



New Perspectives on Fraternity and Sorority Life

Perceptions of Non-Members and Evidence of Civic Thriving

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In partnership with the North American Interfraternity Conference, EVERFI is leveraging its unparalleled national data set related to student attitudes and behaviors, including that of fraternity and sorority members, to study two critical questions associated with fraternity and sorority life on college campuses:

What are the perceptions of non-fraternity/sorority members with regards to fraternity/sorority life on campus?

What are, if any, the unique developmental strengths present among fraternity/sorority members that set them apart from non-members?

This report includes data insights addressing both of these questions, implications and potential action steps for leaders and members of fraternity and sorority organizations, limitations of the current research, and proposed directions for future research.



Area of study: Perceptions of non-fraternity/sorority members

The goal for this line of research was to better understand non-members' perceptions of fraternities and sororities in order to identify focus areas that can inform strategic messaging, build membership, and address high-risk behaviors in a proactive manner.

Of particular value, rather than treating all non-member students as the same, differences in perceptions among non-members were disaggregated based on whether students were interested and ultimately did not pursue membership, or were not interested in membership at all. In addition, differences in perceptions of fraternity and sorority life based on race and gender were also analyzed and are highlighted where relevant.

All findings and recommendations related to this area of study are based on an analysis of data collected across multiple EVERFI courses in the fall of 2020. The sample consisted of 23,593 students from 43 universities who answered questions regarding their involvement and interest in fraternity and sorority life. Within the sample, 51% self-identified as a woman,

43% self-identified as a man, 3% self-identified in some other way, and 3% declined to answer or skipped the question altogether. To ensure that survey respondents' opinions were based on more prolonged exposure to fraternity and sorority life, we oversampled for older grades with a breakdown by grade as follows: first-year 3%; second-year 14%; third-year 38%; fourth/fifth/sixth-year 41%. The survey instrument used to measure perceptions of fraternity and sorority life included items adapted from the Fraternity and Sorority Life NASPA Consortium Survey, as well as additional questions created by subject matter experts in adolescent development and fraternity and sorority life.

Area of study: Positive youth development

The goal for the second area of inquiry was to investigate whether unique developmental strengths were present among fraternity and sorority members that set them apart from non-members. We approached this research question using a positive youth development lens.

A deficit perspective (i.e., viewing youth as problems to be managed) persisted in adolescent development research throughout the 20th century, a lens often applied to fraternity and sorority organizations with regards to high-risk behaviors. However, interest in resilience and individual strengths coalesced in the 1990s into the positive youth development (PYD) perspective—that youth are resources to be developed.

PYD programs seek to align individual and contextual strengths to promote positive development among young people, and the most empirically validated model of PYD is that of the Five Cs of PYD. The Five Cs model was developed through a 10-year longitudinal research study across 42 states with thousands of youth and their families. This work helped to operationalize PYD as consisting of Five Cs: competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character. Modeling PYD in this way has been replicated in many contexts and across age groups, including out-of-school programs, in K-12 schools, and in higher education.

Of note, higher levels of the Five Cs are consistently associated with increased levels of contribution to self, family, and community; and lower levels of risk behaviors (e.g., unsafe drinking) and mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety and depression). Research into measuring the Five Cs has produced a valid and reliable 17-item measure which was adapted for use in this study. An additional three items were added to measure contribution, thus a final 20-item instrument included items measuring each of the Five Cs as well as contribution.

Gender Identity	Percentage
Woman	51%
Man	43%
Answered another way	3%
Declined to answer	3%

Grade Level	Percentage
First-year	3%
Second-year	14%
Third-year	38%
Forth/fifth/sixth-year	41%

The Five Cs of Positive Youth Development

Competence

A positive view of one's actions in domain specific areas

Confidence

An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy

Connection

Positive bonds with people and institutions

Character

A sense of right and wrong, morality, integrity

Caring

A sense of sympathy and empathy for others

All findings for this area of study are based on an analysis of data collected from a national sample of college students who completed the online program *AlcoholEdu for College* in the fall of 2019. Respondents consisted mostly of first-semester, first-year students, with membership determined by students indicating that they were currently a member of a fraternity or sorority. Specifically, this sample was composed of 49,152 students of which 59% self-identified as a woman, 40% self-identified as a man, and <1% self-identified in some other way, with 85% of the sample consisting of first-year students. In future years, continuing to follow this cohort while also measuring positive youth development across all grade levels and among more fraternity and sorority members (such as those who complete *GreekLifeEdu*) will likely provide even more generalizable insights and enable greater levels of disaggregation. Collecting additional positive youth development data among fraternity and sorority members is planned to coincide with the deployment of digital education courses at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year.

Executive Summary

One-in-five students considers joining a social fraternity or sorority but ultimately decides not to pursue membership. The reasons that influence a student's decision are many, but by far the top two, cited by two-thirds of students who decided not to pursue membership, are "too busy with academics" and "too expensive." The third most-cited reason, selected by 40% of students who consider but do not pursue membership, is "did not have a good impression." Other major reasons for students not pursuing membership included worries about hazing, a lack of diversity, and concerns about alcohol use, which were selected by about one-quarter of prospective students who considered joining but did not pursue membership. Interestingly, there were no differences based on race in the proportion of students who considered, but did not pursue membership. That is, there were equal proportions of White students, Students of Color, and multi-racial students who were interested in but did not pursue membership; this despite disproportionately more White-identifying students currently members of fraternities and sororities (18%) compared to the proportion of multi-racial students (12%) and Students of Color (10%) in this sample who were current members.

Academic concerns were slightly more prevalent among men, and financial concerns were more prevalent among women; more women (44%) also endorsed not having a good impression as affecting their decision than men (35%). In fact, students who considered joining but did not because they did not have a good impression were twice as concerned about hazing, alcohol use among other members, and a lack of diversity among membership compared to students who considered joining and had a good impression. In other words, students who did not have a good impression were more likely influenced by their perceptions about hazing, alcohol use, and a lack of diversity, whereas these factors were not primary barriers to pursuing membership among students with a good impression of fraternity and sorority life.

1 in 5

One-in-five students considers joining a social fraternity or sorority but ultimately decides not to pursue membership.

Top 3 Reasons Students Decide Not To Pursue Membership

1. **Too busy with academics**
2. **Too expensive**
3. **Not a good impression**



Broadly, a higher proportion of interested students who identified as White (44%) noted they did not have a good impression as compared to Students of Color (29%). However, among interested students who do not have a good impression, there were statistically significant differences based on race regarding “a lack of diversity of membership” and “concerns about alcohol use among members” with 10% more Students of Color concerned about both of these factors than White students. This finding indicates that although a smaller proportion of Students of Color had a bad impression, for those who did, concerns about diversity and alcohol use were particularly more outsized compared to their White peers (see Table 2).

Furthermore, Students of Color were also more than three times as likely to say that “not being sure how to sign up” contributed to their not pursuing membership (16%) compared to White students (5%), for whom not knowing how to sign up is not a considerable barrier.

Although there were no differences in citing “too busy with academics” based on race/ethnicity—a primary reason across all demographic groups for not pursuing membership—there were differences regarding “too expensive” in regard to race/ethnicity. Specifically, although 73% of White students cited “too expensive” as a factor in not pursuing membership, only 55% of Students of Color in this sample cited “too expensive” as a factor for not pursuing membership, counter to common narratives. It may be worth further exploration to determine whether fewer Students of Color than White students cite “too expensive” because they are not sure how to sign up and therefore may not have enough information about cost, or whether Students of Color who are interested in fraternity and sorority life have different financial situations, etc.

FIGURE 1
Among students who indicated that they had considered joining a social fraternity or sorority, but did not pursue membership, their overall perceptions of social fraternities and sororities are:

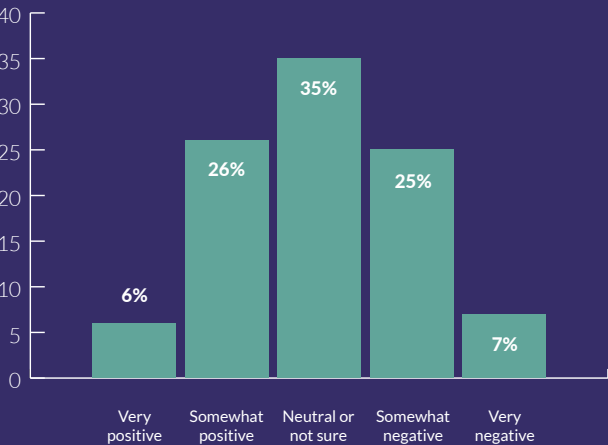
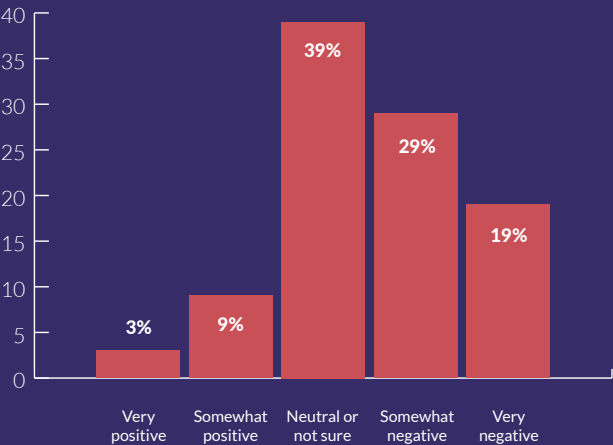


FIGURE 2
Among students who indicated that they had not considered joining a social fraternity or sorority, their overall perceptions of social fraternities and sororities are:



In regard to indicators of positive development, there were no statistically significant differences between fraternity and sorority members and non-members as it relates to their character or endorsement of the importance of contributing to community and society.

However, there were statistically significant, though modest, differences between members and non-members in their perceived connection to the community and for actually serving their communities. Specifically, fraternity and sorority organization members, in aggregate, scored statistically significantly higher on “I often spend my time volunteering, mentoring, or doing other types of service work” and “I feel like an important member of my local community” than non-members.

These findings provide evidence that whereas fraternity and sorority members and non-member college students equally value contributing to their communities and society, fraternity and sorority members more often act upon those values, volunteering and providing service work at a higher level than non-members. Fraternity and sorority members also feel a stronger connection to their community, a particularly valuable insight considering the positive connection between engagement, belonging, and retention. This is consistent with other recent studies¹ which demonstrate higher community engagement among affiliated versus non-affiliated students.

The two other statistically significant and meaningful differences between fraternity and sorority members and non-member college students were also in favor of membership. Specifically, fraternity and sorority members scored higher in two areas of competence: social and physical. This indicates that in aggregate, fraternity and sorority members may have larger social circles and be more inclined toward physical activity than non-members. Furthermore, there were no meaningful differences in self-reported academic competence between affiliated and non-affiliated students—notable because concern regarding academics is a primary reason that non-affiliated students choose not to pursue membership. This, too, is consistent with other recent findings.²

In general, although there were no aggregate differences in overall PYD scores between members and non-members, at the item level, all statistically significant differences with an effect size > 0.2 —a cutoff for meaningful differences—were in favor of fraternity and sorority members. The four items with statistically significant and meaningful, though modest, differences were described above and include **community connection, service contributions, and social and physical competence.**

In sum, students are most likely to not pursue membership in a fraternity or sorority due to academic or financial concerns, with another primary reason being that many interested students do not have a good impression of fraternity and sorority organizations. For students that do not have a good impression, hazing, alcohol use, and diversity of membership are twice as likely to be contributing factors to not pursuing membership.

However, membership in Greek organizations is in fact associated with higher levels of community connection, service contributions, and social and physical competence, whereas there were not any meaningful differences in which Greek membership was associated with lower levels of positive development across the constructs measured in the current study. It is also noteworthy that although academic concerns were the top reason for not pursuing membership, self-reported academic competence did not differ in aggregate between fraternity and sorority members and non-members.

Instead, these data support a case for social, physical, and civic thriving among fraternity and sorority members compared to non-members, without evidence of deficits in character or academics.

Fraternity and sorority members scored higher than non-members on measures of community connection, service contribution, and social and physical competence.

The data supports a case for social, physical, and civic thriving among fraternity and sorority members compared to non-members, without evidence of deficits in character or academics.

1 Asel et al., 2009; Bureau et al., 2011; Pike, 2020

2 Biddix, Matney, Norman, & Martin, 2014; Bureau et al, 2011; DeBard and Sacks, 2010; Hevel, Martin, Weeden, & Pascarella, 2015; Pike, 2020; Routon and Waker, 2016

Implications and Potential Action Steps

There are several steps that fraternity and sorority organizations can take to address the perceptions of non-member students and leverage the unique strengths associated with membership. Although some forms of these recommendations may already be in practice, expanding current efforts' reach among diverse students and connecting with non-members may be ways to enhance work already under way.

- Encourage campus leadership to determine whether the academic performance of fraternity and sorority members at a given institution differs from non-members as this is a major barrier for pursuing membership among interested students. Consider amplifying messaging around the academic performance of fraternity and sorority members, and identifying ways in which membership can promote academic achievement.
- Ensure that the financial obligations of membership do not inhibit students' ability to join - sliding scales, scholarship or sponsorship, or other ways to educate on and alleviate financial concerns are encouraged.
- Non-member, non-interested students do not have a positive view of fraternity and sorority life, but also rarely interact with members. These non-member, non-interested students get their information from social media and from their (limited) interactions with current members. Share this data with current members to reinforce the need for serving as ambassadors of their organization, and identify ways that non-member students would have the opportunity to interact with members in environments that don't reinforce unhealthy and unsafe narratives. Only one in five students say that social fraternities and sororities play 'no role' in campus culture, so no matter students' impressions of fraternities and sororities, it is broadly accepted that the organizations impact campus culture.
- Our research indicates that students who have a poor impression of fraternity and sorority life are disproportionately (about 2x) more concerned about alcohol use and hazing. This finding isn't particularly surprising given that a recent 200-page report on mental health, substance use, and well-being in higher education published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine referenced fraternity and sorority life involvement three times: as a risk factor for heavy alcohol use, for prescription drug abuse, and for sexual assault. Furthermore, Students of Color without a good impression are particularly concerned about alcohol use and a lack of diversity in fraternity and sorority organizations. To allay these concerns it will be important to continue to emphasize harm reduction and prevention education including bystander intervention training, and to establish strong policies addressing alcohol use, prescription drug safety, and sexual misconduct.

Bystander Intervention

As a highly social population with traditions and values strongly rooted in community, bystander intervention approaches for fraternities and sororities can be highly effective in minimizing the impact of multiple risk behaviors. These approaches are most successful when paired with efforts to correct misperceptions of social norms, including other members' willingness to intervene. Furthermore, gathering data on the actual prevalence rates of these behaviors for a given chapter and among your membership, in general, will be critical in understanding how accurate these perceptions are when compared to the reality of members' experiences.

- Students of Color seem to less often be aware of how to sign up for fraternities and sororities - although this represents a small percentage of potential members compared to other barriers, this is one of the biggest differences based on race/ethnicity. Ensure that racially diverse students understand the means of applying for membership and make it a transparent and easy process no matter a student's background. Furthermore, previous research has indicated that Students of Color drink less than White students, so perceptions of alcohol use may need to be properly addressed in order to attract more diverse members. It may also be helpful to identify variations in the time and location of recruiting activities, considering ease of accessibility by those who may have jobs, live off campus or commute, etc.
- As noted, although smaller proportions of Students of Color choose to drink compared to White students, alcohol consumption rates overall have been on a downward trajectory among college students in aggregate for the past decade.¹ These trends in college drinking rates, when considered in concert with previously noted concerns about alcohol and hazing, indicate that it will be increasingly important for fraternities and sororities to provide an experience that appeals to infrequent drinkers and abstainers as these students will continue to make up a larger proportion of the college student population into the future. Additionally, with the number of Students of Color continuing to increase proportionally², focused attention to creating healthier norms related to drinking may increase the appeal of joining Greek letter organizations among Students of Color, driving greater racial diversity of members.
- Members of fraternities and sororities value contributing to society and their communities just as much as non-members, but fraternity and sorority members report performing service and giving back at higher rates than non-members. Fraternity and sorority members also feel more connected to their communities and are more likely to excel socially and athletically than non-members. And despite concerns about academics by students who considered joining a fraternity or sorority, members and non-members self-report equivalent levels of academic performance. Identifying and leveraging strengths in these areas can reinforce the positive developmental aspects associated with Greek membership - particularly civic engagement and community connection, which are positive indicators of retention and thriving.

1 Monitoring the Future, 2019

2 National Center for Education Statistics

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Fraternity and sorority members report performing service and giving back at higher rates than non-members

Conclusion

Today's students are more socially aware, safety conscious, and technology-driven. A recent study of college-bound high school seniors reported that a school's commitment to issues of safety, well-being, and inclusion were as important as academic rigor when deciding where to enroll³. Just as institutions of higher education will have to adapt to these changing demographics in order to elevate their brand and meet enrollment objectives, so too must fraternities and sororities. With a decline in the population of graduating high school seniors⁴, organizations will be competing for potential members from a much smaller pool of students whose opinions and views are very much shaped by multiple sources, including social media. Greater attention to issues related to diversity and inclusion, and a desire to avoid situations that could potentially derail their academic goals are themes repeatedly identified in the research⁵ on this current generation of students. The findings shared in this report suggest that these generational attributes may play a role in the hesitation of some students to become a part of fraternity and sorority life. Decisions about member recruitment and retention initiatives should draw upon the higher levels of community connection, service contributions, and social and physical competence exhibited by fraternity and sorority members to shift perceptions that may be barriers to increasing member diversity and the ability for individual members and the organizations themselves to thrive.

Limitations

These insights are based on aggregate, cross-sectional, self-report data from a representative sample of college students.

- These aggregated insights are useful for making strategic and population-level decisions based on identified differences between different types of students. However, group averages should not dictate interventions or policies for specific individuals who are members of these groups and whose own circumstances may or may not vary considerably from group averages. However, disaggregating data at the organization and (ideally) chapter level may provide more actionable and applicable insights for individual members than national data and is encouraged.
- Although we can compare and contrast fraternity and sorority members to non-members, it cannot be determined to what extent specific types of students (e.g., more social, more athletic) pursue membership in Greek organizations. Thus, although we can detect differences between Greeks and non-Greeks, we cannot (with this data) directly attribute those differences causally to membership.
- Without longitudinal data, it is also not appropriate to use these data insights to support claims about change in members or non-members. The data is cross-sectional and used to evaluate differences and associations at a single time point.
- These data are from self-report measures of development. Although the scales have been tested for reliability, validity, and measurement equivalence and are appropriate to use in measuring the developmental constructs discussed, this analysis does not include objective measures (e.g., GPA) and so insights should be framed appropriately.

Although the current data does not include multiple time points or comparison groups, it does not mean that fraternity and sorority membership does not have a positive impact; rather, the insights in this report should be viewed in the context of previous research and theory regarding participation in fraternity and sorority life and conclusions should not be drawn that go beyond the limitations of the data as described. The data may be evidence for supporting or refuting previous findings, and can show the associations between and among different groups of students, but caution should be used in regard to what this data says as a standalone, versus in conjunction with other findings, and in light of previous theory and research.

3 EVERFI survey database, college-bound high school seniors, 2021

4 The 2019 Trends Report, Chronicle of Higher Education, February 2019 <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/trends2019#Theme-Section-Position-6>

5 Atlas Business Journal, 2016; Barnes & Noble College, 2018; Hope, 2016; Palmer, 2014; Seemiller, 2016

Directions for Future Research

The initial findings described in this report represent the beginning of a multi-year collaboration in which additional data, broader sampling, and multiple time points may allow for additional analyses and further generalizability. Specifically, there are several ways to build upon our initial research.

- Collecting longitudinal data will enable the tracking of differences in trajectories of development between fraternity/sorority members and non-members across their college and fraternity and sorority life experience.
- Measures of program experience (e.g., engagement, tenure, duration) will enable analyses that can determine the extent to which the quality of fraternity and sorority life participation matters in developmental outcomes.
- Broader dissemination of measures during the deployment of population-level training and education courses (like *GreekLifeEdu*), and ensuring that fraternity and sorority members and non-members can be disaggregated in either the base surveys or via supplemental measures will broaden the sample and improve generalizability of any findings across different groups according to age, race, gender, etc.
- The incorporation of objective measures of academic and student success will help to corroborate self-report data.
- This initial exploratory work can guide future research questions based on identified group differences. For example, future research questions may include exploring whether larger social circles and higher levels of physical activity are linked to any issues related to body dysmorphia or eating disorders, or to what extent increased levels of civic and community contribution are related to feelings of belongingness and inclusion.

EVERFI

EVERFI helps fraternities and sororities create safer, healthier, and more inclusive communities. Through online prevention education and compliance training, policy and program guidance, professional development, data insights, and performance benchmarking, EVERFI drives lasting, large-scale change on the critical issues of health and well-being facing our society.

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or call 1-800-945-2316

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APPENDIX

I. Non-Member Perceptions of Fraternity and Sorority Life

Among students who indicated that they had considered joining a social fraternity or sorority, but did not pursue membership, what % said that these reasons influenced their decision to not participate (n=4,216) [statistically significant differences in brackets]:

Percentage	Reason
67%	too busy with academics [65% women, 71% men]
67%	too expensive [74% women, 58% men] [73% White, 55% Students of Color]
40%	did not have a good impression [44% women, 35% men] [44% White, 29% Students of Color]
27%	work schedule conflict
26%	not interested [27% Multi-racial, 29% White, 20% Students of Color]
27%	concerns about hazing [26% women, 29% men]
23%	a lack of diversity of membership [31% women, 13% men] [34% Multi-racial, 22% White, 25% Students of Color]
14%	did not know anyone else participating [15% women, 12% men]
16%	concerns about alcohol use among members
9%	not sure how to sign up [10% women, 7% men] [5% White, 16% Students of Color]
9%	family not supportive
7%	concerns about my own alcohol use [5% women, 10% men]

II. For students that indicated above that they did not have a good impression (n=1,670),

we see that there are much more prevalent concerns about hazing and a lack of diversity among membership and a jump in concerns about alcohol use among members. Of note, there were statistically significant differences based on race for “a lack of diversity of membership” and “concerns about alcohol use among members” with 10% more Students of Color students concerned about both of these factors than White students.

Percentage	Reason
76%	too expensive [79% White, 68% Students of Color]
66%	too busy with academics [64% White, 70% Students of Color]
44%	concerns about hazing
42%	a lack of diversity of membership [39% White, 49% Students of Color]
31%	not interested [33% White, 25% Students of Color]
28%	concerns about alcohol use among members [25% White, 35% Students of Color]
26%	work schedule conflict

Percentage	Reason
18%	did not know anyone else participating [16% White, 25% Students of Color]
12%	concerns about my own alcohol use
11%	family not supportive
6%	not sure how to sign up [5% White, 11% Students of Color]

III. Among students who indicated that they had not considered joining a social fraternity or sorority, these reasons influenced their decision not to pursue membership, in order of the proportion of students who selected each reason as influencing their decision:

Percentage	Reason
76%	not interested
51%	too busy with academics
46%	too expensive
43%	do not have a good impression
20%	work schedule conflict
26%	concerns about hazing
22%	lack of diversity of membership
21%	concerns about alcohol use among members
14%	do not know anyone else participating
6%	concerns about my own alcohol use
5%	family not supportive
5%	not sure how to sign up

IV. ...and the perceptions of non-interested students of social fraternities and sororities are influenced by:

Percentage	Source
60%	interactions with fraternity/sorority members
59%	social media
50%	second-hand information from fraternity or sorority members
37%	television / media
33%	off-campus events sponsored by fraternities or sororities
25%	on-campus events sponsored by fraternities or sororities

V. ...and the type of social fraternities and sororities that inform non-interested students' perceptions:

Percentage	Type
18%	Recognized
5%	Unrecognized
22%	A mix
55%	Not sure

VI. Among All Students Surveyed: Have you considered joining a social fraternity or sorority? (n=22,777)

Percentage	Response
18%	Yes, and I am currently a member
2%	Yes, and I plan to join or am in the process of joining
19%	Yes, but I did not pursue membership
63%	No

VII. Among All Students Surveyed: How significant of a role do social fraternities and sororities play in campus culture at your institution? (n=22,740)

Percentage	Response
22%	Very significant role
40%	Somewhat significant role
18%	Small role
20%	No role

VIII. Positive Youth Development

In the current study, there was no statistically significant difference in character between members and non-members, nor at the item level for “It is important to me to contribute to my community and society” -- indicating that in aggregate, there are not overall differences in values or a contribution mentality between Greek members and non-members.

However, there were statistically significant, though modest, differences at the item level for a connection to the community and for contribution service between members and non-members. Specifically, Greek organization members scored higher on “I often spend my time volunteering, mentoring, or doing other types of service work” and “I feel like an important member of my local community.”

These findings provide evidence that whereas fraternity and sorority members and non-members equally value contributing to their communities and society, fraternity and sorority members more often act upon those values, volunteering and providing service work at a higher level than non-members, and that fraternity and sorority members feel a stronger connection to their community.

	Non-fraternity/ sorority students	Fraternity/ sorority members	Difference	Effect size
It is important to me to contribute to my community and society	4.02	4.08	0.06	0.00
I often spend my time volunteering, mentoring, or doing other types of service work	3.02	3.31	0.29**	+0.25
I feel like an important member of my local community	3.15	3.43	0.28**	+0.24

Note. Scores on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree);

*** = statistically significant difference at the $p < .001$ level;*

An effect size of 0.2 is considered small, so these differences are present, but modest.