

*Executive Summary*

To further understand the fraternity experience we conducted both group and individual interviews. Demographically, the majority of the students we interviewed were students of color with a majority of those students being Latino and primarily sophomores and juniors.

There were many significant and positive themes that emerged from this study. While the men identified the negative stereotypes of drinking and grades they also shared their belief that ultimately everyone suffers when these misconceptions of fraternities are perpetuated. For them, the fraternity played a key role in their social network, allowing members to create a social network they may have never formed otherwise. They also asserted that this network helps them navigate the campus, connecting them to various faculty, staff, and campus resources they did not know before. Students felt their fraternity motivated them academically because they needed to achieve and maintain a certain GPA to hold positions within their Greek organizations. One of their main goals as fraternities were for each member to leave their fraternity experiences a better person than when they entered. Each member seemed willing to put other members before themselves. Again and again students mentioned the words ‘family’ or ‘home’ or ‘brother.’

These glowing reports, however, need to be tempered with the research that shows that fraternities are often a place of trouble. If this is truly the case, the fraternity should be thoroughly examined and compared to broader Greek Life to explain why there are no problems. One way this can be done is by having more individual interviews. Another way is by interviewing alumni of these Greek organizations. If a university can change fraternity practices and stereotypes, it can recruit a good group of students who can perpetually transform the Greek Life tradition into a healthier experience for all students involved. Whether through living learning communities or alternative spring breaks, other options exist to facilitate the brotherhood and family atmosphere found in fraternities.

*Descriptive Information*

To better understand Fraternity Life and its effect on its members we conducted both group and individual interviews of young men from the Phi Delta Theta and Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternities at the University of La Verne. La Verne is a small private university in southern California with an on-campus residential population of about 400 students. Roughly 50% of those students are Greek and La Verne students describe their school as highly involved in Greek Life. There are two active fraternities on campus and we interviewed members from both. We were able to recruit students to our study by way of personal networks as well as gift cards to encourage participation. The only criterion to be a part of our study was the student needed to be a current member of a ULV fraternity.

The men that we interviewed were primarily sophomores and juniors. For many of them this was the first full school year that they had been members of the fraternity. The men that we interviewed represented a range of positions within the fraternity, including the presidents of both fraternities. Demographically, the majority of the students that we interviewed were students of color with a majority of those students being Latino. There were very few African American students and no Asian American students involved in this study.

It is very possible that our relationship with these students created a barrier to getting deep and significant information from them. In my (Dwayne's) role as a Hall Coordinator at La Verne, I have a responsibility to report and respond to incidents of student misconduct. If the students in the study were to mention anything that was a violation of the student handbook, it would create an ethical dilemma for my dual role as researcher and professional. Additionally, because we were not members of either fraternity, the members stayed true to their vow to keep their secrets within the fraternity. Few specific details were disclosed in the interviews.

*Bracketing Our Perspectives*

Initially, I (Dwayne) had no personal experiences with Fraternities; I believed them to be harmless social clubs for college men. However, as I started reading about the various ills that are sometimes associated with Greek men, mainly sexual assaults and binge drinking, my perceptions started to change. I asked myself: Why do universities even allow fraternities to be on campus? What good could possibly come from them? That was the question that was in the back of my mind as we interviewed these fraternity men.

I (Eric) entered my work with fraternities unsure of their purpose at institutions of higher education as well. I believe that for any co-curricular activity to exist it must have a clear and beneficial purpose. From my perspective and my college experience, fraternities were just a group of overly masculine guys who got bad grades, excessively drank alcohol, and sexually assaulted women. I wondered what good these groups of young men brought to the college campus and I questioned why administrators would want to keep fraternity organizations around. Although I had heard the counterarguments of fraternities being facilitators of brotherhood and networking, I felt the bad that fraternities caused on campus far outweighed the good they caused. I felt that networking and brotherhood could be achieved on campus through alternative clearer, safer, and beneficial co-curricular means. I also understood that other groups at universities had troubles with academics, alcohol, and rape; that these issues were systemic and not just fraternity and Greek Life problems. However, I felt removing fraternities from universities would be a specific and practical way of addressing these systemic issues, no matter what the repercussions were. In all, I entered my work with fraternities holding negative views and examining with skeptical eyes.

*Analysis of Themes*

There were many significant and positive themes that emerged from this study. The men that we interviewed had mainly good things to say about their experience in their fraternities.

One consistent theme throughout this study was the widespread complaint most participants expressed about having to face certain stereotypes because they were members of a fraternity. They identified those stereotypes as notions people had of them throwing wild parties and getting bad grades. Whenever a participant would express the negative stereotypes they faced they would then proceed to provide evidence for why the stereotype is not true for them. One student stated, "I've seen more fraternities that care about each other and actually do try and do well in their academics...and not just drink themselves to death all the time..." While the men identified the negative stereotypes of drinking and grades they also shared their belief that ultimately everyone suffers when these misconceptions of fraternities are perpetuated. When Greek Life looks bad, great people will not pledge and will not have a chance to enter into an enriching experience because they are worried about what might happen to them. As one student explained, "I feel like a lot of good people miss out because they have that [negative stereotype] in their minds."

Beyond the negative stereotypes many of the men stated, a theme of connection to each other surfaced. The participants truly seemed to be connected to one another and exhibited signs of care for each of their fraternity brothers. For them, the fraternity played a key role in their social network, allowing members to create a social network they may have never formed otherwise. One fraternity stated they would not have been friends with each other had it not been for the fraternity. They used words like 'utopia' and 'everlasting brotherhood' to describe their connection with one another. In addition to the social benefits of the fraternity, these men noted

that being in the fraternity gave them the right connections to get jobs on campus. They also asserted that this network helps them navigate the campus, connecting them to various faculty, staff, and campus resources they did not know before. In some ways, the fraternity has served as an informal guide to the campus and college life for these students. Incidentally, they all stated that the only regrets they had about being in their fraternity was that they did not join sooner. Other than that, the fraternity members revealed again and again that they had no regrets about their fraternity experience.

A general theme of personal development emerged in four specific areas: academic motivation, moral code, bringing out the best, and life experiences. Students felt their fraternity motivated them academically because they needed to achieve and maintain a certain GPA to hold positions within their Greek organizations. They also mentioned that being in a fraternity helped them keep up with their academics because of the many events happening on campus. Having a lot of extracurricular activities that they wanted to or were required to attend inspired them to get all of their schoolwork done beforehand. With the theme of moral code, the fraternity members mentioned their concept of being true gentleman. They believe their fraternity's main purpose is to be makers of men. With this they desire to show the world that chivalry still exists. The fraternity members' moral code is also evident by their core fraternity principles to be involved on campus and in the community, trying to better both places.

Another specific theme related to the broad theme of personal development is bringing out the best. The members of the fraternities repeatedly described their desire to better themselves as well as their fraternity brothers. One of their main goals as fraternities were for each member to leave their fraternity experiences a better person than when they entered. The members felt that one could become a better person through ways such as learning to understand

others and going through situations they normally would not go through. Also, many times the students spoke about selflessness within their fraternity. Each member seemed willing to put the other members before themselves. The communal value of selflessness was evident in each member's willingness to look down upon selfishness, hoping to bring out the best in each student within the fraternity. Bringing out the best was also expressed in the participants' desires to grow as individuals in their perceptions of what they were capable of achieving in life. In speaking of this stretching experience, one student elaborated on their experience within their fraternity, "...you see the bigger picture you see outside yourself, outside of your own world, you need to expand upon what is possible and what you think you can do, what you think other people can do."

One last specific theme of personal development is life experiences. Fraternity members reported influential life experiences as a key to their fraternity experience. When describing the purpose of their fraternity, one student put it this way, "...it's the essence of college." The student was speaking about their time spent with fraternity members during football games, Saturday mornings, late night study sessions, road trips, philanthropy, brotherhood, lessons learned, and helping others. All of these activities, the participants reported, were encapsulated in the fraternity experience and that experience offered much toward the students' growth as a person. Participants felt that being in a fraternity allowed them to be a part of life-shaping activities they may not have otherwise done, providing them with experiences that they now hold with the utmost esteem. Seeing that one student described their fraternity as the *essence* of college reveals how important the experience of being in a fraternity is to these young men. One is left to wonder how much different, and possibly how much worse, these students' college experiences would have been had they not been a member of a fraternity.

Brotherhood, deeper relationships, and family were three specific themes that surfaced surrounding the general theme of relationships. The transcripts of the interviews with a total of 12 fraternity members revealed that the word 'brotherhood' was mentioned 12 times. The prevalence of the word and its attached concept shows one of the characteristics of fraternities: having deeper relationships in a family-like atmosphere. Concerning deeper relationships, one student said, "I joined just to have that deeper level of friendship." Throughout the interviews students shared stories about letting emotions out through crying with fellow fraternity members. This expresses signs that these relationships were beyond basic friendships, especially because the people involved were all male. (Popular culture seems to define masculine identity as one that does not show emotions, particularly around other males.) Lastly, with these deeper relationships, came the idea of family. Again and again students mentioned the words 'family' or 'home' or 'brother.' The fraternity men also spoke about relying on each other, being there for one another, sharing a way of life--a way of going about things, and how they were all united. All of these behaviors exhibit characteristics of a family and the fraternities embrace this idea. Fraternities can be, as one student shared, "...a family away from home."

Campus involvement prevailed as another theme amongst the fraternity members. Students mentioned the need and desire to get involved on campus as a reason why they joined their fraternity. They wanted to expand socially so that they could have an improved college experience. Some students wanted to get involved simply because they were not involved in their high school experience or because they saw that their college experience needed more involvement. In speaking about Greek Life at ULV, one student described it, "...so it's kind of like a way of life around here. It's something that you do to get involved and to get to know more people on a personal basis if you don't then you're just missing out on it."

*Suggestions for Practice*

We must mention again that because of our lack of membership with these fraternities, the study participants may have demonstrated significant signs of loyalty to their organization by keeping their secrets within their respective fraternity. Few specific details were disclosed during the interviews when students shared their stories. In all, the study revealed many significant and positive themes as the young men had only good things to say about their fraternity experience. These glowing reports, however, need to be tempered with the research that shows that fraternities are often a place where alcohol abuse runs rampant along with other troubles such as sexual assault. We acknowledge that these ULV fraternities may not struggle with such problems. If this is truly the case, then future research needs to be conducted in which the characteristics, dynamics, and culture of these fraternities are thoroughly examined and compared to broader Greek Life to explain why these fraternities have no problems. If this is not the case and these fraternities are hiding their struggles, future studies can attempt to break through their bond of secrecy. One way this can be done is by having more individual interviews and less group interviews as students may feel more freedom to disclose their fraternity's problems when their peers are not listening to and examining their every word. Another way around fraternity secrecy is by interviewing alumni of these Greek organizations. Alumni may feel more freedom to disclose because they do not fear any punishment from university administration for revealing incidences where campus rules were broken.

Whether fraternities are seemingly faultless or outwardly rebellious, student affairs professionals need to weigh the pros and the cons of Greek Life on their campuses. If the evaluators do find the pros to outweigh the cons and fraternities remain at an institution, there must be efforts made to ensure the best experiences in Greek Life are enabled while the worst are



disabled. This can be done through policy revision and clarification. It can also be done by studying fraternities that do not cause trouble on college campuses, seeing why that is so, and applying the necessary changes at one's own university to attempt to create a better fraternity experience. By cracking down on misbehaving fraternities and forming policies to ensure healthier fraternities, a university can increasingly affect Greek Life in a positive manner. Fewer cases of fraternity misconduct mean fewer negative stereotypes about fraternities. Fewer negative stereotypes mean more students seeking to be in a fraternity because of its quality experience offered and not its provision of a space to misbehave. If a university can change fraternity practices and stereotypes, it can recruit a good group of students who can perpetually transform the Greek Life tradition into a healthier experience for all students involved.

Lastly, if evaluators find the cons to outweigh the pros and fraternities leave an institution, student affairs professionals should examine which co-curricular programs bring out similar social networking benefits and deep meaningful relationships that the fraternity men in this study spoke about. One solution may be supplanting fraternities with living learning communities made up of male membership. This could provide a formal structure, similar to fraternities, for young men to connect, network, and develop deep friendships. It may also provide opportunity for more academic and student development curriculum to enter into their groups. If living learning communities are not suitable then alternative spring break trips may allow for young men to gather together to form relationships. These young men could connect with each other while gathering around a humanitarian cause or theme. An alternative spring break would also allow for more mentorship and supervision from the university. Whether through living learning communities or alternative spring breaks, other options exist to facilitate the brotherhood and family atmosphere found in fraternities.