

NIC – Single Sex Organization Involvement

Final Study Report

The Benefits of Single-Sex Fraternity Involvement

Single-sex fraternities are important contributors to the growth, advancement, and support of male college students. At first, potential members may be attracted to the single-sex characteristic of these organizations for social connections, but they soon find opportunities for academic, personal, professional, and leadership development. At this crucial stage in their lives, the single-sex environment provides college men with a place to learn, share, and experience growth together. Further, as college students increasingly come to campus with significant mental health and wellness issues, men who join fraternities discover personal support networks among their chapter peers.

COVID-19 was an unexpected test for college social organizations. Findings from our study showed that fraternity members turned to each other during their social isolation and found a sense of belonging and support. Despite the inability to meet in person, they connected online, maintained community, and successfully recruited new members to their organizations. These experiences fostered belonging, engagement, thriving, and overall well-being, which are primary predictors of retention and graduation. Overall, single-sex fraternities emerged as important support networks for college males.

The benefits of single-sex fraternity involvement for college males are positive and multifaceted. Fraternities provide supportive environments for men to grow and develop alongside their peers. This experience is difficult to attain in collegiate organizations that do not share the security and comfort of a single-sex environment. A fraternity chapter creates a peer culture that allows for vulnerability to enable growth. The results of this study, coupled with prior research, suggest these benefits begin almost immediately after members join and further strengthen throughout college.

Summary Study Results

- According to published research, single-sex fraternity involvement results in:
 - Positive academic outcomes, higher campus involvement and sense of belonging, leading to higher levels of retention and graduation.
 - Enhanced leadership and growth in areas of identity development such as social responsibility, racial/ethnic identity (among cultural mission-based groups), and spirituality.
- According to focus group research, single-sex fraternity involvement results in:
 - Opportunities for male-bonding, comradery, and male friendships that many participants indicated they had not experienced prior to joining.
 - Safe spaces for difficult conversations to take place, especially about personal issues such as relationships, family, and mental health struggles.
- According to survey research, single-sex fraternity involvement results in:
 - Strong satisfaction with the overall student experience and connection to campus, including high intentions to persist to graduation.
 - Opportunities for leadership development and high leadership confidence.
 - Strong agreement on respect for individuals and differences of opinion.
 - Comfort in having difficult discussions in the fraternity environment, including social/racial injustice, culture and mental health and well-being.
 - Support for many spiritual practices and beliefs.
 - Willingness to reach out to chapter members for mental health and wellness support before family, other peers, and professionals.
- According to mental health and wellness research, single-sex fraternity involvement results in:
 - Higher psychological well-being scores among fraternity members ($M=45.22$, $SD=8.052$) than unaffiliated male peers ($M=43.22$, $SD=8.912$).
 - Lower depression scores among fraternity members ($M=7.400$, $SD=5.666$) than unaffiliated male peers ($M=7.750$, $SD=6.197$).
 - Higher agreement about strong campus support systems among fraternity members ($M=4.360$, $SD=1.140$) than unaffiliated male peers ($M=4.210$, $SD=1.148$).
- According to COVID-19 survey research, single-sex fraternity involvement results in:
 - High perceptions of academic, social, and personal support from peers.
 - High overall self-rating of health and wellness (very good or excellent).
 - High levels of satisfaction with their fraternity engagement, including peer connection, overall fraternity experience, and sense of belonging.

Key Statistics and Quotations

- 83% of members demonstrated increased confidence levels in leadership skills
- 88% of members indicated comfort in voicing disapproval if members engage in inappropriate behavior
- 91% of members reported that their fraternity cares about the spiritual development of its members
- 91% of members agreed that their fraternity respects unique differences among members and that their fraternity welcomes culturally different viewpoints
- 84% of members felt comfortable talking openly about racial and social issues with fraternity members
- 79% of members stated that they have been exposed to diverse opinions, cultures, and values in their fraternity
- 71% of members agreed that their fraternity encourages members to examine biases and prejudices
- 78% of members reported excellent to good mental health and well-being
- 59% of members experienced more than average or tremendous stress levels in 2021; most common issues were feeling overwhelmed (78%) and anxiety (48%)
- 81% of members sought help from other fraternity members when needed

“(My fraternity) has given me a sense of direction and purpose in my life.”

“My fraternity has helped me grow in confidence and maturity throughout college.”

“My fraternity contributes greatly to my sense of community and belonging on campus and has enhanced every aspect of my college experience.”

“My fraternity has helped me grow in my leadership skills and as a man.”

“(My fraternity) has allowed me to grow as an individual and garner confidence and leadership skills.”

“I believe my fraternity chapter has greatly improved my social, mental, academic, spiritual, and physical well-being while in college.”

“I find that it's difficult to have the same level of emotional connection outside of the fraternity. Like other friendships outside of it feel much more surface level and there's a lower level of trust...there's definitely a depth that is harder to find...”

“As I felt myself struggling with my academics and my social life, I reached out to my academics chair and other brothers in order to find someone to speak to about my issues. Each of my brothers listened to me and gave me solid advice. Since then, I have stabilized my mental health because of my brothers.”

Overview and Methodology

In June of 2021, the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) completed a two-year research study of membership correlates and outcomes from single-sex fraternity involvement among members of North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC). The purpose of the study was two-fold: 1) to determine the value of single-sex fraternities for male college students and 2) to identify the benefits of peer culture in this environment. The study included the following research activities:

1. A literature review of single-sex fraternity involvement, focused on educational, developmental, and other outcomes, conducted in fall 2020.
2. Focus groups at 4 institutions, which included 10 fraternities, 4 sororities, 4 single-sex club sports teams, and a single-sex spirit team, conducted in fall 2020.
3. A multi-institutional survey with representation from 197 colleges and universities, 26 fraternities, and 1,619 members, conducted in spring 2021.

PERC completed two supplemental studies during the same period, focused on additional aspects of fraternity membership. Results from these studies were also incorporated in this final study report, as they verified findings and revealed additional insights into the value of single-sex peer culture for supporting male students.

4. An analysis of national data from the 2018-2019 Health Minds Study focused on collegiate mental health and wellness outcomes, conducted in summer of 2020.
5. A multi-institutional survey of membership experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic, conducted in spring of 2021.

Prior to this series of studies, the existing research examining the effects of single-sex organizations on college student outcomes, and in particular fraternity membership, was largely non-existent. Although researchers have examined group effects, results often were based on small-scale samples. This study integrated several research approaches to provide a holistic and large-scale examination of the effects of single-sex fraternity involvement on male student success and developmental outcomes.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the resulting changes to the college landscape in spring 2020 led to an opportunity to test an emergent hypothesis identified during the study - that fraternal involvement was critical to student connection, stress reduction, and overall wellness related to success. Our findings were confirmed in the large-scale survey and also verified in results from our mental health and well-being study and our COVID-19 experiences research. Fraternity members turned to their fraternity during times of stress and found peer support in nearly all aspects of their collegiate lives.