athletes defer to veterans and, in the process, acknowledge and confirm the veterans as the holders of power. Failure to support this relationship will threaten acceptance for group membership" (p. 51).

In 1999, Alfred University conducted a survey of initiation rites within National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)-affiliated sports teams (Hoover, 1999). Over 325,000 male and female student-athletes from over 1,000 NCAA schools participated in this study, which found that over 250,000 of the participants experienced some form of hazing as part of their initiation into their sports team. It was also found that 20% of participants were subjected to potentially illegal hazing activities, (e.g., kidnapped, beaten, forced to commit crimes); 50% of participants were required to play drinking games as part of their initiation; 40% of participants consumed alcohol before joining the team during their recruitment visits, and 67% of participants participated in humiliating hazing (e.g., being yelled/sworn at, sleep deprived, forced to wear embarrassing clothing) (Hoover, 1999). Additionally, it was found that although male student-

athletes were most at risk for any kind of hazing, female student-athletes were more likely to participate in alcohol-related hazing, and football players were more likely to participate in dangerous and potentially illegal hazing (Hoover, 1999).

*Pre-collegiate Influences on Collegiate Behaviors*

Often student affairs and other institutional administrators focus on what happens once students arrive on a campus; however, it is also necessary to understand the experiences that have shaped student perceptions of what it means to be a "college student," especially in regards to participation in certain behaviors. One such example can be found in research on the drinking behaviors of college students which indicated that pre-collegiate (e.g., high school) drinking behaviors often influenced students' participation in binge drinking practices once in college (Crawford & Novak, 2006; Hersh & Hussong, 2006; Reifman & Watson, 2003). If such is true in the case of drinking behaviors, what other behaviors might follow students to our campuses?

Unfortunately, the prevalence of hazing activities among high school students in various types of organizations indicates that hazing is not just an issue facing those in collegiate organizations (Dixon, 2001; Fierberg, 2000; Hoover & Pollard, 2000; Lipkins, 2006; Nuwer, 2000; Taylor, 2001). In 2000, Alfred University released *Initiation Rites in High School,* a survey of 1,541 juniors and seniors enrolled at high schools in the United States. Ninety percent of participants were enrolled at public schools; 5% attended church affiliated schools; 5% attended other private schools, and 1% were home schooled. In this study, it was found that 48% of participants who belonged to student groups participated in hazing activities (Hoover & Pollard, 2000). Forty-three percent of participants reported being subjected to humiliation as part of their hazing activities, The largest percentage of participants (24%) were subjected to hazing as part of initiation into a sports team, compared to 16% for peer groups or gangs, 8% for music,

theater, or art groups, and 7% for church groups (Hoover & Pollard). Additionally, it was found that participants were more likely to participate in hazing if they knew an adult who had been hazed, and 25% of participants reported first being hazed before they were 13 years old (Hoover & Pollard).

In "Why High School Hazing is Our Problem, Too," (2003), Nuwer and Allan identified three theories that guided their opinions as to why young adults and college students are susceptible to participation in such activities:

1. Hazing attempts to fulfill basic emotional needs (p.2);
2. Hazing is a reflection of the larger society's attitudes (p.2);
3. Sometimes a group's culture takes on a life of its own (p. 2).

These authors believed that today's college students come to college with perceptions of "pledging" their affiliation to something as part of a rite of passage or need to participate in various traditions that connect them to a greater group (e.g., their institution, fraternity/sorority, social club). According to the authors, this desire for connection can lead to participation in activities that may appear to fulfill those needs, but may only do so for a short period of time. Additionally, such activities could result in the creation of the opposite of the desired outcome (e.g. the creation of fear instead of trust, instead of unity, division).

In order to combat what is viewed as an "addiction" to hazing, Hollmann (2002) recommended that institutions consider the following strategies:

1. Examine institutional policies and regulations, providing clear definitions and consequences (p. 19);
2. Communicate a clear message of intolerance of hazing and provide educational programs (p. 19);

3. Attack high risk alcohol consumption (p. 19);
4. Monitor activities of student organizations (p. 19);
5. Investigate reports of hazing and enforce campus policies and local laws (p. 19);
6. Build relationships with national organizations (p.19);
7. Facilitate alternative team-building initiation rites (p. 20); and
8. Provide student leadership education and transition (p. 20).

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations. In order to provide a theoretical and historical framework for this study, this chapter provided an overview of relevant literature in the areas of collegiate student involvement, aspects of such involvement, a brief history of American Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, and a discussion of the risk management and legal issues typically associated with this population and similar organizations.

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

The previous review of literature revealed that hazing is an issue that affects all types of collegiate student organizations, from fraternities and sororities to general student organizations and athletic teams (Allan & Madden, 2006; Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005; Ellsworth, 2006; Hollmann, 2002; Hoover, 1999; Hoover & Pollard, 2000). However, with regard to hazing, one of the more interesting revelations is that such hazing behaviors are not limited to college students but are also present among students who participate in high school clubs and athletic teams (Dixon, 2001; Hoover & Pollard, 2000; Lipkins, 2006; Nuwer, 2000; Taylor, 2001). Although it is possible to identify literature that discusses the occurrence of hazing in high school organizations and athletic groups, as well as collegiate organizations, there is a lack of literature exploring how the culture of hazing and its associated values and behaviors evolve from high school through college.

The purpose of this study was to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their perceptions of and values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations. In order to best understand how participants made meaning of their experiences and formed values in regards to the rituals and traditions associated with membership in fraternities and sororities, it was beneficial to explore this topic using the qualitative approach of phenomenology, guided by a constructivist framework. As identified in Chapter One, the following research questions (RQ's) guided this study:

RQ1: What are participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ2: How did pre-collegiate experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ3: What aspects of identity or personal experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

When discussing the process of conducting qualitative research, Moustakas (1994) believed that "[a] method offers a systematic way of accomplishing something orderly and disciplined, with care and rigor" (p. 104). The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the proposed methodological framework for this study, including a description of the data collection process, an outline of the site and participant sampling procedures, and a description of the data analysis process. The format identified by Moustakas will guide this chapter under the following headings: Methods of Preparation, Methods of Collecting Data, and Methods of Organizing and Analyzing the Data.

## Methods of Preparation

Methods of preparation refer to the elements necessary for the creation of the methodological foundation of a study. This section will begin with the restatement of the purpose of this study, including a clarification of the terms included with the statement, followed by a description of my connection to the topic and the topic's connection to greater social issues (p. 105). Additionally, this section will address ethics within the context of this study and provide an overview of the methodology and inquiry paradigm.

### *Clarifying the Statement of Purpose*

The purpose statement of a study provides important foundational information and "must be stated in clear and concrete terms. The key words of the question should be defined, discussed, and clarified so that the intent and purpose of the investigation are evident" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). Therefore, the purpose of this section is to define and clarify the terms that appear within the statement of purpose.

*Sorority & Fraternity Members*

As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, collegiate fraternities and sororities have existed in the United States since the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 and Alpha Delta Phi in 1851 (Rudolph, 1990; Schwartz & Bryan; Torbenson, 2005; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998; Winston, Jr., Nettles, III, & Opper, Jr., 1987). For the purpose of this study, "sorority and fraternity members" referred to a currently enrolled undergraduate student or a recent alumni (defined as five years or fewer removed from their undergraduate experience) who is a member of a fraternity or sorority affiliated with one of the following established national governance organizations: North-American Interfraternity Conference (IFC); National Panhellenic Conference (NPC); or National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC); or is a member of an independent organization of similar structure and purpose.

*Membership Rituals & Traditions*

Bird (1980), La Fontaine (1986), Manning (2000), van Gennep (1908/1960), and Scott (1965) discussed the roles that rituals, rites, and traditions play within the culture of organizations and the way that such rituals and traditions enforce the values held by these groups. As defined by La Fontaine, initiation rites are the, "rituals of admission into secret societies . . . as well as those [rites] which mark the passage between childhood and maturity" (p.

14). Most fraternities and sororities can be considered secret societies by today's standards; therefore, for the purpose of this study, "membership rituals and traditions" refers to those formal rituals and informal traditions that are associated with gaining membership into a fraternity or sorority (further exploration of the definitions of *rituals* and *traditions* can be found in the Operational Definitions section of Chapter One).

### *Researcher Connection to Topic*

According to Moustakas (1994), one of the qualities of human science research (including phenomenology) is a desire to "formulat[e] questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher" (p. 20). This especially true in regards to my selection of this topic. Not only am I a student affairs professional, I am also a sorority woman. I was initiated into my sorority during my sophomore year of college and at one point served as the president of my chapter. The positive experiences that I had through involvement in this and other organizations and activities are some of the main reasons why I feel a calling to work in student affairs and why I pursued an advanced degree in this field. Additionally, during my professional career, I have advised a campus chapter of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), the governing body for the nine historically African-American fraternities and sororities, with which my sorority is affiliated.

Through membership in my organization, by serving in an advisory capacity to a governing body, and as someone who cannot help but look through a student affairs lens when making observations about college student life in a variety of settings, I have had the opportunity to observe (directly and indirectly) all types of behaviors, from the very good (e.g., organizations coming together to aid with a philanthropic or community need) to the

outrageously bad (e.g., news reports of "drunk busses" filled with intoxicated sorority members en route to a chapter formal).

As a result of my experiences I understand why others treasure their respective organizations, regardless of the governance systems to which they belong. Thus, my purpose was not to show why certain beliefs or values are wrong, but to understand what my participants thought and why. I believe that by understanding how contemporary fraternity men and sorority women think about membership rituals and traditions, campus administrators and national organizations can better understand why they may have issues with the implementation of policies and procedures related to hazing, binge drinking, and risk management. If we can better understand why students think the way they do, then we, in turn, can better meet them where they are when developing programs and educating students about appropriate behaviors.

*Researcher Ethics*

Not only are ethical practices a cornerstone of conducting good research, but as a student affairs professional, I am also bound by codes of ethics that guide my practice (College Student Educators International [ACPA], 2006; Merriam, 2002a; Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education [NASPA], n.d.) Additionally, as a scholar conducting dissertation research I was expected to adhere to guidelines set forth by my institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Subjects' Review. Therefore, it was my purpose to maintain ethical practices throughout this study through adherence to these guidelines, in addition to following the suggestions for practice provided by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (1998):

1. The confidentiality of participants was protected through the assignment of pseudonyms (Creswell). Participants either selected their own pseudonym were

provided with one that I created for them. Additionally, their organization was only referred to by the national organization with which it was affiliated, if any.

2. As required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were provided with the option of participating through informed consent. During this process, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, in addition to presented with any potential risks associated with participation in this study (see Appendix A);
3. When recruiting participants for participation, they were made aware of the nature of the study, in addition to the time commitment and expectations for participation in the study.
4. Participants were allowed to withdraw from participation at any point of study without penalty (Moustakas).

## *Review of Inquiry Paradigm & Methodology*

### *Constructivism*

A "[paradigm] represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world,' the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts. . ." (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). Similarly, inquiry paradigms, "…define for *inquirers* what it is they are about, and what falls within and outside the lines of legitimate inquiry" (p. 108). Guba and Lincoln provided three fundamental questions that aid in the definition of inquiry paradigms:

1. *Ontological question*, which asks, "[w]hat is the form of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?" (p. 108);
2. *Epistemological* question, which asks, "[w]hat is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?" (p. 108);

3. *Methodological* question, which asks, " [h]ow can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?" (p. 108).

The purpose of this study was to understand how participants used previous experiences to inform, or aid in the construction of, current values and behaviors in regards to the rituals and traditions associated with joining collegiate fraternities and sororities. Therefore, the inquiry paradigm of constructivism will provide the theoretical framework of this study. According to Schwandt (1994):

> …[C]onstructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experiences and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience. (pp. 125-126)

When answering the three questions posed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), the authors viewed constructivism as having:

1. A *relativist ontology*, where, " [r]ealities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature . . . and dependent for their form and on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions." (pp. 110-111);
2. A *transactional and subjectivist epistemology*, where, "[t]he investigator and object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the 'findings' are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds." (p. 111);
3. A *hermeneutical and dialectical methodology*, where, "[t]he variable and personal (intramental) nature of social constructions can be elicited and

> refined only through interaction *between and among* investigator and respondents." (p. 111)

In essence, constructivists view objective knowledge and truth as being connected to one's perspective (Schwandt). As the purpose of this study was to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations, a constructivist framework allowed the study to focus on this element of construction.

*About phenomenology*

As identified previously, the purpose of this study was to understand how participants used previous experiences to inform or aid in the construction of current values and behaviors related to the membership traditions of their fraternity/sorority. Although other forms of qualitative inquiry (e.g., case study, grounded theory, ethnomethodology, ethnography) could address this question, when operating in the inquiry paradigm of constructivism, the use of a phenomenological approach was best suited because of its focus on understanding one's experience(s) with a certain phenomenon or occurrence.

Phenomenology believes that, "…all human events involve forms of consciousness, which inevitably are shaped through one's biographical perspective, goals, values, and situation-as-lived" (Giorgi, Fischer, & Murray, 1975, p. x). Philosophically, phenomenology asks the question, "[w]hat is there about being human that it is possible for psychological phenomena to appear to us as they do?" (p. x). It is this foundational philosophy that has shaped how phenomenology as a methodology has formed.

Edmund Husserl has been identified as the founder of phenomenology (Grbich, 2007; Hein & Austin, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). According to Holstein and Gubrium, philosophical phenomenology is "[c]oncerned with the experiential underpinnings of knowledge, Husserl insisted that the relation between perception and its objects was not passive … human consciousness actively constitutes the objects of experience" (p. 262). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) believed, "[r]esearchers in [this] mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations…. [w]hat phenomenologists emphasize, then, is the subjective aspects of people's behavior" (p. 23). Grbich (2007) added:

> [t]he focus is on first-person experiences and the trait of intentionality (direction of experience towards things in the world), understood as the means by which an established world of objects or an established way of seeing is brought into being. (p. 85)

Researchers in this methodology come from a variety of social science disciplines, including sociology and psychology, and from a variety of philosophical perspectives, including empirical phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and social phenomenology (Creswell, 1998).

In order to design a study exploring how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities constructed their values for membership rituals and traditions, and how previous experiences have helped to shape those values, the purpose of this section was to establish the theoretical foundation for this study. Terms within the statement of purpose were clarified in addition to the disclosure of my connection to this topic and its social significance. The ethical guidelines that will direct this study were also outlined. Lastly, an overview of the inquiry paradigm that guided this study (constructivism) and the methodology (phenomenology) were reviewed.

## Methods of Collecting Data

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the data collection process, including a description and rationale of the proposed site for the study, the criteria for participation, and a description of the data collection process.

### *Description of Site*

This study occurred at a large, accredited university (hereafter referred to as 'State University') located in the southern region of the United States. State University is a research institution with a total enrollment of over 30,000 students (over 70% undergraduate enrollment), the majority of whom are Caucasian/White. State University has a thriving student life program with over 500 registered student organizations, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletics programs, and a large (23% of undergraduate enrollment) and traditional fraternity and sorority system, which includes almost sixty chapters including independent organizations (not affiliated with a major national governance body) and those affiliated with either the North-American Interfraternity Conference (IFC), National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), or National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). When developing this proposal, the Office of Greek Life at State University was consulted in order to understand research questions regarding its fraternity and sorority population. It was from these discussions that this study was developed.

### *Participant Recruitment & Selection*

According to Polkinghorne (1989):

> The purpose of selecting [participants] in phenomenological research is to generate a full range of variation in the set of descriptions to be used in analyzing phenomena, not to meet statistical requirements for making statements about

> description with a group of [participants] . . . the point of [participant] selection is to obtain richly varied descriptions, not to achieve statistical generalization. (p. 48)

In order to participate in a phenomenological inquiry, Creswell (1998) believed that participants should have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. In addition to these criteria, Polkinghorne (1989) added that participants should be able to "provide full and sensitive descriptions of the experience under examination" (p. 47).

*Recruitment of Participants*

Members of fraternities and sororities are typically very guarded populations (e.g., the National Panhellenic Conference has its own Institutional Review Board process for conducting research using its members). Therefore, sampling of participants (discussed in the next section) occurred primarily with the assistance of the Office of Greek Life at the site institution. As discussed by Creswell (1998) and Seidman (2006), it is often necessary for qualitative researchers to cooperate with formal gatekeepers.

Once IRB approval was received, the advisors to the various governance systems sent information about the study to students using their departmental listserv. Additionally, I attended council meetings with the advisors to discuss the study and answer any questions potential participants had. Participants were also recruited using other organizational and departmental listservs and e-mail lists.

As mentioned previously, in order to conduct research involving undergraduate members of its affiliated organizations, the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) has its own institutional review process. Unfortunately, their research committee did not grant me access for this study, and sent e-mail messages to the various individual organizations affiliated with the

body discouraging their participation. In order to maintain ethical practices, any potential undergraduate participant who was affiliated with a NPC sorority was automatically removed from my sample. As a courtesy to those providing their time to participate in this study, participants received a $10 Wal-mart gift card, provided by the researcher.

*Criteria for Participation*

Due to the size of the pool of potential participants (over 5,000 fraternity and sorority members), purposeful (or purposive) sampling was employed to select participants with the assistance of the Office of Greek Life serving as the primary resource. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) defined purposeful sampling as "choos[ing] particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory" (p. 65). Similarly, Fraenkel and Wallen (1996) stated that when researchers employ purposive sampling, they "use their judgment to select a sample that they believe, based on prior information, will provide the data they need" (p. 101). Although the Office of Greek Life assisted with the recruitment of participants through the use of their various listservs and meetings, I made the final selection of participants. As described in the ethics section of this chapter, only the basic demographic information of participants (number, sex, ethnicity, classification, etc.) is available to the Office, as that information appears in this study. The following criteria were used to identify potential participants for this study:

1. Due to State University's Institutional Review Board policies regarding research involving minors and the parameters it places on the location of participants, each participant must be at least 18 years old;
2. As the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of fraternity and sorority members, each participant must be an already initiated member of a fraternity or sorority

that is affiliated with the North-American Interfraternity Conference (IFC), National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), or an independent organization with similar structure or purpose. For current undergraduate participants, their organization must be in good standing with the University at the time of the interview (to verify existence as a recognized chapter);

3. The participant must be willing to participate in one, 60-90 minute face-to-face audio-taped recorded interview and provide demographic information to the researcher in the form of a Participant Information Form (Seidman, 2006,see Appendix B);
4. The participant must be willing to review a copy of the transcript from their interview, in addition to reviewing the themes I identified from their transcript and providing feedback.

*Overview of Data Collection Method*

When conducting a phenomenological study, the use of research interviews is one of the most common forms of data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Kvale (1996) defined the research interview as "an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (pp. 5-6). Seidman (2006) believed:

> The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to 'evaluate' as the term is normally used . . . .[a]t the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (p. 9)

With this being said, due to the purpose of this study being to understand participants' experiences with membership rituals and traditions, the use of interviews provided the best form

of data collection. Within phenomenological studies, interviews generally "involv[e] an informal, interactive process and utiliz[e] open-ended comments and questions" (p. 114). This pre-developed set of questions is often referred to as an interview protocol (Creswell, 1998). For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2002b) were employed, with an interview protocol providing the general framework for questions, while allowing flexibility for additional questions to be asked of participants (see Appendix C). The protocol was developed following a template presented by Moustakas (1994), and interview questions were piloted using colleagues within my academic and internship departments who were members of collegiate fraternal and sororal organization. The final protocol was modified to include their suggestions (Seidman, 2006).

When discussing the "necessary" number of participants necessary to conduct a qualitative study, Seidman (2006) believed that researchers should attempt to meet two criteria when recruiting participants: sufficiency and saturation of information. Kvale (1996) added that participant selection is dependant on the purpose of the study, and one of the biggest mistakes in qualitative research is interviewing too small or large a number of participants. Nine participants were interviewed for the study, with eight participants serving as the final sample due to technical difficulties with the interview equipment and the inability to conduct a second interview with the ninth participant. I conducted all interviews in the student union at State University, and transcribed them in order to provide a written record of the conversation. This set of transcripts served as the data for analysis (Kvale, 1996). A detailed description of the participants appears in Chapter Four.

*Storage & Maintenance of Data*

As discussed by Creswell (1998), the storage of qualitative data typically receives little attention in discussions of qualitative methodology. For the purpose of this study, electronic and printed copies of transcripts and notes were stored in my home via my computer, portable USB drives, and a locked file box. Additionally, an extra back-up version of interview transcripts was stored on a USB drive and secured in a safe. An inventory of all data collected was also maintained (Creswell).

*Epoche Process*

In order to focus on the experiences of the participants, phenomenologists believe in the concept of *epoche*, or *bracketing*, which Moustakas (1994) described as a process where "to a significant degree, past associations, understandings, 'facts,' [and] biases are set aside [so they] do not color or direct the interview" (p. 116). To Grbich (2007), "[t]he putting aside of experiences of the particular phenomenon and the placing of brackets around the objective world should eventually enable a state of pure consciousness to emerge which will clarify [the researcher's] vision of the essence of the phenomenon and enable [him or her] to explore the structures and 'truths' which have constituted it" (p. 86). During the data collection and analysis process of this study, I was enrolled in a dissertation writing class, and my colleagues often served as a sounding board for the discussion of my experiences and thoughts regarding the study as part of my Epoche process, providing another level of accountability. Additionally, my assumptions and potential biases were addressed earlier in this Chapter under "Researcher Connection to Topic."

The purpose of this section was to identify the data collection process for this study, including a description of the site, criteria for participation, and recruitment strategies for

soliciting participants. This section closed with an explanation of research interviewing, which will serve as the method for collecting data

## Methods of Organization & Analysis of Data

Now that the method has been discussed and the process of data collection has been described, the purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the organization and analysis of the data. Data analysis is considered the "core stage of research efforts in phenomenological psychology" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 50). Most research employing phenomenological methodology utilizes the same series of steps in data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Giorgi, 1975; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne). At the beginning of the analysis process I intended to follow the process identified by Giorgi, however, once I began the analysis of my data I found that Moustakas provided a clearer description of the same process and decided to incorporate Moustakas' steps in my analysis. Both scholars provide a detailed description of the analysis process that appears below.

### *Step 1: Review of Transcript*

Once an interview was completed it was transcribed to provide a written record of the interview. It was then reviewed in its entirety to get a "sense of the whole" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 53).

### *Step 2: Identify Units of Meaning*

After reading the entire transcript, Giorgi (1975) described the next step as "…determin[ing] the natural 'meaning units' as expressed by the [participant]" (p. 87). Polkinghorne (1989) described this as "divid[ing] the transcript into units (blocks) that seem to express a self contained meaning from a psychological perspective" (p. 53). Creswell (1998) has also referred to this step as *horizontalization*, which Moustakas (1994) described as being based

in the term *horizon*. According to Moustakas, "[h]orizons are unlimited, we can never exhaust completely our experience of things no matter how many times we reconsider them or view them. A new horizon arises each time that one recedes" (p. 95). Essentially, these *horizons* represent the *meaning units* that appear within participants' transcripts, and the process identifying the separate units of meaning (or *horizons*) can be described as *horizontalization*.

In order to identify these "meaning units," using Microsoft Word, I went through the electronic version of each transcript and highlighted all participant comments that were related to my purpose and research questions.

*Step 3: Identify Central Theme of Meaning Unit*

Continuing in the process described by Giorgi (1975), I then "stat[ed] as simply as possible the theme that dominate[d] the natural unit within the same attitude that defined the units" (p.87). Using the highlighted document described in Step 2, I then created a separate Word document where I listed brief descriptions of the highlighted sections, creating a series of bulleted comments. Duplicate comments were removed from this list.

*Step 4: Clustering Meaning Units & Identifying Themes*

The next step provided by Moustakas (1994) indicated a need to "relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes" (p. 122). Using the bulleted list created in Step 3, I color-coded those units that described similar experiences/beliefs, and used Word to create another bulleted list of those themes and their related comments.

*Steps 5 & 6: Synthesis of Themes & the Creation of Textural/Structural Descriptions*

During this step, the units identified in Step 4 were then synthesized to create descriptive statements of the "essential, non-redundant themes" (Giorgi, p. 88). Polkinghorne (1989) explained that these "transformed meaning units are related to each

other and to the sense of the whole [transcript]" (p. 54). According to Creswell (1998), these narratives "make a general description of the experience, the *textural description* of what was experienced and the *structural description* of how it was experienced" (p. 55). Detailed textural and structural descriptions were then created as a new Word document, and included "verbatim examples" from the participant's interview (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

*Step 7: Describing the Essence of the Experience*

The final step of analysis for the individual interviews included the combination of the textural and structural descriptions developed in Steps 5 and 6 to create a description of the "essence" or "invariant structure" of the participant's experience. Creswell (1998) described this as "the goal of the phenomenologist, to reduce the textural (*what*) and structural (*how*) of experiences to a brief description" (p. 235). The essences of participants' experiences can be found in Chapter Four.

*Step 8: Bringing it all Together*

Once each transcript was analyzed individually, all of the experiences were evaluated as a group (Polkinghorne, 1989). The individual textural-structural descriptions and essences that were created using the steps above were then used to create textural-structural descriptions and an essence that represents the experiences of all participants. These descriptions are presented in Chapter Four.

## *Validity & Reliability of Data*

As a researcher, it is my responsibility to "produce valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner" (Merriam, 2002a, p. 22a). In order to do so, I must insure that my research is rigorous and able to be trusted by those that create, as well as seek out this

research. Creswell (1998) described the verification and standards of phenomenological research as, "…largely related to the researcher's interpretation" of the data (p. 207).

According to Merriam (2002a), this credibility of qualitative research is accomplished through internal/external validity and reliability. Internal validity allows researchers to recognize whether their findings are congruent with reality (Merriam). In an effort to ensure the internal validity of this study, member checks were employed by e-mailing copies of interview transcripts and identified themes and essences to participants for review and verification (Moustakas, 1994).

In addition, this study was conducted under the direction of a dissertation committee, which included a member with knowledge of qualitative methodologies. Additionally, I continuously participated in the Epoche process as described in previous sections of this chapter, thereby "bracketing" my thoughts and beliefs in order to focus on those of my participants. Lastly, peer reviews of collected data occurred through my participation in a dissertation writing course in order to see how different researchers would categorize the experiences of participants.

## Summary

In order to answer the research questions identified in this study, a constructivist framework guided this phenomenological study which employed research interviews as the primary form of data collection. To insure that this study was conducted in an orderly and rigorous manner, the framework for conducting a phenomenological study provided by established scholars in the area of phenomenological research was followed as a means of developing and applying the methodology for this study.

# CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations. In order to best understand how participants made meaning of their experiences and formed values in regards to the rituals and traditions associated with seeking membership in fraternities and sororities, it was beneficial to explore this topic using the qualitative approach of phenomenology, guided by a constructivist framework. As identified in Chapter One, the following research questions (RQ's) guided this study:

RQ1: What are participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ2: How did pre-collegiate experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ3: What aspects of identity or personal experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

Eight participants affiliated with collegiate fraternities and sororities were interviewed for the purpose of this study. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and the transcripts were analyzed following the phenomenological methods identified by Moustakas (1994). Textural and structural descriptions, along with a description of the

essence of the experience were developed for each participant. Themes were then identified across the eight participants' experiences and a composite textural and structural description, along with a composite essence of the experience were developed based upon those themes to describe the experience of initiation and the values associated with such an experience.

In order to best present the results from this study, this chapter will first review the selection criteria and sampling methods for participation, followed by an introduction of the eight participants, including the essence of their initiation experience. Results from the study will first be presented using the themes that were identified during data analysis, followed by the presentation of the composite textural and structural descriptions and essence that were developed using those themes.

## Participants

Due to the purpose of this study, it was important to identify participants who had experienced the phenomenon of being initiated into a collegiate Greek-letter fraternity or sorority. Therefore, purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996) was employed when recruiting participants. State University's Office of Greek Life provided support when accessing this population of students and recent alumni. Participants included four alumni members and four current undergraduate members of social and service-based organizations, and represented affiliations in National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC), and independent (I) organizations. In order to provide participants with confidentiality, participants either selected or were assigned pseudonyms, and their organizational affiliation is only identified by the system to which it belongs, if any. Five of the participants identified themselves

as Caucasian, and the remaining three self-identified as African-American. The sample included five male and three female participants, and the average age of participants was 23 years old. An overview of participant background information can be found in Table I.

Table 1
*Participants' Demographic Information*

| Name | Gender | Age | System of Affiliation | Member Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alison | Female | 24 | National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) | Alumna |
| Erica | Female | 20 | National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) | Undergraduate |
| Hillary | Female | 20 | Independent (I) | Undergraduate |
| James | Male | 27 | North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC) | Alumnus |
| Knox | Male | 25 | North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC) | Alumnus |
| Marcus | Male | 21 | National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) | Undergraduate |
| Sam | Male | 26 | National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) | Alumnus |
| Tyler | Male | 21 | North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC) | Undergraduate |

### *Alison*

Alison is a twenty-four year old Caucasian alumna member of a National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) affiliated sorority, and is currently a graduate student at State University. She was initiated into her sorority during her sophomore year of college, and continues to be involved with her sorority in an advisory capacity. She previously worked for the organization before beginning her graduate studies. Before attending college, Alison was involved in high school athletics, choral activities, and student government.

*Essence of Alison's experiences*

When describing her high school and collegiate initiation experiences, Alison did not believe the two were connected, but did feel that her habit of goal-setting began as a result of her experiences on the tennis team and continued to her involvement in her sorority and other organizations. To her, the new member education process she experienced in her sorority was an important one that prepared her for involvement in the organization. Although she can look back now and see how some of the activities could be defined as hazing (within both experiences), she did not believe the requests that were made of her were unreasonable or extreme, unlike some of her peers' experiences in their organizations. Those requests served a purpose, and she saw how other members continued to play out certain roles after their initiation.

To her, the initiation experiences she encountered were no different than what someone would encounter in the workplace or other environments. She believed that certain structures and societal norms already exist that automatically stratify people based on factors such as status, age, or academic classification, which is not taken into consideration when individuals attempt to define "hazing" within certain types of organizations.

### *Erica*

Erica is twenty year old African-American senior at State University (SU). She is a member of a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) affiliated sorority at SU, and was initiated into her sorority as a freshman. Erica is currently involved in numerous other campus organizations, and is busy within her major as she prepares for graduation and plans for graduate school. Before attending college, Erica was involved in a high school military organization,

athletics, and an auxiliary organization sponsored by an NPHC sorority for high school-aged girls.

*Essence of Erica's experiences*

Erica viewed her initiation experiences as providing a foundation for one another, with her high school experiences setting the stage for her collegiate experiences. To her, all of those experiences provided her with opportunities to "stretch" herself and gain skills such as flexibility, the ability to multitask, and sacrifice. Erica viewed each initiation experience as a choice, and in the case of her high school military organization, an honor based upon the group's views of her leadership potential.

Additionally, Erica considered her initiation experiences for her sorority to be important to her personal growth, believing that everyone should want such growth throughout their own life experiences. She viewed it as a transition from one area of life to another, "from a girl to a woman" resulting in greater levels of self confidence from her ability to overcome the challenges and stresses of her "educational process."

### *Hillary*

Hillary is a twenty year old Caucasian student at State University (SU). Currently in her junior year, she is a member of an independent service-based sorority at the University. Hillary was initiated into her sorority during her freshman year, and is extremely passionate about the purpose of her organization. In addition to her on-campus involvement she is dedicated to serving her local community, and desires to work in educational reform after graduation. Before attending college, she was involved in various civic organizations and athletics at her high school.

*Essence of Hillary's experiences*

Hillary is originally from a small town, and when making the decision to join her sorority, she desired to find her niche, or something smaller to belong to. As a result of her values for community involvement and service, she sought membership in a service based sorority, unlike the more social sororities that have chapters at State University. To her, these organizations did not represent her values, feeling that their approaches to membership were more superficial, as well as a less diverse membership. Within her sorority, she found that the "common bond of service" helped bring members together, and her pledge and subsequent membership experiences have helped her increase her opportunities on campus and in the community, and have also helped create opportunities for her future profession

*James*

James is a Caucasian alumnus of a North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC) affiliated fraternity. He is twenty-seven years old, and a graduate student at State University. James was initiated into his fraternity during his junior year, and was involved on campus as a Resident Assistant (RA), and served in leadership positions within his fraternity. During his interview, he did not provide any information about his extra-curricular activities in high school.

*Essence of James' experiences*

James' status as a "nontraditional rushee" caused him to have a different experience than most of his pledge brothers when joining his fraternity. To him, because he was older and had the responsibility of being an RA, in addition to his goal to work for the federal government, his approach to pledging a fraternity and what he wanted to get out of membership were dramatically different from that of his freshmen counterparts.

Although he admits he would have participated in activities that could be defined as hazing, had his situation been different (job, career goals), he intentionally selected an organization that did not involve hazing as part of its pledge process, based upon the observations and "horror stories" he witnessed from his peers. To James, the lessons he learned as part of his initiation experience may not have been as obvious to him then, but he now sees the influence it had on his sense of responsibility and work ethic.

### *Knox*

Knox is a Caucasian alumnus of a North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC) affiliated fraternity. He is twenty-five years old, and a graduate student at State University. Knox continues to be involved with his fraternity in an advisory capacity. Before attending college, Knox was involved in high school athletics, debate, his church's youth group, and other academic clubs.

#### *Essence of Knox's experience*

Knox's value for his fraternal initiation experience was not connected to his experiences with his high school football team. Instead, he credits his desire to "earn" his membership and "not be handed anything" from the lessons his parents instilled in him as he was growing up. Knox believed his pledgeship should be a meaningful and rigorous experience where he learned about the organization and proved his ability to be a member of the organization. Through those experiences, he desired to develop lifelong bonds with his pledge brothers and members of the fraternity. Additionally, his initiation experiences and subsequent affiliation with the fraternity served as a means of connecting him to the legacy of the institution, in addition to creating opportunities for involvement on campus, and providing a "home base" and a group of friends to "do college" with.

### *Marcus*

Marcus is a twenty-one year old African-American senior at State University (SU), and is a member of a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) affiliated fraternity. He was initiated into his fraternity during his junior year and serves as an officer within his chapter. Before coming to college, Marcus was involved in high school athletics and various student organizations, including a high school fraternity/step team.

*Essence of Marcus' experiences*

Marcus described his initiation experiences as being shaped by each organization's unique culture and traditions, with his NPHC fraternity initiation experience serving as the most significant due to its connection to his experience and culture as a Black man. He believes that this culture is shared by the other eight NPHC organizations, which creates a value for pledge process and the importance of "earning" one's Greek letters, resulting in potential members seeking out traditional pledge experiences and thus disregarding anti-hazing policies.

When describing his experience, he depicted 2 distinct phases, the first self-directed in preparation for membership and influenced by the stories and rumors that surround Greek affiliation; the second, his organizationally guided initiation experience. To him, the experience taught him how to be a better team player and helped him develop fervor for doing the work of his organization.

### *Sam*

Sam is twenty-six year old African-American alumnus of a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) affiliated fraternity at State University. He is still active with his undergraduate chapter, serving as a liaison between the undergraduate and graduate chapters. Before coming to college, he was involved in high school athletics and other academic student organizations.

*Essence of Sam's experience*

Sam's initiation experiences provided an opportunity to create unity among group members through the continuation of the groups' membership traditions. While different organizations may present their traditions in various ways (i.e., physicality, mental challenges, etc.), it was Sam's belief that all organizations have some form of membership traditions, based upon the nature of the organization.

Sam believed his initiation experiences with the high school football team served as a form of preparation for his initiation experiences with his fraternity, providing him with "physical and mental toughness." To Sam, his initiation experiences were periods of time where he chose to experience various forms of adversity as a way of proving his ability to belong to the groups; however, he believed the benefits of affiliation (i.e. serving as a role model, the ability to give back to his community, and the connection to "something bigger") outweighed the challenges associated with his membership process.

### *Tyler*

Tyler is a twenty-one year old Caucasian student at State University. He is a member of a North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC) affiliated fraternity, and was initiated into the organization his freshman year. Currently in his junior year, he is involved in a variety of campus organizations, and considers himself a "Renaissance Man." Before coming to college, he was involved in high school athletics and theater.

*Essence of Tyler's Experience*

Tyler viewed his initiation experiences as providing an opportunity to build a deeper sense of camaraderie with his teammates (high school) and his fraternity brothers (college), although he viewed his fraternity experience to be "tougher" and at a "higher

level" than his high school experience. He viewed his pledgeship as teaching valuable life skills (e.g., humility, time management, people skills, conflict resolution), and compared the bonding that occurs during that experience to the camaraderie that occurs on sports teams or in military organizations.

He also expressed his belief that the pledgeship mirrors life, where individuals have to start at the bottom and work their way up to where they want to be. To Tyler, individuals that are involved in fraternities/sororities that do not have pledgeships are missing out on that level of camaraderie, and lack certain skills as a result.

## Overview of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities made meaning of their initiation experiences, and how their previous experiences influenced the value they have for those encounters. In order to provide a full description of the experiences discussed by participants, this section will begin with the presentation of the themes and sub-themes identified during data analysis. Once the themes have been identified and discussed, the composite textural and structural descriptions and composite essence that were developed during the data analysis process will be presented in order to summarize the experiences described by the participants.

### *Themes*

Based upon interviews with eight members of collegiate Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, four themes were identified; initiation experiences as purposeful events, adherence to tradition and the "unwritten rules" associated with membership, societal and cultural influences on initiation experiences, and expectations of/preparation for initiation experiences. For the

purpose of this section, the four themes will be discussed using examples from participant interviews and connected to their relevant Research Question (RQ).

*Theme 1: Initiation Experiences as Purposeful Events*

When describing their initiation experiences for their collegiate fraternal or sororal organization (and in some cases, their experiences with high school organizations before attending college), participants described the activities associated with the experience as being purposeful to them within and outside of the organization. Within these conversations, three sub-themes were identified in regards to the "purposes" their initiation experiences served; the building of camaraderie among organizational members and a connection to the organization, personal development and education, and the ability to "earn" one's membership through their ability to overcome the adverse situations presented to them during their initiation experiences. The topics addressed by this theme and subsequent sub-themes address the question posed by Research Questions 1, 2, and 4.

*Sub-theme 1.1: Camaraderie and connection.*

The majority of participants (seven out of the eight) in this study described their initiation experiences as being purposeful. One of the purposes they identified was the camaraderie that formed between them and other members of the organization, particularly the people who were undergoing the experience at the same time (i.e. a pledge brother/sister or line brother/sister, depending on the organization). Additionally, they believed the experience also provided a sense of connection to the organization they were joining. When describing their experiences, the participants often viewed their organization as a "family" and the bonding that occurred during their initiation experiences as a means of bringing participants closer to one another, creating a

stronger familial relationship. Sam (NPHC) provided an example of how his experience helped him bond with those sharing the experience with him:

> …[I]t sounds cliché, but it really, like togetherness I mean, that's the main thing, because, for me it wasn't to bad, but I know a couple of guys that I did it with, they were like, only children, and, like I was [the oldest of a group of siblings], so I'm used to, like sharing my stuff with [other] people,[other] kids, and just, you know, just being together, and so they were like, you know, kinda, not standoffish, but a big part of what we do, or, what we all did, was coming together, you know, being one, being a unified group, or whatever, a unit, and so, like, for some people it was hard, for me it was good, and like, that, that was the one thing, 'cuz [*sic*] we all came from different backgrounds, like, I think a couple of us came from, like, small country towns, the rest of us came from big cities…so it's like, we all came from different backgrounds, but that one thing brought us together, and I think that any organization can do that…but I guess that's what makes ours different in a sense, 'cuz [*sic*], like you could all be for, Habitat for Humanity, and you can meet people from different backgrounds and whatever, but, you know, that common thing united them, they're all building houses together, and like, our common thing was, we're doing this for, you know, our organization, doing it for this and, we might 'notta [*sic*] known each other before, but we're tight as, um, tight as glue now, and I mean, we're gon' [*sic*] keep each other through it, and we vowed, like, ay, [*sic*] we all start [the pledge process], we all finish, and so, that's, that's what the main thing, just the togetherness of it…

To Sam (NPHC), his experience created a sense of togetherness between a group of people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

To some, the nature in which people are initiated into their organization has an influence on how close they can become to those individuals sharing the experience. When discussing the camaraderie he developed during his pledgeship, Tyler (IFC) felt that those who did not experience a pledgeship lack a deeper connection to the other individuals sharing that experience:

> …[T]here's one fraternity on campus that doesn't actually do a pledgeship. They do actually, like it's an initiation. And while I think that's fine, it's what they wanna [*sic*] do, and they do other things besides that, that's you know, a great fraternity, they do a lot of good things on campus, but I feel that they're missing something…it comes back to that same idea of like, a sports team, the military, you're missing that camaraderie of going through things that aren't exactly pleasant…they aren't exactly fun, and they test you a little bit, and you've gotta work as a team, a unit. THOSE (Tyler's emphasis) things bring people closer together. If you don't go through that, I know you're not gonna [*sic*] be as close. I, I'll bet money on it every time…without that, I feel you're missing something. It's, I don't know what it is, the intangibles, but going through those different events, and whatnot, as a group, as a pledge class bring you closer together, and they'll make you better friends because of it. They'll make, you know, the memories better, things will be just, you'll be a closer family, you always will…

To Tyler, the fraternal/sororal initiation experience is similar to that of participation in military or athletic organizations, where adversity helps to create the bond.

Unlike the thoughts shared by Sam (NPHC) and Tyler (IFC) who viewed adversity as providing the glue that connects members to one another, Hillary (I), believed that although her initiation experience created the opportunity to bring her pledge sisters together, the overall purpose of the organization is what created their bond:

> I have some of my dearest friends on campus are from that organization and those few weeks, you know, just like, at the meetings, the pledge meetings you just meet random people. There was one girl who I was volunteering [at a community center] with and then we realized we were pledging together, and we became really close…I mainly just remember the [pledge] meetings, and then like, we would end up, starting eating together before the meetings, and just became like, really building a bond, and like, having that common interest of service really creates, like, you have that one common interest, so, you really, like, bond on a lot of levels, 'cuz [*sic*] people who are interested in serving the community tend to have, like, a lot of similar beliefs, and like, then we're all different, too…but it's just one of those things where you know, you're with someone every week, it really creates opportunities just to, for growth with people, and so you do have that common bond of service, it just really made it even stronger, and um, and you know, we had really good times…

Hillary's (I) thoughts revealed that it is not always the membership activities that unite members, but also the individual's reasons for joining the group, as well as the group's purpose.

Just as participants described developing a connection to the individuals sharing their initiation experience, some participants also believed their initiation experience helped to create

a connection to the greater organization. When describing his pledge process, Marcus (NPHC) discussed why his experience was important to him:

> …[I]t was important to me because it connects you to the organization as well as the other members in the organization. Um [*sic*], you know there are hundreds of thousands of members [of my fraternity], but you'll never meet all of them, but that's something that you know is for the most part universal, you know? So, it gives you a greater connection, and then, you, you meet other people, you know, you share stories, and then you just kinda [*sic*] talk about it and things like that, and, it, it helps break the ice because its, there's networking and then there's the brotherly love, but then at the same time, you know, I don't know you from Adam. We're, we're bruhs [*sic*], you know, and I'ma [*sic*] come up and get to know you, I'ma [*sic*] say hi, grip you up, you know, but I don't actually know who you are. But when you do, when you can share that it helps break the ice and then you've already started conversation that will lead to other things and other conversations, and then things like that.

To Marcus (NPHC), the shared experience of pledging the same organization provided the starting point for getting to know his fraternity brothers from other chapters.

*Sub-theme 1.2: Personal development, education, & acquisition of skills.*

In addition to developing a sense of camaraderie and organizational connection, participants also viewed their initiation experience/pledge period as serving the purpose of teaching them about the organization while also contributing to their personal development and teaching of beneficial life skills. Alison (NPC) described enjoying her new member period, viewing it as valuable to her development as a member of the sorority:

> …I enjoyed the period of being a new member, because it allowed you to learn, it allowed you to ask questions, it allowed you to, you know, not necessarily make mistakes, but maybe if you did something that wasn't appropriate to that organization, it was, you were allowed to say, 'ok, next time, don't do it,' and it not affect, kind of, your future membership. It was kinda [*sic*] that trial period that allowed you to just, I mean, learn is what I keep coming back to. But I think that's kind of the biggest reason is, it gives you that time to educate, so then once you do become a member, you can fully participate and get involved and become a leader, and as opposed to if you just joined. I just think it's a very good structural way of organizing an organization…

To Alison (NPC), her experience prepared her for involvement and leadership within her sorority.

When describing her initiation experiences, Erica (NPHC) viewed her educational intake process as helping her to develop beneficial skills, believing that the experience helped her to transition from a girl to a woman:

> …I would say it's, it's important to personal growth, and everybody wants personal growth, everybody should need personal growth, and just to be able to continue to make transitions in life, like you should never get, like be happy with being comfortable, always wanting to change and learn new things, and then, that's definitely what you get from going through this educational intake process, um, that [my sorority has]. It's just growing from the beginning when you started, you may be one way, but once you come out of it, you're gonna be different, not necessarily different as far as, 'oh, we've brainwashed you,' or things like that,

> but different because, it's kinda like you…made that transition…going from becoming a girl to a woman type thing, and it's, you definitely see the changes in you. You, you grow, you kinda take on a new level of confidence knowing that you can go through something as challenging and as stressful as an intake process to something like, being able to take on things harder than that, or just as hard, you know?

To Erica (NPHC), the experience taught her how to manage stress, time management, sacrifice, and flexibility. She believed her experience was important to her personal growth.

Although he discussed not seeing it at the time, when describing his pledge experience, James (IFC) recalled a story where he was introduced to "the most influential member" of his fraternity while blindfolded. When he removed the blindfold, it was revealed that he was looking into a mirror at his own reflection:

> …I don't reflect back on it very often, um, but I do feel that…I hate to, to lie to you and say that it shaped who I am today, I don't think it has, but I do think it helped me realize at the time that if I didn't do it, it wasn't gonna [*sic*] get done, so, which comes to play in my job everyday. If I don't do it myself, it may not get done, the ball may get dropped, so I need to take responsibility for the things that I do, and I need to go ahead and just get it done, 'cuz [*sic*] I am the most influential person…I am the man, I am the person who, you know, is the role model now, I am the person who people look up to, so I may as well get it done. That is one of many, you know, instances or stories in my life where I'm like, wow, that's, you know, that's probably true, whoever is standing in front of that

mirror, that is, you are the person, you need to do whatever it is in life you're designated to do…

James' (IFC) example provided an illustration of how although he did not see it at the time, some of his experiences encountered during his fraternity initiation are still viewed as beneficial to his personal and professional life.

Although Sam (NPHC) did not feel as though his initiation experience necessarily taught him skills, he did believe that the experience developed certain skills he already possessed:

> …[I]t doesn't set you apart, but, it just, like, it gives you, like, an extra edge, because not only are you a student, but you have overcome, like, these other obstacles while still maintaining, like, scholastic achievement, and its like, if you can do this on top of that, then you're ready for the world, you can do anything. If you can overcome this process, in addition to being a top student that you were, like, you know, it just makes you that much more competitive in the real world…

As a result of his fraternity intake process, Sam believed that he developed an "extra edge," due to his ability to overcome the adversity he faced during his initiation experience. In addition to the skill development that was described by participants, some viewed their initiation experiences as creating additional opportunities for them. Knox (IFC) provided one such example of this philosophy:

> …[My pledgeship] was really the thing that kinda [*sic*] changed my college career for the better. [It] really kinda [*sic*] liked like, kicked it into the high gear, and allowed me to do a lot of other things… when I was a pledge, I remember the president of the fraternity being like, 'Knox, like, I can tell that you are gonna be good at on-campus leadership stuff. You need to get involved in this [leadership

> program].' And so, like, I never woulda [*sic*] known about that, or wouldn't, I wouldn't have had an opportunity to join it if I hadn't, um, being, if I had not been pledging at the time…

Knox (IFC) believed his initiation experience served as a launching pad for involvement with other campus activities, experiences he felt he would not have had access to had he not been involved with his fraternity at the time.

*Sub-theme 1.3: Ability/desire to "earn" membership.*

Not only did participants view their initiation/pledge experiences as providing them with the opportunity to develop a greater sense of connection to peers and the organization, as well as the development of skills/knowledge, some also viewed the experience as providing them with the opportunity to "earn their letters," and prove their ability to belong to their fraternal/sororal organization. Some of the beliefs espoused during these conversations were in relation to the culture of particular Greek systems (i.e. NPHC, IFC, NPC, etc.), or personal values, and those aspects will be discussed within a different theme.

With this being said, participants did discuss views regarding the importance "earning" one's membership and the work that is associated with pursuing membership in a fraternity or sorority as its own entity. Although most participants (male and female) alluded to the topic in some form, the male participants within this study contributed greatly to the formation of this theme. When describing his experience, Tyler (IFC) provided such an example, describing the structure of his pledgeship, and how the work he put into it made him appreciate his membership, once initiated:

> …[T]he length of [our pledge period] is always the major thing that people talk about…we don't, I guess, physically haze…we've never done that, we never will do that…It's just it's so much time, and you're basically, you're a pledge, if you will, for that much longer, you're still at the bottom of the totem pole that much longer. So for some people it's just not as appealing, because they don't wanna [*sic*] be at that level forever. They wanna [*sic*] be a (snaps his fingers), you know, on [the brothers'] level, 'so I can do whatever I choose to do.' So it's probably a little bit less appealing to say you've gotta [*sic*] be this, you're at the bottom of the totem pole, there for so long, and go through so much. But, at the better, you know, the better end it's still, it makes it that much sweeter when it's over, and when you're initiated. For us, it's like this huge victory, like going through a football season…

Tyler's (IFC) beliefs about one's pledgeship serving as an opportunity to develop an appreciation for one's membership was also described by Knox (IFC).To Knox, the length of one's pledgeship and the trials that are presented help the organization to see pledges' true colors, and assess their fit for the organization:

> …I think it's important because, it can be a double edged sword, because people after they're initiated can say, 'oh, well, we didn't, you know, their pledgeship's too easy, we need to make it harder like ours was' and they're forgetting how hard their pledgeship was… I think that if you say that you're tryin' [*sic*] to be, you know, a group of guys that have these certain ideals and goals, and that you wanna [*sic*] be one of the best fraternities on campus, and, um, inert goals here, then entry into whatever club it is, I think should be a rigorous test of, of that person.

> Um, not just their ability to do well on a test of history, or anything like that, but you really need to, to see them, who they really are, um, when things are stressful, um, when you don't have a lot of free time, or, um, under adversity. And so, and I'm not sayin' that, you know, you should beat a pledge up to see how he handles adversity. Like, I'm saying, like, sometimes peoples' true colors come out when, when things aren't handed to you, or when things aren't easy. And so, 'cuz [*sic*] our fraternity usually, on, on average, kicks out like, one pledge a year, and not because we plan on doing that, but because some guy just either doesn't get it, doesn't wanna [*sic*] be [there], doesn't wanna [*sic*] work to be [there]…

To this thought, Knox (IFC) added his belief that one's pledgeship should de difficult yet meaningful, and considered his pledgeship a "badge of honor":

> …[I]t's kinda [*sic*] like a badge of honor to say that, that I had a meaningful pledgeship where I wasn't, you know, it wasn't like three weeks of hell and then I was initiated, it was [months] of hard work. And, and you can look at other fraternities and say, you know, um, you guys are nice and great and whatever, but, back in your mind, you know that, that you worked hard for what you got, and, and that it means something to you…

Knox's (IFC) views of his pledgeship experience, and its comparison to a "badge of honor" provided an example of his value for "earning" his membership, and what that may look like to others undergoing similar experiences.

Similar to his belief that one's pledge experience serves a means of connecting the participant to his/her fellow members and the organization, Marcus (NPHC) also discussed one's experience as being connected to the respect they receive from their peers:

> …I feel like some, maybe sometimes people feel if they don't go through a pledge process they're disconnected from the other members, you know, they're, they're still a member, but, they, essentially, you know, as the term goes, they 'skated' through… I know a lot of people who, um, who want to be Greek, and they want to go through [pledge] processes. They know it's gonna [*sic*] suck, they know it's gonna [*sic*] be, you know, hell for two or three or four months, but they realize that in the, in the window of life that's a small amount of time, and you know that you earned your letters, and you, they weren't just given to you. So I think a lotta [*sic*] times people will, will do that just so that they can say, you know, 'I did THIS for my letters, and they mean THAT much to me' (Marcus' emphasis). Um, I think that's usually why…

To Marcus (NPHC) "earning" one's membership is indicative of the amount of respect an individual will get within their organization, and it is often a personal choice that individuals make.

As demonstrated in Tyler (IFC), Knox (IFC), and Marcus' (NPHC) descriptions of the desire to "earn" one's membership, there was also the notion of how those experiences are temporary and have the benefit of lifelong membership within the organization. Another example of this was provided by Sam (NPHC):

> …[T]he glory outweighed the guts, and I mean, I knew that, yeah, I'ma have to go through this, but this is temporary, like they say, it's temporary, I'm like, the rewards of it are gonna [*sic*] be far reaching, and it's gon' [*sic*] be like, lifelong. Whereas, what I'm going through now, I'm like, I was like, hopefully they won't have me doin' [*sic*] it the whole year, the whole freakin' [*sic*] semester, I'm like,

> it's not gon' [*sic*] last forever, but once I'm in, I'ma [*sic*] be in it forever, as long as I continue to wanna [*sic*] be in it and do my part, so I'm like, I can sacrifice a couple weeks, months, for the lifetime, and so, that's what, that's what really made it worth it, I'm like, ok, I can do this, it's only for this 'X' amount of time…
>
> To Sam (NPHC), the "glory" of membership outweighed the "guts" of his pledge experience.

*Theme 2: The Importance of Tradition & Adherence to "Unwritten Rules"*

When describing their experiences, participants also discussed how the traditions and "unwritten rules" associated with initiations shaped their behaviors when going through their experience. So much of what participants described was attributed to the traditions of the organization, and member expectations and requests of those who desired to join the group often went unquestioned. It was also during this conversation about traditions and "unwritten rules" that the topic of hazing appeared. Although this term was used during other parts of participant conversations (such as the notion of "earning" one's membership), participants seemed to more readily discuss the topic of hazing and their opinions of it when describing the traditions and "unwritten rules" associated with membership. Similar to the topics presented by the first theme, this theme also addressed the question posed by Research Question (RQ) 1 of this study.

Alison (NPC) provided several examples from her high school and collegiate experiences where traditions were adhered to without question. To Alison, the requests that were being made of her did not interfere with her everyday life and served a purpose, therefore she did not feel a need to question them. It was not until she completed college and began working for the organization that she began to think that maybe some of the requests could be considered hazing,

if only by definition. One of these examples can be found when she described the "mental expectations" that older members of her sorority had for her and her counterparts that were joining the sorority:

> I think because [the requests] didn't really affect my day to day life. It didn't alter my perceptions really in any way. Um, you know, the wearing of the [new member] ribbon, ok, I see all the other groups wearing ribbons, I wanna [*sic*] be proud that I'm part of this organization. And for me I also viewed it as, I'll be able to tell who other members in my pledge class are… [and the] initiated sisters will be able to tell who I am. 'cuz [*sic*] again, during that process, you don't meet every single person that ends up joining. And, so, I think for me, I was like, you know, I get to say, this is the organization I'm a part of, but then for other things, like, you know, we ask that you go set up early to events, it was kind of like, 'ok, we're goin' [*sic*] to an event, we have to go to the event anyway, we might as well save seats.' And so, I really, I think if it was something where they said, like, my roommate for example, she, um, as part of her, you know, process, they were taken on this scavenger hunt where they had to do certain things, like, um, just wear a bra and underwear and do the *Ally McBeal* 'baby dance', and I think things like that, I would've maybe said is that really, you know, do I really need to do that? But I think, because, every, I think everything we were asked to do was related to the chapter in some way, it was kind of for the better good of the chapter, we're asking you to come set up early, we're asking you to do this. Nothing was, 'I need you to go get me a candy bar now', and so I think because it

was related to the organization, we didn't necessarily question their, their, um, like question what they asked us to do.

Alison (NPC) also described how her adherence to some of these traditions came from her observation of the roles that members of the sorority continued to perform even after they were initiated. During her interview, she described one of her chapter's traditions regarding seating arrangements when gathering in her sorority's lounge:

> …I still say I don't think we should've changed, but we kinda [*sic*] had a general rule that for organizational meetings, not just hanging out, um, 'cuz [*sic*] we met where we lived, so not just for hanging out, if an older member of the organization walked in, you would give them a seat on the chair or the couch, and then you would move to the floor. And that was mainly because during our actual formal chapter meetings, in the order that we sat in, the older members just naturally took the chairs first in the way that they had to sit, and then everyone else sat on the floor. So, it was kind of like a continuation, so, if you were doing any sort of chapter business, generally, the older members just took the chairs. And we were REALLY (Alison's emphasis) encouraged to discontinue that practice, you know, it's classism [*sic*] , it's like, all this stuff, but it was a really interesting switch, once we kind of got rid of that, um, that, you know, practice, there just became this kinda [*sic*] cavalier attitude of, and I don't wanna [*sic*] say disrespect, but almost, almost a level of disrespect of, if, um, you know, especially like, newer members just kind of, and it sounds weird, like, just sitting wherever they want, but sometimes, like, you know, the president would walk in, and no one would offer her a chair. And, it was just almost like, you would do

> that, you know, maybe for, like, someone in your family, like you aunt or something, you would kinda [*sic*] give them a chair. And even as I say it now, it still sounds a little funny, but I just, there was different attitudes switches that…[y]ou could see that, even though this was something little that, you know, Suzy over here, she's an older member, I'm gonna [*sic*] give her my chair, I carried that kind of respect through other parts of our interactions in the organization…

To Alison (NPC), the traditions and "unwritten rules" of her sorority served a purpose and set expectations for member behaviors and attitudes.

Marcus (NPHC) provided another example of the traditions associated with membership. To him, the traditions associated with an organization influence why people decide to join the organizations they do:

> I think it's a historical thing as well as a traditional thing because until the 1990's, hazing was all above ground, um, so, for the organizations it's tradition. And then when you're going through, and you're joining this organization, a big part of most people joining the organizations is the tradition of that organization. You know, whether it be the traditions of, um, of excellence or traditions of community service, social progress, things like that, but all those things kind of get encompassed in why you want to join, and then also, doing that gives you a connection to the history of that organization, as well as, the older members who've gone through pledge processes, as well as the new members who are, who still go through the pledge processes…

To Sam (NPHC), hazing is part of the tradition of NPHC-affiliated organizations, often resulting in potential members disregarding institutional and organizational policies regarding hazing when seeking membership.

When describing his beliefs regarding the traditions associated with membership, Sam (NPHC) stated that while traditions lay the foundation for the organization and help to connect all members of the organization, it is also important for members to understand why those traditions exist and recognize what traditions may be detrimental to the organization:

> …[T]raditions are traditions, always. But equal, like, as times change, you change with 'em [*sic*]. And so, at the same time, even though we, I know I was brought in a certain way, and people that came in after me were brought in a certain way, but we try to adapt with the, so that's one thing I can see people do try to adapt with the changes, and as far as, like, all of the things that used to go down, back, I guess whenever they started instituting whatever we do, like, definitely changed with the times. And it's like, you know, we keep up with the times, but at the same time, we try to hold on to a little bit of the tradition, because that's, that's like what unites, not unites us, but connects us, to like, you know, our chapter members or our chapter founders, you know…I'm the big believer in if it's not broke, don't fix it, but if it ain't workin', get rid of it [*sic*]. And so, the things that are working fine, you know, that are serving their purpose, and those are the traditions that we try to hold on to, but, the things that they did in the past, that just like, there wasn't any point for them to do this in the first place, you know, we, I try, we're like, real vocal and instrumental on trying to, you know, reform and we're constantly trying

to update and just get rid of, you know, the stuff that's just like, useless and would end up jeopardizing, our bigger, you know, purpose…

Sam's (NPHC) example provided a recognition of how although traditions are to be highly regarded and adhered to, they are also malleable, and must be occasionally reevaluated to ensure they are still serving their purpose.

*Theme 3:Cultural & Societal Influences on Member Perceptions of Their Initiation Experiences*

When describing their initiation experiences, participants made it very clear that such experiences are different for those who experience them, due to a variety of internal and external variables. When identifying this theme during data analysis, it was necessary to develop three sub-themes in order to appropriately discuss the cultural and societal influences that existed in their experiences; personal and experiential differences, pledging is like life, and cultural/systematic differences. Participant responses presented within this theme address the question posed in Research Question (RQ) 3.

*Sub-theme 3.1: Personal & experiential differences.*

Participants indicated that several personal variables influenced how they made meaning of their initiation experiences. To these participants, factors such as age, desired outcomes, previous experiences, and personal values influenced their collegiate initiation experiences, causing their experience to be different from their peers who may be going through the exact same experience at the same time. James (IFC) and Knox (IFC) provided examples of such influences.

Following his father's recommendation, James (IFC) did not immediately pursue membership in a fraternity. Instead, he waited until his junior year to pledge his organization, and approached his selection process differently from his peers. Due to his age and classification,

he viewed himself as a "non-traditional rushee" since most people at his undergraduate institution joined fraternities during their freshman year. Additionally, James had additional obligations as a Resident Assistant (RA), as well as a desire to pursue a career in the Federal government, so it was important to him to select a fraternity that did not participate in hazing. He believed that such involvement could be detrimental to his status as a role model, and could potentially jeopardize his career prospects:

> …[T]he RA position made it very different, because I couldn't be as dedicated, and, the brothers that I was rushing with, not my pledge brothers, they didn't understand, but the, the brothers that were actually already in the fraternity, um, knew that commitment, understood that commitment, and were very flexible with me, because I did have a job, and was already actively involved in that role as an RA, so I didn't have to go to everything, and if I had duty, or I have to be in my residence hall, they understood that and they accepted that. Some of my freshman fraternity brothers didn't understand that at all, 'Why doesn't he have to be here? We gotta [*sic*] be here, why doesn't he have to be here?' Um, so that made my experience very different, the other part is, like I said, a lot of the people that rush at that university are freshman, I was a junior at the time, so, my experience was different because I already had some leadership experience, they were comin' [*sic*] straight out of high school, probably didn't have more, I know for a fact that many of them didn't have any sorta [*sic*] leadership experience, whatsoever. Um, I had already worked two separate jobs, 1 in which I was, um, in a head position where I had supervisees, and many of them had never even had a job, so I came in with a little different perspective, and I was in it for the leadership portion, I was in it for

> the resume building, I was in it for the connections that I was gonna [*sic*] make outside of which. Um, some people were in it just, like I said, to have a place to hang out on game day Saturdays where they could drink beer…

As a result of these factors, James (IFC) described approaching fraternity life differently from his peers and pledge brothers.

Knox (IFC) also described age as playing a role in how he interacted with his pledge brothers (he was a sophomore and most of them were freshmen). Additionally, he viewed the values instilled in him by his parents as influencing his work ethic, which had an effect on how he approached his initiation experience:

> …[W]hen I was 13 or 14, they [cut off my allowance]. And, and I remember being like, 'Dad, I need, I want some money', you know? And my Dad was like, 'if you want money, go earn some money' and he was like, 'I'll let you use my lawn mower, and, and I'll pay for gas, if you wanna [*sic*] start cutting people's yards'. And so, I, I remember getting on like, you know, Windows 1992 version and goin' [*sic*] on like, the whatever Paint was back then, and like, drawing this lawnmower kinda thing, and making these flyers that said '[Knox's] Lawn Service' and goin' [*sic*] around to every house in my neighborhood, knocking on the door, shaking the hand of whoever answered the door, and telling them that I'm, that I would like to cut their grass. And, before that, I had sold wrapping paper to help pay my private school tuition. Like, we weren't, we didn't have a lot, like, we weren't poor, but, my dad was a very middle class, like, they could barely afford to send me and my brother to this private school. Like, so I wasn't used to, we didn't have tons of extra stuff. Um, so I think that's also probably plays into it too, like, we

> never took extravagant vacations, I never, I never got the big thing I wanted for Christmas. I never, you know, like, so I'm used to when I want something, like, like working to get it. And so, so I, I, maybe all guys aren't like that, 'cuz [*sic*], there are certainly people in this world that, you know, that would, would like to join a fraternity where you didn't have to have a pledgeship, or whatever it may be…

Knox's (IFC) example provided an illustration of the background and personal experiences, such as age and upbringing, that influence how people view their membership traditions.

*Sub-theme 3.2: Pledging is like life.*

In addition to the personal and experiential differences that influenced how participants viewed their initiation experiences, some also described the influence that American culture played on how they and others approach initiation experiences. During interviews, pledge/initiation experiences were compared to numerous existing structures such as athletics, school classifications, military involvement, and internships. When discussing her experiences with her high school athletic team, Alison (NPC) was very critical of how people defined "hazing" within certain organizations while ignoring certain societal structures:

> …[I]n general, like, American culture, I mean, freshmen are, I mean you hear it even now in college, like, 'oh freshmen, they're so cute, they don't know anything.' Like, it's just this, assumed knowledge of if you're younger, you're gonna [*sic*] have to do things, because you haven't proven yourself…you're not gonna [*sic*] have the access to things that you will as an older student just for the simple fact that you're younger…I think, sometimes people forget that there are already in place things that separate the classes, so that hazing sometimes really

> isn't, I don't know exactly what I'm trying to say, but I think, 'cuz [*sic*] there are many forms of hazing that are horrible, but I think the broad definition kind of forgets sometimes that there are already in place, um, ways to separate the different, you know, new member classes, or grades, or things like that.

Alison later continued this conversation when discussing her sorority membership experience in comparison to advancing in an employment situation:

> …I had mentioned this before, that you do have classifications in so many organizations, that as a newcomer, you're just expected to do things. I mean, you look at the work environment, and if you're an intern or, you know, someone that works in the mailroom, you're gonna [*sic*] be asked to do things that you would not, you wouldn't do as the CEO, you're asked to do the things for the CEO that may not be in your job description, but because that person asked you to do it, you're gonna [*sic*] do it, because you're looking out for your future in that organization. And I really think it can relate back to any type of organization, you know, if it's a tennis team, a fraternity, a chess club, that if you want to excel and succeed and, you know, positively influence the other members, as a new person, you're probably gonna [*sic*] do what it takes, or what you perceive it to take, to be accepted...

Tyler (IFC) also discussed how some people do not want to experience pledgships because they do not want to be "beneath" someone, forgetting other structures that exist in society:

> …[P]eople who don't go through [pledge experiences] just don't understand it…I don't know how that is, but, to kinda [*sic*] go through this, say, I don't wanna [*sic*]

> be below somebody, I don't wanna [*sic*], you know, I don't wanna [*sic*] be a plebe, a pledge, whatever you wanna [*sic*] call it, I don't wanna [*sic*] do that, because it's beneath me. And, you realize those people don't exactly get it. It's not that whole aspect of you being a pledge, or beneath somebody, it's that you're working your way up to get somewhere, you're starting at the bottom and working your way up. And, it's kinda [*sic*] how life is, you don't start off at the top, it doesn't happen like that, you know? You start at the bottom, you work your way up to get to that next level. That, I think is what pledgeship is, or whatever you wanna [*sic*] call it…

To both Alison (NPC) and Tyler (IFC), everyday experiences share similarities with how people view and define membership traditions and hazing within Greek organizations.

*Sub-Theme 3.3: Cultural/systematic differences in initiation experiences.*

Although participants were extremely clear with the first two sub-themes they described when discussing how peoples' initiation experiences differ, participants were vocal when describing the cultural (i.e. race, gender) and systematic (governance structures) differences that existed across their experiences, and their perceptions of the experiences of others. While cultural and systematic differences may appear to be two different entities, due to the structure of State University's fraternity and sorority system, findings in this sub-theme appeared within the existing structures; the historically African-American fraternities and sororities are all associated with the NPHC, while the traditionally Caucasian organizations are affiliated with the NPC and IFC. Additionally, gender differences were separated by organizational type (fraternity vs. sorority). Therefore, when describing how their experience may be different from someone else's,

participants often referred to the "other' as someone in the opposite organization/system (i.e. NPHC fraternity member would describe an IFC or NPC organization member, and vice versa).

One such description of how one's culture influences their initiation experiences was presented by Marcus (NPHC) who viewed his participation in his fraternity and its membership traditions as being directly connected to his experiences as an African-American male. First he described his perceptions of the differences among the purposes of the Greek systems that exist at State University:

> NPHC organizations were born out of necessity… from Alpha Phi Alpha to Iota Phi Theta, necessity…[T]hese organizations were needed to create social change and to champion the progress of Black people in the community, as well as the uplift the community. Um, whereas those organizations, it almost seems like they were all created just for high society, to give people a better way of connecting, uh, on that level, whereas, NPHC, the basis of every organization, you know, no matter how their founders decided to write their principles, they're all brotherhood slash sisterhood, scholarship, and service, except for the sororities, they all have some form of being a, a better woman. But, other than that, those were it. Um, whereas, the other, IFC & Panhellenic, they all just seem to have parties all the time just so they can meet each other and then this family knows that family so you two get married. You, know, it's almost like a matchmaking system.

To Marcus, the differences that exist among the purposes of these organizations influence how people approach membership within these organizations, and their subsequent experiences. He

later described how his initiation experience resonated with his status as an African-American male:

> It's important to me just because, it's, it's yet another way to connect with my own history, and then, it's important to me because it allows me to have a better understanding of things that have gone on, why they've gone on. Um, because, the whole point of, when people always say the point of a pledge process is, is, it's metaphoric for, um, for Black people's history in America, I'm just kinda [*sic*] going through rough times to find some semblance of salvation, at this point, if you want to call it that. Um, so it, it gives you a better grasp of the things that have happened, and it also gives you the chance to say it's time to march forward.

Erica (NPHC) did not believe that one's race indicated a difference in initiation experience. Instead, she viewed her experiences (both high school and collegiate) as being different due to her status as a woman. During her interview, she discussed some of the observations she has made of how male and female students approach membership:

> Um, I definitely see the difference everyday, just with like women who are interested in sororities, it's like, they feel as though they have to become, like, the person's best friend, or it's kinda [*sic*] like, they have to, like, suck up, or things like that, which, we, we don't we're not looking for that, you know what I'm saying? We're just looking for a female who can provide something to the organization that we don't have, or something that we like and that we need and that we want to continue in our chapter. But, yet, girls'll go and do some crazy stuff, and we'll just look at them like, that, you didn't have to do that. You know, as far as in, on the different hands, like, males they're so laid back, they're like

> ‘I’ll just go to the interviews, you know, I’ll show my best face’, and that’s it, they don’t really have to worry about kissing up to these guys and things like that. And I just think, um, the way that women perceive the sorority life is different form how males perceive it. Males, um, both sides are about business, but at the same time, males are little bit laid back and can deal with the stress a little bit better, as far as like, ‘ok, I gotta do this, I gotta do that’ [*sic*] whereas females be like (talking frantically) ‘oh my God, I gotta do this, I gotta do this, I gotta have it done, they said I gotta have it done now’[*sic*] …it’s just a little more frantic as far as women are.

Unlike Marcus (NPHC), Erica (NPHC) viewed the differences between how people view their initiation experiences as being more gender-based than defined by race.

When discussing his experiences and some of his observations of other groups, Knox (IFC) also recognized some of the differences that culture (race and gender) can play within peoples’ initiation experiences; however, he also described some of the differences that can exist within a system, based upon the particular chapter of an organization:

> …Um, I know some of my friends who went through pledgeship in other (IFC) fraternities, and all it was, was just a big haze-a-thon that they just had to get through, and it was sorta [*sic*] like, can you last, can you run this marathon? And, so it was different from me in that respect, that yeah it was hard and I was tired, but it wasn’t, you know, it wasn’t demeaning, or, it wasn’t pointless. And a lotta [*sic*] guys that I know had very pointless pledgeship experiences where it was pretty much brothers telling them to do stuff ‘‘cuz [*sic*] they could, ‘‘cuz [*sic*]

they were brothers and they were pledges, and pledges have to obey the brothers.

And, I was glad that that wasn't how our pledgeship was.

Knox's (IFC) example, along with those of Marcus (NPHC) and Erica (NPHC), provided an illustration of how personal and individual initiation experiences are, and how cultural and systematic differences can influence those experiences.

*Theme 4: Expectations & Preparation*

The final theme that was identified during data analysis involved how participants described what they expected their fraternal/sororal organization initiation to be like, and how (if at all) they prepared for that experience. Within this theme, two sub-themes were identified, the influence of peers and pre-collegiate involvement with initiations. The topics presented in this theme address the questions presented in Research Questions (RQ) 1 and 2.

*Sub-theme 4.1: Peer influence on expectations & preparation.*

During these discussions, it was revealed that more often than not (6 out of 8 participants), peers played a tremendous role in how participants developed their expectations for their initiation experiences. Although some described how the media presents Greek Life through stories about hazing, or the influence that parents have on their thoughts about Greek Life and initiation experiences, participants described the stories/rumors they heard from their peers and their observations of their peers' experiences as providing them with information about fraternities and sororities and their initiation experiences.

When deciding which organizations to pursue for membership, James (IFC) described how his observations and the conversations he had with his roommate shaped his selection of organizations and perceptions of fraternal initiation experiences:

> …[T]here was [*sic*] a couple [fraternities] that I avoided intentionally, because of some of the horror stories that I did hear about hazing, uh, and things like that, and as an RA, so [I] particularly looked at organizations that I hadn't heard horror stories about, [my roommate's fraternity] being one, [the one I joined] being the other…That's how I got involved, and that's kind of my story of where it came from…

Similar to the influence James' (IFC) roommate had on his decision, Alison (NPC) also described how her friend's stories influenced her selection process and expectations about her sorority initiation experience:

> It was, it was interesting, um, because like I said, my friend had gone through, and she enjoyed it, and she went trough quite a bit of hazing, which…didn't dissuade me from doing it. It wasn't something that I said, 'at this point I want to be her while she's going through this experience,' but it was, I think it was something that I assumed would happen, I just assumed that that was part of the experience. Um, you know, she, and she never said she regretted doing it, which I think would've had a lot of impact on me, if she had gone through some of these experiences and come out of it saying, 'I didn't think they would put us through this, I didn't think of this' that probably really would have affected me, but the fact that she took it with stride, and, you know, this is something normal, I think that really led me to just assume it as normal….I kinda said to her 'well, give me the

scoop on the different organizations' and so she kinda took me through all the groups on our campus, and she said one, like [the sorority I pledged] she's like, 'I really like them', and it was really one of the only groups that she spoke favorably of, besides her own. Um, so that really just kinda stuck in my mind. I also had met a couple other people in different organizations, and I said, oh, you know, I think I would like, you know, those groups, and I formed my own, kind of, perceptions just being there for the year…

While James (IFC) and Alison (NPC) described the influence that their peers' stories had on their expectations about sororal/fraternal initiations, Marcus (NPHC) explored the topic a little deeper, describing some of his observations and the discussions he had with his peers regarding seeking membership in fraternities and sororities. First he described peoples' perceptions about institutional and organizational anti-hazing policies:

Well, just coming into it, I think most people when they, when they join, when they go to join a organization, nobody really believes the anti-hazing thing going into it, so you just kinda like, 'okay, whatever' but you have, you know, you hear the stories from other people, from people you know, from friends, um, on different campuses and things like that, you hear, you know the different stories of things that go on, and 'oh did you hear this about that organization or this about this organization, or did you hear this about so and so'…[S]o, we hear all that while you're preparing and researching and things like that, 'cuz [*sic*] it's also part of the research, finding out, you know, what's gonna [*sic*] go on? What should I expect? You, um, you realize that it's not necessarily gonna [*sic*] be a cakewalk when you go in to it, at least you're prepared for it not to be.

He then added some examples of the stories/rumors he had heard throughout his experiences, and the weight he believes such stories hold as individuals develop their perceptions and expectations:

> …[O]f course they hold a lot of weight…. I won't say the majority [are] true... I'd say a good bit of the stories are actually true, or at least mostly true. Um, there have been chapters of different organizations that have been known to just beat their pledges with bats for no reason. Then there have been stories of people who have wrapped barbed wire around paddles and things like that. So when you hear these stories you kinda [*sic*] go 'alright, well, I know the people in this chapter, if any of that's going on I, they wouldn't do that, like, take that out, but that I don't know about'…[T]hen you just hear of the generic things, you know, of people taking wood, you know, things like that…So you, you take that all into consideration when you're thinking about joining an organization, 'cuz [*sic*] you, I feel like anyone who's really interested and that's what they wanna [*sic*] do, they would think about all the aspects of it, and what they're willing to do, what they're not willing to do, what they're willing to put up with, and if it's worth to them to even start down that road thinking that it may turn out to be something that they're not ready to do, or willing to do…I think most people have a set of expectations [of being hazed]… at least some fashion. Um, it may not necessarily be physical but mental or however, you know, whatever happens, I think most people are pretty aware that something along the lines of that happen…

Marcus (NPHC) also described how some of his peers take their questions one step further, asking their friends who are involved in Greek organizations to "give them wood" to see what

that would feel like and if they could handle it. Additionally, both Marcus and Knox (IFC) described taking a lighter course load the semester that they sought membership, in order to have more time to devote to the experience and related work.

*Sub-Theme 4.2: Pre-initiation experiences.*

The second Research Question (RQ) of this study specifically asks if pre-collegiate experiences with initiations influence how participants viewed their fraternal/sororal initiation experiences. During their interviews, participants were asked about their experiences with high school organizations or other non-Greek collegiate organizations, and how those experiences influenced their expectations and preparation when joining their collegiate fraternity or sorority. Five out of the eight participants described being involved in a high school organization that involved some form of new member traditions. These organizations and experiences ranged from involvement on athletic teams, to participation in a high school fraternity/step team and community service organization sponsored by an NPHC sorority.

When asked about the role that such involvement played on participants' expectations, responses were mixed, with three participants seeing no connection between the two experiences, and two participants viewing their high school experience as preparation for their collegiate experiences.

Although Tyler (IFC) believed the purposes of his high school and collegiate initiation experiences were similar, he felt that they represented two different "beasts":

> …I guess it comes back to the team thing. That, if anything, will come back, and you can link any sports team to this, 'cuz [*sic*] you're with [a group of] guys, you're a team, you're trying to get things done, you're trying to succeed as a whole to become brothers, that's the main goal. You're trying to win, that could

be the championship, if you will. Same thing back, probably from high school, like, being on, on a sports team, or something like that, you're working together to achieve that goal of winning a championship, that's what you're trying to do. If anything, there may be some correlation there, but the two things are also, just, they're different beasts a little bit, 'cuz [*sic*] you're doing different things, you're, the style things are different, the people you interact with are probably different, you know? The level of guys at my fraternity is probably higher than the level of guys at, you know, my football team back at home. It's just because, now you're at a university level, now, you're a little bit higher, it's a little bit tougher. Um, there was some, like, I guess, like, keeping motivated, keeping the hard work aspect of it, like, that idea of, just coming, put your nose to the grind a little bit [*sic*], probably there's some link there, yes, but other than that, it's almost two different beasts.

To Tyler (IFC), his high school and collegiate initiation experiences were two separate entities.

Alison (NPC) also described seeing her high school and collegiate experiences separately, but attributed that to the "way her mind works:"

…I think is maybe just part of kind of my, the way my mind works, but I don't make a lot of connections, necessarily, so I think I just, I kinda go into things as their own separate entities. And so I, so going into Greek life, again it was just like, ok, I'm gonna [*sic*] do this and I'm not exactly sure what it means when I, if I actually get to do it, but we're gonna [*sic*] find out. And so, I don't know if I consciously brought in, kind of, those experiences. I'm sure they were there, under

there somewhere, but I don't know if I consciously thought this would be similar to my past experiences

In contrast to the views described by Tyler (IFC) and Alison (NPC), Sam (NPHC) and Erica (NPHC) viewed their high school and collegiate experiences as being connected to one another. To Sam, his experiences with his high school athletic team was connected to his collegiate fraternity initiation experience:

> …I think the [high school] experience, it, prepared me for [the fraternity experience], even though I didn't know what to expect as I was going through my process, but, it definitely prepared me, so, I feel that they're connected on that way, just from, like, a mental toughness, physical toughness, like with anything, in life, when something is physically taxing, the first thing you're gonna wanna [*sic*] do is quit, but your mind has to tell your body to keep going, you know, keep pushing. So, that kind of helped prepare me for the later process. Because, like I said, I didn't know anything about Greek Life comin'[*sic*] into college, but, I feel like that's what connects it to. It's just, all those characteristics that I built up in high school, they helped prepare me for what I went through in college, or through my fraternity process

To Sam (NPHC), his high school experience equipped him with mental and physical toughness, which he believed assisted with his ability to complete his fraternity initiation experience.

When discussing her experiences, Erica (NPHC) described her high school initiation experiences as building a foundation for her collegiate involvement:

> …I don't really think that there were any similarities or differences, I just feel as though one set a foundation for the next. One built the foundation for the next,

> and, and, that, and I really feel as though that was a key, a key component in helping me transition from [my high school organization] to [my sorority], or [from another HS organization] to [another group that I'm currently involved in]. Yeah, it kinda, it didn't really help ease the transition, but it, it allowed for me to have a lot more knowledge in what I was doing, and what I was gettin' [*sic*] into, as opposed to just going into it blind

To Erica (NPHC), her initiation experiences in high school provided her with a framework of what to expect with her collegiate initiation experience for her sorority, and prevented her from "going in blind."

## Composite Descriptions of Participant Experiences

The themes that were identified during data analysis were also used to develop composite structural and textural descriptions, as well as a composite essence, as identified by Moustakas' (1994) methodological framework. In order to provide a complete description of the experiences that were discussed by participants, these descriptions have also been included in this chapter.

### *Composite Textural Description: What Was the Experience?*

Encounters with initiation experiences can occur in a variety of organizations, institutional settings, and include both male and female participants from diverse backgrounds (age, race, culture, etc.). Group initiations are not just limited to collegiate fraternal and sororal organizations, but also occur in high school athletic and student organizations. Such experiences can also vary across organizations and participants, through the use of various models of practice.

All of the participants described their involvement with their initiation experiences as a choice, but expressed a variety of expectations for that event. To some, it represented a time to learn about the organization's history, traditions, and beliefs. Others considered it a time to prove their ability to belong to the group through physical and mental challenges and the overcoming of adverse situations. It was also described as a "building" time that taught lifelong skills (i.e. teamwork, time management, self-confidence, conflict resolution, etc.), creating camaraderie/group unity among the organization's members. Many of the participants described their experience as doing all three.

When describing their collegiate initiation experiences, participants also described numerous approaches and structures. Some participants described methods of preparing for the experience, including preliminary organizational research, observation of member behaviors, meeting members of the organization, discussing the stories/rumors associated with pursuing membership in a fraternity/sorority with peers, or drawing from previous personal experiences, while others did not describe any form of preparation when going into their experience. The format of such experiences also varied. Some described structured initiation experiences through formalized "pledge/new member" periods within their fraternal/sororal organizations or high school groups, while others described their experiences (particularly in high school) as not having any formal structure or purpose. Most of these experiences were described as being guided by organizational "traditions" or "unwritten" rules that were followed without question.

When describing the actual activities that occurred during their initiation experience, most participants recognized that certain incidents could be defined as "hazing" although they either did not think of it that way at the time, but see it now, or still do not consider it hazing when comparing it to other things (such as their peers' experiences in different organizations),

considering "hazing" to be a relative term. Additionally, when discussing "hazing" in the context of organizational initiations, some participants described intentionally seeking fraternal/sororal organizations that did not employ such methods, or did not do it "a lot," while others viewed it as unavoidable and part of the experience to be expected.

*Composite Structural Description: How Was it Experienced?*

Just as the format and descriptions of initiation experiences can vary across organizations and settings, so can the individual values and outcomes of those experiences. Participants in this study described a variety of feelings when discussing the events surrounding their organizational initiations.

Most participants described their experiences to be purposeful for them, attributing some of their skills and personal development to those experiences, especially when describing their collegiate initiation activities. To some, the experience did not only result in individual personal growth, but also provided an opportunity to grow closer to those who were sharing the experience (such as a pledge/line brother/sister).

Similarly, individual values were also connected to the encounters that were described by participants when discussing their initiation experiences. Some participants viewed their experiences as culturally significant to them, providing an opportunity to connect to their racial background/legacy. Others described a strong value for "earning" their membership, whether due to larger societal values for hard work, beliefs instilled by parents, or organizational/systematic cultural values. Although most participants believed that others may encounter initiation experiences, who they are (gender, race, age, etc.) combined with the nature of the organization and its "type" of initiation practices, creates different experiences and outcomes for participants (i.e. everyone will not necessarily have the same experience or outcomes from that experience,

even if going through the exact same process at the same time). Additionally, some participants shared their belief that the failure to go through an initiation experience can hinder one's connection to the organization and its members, sometimes resulting in a lack of respect from other members within and outside of the organization.

### *Composite Essence: A Summary of the Experience*

Initiation experiences are personal, defined by the participant going through it. Although most individuals described similar purposes for and outcomes from going through their initiation experience (i.e. learning about the organization, connection to the organization and its members, personal development, respect, etc.), the way one experiences their initiation varies due to the personal values and identities they bring to the experience. With that being said, there was also the recognition of greater societal, cultural and organizational values that influence how people approach their initiation experiences. Traditions and "unwritten rules" often shaped how organizations welcomed new members into the group, and most participants described an acceptance for those traditions without question, some purposely selecting organizations because of their membership traditions and how they lined up with their personal values.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations. The findings presented in this chapter provided an overview of how eight participants from four different Greek-governance systems described their collegiate initiation experiences, in addition to how their personal experiences outside of the organization influenced those encounters.

Through the analysis of data, four themes and their related sub-themes were identified, and connected to the three research questions that guided this study. The first theme, *Initiation Experiences as Purposeful Events*, discussed participants' beliefs that their initiation experiences 1) provided them with the opportunity to create camaraderie with their fellow members while also creating a connection to the organization, 2) provided them with the ability to experience personal development, and 3) provided an opportunity for them to "earn" their membership in the organization.

The second theme, *The Importance of Traditions and Adherence to Unwritten Rules*, provided a closer look at the norms and values that guide membership traditions within collegiate fraternal and sororal organizations, and how participants rarely questioned such traditions. The third theme, *Cultural and Societal Influences on Member Perceptions of Their Initiation Experiences*, discussed how personal and experiential differences, American culture, and cultural/systematic differences influenced participants' initiation experiences. The final theme, *Expectations and Preparation*, described how participants used their peers' stories and experiences, as well as, their own previous initiation experiences when developing expectations of and preparing for participation in collegiate fraternity and sorority membership traditions.

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

## Introduction

Previous chapters have provided a detailed outline of this study, including a statement of the problem, a review of the literature relevant to the topic, the method and theoretical framework that guided data collection and analysis, and the subsequent findings. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the study in addition to a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter Four and their relevance to the literature presented in Chapter Two. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the limitations of this study, concluding with its implications for student affairs practice and suggestions for future research.

## Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations. In order to best understand how participants made meaning of those experiences and formed values in regards to the rituals and traditions associated with seeking membership in fraternities and sororities, it was beneficial to explore this topic using the qualitative approach of phenomenology, guided by a constructivist framework. As identified in Chapter One, the following research questions (RQ's) guided this study:

RQ1: What are participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ2: How did pre-collegiate experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

RQ3: What aspects of identity or personal experiences influence participant perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with collegiate fraternity/sorority membership?

Eight participants affiliated with collegiate fraternities and sororities completed in-depth semi-structured interviews for the purpose of this study. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and the transcripts were analyzed following the phenomenological methods identified by Moustakas (1994). Four themes and related sub-themes were identified across the participants' experiences, and were presented in detail in Chapter Four. An overview of the themes is presented in Table 2 on the following page.

Table 2
*Themes Identified During Data Analysis*

| Theme/Sub-Theme | Description |
|---|---|
| Theme 1 | Initiation Experiences as Purposeful Events |
| Sub-Theme 1.1 | Creation of Camaraderie & Connection to the Organization |
| Sub-Theme 1.2 | Personal Development, Education, & Acquisition of Skills |
| Sub-Theme 1.3 | Ability to Earn Membership |
| Theme 2 | The Importance of Traditions & Adherence to Unwritten Rules |
| Theme 3 | Cultural/Societal Influences on Member Perceptions of Their Initiation Experiences |
| Sub-Theme 3.1 | Personal & Experiential Influence on Perceptions of Experience |
| Sub-Theme 3.2 | Pledging is Like Life: Societal Influences on Member Perceptions |
| Sub-Theme 3.3 | Cultural/Systematic Differences in Initiation Experiences |
| Theme 4 | Expectations of and Preparation for Fraternity/Sorority Initiations |
| Sub-Theme 4.1 | Peer Influence on Expectations & Preparation |
| Sub-Theme 4.2 | Pre-Initiation Experiences |

## Discussion of Findings

Four themes were identified across participant experiences regarding their initiation into their collegiate fraternal or sororal organizations, and the values they associated with those experiences. In some cases, the findings from this study supported the literature identified in Chapter Two, while in others it raised additional questions not addressed by the literature. In order to provide a framework for this section, the research questions that guided this study will be used to outline this discussion.

### *Participant Perceptions of Fraternity/Sorority Membership Traditions (RQ1)*

When discussing their perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities, participants described a variety of beliefs about those experiences. Some of these beliefs included the importance of tradition and an adherence to the "unwritten rules" of their organization, including the implications that those beliefs might have on some participants' involvement in activities that could be defined as hazing. Ultimately, participants identified various outcomes associated with their participation in the traditions and rituals associated with membership in their organization, viewing them as positive and beneficial to their connection to the organization, as well as to their development as members and as individuals.

#### *Importance of Tradition and Adherence to "Unwritten Rules"*

When describing their beliefs about tradition and an adherence to the "unwritten rules" associated with membership in their fraternity or sorority, participants provided numerous examples of why they valued the traditions of their organizations. Whether in the case of Marcus (NPHC) who viewed the membership traditions of his fraternity as providing a deeper connection to his fraternity and its greater membership, or Alison's (NPC) observation of how members performed duties and fulfilled certain roles within the group even after initiation, participants often viewed the membership traditions of their organizations as "good," and as rules to be followed without question.

Such findings supported the literature on organizational culture, values, rites of passage, and rituals, revealing a continuing desire and appreciation for participation in such traditions within organizations. When describing rites of passage and the associated rituals associated with membership, both van Gennep (1908/1960) and Bird (1980) described the transition that occurs

as an individual moves from one area of life to another; in this case, from non-member to member status. Bird defined rituals as "…culturally transmitted symbolic codes which are stylized, regularly repeated, dramatically structured, authoritatively designated, and intrinsically valued" (p. 19). Additionally, examples provided by participants support Scott's (1965) findings regarding the "universally shared" behaviors and values held by organizations (pp. 81-82).

When discussing their beliefs regarding the adherence to some of the traditions associated with membership in their organizations, some participants also described participation in activities that could be defined as hazing. In some situations, participants openly defined their experiences as such, while in other situations, they did not believe that their experiences could be considered hazing, often relying upon comparisons to the experiences of their peers as the rule of definition. Additionally, these experiences were often looked at as serving a greater purpose (to be discussed later), and to the individuals who described participating on these experiences, the ends often justified the means. This also supports Scott's (1965) belief that when participating in organizations, participants' values may be replaced by organizational values, resulting in the need for participants to "justify" themselves and their behaviors to those outside of the group who may not understand (pp. 81-82).

While these findings supported the literature that explores the existence of hazing within collegiate fraternities and sororities (i.e. Nuwer, 1999; Robbins, 2004; Wright, 1996), and reinforced the concerns posed by Ellsworth (2006), Hennessy & Huson (1998), and Hollmann (2002) who described the difficulty that comes with developing an accurate definition of what hazing is, what activities or behaviors comprise it, it is important to note how the findings provided just as much support for those activities that would not be defined as hazing, revealing

participants' appreciation for those experiences associated with their fraternal/sororal membership traditions.

*Benefits of Participating in Membership Traditions*

Participants also described the belief that their initiation experience provided them with an opportunity for personal development, the acquisition of beneficial skills (i.e. time management, stress management, etc.), in addition to the opportunity to create a connection to the organization and its members. Additionally, some participants believed their experience provided them with an opportunity to do more, whether through involvement in that organization, or as a gateway for involvement in other campus or community organizations. Knox (IFC) served as an example of this with his belief that his pledgeship changed the course of his college career, creating opportunities for involvement in other campus organizations that he may not have been able to become involved in, had he not been a member of his fraternity. While this finding supported Bird's (1980) belief that "[d]ramatic changes in social status and personal identity are often marked, occasioned and brought about by the utilization of ritual codes, which symbolically set forth these changes" (p. 23), the only other time that such "benefits" were described were in the examples of hazing characteristics provided by Lipkins (2006), and Nuwer and Allen's (2003) belief that "hazing attempts to fulfill basic emotional needs" (p. 2), revealing the need for such benefits to be explored outside of the context of hazing. As described by the participants in this study, while some participants' experiences could be defined as hazing, not all of their experiences were such, indicating a gap in the literature regarding the benefits and outcomes of healthy and appropriate initiation experiences

## *Influence of Pre-Collegiate Experiences on Participant Perceptions of Fraternity/Sorority Membership Traditions (RQ2)*

Participants described a variety of sources as influencing their perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities. Based upon my review of the literature, an assumption was made regarding the influence of participation in high school organizations or other pre-collegiate involvement, however, it was noted that interactions with peers in college also served as an influence for some, in addition to the existence of societal values for hierarchies and affiliation.

### *Participation in High School Organizations*

When describing factors that influenced their perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities, some participants looked to their involvement in high school organizations as shaping their perceptions and expectations regarding membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities. Those participants described being involved in a variety of high school groups including athletic teams, military organizations, and an auxiliary organization for high school girls sponsored by a sorority. An example of this can be found in Sam (NPHC), who viewed his participation with his football team as providing the "mental and physical toughness" he needed to make it through his fraternity's membership process. Similarly, Erica (NPHC) viewed her high school initiation experiences as providing a foundation for her involvement in her collegiate sorority, preventing her from "going in blind." Although Alison (NPC), Knox (IFC), Marcus (NPHC), and Tyler (IFC) also described participating in high school organizations that employed various types of membership traditions, none of them viewed those experiences as influencing how they viewed or prepared for their fraternal or sororal membership traditions, instead viewing them as separate entities, crediting

other experiences (race, gender, family background/upbringing, age) as providing the major influence.

Additionally, for some of the participants, the nature of their high school experiences could be defined as hazing which supported the literature that explores the existence of hazing within high school organizations (i.e. Dixon, 2001; Fierberg, 2000; Hoover & Pollard, 2000; Lipkins, 2006). However, in other cases (such as Erica's [NPHC]), the structure or outcomes of their experiences are what provided the template for their perceptions about seeking membership in collegiate fraternal and sororal organizations and their value for the associated traditions and rituals associated with membership in those organizations, a concept that was not present in the literature.

*Peer & Societal Influences*

Participants also described the influence that peers had on their perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities. To them, it was not the media that influenced their perceptions, as some might assume, but the stories, rumors, and observations obtained through their peers. As mentioned earlier, peers' experiences often provided a scale for comparison when defining hazing. Additionally, participants often described using their peers' experiences as a form of research when making decisions about which organizations to join, and as a means of understanding what types of practices different organizations used within their membership traditions. This finding presents information that is not present in the literature discussed in Chapter Two.

In addition to their peers serving as an influence, participants also described the influence of societal norms and values on their perceptions of the rituals and traditions associated with membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities, and their decisions to participate in activities

that could be defined as hazing. As identified by the theme "Pledging is Like Life," participants such as Tyler (IFC) and Alison (NPC) viewed their experiences as being no different than other experiences in everyday life, such as the bonding that occurs within military or athletic settings (i.e. sharing an experience brings people together), as well as comparing the stratification that exists within organizations between members and non-members to other stratifications that exists in society (i.e. internship/entry-level employment, grade level distinctions, etc.). This supports Nuwer and Allen's (2003) belief that "[h]azing is a reflection of the larger society's attitudes."

### *Influence of Identity & Personal Experiences on Perceptions of Fraternity/Sorority Membership Traditions (RQ3)*

Overall, participants described their belief that initiation experiences are very personal, with experiences and outcomes being different for everyone. Participants described their experiences as being influenced by their race, gender, age, organizational affiliation, Greek system, as well as personal background. For example, some participants who were members of historically African-American fraternities (such as Marcus or Sam) viewed their membership traditions and rituals as providing a connection to their culture, while Knox (IFC) connected his value for his pledgeship to the value for hard work instilled into him by his parents.

Although existing literature describes some of the differences that may exist within organizational practices in regards to hazing within various types of fraternal and sororal organizations (i.e. Arnold, 2004; DeSousa, Gordon, & Kimbrough, 2004; Jones, 2004a; Nuwer, 2004a; Nuwer 2004b), this notion of differences in perceptions, experiences, and expected outcomes does not appear, again, revealing an area for further exploration outside of the context of hazing literature.

## Limitations

As with any qualitative study, the ability to replicate the methods employed in a study is possible, however, findings are often difficult to replicate. Although certain elements may be transferable (i.e. theoretical framework, methodology, etc.), the experiences encountered by participants may be different, and their willingness to openly discuss those experiences could also be a factor. Additionally, the sample of eight participants from a variety of fraternal and sororal organizations, with some being initiated on different campuses, may not provide an accurate account of external variables (i.e. campus location, institutional policies, trends in practice, etc.) that could affect their experiences. Also regarding the sample, my lack of access to members of National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sororities, and the non-representation of members of other types of Greek organizations (i.e. Latino/a, Asian, and other multicultural fraternities and sororities), does not provide a full spectrum of experiences.

With this being said, the purpose of my study was to provide a glimpse into the experiences of members of collegiate fraternities and sororities so that we can gain a better understanding of why they value their membership traditions, sometimes choosing to participate in activities that could be unhealthy or detrimental. Therefore, I do believe that regardless of the limitations, this study can serve as a starting point for the research of membership traditions within Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, and the students who belong to them. Additionally, this study provides an example of how relationships between student affairs professionals and Greek national organizations need to be nurtured so that all voices can be heard when attempting to address issues faced by our students.

## Implications for Practice & Recommendations for Future Research

Inherently, the qualitative research process provides the researcher with a lot of time to hear and reflect upon the voices of the study's participants. This was especially true with this study. Through the review of transcripts and development of themes, I was able to explore the experiences encountered by participants and develop a deeper understanding of the values they associated with their initiation experiences. From this process, I was able to identify three implications for practice, in addition to related recommendations for future research.

### *Implication #1: Understanding the Diversity of Organizations & Their Memberships*

Student affairs professionals need to increase knowledge of the organizations that exist on our campuses and the nature of their membership traditions in order to better educate students about healthy membership practices. As identified by this study, and supported by the literature, hazing is still an issue relevant to Greek-letter fraternities and sororities (as well as non-Greek organizations), and some students do come to our campuses having already experienced such encounters. As a result, opinions and expectations about their Greek initiation experiences may be shaped by outside influences, which often go unaddressed when students are asked to fill out hazing compliance forms and other documents when desiring to participate in rush, recruitment, or membership intake.

Additionally, cultural background, age, gender, and organizational differences were described as influencing participants' values for and experiences with their initiations, indicating a need to modify our messages and approaches to fit our audience when discussing membership traditions or hazing. Within student affairs, we often feel the need to send the same message across a variety of populations, which is a good practice for consistency. Unfortunately, this may

not be the best approach when attempting to educate students about participation in healthy membership traditions.

One such example of why we may need to consider treating organizations differently can be found in the research regarding the differences in hazing issues facing National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organizations and North-American Interfraternity Conference (IFC) fraternities (i.e. Arnold, 2004; DeSousa, Gordon, & Kimbrough, 2004; Jones, 2004a; Nuwer, 2004a; Nuwer 2004b). As discussed by participants, hazing is what "other" organizations do, although institutional policies would probably consider some of their practices hazing, as well.

In order to contribute to the existing literature on rituals, membership traditions, and participation in Greek letter fraternities and sororities, it would be beneficial to explore organizational choice and why people decide to pursue membership in the organizations they do, especially in regards to those who choose culturally-based organizations, as participants described a different type of connection to their membership traditions. Additionally, future studies could explore other influences of participant experiences with the rituals and traditions of membership, such as age (especially in regards to the needs and experiences of "millennial" students), gender, as well as the differences that exist within the membership traditions of various Greek organizations and systems. Although it may take away from some of the richness of the stories, this topic could also be explored quantitatively with a larger sample to see how experiences vary across organizations and participants.

*Implication #2: Understanding Peer & Societal Influences*

Another implication presented by this study involves the influence of peers and societal messages. As student affairs and Greek life professionals (national offices and campus-level), we need to understand the messages that exist regarding membership traditions and hazing in order

to understand how to best address this issue on our campuses. Participants in this study discussed a strong reliance on their peers when selecting organizations and "preparing" for their initiation experiences. Additionally, participants often justified their participation in activities that could be defined as hazing by comparing them to other structures that exist in society, such as internships/entry-level positions and grade-level separations.

Unfortunately, although the strength of peer influences has been described in other contexts (e.g. Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), no research currently explores peer and societal influences on perceptions of membership traditions. In order to develop a better understanding of this issue, it would be beneficial to assess cultural messages about membership traditions and hazing, in addition to student beliefs about such messages. It would also be beneficial to continue exploring the influence of peers on the perceptions of and participation in membership traditions and hazing. Additionally, it may be also be interesting to explore the role that technology plays on such influences. As technology (i.e. cellular telephones, social networks, etc.) aids in the connection of peers, it may also influence how rumors, stories, and myths travel and influence students seeking membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities.

*Implication #3: Are Hazing & Pledging Always the Same Thing?*

As discussed by Ellsworth (2006), Hennessy and Huson (1998), and Hollmann (2002), one of the issues facing campuses and organizations is the lack of a common definition for hazing. Additionally, depending on the organization, campus, or Greek-system, certain behaviors or actions may have different categorizations and consequences. In this study, most participants did not consider their experiences to be hazing, even though certain examples could be defined as such. Student affairs and Greek life professionals (national offices and campus-based) need to

reconsider our definitions and re-evaluate our approaches when developing hazing policies and New Member Education/Intake Programs.

Participants described a value for their initiation experiences, and considered them beneficial to their personal and social development. As student affairs professionals, we need to understand what aspects of those experiences they found beneficial, and find ways to duplicate those outcomes with different methods when necessary. If we do not, it is likely that students will continue to create their own experiences, potentially resulting in lawsuits, injuries, and possibly deaths.

Another notion that appeared within these discussions is the need to develop an understanding of the differences between pledging and hazing. Most participants described their initiation experience as a "process," "pledgeship," or "pledge period," and while in some cases those experiences may have included hazing, that was not always the case. Dependent upon the system, the language can be very different; for example, as a member of an NPHC-affiliated sorority, I was taught that the term "pledge" was a term never to be used when describing my initiation experience, while other organizations use it as a proper term to describe the initiation period of new members.

It may also be beneficial to identify best practices among the various membership programs that exist and use those to help shape the practices of other organizations, not to create duplicate new member programs, but as a means of identifying and discussing what works and creates the experiences students are seeking.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities used their pre-collegiate experiences to inform their values for the traditions and rituals

associated with seeking membership into Greek-letter fraternal and sororal organizations. Eight members of collegiate fraternities and sororities participated in this phenomenology, completing in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Through the analysis of data, four themes and related sub-themes were identified (see Table 2).

Although some of the findings from this study supported existing literature on rites of passage, rituals, organizational culture, and risk management within contemporary Greek-letter organizations, the majority of the findings raised new questions for consideration when supervising student involvement in fraternal and sororal organizations.

Often, within student affairs practice we act reactively, developing policies and procedures as a result of an incident, lawsuit, or "hot topic," with the practice then becoming the new approach discussed at conferences, on listservs, and in journals. However, it is also necessary to seek the voices of those involved, and to listen to the reasoning behind the thought process that produced the behavior. Otherwise, we will never truly understand why students do the things that they do.

The findings from this study provide a starting point for these discussions, and it is my hope that this population and their issues continue to be explored, for I know the benefits of involvement in Greek life. It is up to us as student affairs professionals to create safe environments for our students to continue their involvement and development; we must ask the tough questions and have those difficult conversations that might reveal what we hoped they would not. It is vital that we understand the benefits that students associate with their membership experiences so that we can identify the healthy and positive aspects of those practices. If we are to shift from a culture that celebrates hazing to one that embraces healthy

membership experiences and encourages respect, we must first overcome our own fears of the unknown, realizing that while such changes will not occur overnight, they do begin with us.

# EPILOGUE

The process of writing a dissertation is indeed a personal journey, especially as a qualitative researcher. I spent many long afternoons and evenings collecting, transcribing, and analyzing data, as well as trying to navigate the politics that sometimes determine what can or cannot be studied, experiences not easily captured within the body of my dissertation. For this reason, my methodologist recommended that I take a moment to share the story of my experiences, and the lessons learned during this journey.

The first lesson learned involved the politics that can influence research. Early in this process, I had a unique encounter with the research committee of one of the governing bodies that I wanted to include in my sample. Although I had the support of the Greek Life Office at my site, and had already received IRB approval from the institution, after months of going back and forth with this committee, they ultimately decided that they did not want to approve access to their undergraduate members. Unfortunately, not only did this affect the size and diversity of my sample, it also delayed the launch of my study, causing my data collection to begin during the summer when there were not too many available participants, which then resulted in the need to modify my graduation timeline. From this I learned that regardless of my desire to tell the stories of my participants and address the questions held by professionals in my field, the research process is not always a smooth one and does include obstacles.

The next lesson learned involved my experience conducting a phenomenology. In order to explain my love/hate relationship with this method, I must begin with a story. During my program's annual Doctoral student retreat (my fourth and final), we had an activity where teams

of students were competing against the faculty in a trivia game. One of the questions to the group was to spell the term "phenomenology." As the only person on my team familiar with this particular methodology, everyone turned to me to provide the proper spelling, which I did, earning our points. The other student team, a group of first-year students who were brand new to the program, also provided the proper spelling, extremely impressed with themselves (to say the least). Following their impromptu celebration, I posed the following question to them, "Yeah you can spell it, but can you do one?" to which I received a few blank stares.

Why do I tell this story? While I do consider myself to be a qualitative researcher, at the beginning of my dissertation journey, I found this method extremely frightening, full of confusing terminology and time consuming steps, and in all honesty, it was a tedious experience at times. However, although this method was repetitive and sometimes frustrating, it was also extremely rewarding. Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (1998) became my tour guides, and helped me develop a better understanding of this method and its procedures.

Looking back at my data analysis process, it can almost be compared to panning for gold or hunting for diamonds; constantly sifting the dirt to uncover your treasure, in this case, the "essence" of my participants' experiences. I was able to explore their stories more deeply and spend more time with the data, uncovering things I might not have seen had I employed other methods. This is a benefit of not only employing phenomenological methods, but in my opinion, the overall advantage of a qualitative approach.

The lessons learned from this journey are greater than can be expressed in the pages of this dissertation. Not only did I increase my knowledge of this qualitative approach, I also learned a great deal about myself. In addition to the basic lessons of learning how to "do" a phenomenology and complete the various steps of analysis, I also developed a greater sense of

patience and perseverance as a result of the trials encountered during this journey. It is my hope that through the completion of this study and the sharing of my experiences, others will overcome their phobias of qualitative inquiry and its various approaches, considering them as viable approaches for data collection and analysis. Ultimately, it is now my belief that if you can learn to spell phenomenology, you can also learn how to "do" one. Happy dissertating!

~Khrystal L. Smith
April 2009

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APPENDIX A

**Informed Consent Participation Form**

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled " Rituals and Traditions: Understanding Collegiate Fraternity and Sorority Members' Perceptions of Membership Activities" conducted by Khrystal Smith from the Department of Counseling & Human Development Services at the University of Georgia (706-552-3272) under the direction of Dr. Richard Mullendore, Department of Counseling & Human Development Services, University of Georgia (706-542-6478). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed. By participating in this study, I will receive a $10 Wal-mart gift card as a token of appreciation, even if I later decide to withdraw from the study.

The purpose of this study is to understand how members of collegiate fraternities and sororities construct their values for membership rituals and traditions, and how previous experiences help shape those values. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

1) Review and sign this consent form (10 minutes).
2) Complete a Participant Information Form (5 minutes).
3) Participate in an audio-recorded interview discussing my pre-collegiate membership experiences and my experiences with the membership traditions associated with my fraternity or sorority (60-90 minutes).
4) I may be contacted following the interview to provide clarification of information provided during the interview.
5) Review transcripts and researcher-identified themes from my interview for accuracy.

Due to the reflexive nature of this study, there may be minimal emotional risk associated with participation. If at any point you desire to seek psychological assistance, you are encouraged to contact the (INSTITUTION' Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) at 706-542-2273 or any counseling facility of your choice. Additionally, hazing is against the law in the sate of Georgia and also violates University policies. However, confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study, unless required by law. Upon agreeing to participate in this research study, participants and their respective organizations will be assigned pseudonyms, and their true identities will not be used within the study. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and used for research purposes only. All recordings and transcriptions will be stored in the home of Khrystal Smith. Interview tapes and related documentation will be destroyed on or before December 1, 2008.

I understand that if I have additional questions regarding the research at any point during the course of the study, I may contact the researcher at (706) 552-3272 or klsmith1@uga.edu.

Participation in this study will provide an example of the current experiences of participating members of collegiate fraternities and sororities. Participation in this study will contribute to the understanding of how participants view their experiences with the rituals and traditions associated with membership in collegiate fraternities and sororities. This information can then be used to develop educational resources meant to aid local chapters of fraternities and sororities, national offices of fraternities and sororities, national governing organizations for fraternities and sororities, and institutional Greek Life Offices.

My signature below indicates the researcher has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I will also receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Khrystal L. Smith | _____ | _____ |
| Researcher Name | Signature | Date |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Name of Participant | Signature | Date |

**Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.**

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone [redacted]; E-Mail Address [redacted]

APPENDIX B

## Participant Information Form

**Please take a few moments to complete this information form. The purpose of this document is to provide me with some basic demographic information that will help me with this study. As with your interview, no identifying factors will be used when referring to this information in order to provide you with confidentiality.**

First Name: _____ E-mail address: _____

**Organizational Information:**

1. Name of organization: _____

2. What year were you initiated into your organization? _____

**Demographic Information:**

3. Academic status (*please check one)*
   - ☐ Freshman
   - ☐ Sophomore
   - ☐ Junior
   - ☐ Senior
   - ☐ Graduate Student/Alumni

4. Race/Ethnicity *(please check one)*
   - ☐ African-American/Black
   - ☐ Asian-American or Pacific Islander
   - ☐ Caucasian/White
   - ☐ Hispanic/Latino
   - ☐ Other_____
   - ☐ I prefer not to respond

5. How old are you? _____
   - ☐ I prefer not to respond, but I am at least 18 years old

6. I would like to receive a copy of the results section upon completion of this study
   *(please check one)* ☐Yes☐ No



Researcher Use Only:

Pseudonym: _____

Interview Date: _____ Tape no.: _____

APPENDIX C

# Interview Protocol

Part I: Pre-college experiences (RQ1)

1. Take a moment to remember an experience you had involving gaining membership into a high school organization or any organization you were involved in before coming to college (i.e. sports team, civic group, student club, etc.)When you are ready, please describe that experience to me, as clearly as you can.
2. What stands out about that experience (i.e. people, places, things)?
3. How was the experience significant to you?
4. What feelings were generated by the experience?
5. What external factors influenced the experience?
6. Have you shared all that is significant about this experience?

Part II: Collegiate experiences (RQ2)

7. Now that we've talked about a previous experience, I want you to switch gears to the present. Take a moment to remember your experiences with initiation into your fraternity/sorority. When you are ready, please describe that experience to me, as clearly as you can.
8. What stands out about that experience (i.e. people, places, things)?
9. How was the experience significant to you?
10. What feelings were generated by the experience?
11. What external factors influenced the experience?

12. How was the experience different because of your ethnicity/gender? (RQ3)

13. Have you shared all that is significant about this experience?

Part III: Connecting the Experiences

14. When you think about the experiences you shared with me today, what stands out to you?

15. What similarities do you feel exist between the stories you shared?

16. What differences do you feel exist between the stories you shared?

17. How do you feel the experiences are connected?