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# Creating Meaningful Relationships Between New Members in Fraternity and Sorority Life

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Developing Meaningful Relationships Between New Members Involved in Fraternity and  
Sorority Life

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to build community and meaningful relationships with the new members involved in Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL). My research question is: How can I support the development of stronger relationships of the new members involved in Fraternity and Sorority Life at USD? Through this research, I hope to gain a better understanding of how I can contribute to building stronger relationships between different groups of students at USD. Furthermore, I hope to learn how these strengthened relationships impact building community within an organization, and also how it may improve my relationship with the organization and the students I work with.

### **Introduction**

When thinking about my core values, the four that stand out to me the most are meaningful relationships, self-worth, making an impact, and positivity. I aim to embody these in my everyday life, by making sure the relationships that I am forming with others are positive to my well-being and also supporting my goals in wanting to make an impact in everything I involve myself in. Taking classes in the Higher Education and Leadership program at University of San Diego (USD) have confirmed these core values for me. I have learned the importance of having meaningful relationships and how they can become the key to connecting with others and get better at understanding our differences. I realized that forming meaningful relationships is the core of my values because it leads to my self-worth, impactful-ness, and overall positive outlook on life. This is why building meaningful relationships within a community is the core value that is leading my research. As a former college student, I found that being involved in an organization can make more of an impact when the relationships that students are making through those experiences mean something to them as well. During my time as an undergraduate student, I was able to develop into the person and leader I am today as a result of the meaningful relationships that I was able to build. These relationships helped me become more comfortable with myself and with the decisions that I made. These relationships were formed in communities that I had joined, and because of the friendships I had built, these communities ended up becoming more of a family rather than simply a place to work. Reflecting about the importance of having meaningful relationships between students and how they can make or break the communities they join is what led me to my concern regarding the connections with Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL).

From my experience, joining a sorority or fraternity is more than just joining a club on campus. Yes, most students want to join them for the social aspect, but once you join you realize that they are so much more than parties on the weekends. They are nationwide organizations, with secrets rituals not allowed to be shared with anyone else, strict rules, but also benefits that can last you a lifetime. When run effectively, they are an opportunity for students to hone in on their leadership skills, and learn the importance of peer to peer leadership. However, the pressure to find ‘your place’ and where you belong is frightening, and can easily become misconstrued. Suddenly, you belong to an organization and might feel that you are unable to socialize with anyone else outside of that ‘chapter’. These fears are not helped when there is often a rivalry and tension between each of the sororities and fraternities. Members who are not part of the ‘elite’ chapters are consistently degraded, and the time of recruitment becomes a huge competition of which chapter is better. New members who form friendships during recruitment suddenly lose some of those bonds when they decide on joining different sororities or fraternities. This is where a strong tie between each of the new members involved matters most. I am hoping that if the new members of these organizations have an initial relationship with each other, the more effective they would be to work through issues that could potentially come up and can stand together as a united front. I also believe that major change begins with the new members in a community, not in the current people that are perpetuating the issues. In my opinion, if we change the culture so that these incoming fraternity and sorority members want to stand together, then they are more willing to be proactive in creating the change that they want to see within their organizations. This is what I am hoping to prove with this research – that if we want FSL to start flourishing again and becoming the great organizations that they were founded upon, we need to have the students start by building relationships with each other and acknowledging their peers’ value.

Relationships are at the heart of a strong community. When people start truly valuing each other as human beings, they start to appreciate them and instinctively care for them. When a community is built around people that care for one another and root for each other, that community strengthens. This is especially crucial for FSL; not just at USD but nationwide. I really believe that part of the pandemic of hazing and alcohol abuse is because the students do not value each other. If we focused more brotherhood and sisterhood bonding activities on actually getting to know each other, even during recruitment, then possibly the active members would look at their new members as actual people that they are harming, instead of objects that need to earn their place. Perhaps then, one day someone would be brave enough to stand up for someone that is heavily drinking and make sure they get them home safely, instead of feeling uncomfortable but still ignoring them. Maybe bystander intervention would actually be a common thing, and a sister would be able to stand up for another sorority woman when she felt that a man wasn't leaving her alone, even though he is the president of the 'top fraternity' on campus. But these negative aspects of being a young adult in a social organization can only start to diminish when the students involved start valuing each other, and I believe the best way to start doing that is to start creating more opportunities to grow meaningful relationships with each other.

A goal for this research is to figure out a way that all of the new students within USD's Fraternity and Sorority Life feel a sense of togetherness. This would ideally improve how each of the Greek organizations interact with each other. To achieve this goal, I want to work with the current student leaders of FSL on campus, and re-develop the New Member Series (NMS) that is currently in place. Currently, it is a program that works to acclimate new members to FSL and teaches them about current issues that might happen while being a part of these organizations.

Currently it is run set up very simply. There are a couple presentations about sexual assault, hazing, and alcohol awareness. Through conversations with my supervisor and previous colleagues, the new members do not see this experience as beneficial to them. I want to create something new that brings more purpose to the program, and produces benefits that these students can actually see happening. Through the New Member Series, I also hope to see a tighter community built, where all of the fraternity and sorority chapters are working to further act towards the missions and values of University of San Diego.

The purpose of this study is to work towards building more meaningful relationships and a better community within the Greek life organizations at USD. Additionally, as part of my research, I hope to use the current student leaders involved in Greek Life to further develop their leadership skills in creating a community. This way, not only are the new members benefitting from the revised New Member Series, but the Panhellenic (PHC) and Interfraternity Council (IFC) students are gaining necessary leadership and programming skills. My research question for this study is ‘How can I support the development of stronger relationships of the new members involved in Fraternity and Sorority Life at USD?’

## **Background**

When I first decided to base my action research on FSL, I was not currently working in the FSL office on campus yet, and did not have an extensive amount of knowledge on what specific areas are needed for improvements within this organization. After speaking with the Assistant Director and a previous (then current) Graduate Assistant for the office, I have found that building a strong community is a value that they are consistently trying to improve upon. From these conversations, I gathered that having an environment that fosters meaningful relationships is a critical step in building a cohesive community. As I am now finishing up my

first and final year in this role, I am certain that building a stronger and more cohesive community is something that FSL at USD desperately needs. A prime example for this need is that in one year, there were three big hazing investigations both with fraternities and sororities. In addition, I have noticed that it seems like when one bad thing happens, people are very quick to start rumors and blame the student leaders who are delivering the information. This happens in many organizations, but it is so easy to place blame and start rumors in situations such as this because no one really knows each other. Lastly, it is not unknown that colleges nationwide are not pleased with fraternities and sororities on campus. There is even a sentiment in our own community that the affiliated (those in fraternities or sororities) members think that USD administration is going to get rid of them in the next couple of years. Why should they behave or continue to build something that would take a lot of hard work? I understand their sentiments, but I also know that being a part of Fraternity and Sorority Life, when done right, can be one of the most beneficial things a college student can be a part of. I am hoping that from my research, we can start gaining tools of how these students can strengthen their relationships with each other, and in turn strengthen this community.

When starting to research fraternity and sorority involvement, I found a lot of articles related to the negative aspects of membership within these organizations. One issue that kept coming up was the additional time commitments that are required to participate in the organization and how that can lead to more distractions in Greek members' school work and less time set aside to be successful in their courses. (Walker, Martin, & Hussey, 2015) There are also the negative impacts of the alcohol use in college, and how affiliated students are more likely to state that they have participated in underage drinking at parties, as well as the necessity of having alcohol to have fun at social gatherings (Walker, Martin, & Hussey, 2015). I agree with and

recognize the majority of these statistics. For example, from being personally involved in a sorority, I have felt the time commitment requirements and the stress that being involved put on my commitment to coursework. However, these statistics are not solely what researchers should be focusing on when studying the effects of fraternity and sorority life, and also do not impact what I am exploring in my research.

There are numerous developmental benefits to being a member of a fraternal organization. McClain and Sampson (2015) conducted a study on the link between being involved in a Greek-letter organization to better career development. They found that Greek students may have experienced greater gains in personal development and social learning because of more opportunities to interact with others (socials, weekly chapter meetings, recruitment, etc.) (McClain & Sampson, 2015). This study influenced my thinking towards the developmental aspects of being associated in Greek life.

A popular theme amongst articles I found was the academic benefits of joining a fraternity or sorority. One study examined peer involvement and how it affected students' academic achievement (Ullah & Wilson, 2007). The researchers found that for female students, the more involved they were with their peers, the better they did academically. However, when the male students had a better social life, their grades suffered (Ullah & Wilson, 2007). There was also a direct correlation between being involved in college and how a student better adapted to the university setting in their first year. Similarly, in another study, research found that the more a student was involved, the faster they adapted to school their first year (Tieu & Pancer, 2009). DeBard and Sacks (2010) concluded that students who joined a Greek organization their first year had a higher GPA than their non-affiliated classmates. They also found that students who joined these organizations had a higher retention rate to their second year versus the

students who were non-affiliated (DeBard & Sacks, 2010). When comparing involvement between male and females, the majority of undergraduate involvement are female students (Case, 2011). As a researcher, it is important to keep this in mind when collecting data from both sorority and fraternity members, in order to recognize the different needs of female and male students. This literature directly relates towards why we should be building meaningful relationships within Greek life. These students are involved in an organization and as student affairs professionals, we want them to build relationships so they can find people with similar majors and study habits outside of their own chapter. In my own undergraduate experience, the more relationships I formed on campus the more comfortable I was navigating through college. Creating meaningful relationships throughout the Greek community here can help students feel more comfortable around campus and their experiences at USD. I also believe that the more these students know each other and care about one another, the stronger that this community will be.

### **Context**

The organizational setting for this research is at the University of San Diego (USD), a private, faith-based institution with about 5,600 undergraduate students. The research is focused in the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) which is part of the Student Life Involvement Center (SLIC). As someone who was involved in a sorority as an undergraduate student, I recognize the value of creating lasting and meaningful relationships throughout these organizations, which is why this topic is important to me. I became significantly more comfortable in college knowing that I created friendships with people that had the same values as I did. Knowing how beneficial this was to me, I would like to see this effect on the members of the Greek students at USD. As one of two Graduate Assistants within Greek Life, my role is

advising the Panhellenic Executive Board members in weekly meetings, as well as meeting bi-weekly with three chapter Presidents; two sorority presidents and one fraternity president. I also guide these students in planning the formal sorority recruitment events, and also Greek-celebration events such as Greek Week and New Member Series.

### **Methodology I**

I will be using Kolb's method of Experiential Learning for my methodology. This is a cycle theory that is "a holistic perspective that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior." (Kolb, 2017) There are four stages to this cycle which are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The first step, concrete experience, is where the researcher is actually having the experience such as conducting a focus group or holding an activity with the subjects. In abstract conceptualization, the researcher is reflecting on the experience that was just held. In the third step, abstract conceptualization, the researcher is noting what they learned from this experience, and in the active experimentation step, they are taking what they have concluded and planning to try out what they have learned in the next cycle (Kolb, 2017).

Action research is "a form of enquiry that enables practitioners in every job and walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011, p. 7). Action research is relevant for my issue because it allows me to engage with the subjects and actually use the data that I am gathering to produce change and improve the research after each cycle. Furthermore, it allows me to figure out how I, as a practitioner, can experiment with different ways to build stronger relationships with the students that I work with. Using Kolb's Experiential Learning method gives me an easy tool to continuously go back and re-evaluate my workspace and assess if changes need to be made. I am a firm believer in the 'learn by doing' aspect, and this

epistemology is rooted in how I chose my methodology. By allowing myself to reflect after conducting a session in a cycle and using that reflection to base how the rest of my research will go, is extremely beneficial to not only my learning experience but also the experience that my students are having. In Kolb's earlier work, he originally created this model based off of the process that "knowledge is created through the transformation experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it." (Kolb, 1984) I would not get the best results if I only did one cycle and took all of my data from it; this method enables me to 'learn by doing' in reflecting how to get the best results possible.

There are strengths and weaknesses that are attributed to my chosen method. The strengths are similar to the aspects of the method that I mentioned above; it will allow me to reflect on my actions and how I am conducting the research. If I feel that an activity such as a focus group did not go how I wanted, Kolb's method allows me the opportunity to ask myself what went wrong and what I can do to make the necessary changes the next time. Are the students not responding? Did they interact in a way that I was not expecting? It is important to note these changes and this method makes it easy to do so. Another aspect that could work in my favor is that I will also be a 'new member' in the Greek community. I might be able to use this to share in that initial experience with the new students. The possible challenge that I can foresee happening is the time boundary. The majority of my research is based off of data that I am gathering through interactions with new members in fraternity and sorority life. However, USD's recruitment time starts in the second semester (January). Therefore, I need to be quick in successfully completing and revising my cycles so that I have an accurate amount of information within the timespan of just a few months. I want to make sure that I have enough quality data to use so I can make adequate change.

### **Needs Assessment**

Getting to my topic was difficult because I had no previous context of the office or my students, let alone any problems I saw. After talking with one of the current graduate assistants in that office, I was able to realize what my values were and how I might be able to incorporate them into some issues that she saw while working there and chose to not focus on for her own research. I also thought it was necessary to have a meeting with the Assistant Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life, who will be my supervisor in the fall. From that meeting I was able to gather information from an administrator's point of view on the issues within the organization. Both of these meetings allowed me to assess what I wanted to focus on for my research question, which was based on developing meaningful relationships.

Moving forward, I still need to gather more literature about the history of Greek life, but also I will want to assess the history of fraternity and sorority life at USD. It is important to fully understand the organization in which I am doing research on; the more knowledge I have the better I can work to formulate how I organize my research and how I can figure out the needs of the students that are specifically geared towards the institution. It is important to note the differences in a Greek system at a large public university and a small private institution. The way each Greek-affiliated organization differs across the country, and it is important to understand how USD's specifically works. Once I start working there in the fall, I can get a better understanding of how the office works and the politics within that area. In addition, I hope to gather information on the dynamics between each of the fraternities and sororities on campus and how they react to each other. This will be important when it comes time to developing the material needed to conduct the activities and surveys I will be using.

The participants in this study will be the new members that have joined a fraternity or sorority in the spring of 2018. I will also be working with the executive board of Panhellenic Council and Interfraternity Council (IFC) during the fall and spring to help re-develop the New Member Series that each new member will be participating in. There are approximately 150 new members and 10 members of Panhellenic and IFC. I will be informing the executive board of student leaders by making an announcement in a meeting at the beginning of the academic year. Because the New Member Series is already a mandatory requirement for all new Greek-affiliated students, I will inform them that the information used in this series will not extend outside of my research and this paper, and everything they say will be kept in confidence.

My critical friends are Rama Sabano, Kalena Michalec, Jelitsa Fonseca, Andrea Dame, Joshua Haeffner and Meagan Trudeau. Rama Sabano currently works as the graduate assistant for Student Clubs and Organizations at University of San Diego (USD). Kalena Michalec is the graduate assistant for the Torero Programming Board within USD's Student Life and Involvement Center, and Jelitsa Fonseca is the graduate assistant in USD's Office of Sustainability. Joshua Haeffner works as the graduate assistant of Facilities and Operations in Residential Life at USD, and Meagan Trudeau also works at USD as a graduate assistant in the Career Development Center.

## **Methodology II**

To produce this study, I plan on using a mix of data generation methods. Ideally, I want the Panhellenic and IFC leaders to develop, or co-create, the main revision of the new member series. I want them to be able to use the skills they might gain from this experience and transform them into more effective student leaders, so it is important that they provide input into this process. Ideally, I want the New Member Series to be at the center of my research in the form of

a retreat. Through this retreat there will be multiple opportunities for creating meaningful relationships and building community within USD's Greek life. Before the retreat I would conduct a series of surveys for the new members to fill out and voice their opinion on their thoughts about recruitment and rush, and how they feel coming into this organization. After the retreat, I would again use a series of surveys and dialogues to see how they reacted to the retreat, and how they feel about the relationships they have formed and their thoughts on this organizations' community.

I am proposing to complete three cycles. The first cycle will be focused on the current student leaders within Greek life. Because I am not able to have access to the new members until January, I am hoping to gather data about their own previous new member experience, and also what their honest view on the community and relationships that have been built between each of the chapters on campus. I will be collecting this information through surveys and interviews. From this data, I will reflect with the current student leaders how we can improve the relationships within the chapters and how we can start that process by having a successful New Member Series. From there I will be moving on to cycle 2, which will be the actual act of the New Member Series. After this activity is completed I will also be having dialogues with students afterwards to reflect on their thoughts on the New Member Series. I am curious to know if they felt that there were meaningful relationships created throughout this process, and also about their thoughts on community within the organization.

The third and final cycle will take place two months after the New Member Series has been done. I want to make sure I leave enough time before I review this. It is an assumption of mine that students may immediately create close bonds with their fellow Greek-affiliated peers immediately throughout the series, but I am curious to know if this series will help create lasting

relationships. I will send out a survey and gather data about how the relationships have developed since the New Member Series, and if they also feel that there is a growing sense of community that was more prominent than when they started. In this cycle, I will again be working with my student leaders and gathering their thoughts through interviews and dialogues about how they felt community has improved or not since the start of the research. I will also be reviewing with them how planning this New Member Retreat helped them improve their student development as leaders, and if throughout this process they created meaningful relationships of their own. When reading literature from a previous action research project, the practitioner realized the importance of noticing her students' growth in their leadership journeys throughout her research process (Rae, 2013). She also noticed that leadership was an individual and collective process (Rae, 2013). I found this unpublished research paper to be crucial in recognizing the importance of the student leaders involved in this entire process and why they are so valuable in cycle 1 and 3.

Using multiple cycles throughout this process will allow me to prove the validity within my research. By using Kolb's Experiential Model, I will be able to reflect on the research implemented and use that to form my new questions and concerns throughout, making it a much more purposeful process. As a practitioner, I am not gathering data for just any reason; by reflecting through each cycle I am making sure there is action and change throughout this entire process. Gaining the perspective of my participants further helps validate the implementation; these students are currently involved in this organization and it is important to work with them and get their point of view so that we can work together to develop something that has the potential to last a long time and benefit many people.

**Anticipated Outcomes**

I hope to gain knowledge about multiple aspects of this research when it is completed. I want to develop tools to know how, as a practitioner, to successfully create meaningful relationships within my work organization. By using the information gathered during this process, I am hoping to better understand the needs of students and what they consider to be a meaningful relationship. I also would like to learn about myself and my own leadership role. I want to be able to further develop my skills as a leader, which specifically includes allowing the students I work with to take charge and create something that they are passionate about doing. The idea might not be what I originally had planned, but an important aspect of working in student affairs is giving students opportunities to grow. I hope to be able to gain knowledge and experience doing this with the Panhellenic and IFC student leaders that will be in charge of creating the revised New Member Series.

Ideally if I am successful in my change efforts, we will see a decrease in the tension and rivalry between each of the chapters within USD's Greek life. Additionally, I will know my work is successful if the students that have participated in the updated New Member Series form meaningful relationships, as seen through my observations and the post-questionnaires, throughout the different chapters. I would love for it to be a common occurrence that a member of Pi Kappa Phi, Kappa Kappa Gamma and Kappa Delta, for example, are very close friends and use their relationship to continue to benefit their experience at USD and improve the relationships and community within Greek life.

## **Timeline**

I would like start my first cycle in October or November, with my second cycle starting in the spring, just a couple weeks after recruitment has ended for both fraternities and sororities. I plan on having my third and final cycle in March, a couple months after the new pledge class have completed the New Member Series. This way I can see if the relationships created during the series were actually sustainable. The rest of the semester would be gathering my data and writing the research, having finished my final paper in May.

## **Cycle 1**

For my first cycle I sent out a survey to current members of fraternity and sorority life. this survey took place in December, which is before recruitment takes place for both sororities and fraternities. I had my assumptions about the Greek community, but I felt that it was important to hear from actual members about how they feel the community is. I sent out the survey to about 400 students, both male and female. expecting the number to severely lower with who actually responded. I received a total of 20 responses, which is a significantly low number. however, I was able to take each response as great data, and although the percentage was low, I did not expect much more than that. In all honesty, I was pleasantly surprised that 20 people actually filled out the survey. The survey consisted of 6 questions which were “did you feel included and welcomed in your chapter when you first joined?” “did you feel a sense of community within greek life when you first joined?” “did you consider yourself having meaningful and close relationships with people outside of your chapter?” “as an active member, do you feel a sense of community with greek life?” “how has your sense of community changed or developed over time since first being initiated into your chapter?” “anything you would suggest for the future that FSL staff/leaders could improve on to further improve creating

meaningful relationships amongst each other and finding a sense of belonging within the community?" I talk about my findings below.

I was relieved to read the responses from this survey because overall it helped prove that this community is in desperate need of doing something to improve the community and building relationships within each other. The lack of belonging in this community starts right at the very beginning; active members felt very uncomfortable at times in their new member experience. Not only did some of them not even know what greek life was and what they just joined, it was a common theme that men and women felt like they had to make the most effort to make any connections with people in their chapter. One respondent claimed "I didn't feel immediately connected, but I felt welcomed." I think this is a really important aspect to focus in on. it is very common for chapters to throw numerous events and socials for new members to get to know each other throughout their first semester in the organization. however, if the leaders of the chapter are not intentionally programming these events to actually start forming connections with the girls, it is so easy to still feel lost a semester into joining. these chapters have on average about 100 men and women in them and it is so easy to get lost in the excitement. When talking about their experience after being initiated, most responders stated that although they did have friendships with students outside their chapter, those friendships were either from students they had met outside of the context of greek life, not affiliated at all, or they met them through leadership positions in FSL.

Although some people did feel that there was a general sense of community within greek life, most students thought that it was a front that everyone told them, but something that no one actually showed to each other at the end of the day. One said in their survey that "people get along, but the community as a whole is very separated" and that there was "animosity between

the chapters.” An important theme I noticed was that the people who listed themselves as being involved in leadership roles in greek life, also felt that the community felt stronger and they had better inter-chapter relations. This was not a surprising revelation to me, but it was troublesome. At USD, greek life makes up about 30% of the population. In the 2016-2017 academic year, there were 1509 students that are affiliated, however, the leadership positions don’t even make up a third of the population. If the students who have leadership positions are having a better experience, how do we somehow make sure the students who don’t have the opportunity to get that involved still gain at least some of the benefits that the hyper-involved student is?

I was really pleased with the responses participants gave for this first cycle. I found out that yes, many people in the community do feel comfortable, like they belong, and that the community is strong. But there were also quite a few responses that told me the community needs to be better. I had my assumptions that people felt it was fake and competitive, but it felt a little bit relieving to know that my assumptions were not wrong. Some participants had strong opinions, specifically around fraternity behavior (or lack thereof) and the overwhelming process of being a new member. Reflecting on this survey, it seems like the active members want each other to take more responsibility and hold chapter’s more accountable for their actions. They feel that this is one of the only ways that the community can get better. Personally, I don’t think that will happen until the members actually start valuing each other.

This cycle also proved to me the importance of working with new members in this research. Yes, it is valuable information to see where the current members stand; but the new members are the future of greek life at USD. If we start teaching them the importance of relationship building and changing the social norms of greek life from the beginning, then by the time they become the leaders it could be the new normal. I knew after reading the responses from

the participants that I had to come up with an action plan of how to start actually allowing these new members to get to know each other and start forming the community early. Recruitment started in January, so I knew that I had to get some ideas flowing soon. I looked back at my final survey question, which was feedback of how the staff could better the community in the future to see what current members felt about it. Some common suggestions were to educate members on what it means to be in fraternity and sorority life here, and to make new member series more retreat style. This last suggestion really spoke to me – I had already planned on using the new member series for my cycle 2 and helping the student leaders who plan it make it more relational and interactive.

Following Kolb's Experiential Model, I started planning out the active experimentation of this first cycle. However, I came into an issue when I realized that I had a lot less control of what the New Member Series looked like than I thought. It is an important note for my research that USD Greek Life is very student-centered and student-run. It is an aspect of student affairs that I believe has a lot of pros, like allowing student leaders to make some big decisions and really choose how they want their year in their positions to go. Sometimes however, being solely student run isn't always the best way to go about planning programs and shaping a community. As much as we try to tell students to intentionally program their events, is their purpose of planning an event to actually form relationships with new members really working? Are they educating their members on the true importance of what it means to be an affiliated member of greek life? Are they teaching their brothers and sisters the importance of inclusion and diversity and how to break down the exclusionary practices that comes from being in organizations that were founded over 100 years ago? Do they even know how to have those conversations? This is why I was a little disappointed that I did not have more say in the planning process of New

Member Series. Sure, I was able to talk with the students planning it and try to show them the importance of relationship building during the event, and why talking about these issues are important and how to present the information in a way that new members would actually pay attention to. But at the end of the day, I realized that they could listen to the advice all they wanted to, but they had no motivation to really plan it so they just ended up doing what they felt was the easiest thing to do. I told myself that if I couldn't convince the students to completely change the look of New Member Series, and I didn't have the power to do it myself, then I had to base my Cycle 2 on the New Member Series as it was and learn and reflect on the pros and cons of how it is currently run.

## **Cycle 2**

The New Member Series (NMS) is set up to be a requirement that every new member in Fraternity and Sorority Life at USD is required to go to. It takes place around late February/early March, timed specifically so both sororities and fraternities are done with formal and informal recruitment for the spring semester. The overall purpose of this event is to educate the students on what it means to be a good member of a greek society. With all of the news that is centered around Greek Life nationwide over the past couple of years, it is important that this is set up so that they know what to participate in – and what simply is not okay. Joining a Fraternal organization (both fraternities and sororities) is more than just going to social events and raising money. A lot of leaders in today's society have been affiliated, and it is important that these new members really grasp what it means to represent organizations that are hundreds of years old. The way that this year's NMS was set up was a four-hour long day on a Sunday. During this event, students listened to presentations about sexual assault on campus and how to recognize it, what hazing is and the history of why it happens and the negative effects that come with it, and I

also was asked to give a presentation on the importance of having a sense of belonging in your organization. There was an ice breaker at the beginning of the day, and I also incorporated an ice breaker into my activity. The day was laid out to have good intentions of being a day of educating these students on crucial topics in our community, however there were numerous aspects of the event that went wrong and is important to note when planning something like this for the future.

The layout of the event was the first thing that stood out to me that was problematic. The starting attendance of students was around 350-400 people, and they had the chairs set up in rows so that people in the back could barely see or hear what was being talked about. Originally, the students planning NMS wanted tables with chairs around it to be the set up so it was more interactive, but there was not enough space to put the number of tables necessary to fit everyone. This set up caused the people in the back to be extremely reckless. It was clear that no one wanted to be there in the first place, and there was constant chatter and distractions that were very obvious during each presentation. From experience, when you force young adults to go to a presentation and then not have it be interactive, the chances of them actually learning the material are slim to none. This set up also made it easy for people to leave mid-NMS. Anytime we would give the students a break between presentations, there would be a chunk missing when the next presenter would start. It is easy to plan an event, tell the presenters what you want to present on, and sit back and make sure people show up. But it is important to remember that there is a purpose for these events, and we need to make sure the majority of people are at least getting the information, and hopefully retaining some of it. As I stated earlier, I think that learning by doing is one of the best ways to teach young adults.

I originally wanted to plan the New Member Series so that people could actually get to know each other on a more personal level, and have dialogues that were in depth and personal. Although presentations about what they need to know are useful, I don't think it was the best use of their time. The New Member Series proved to me that we need to do more relational-building programming with this. It would make the time go by much faster, and it would keep them engaged. I tried to stress that importance with my presentation on Sense of Belonging, but it is very hard to incorporate relationship building activities into a 45-minute presentation with 400 participants. Through observing the New Member Series I concluded that this method of teaching should not be completely student led. It is a crucial event that needs to happen, but from my observations I think that the topics of sexual assault and hazing are too important to not be taught in a different way than a presentation, and I think that a completely different model of the series needs to be put into action for the following years. Because of this, I decided that for my third and final cycle, it was important to talk to the new members about their experience so far, and to get some real feedback about New Member Series. At first I was planning on doing another survey so I could potentially reach more people, but I finalized on doing a focus group. By doing this, I knew I would potentially reach less people, but I think it is more useful to talk to participants in person and be able to ask follow up questions.

### **Cycle 3**

To prepare for my focus group, I developed a list of questions that focused around how they felt during recruitment, how they feel as a new member right now, and their feedback about new member series. To see the exact questions listed, see Appendix D. The group consisted of five women, four of whom were in the same chapter. They also were all first-year students at USD. These demographics stood out to me significantly, and I will reference back to them in my

reflections later on. There were a couple themes that came about whilst listening to the participant's answers. The first theme that I noticed was that all of them seemed to feel that they had to put in most of the effort to try and feel connected in the chapter. One participant, Nicole, stated "I felt like the annoying little sibling trying to hang out all the time". In response to that, Jess agreed and said, "I try to put myself out there at events but it's not reciprocated at all. Even if you put yourself out there, sometimes it's not really worth it and you kind of feel weird after." Thinking back to the responses from my cycle 1, I remembered that some participants had stated that they too felt like they had to make the effort to get to know people as new members, instead of the upperclassman in their chapter.

The second theme I noticed was that each of the women had stated multiple times that they did not feel that there was actually a sense of community surrounding greek life at USD. Brigid, one of the participants, said that "there isn't any mixing or intermingling. Even during Greek Week, it feels very much like you're still in your own little bubble". For context, Greek Week is a week where a fraternity and sorority are paired up together and they compete against other teams during different events each day to raise money for a philanthropy that the greek community chose. It is set up so that you can get to know different people in other chapters, and have some friendly competition all for a good cause. A problem with this week however, is that while there are a numerous people who really show the spirit of greek week and embody the purpose of it, there are always people who treat it as simply a competition. Many times fraternities will make it mandatory for their new members to participate, so already it is seen as a "hassle" that older members don't have to participate. Even while preparing for skits, which is the ending event that people get most excited for, it seemed from the participants that it still was pretty separate. Christine shared her thoughts on skits specifically and said "it's not like we're

working together to work on the skits, it's more like 'oh, it's our thing and the guys are here too, so we have to teach them.' It's not united at all".

Each of the woman said that they would love to see more greek community events being held. Jess had brought up that everyone had a 'sister sorority' this semester, but has not heard anything about it nor have they done anything with each other. Nicole attested to her view on the community during recruitment vs. how she feels about it now: "During recruitment, you would hear all the time that Theta loves Pi Phi, and A Chi O loves G Phi. But now it seems like it is a competition for who is best, and not everyone is together." Each participant agreed with that – and the four girls from the same chapter each had said that they were nervous and disappointed joining their chapter because of its reputation. It was clear that people get easily caught up in worrying about who is the best and quite honestly – who the men pay the most attention to. All of the women shared that they were disappointed that active women whom they had a connection with during the recruitment process stopped talking to them post-recruitment when they didn't end up in their chapter. It was an interesting observation because each of the women said that they joined a sorority to make more friends. Jess even said that she felt if she wasn't in greek life, she didn't know how she was supposed to have friends. But it is clear from listening to their sentiments that although everyone wants to make friends, no one seems to want to put in the effort to meet people outside of their chapter, especially when it is clearly hard enough to make connections within their own sorority and fraternity. When asked if they had friends outside of their chapter, or if they even wanted them, they all responded yes. Both Jess and Nicole said that they had friends from their classes and people they knew last semester, but they also both agreed that they would have built those relationships whether they had joined greek life or not. I

followed up with them asking if they were involved in things other than their sorority, and each participant was involved or planned on getting involved in at least one other club or job at USD.

I wanted to make sure that I got quality feedback about New Member Series, since after cycle 2 I knew that I wanted to focus on that event during my recommendations. All five of the participants did not take long to answer this question, and it was clear they did not have much to say about it. There was a communal “I thought it was pointless and wanted to leave” response, and Sashi had suggested that “it would have been so much better if it had been broken up into two sessions”. They also all felt that it was extremely repetitive, not only because it was information they felt that they already knew, but even the speakers repeated each other. These responses, or lack thereof, gave me the data that we are not doing all that we can with the New Member Series. After cycle 2, I had already felt like we were wasting the student’s time forcing them to be there, and this focus group proved that we were. USD already has an over programming issue on campus, there is no need to force 400+ students to go to something if they are leaving and not retaining the information. However, I believe that New Member Series can be something extremely beneficial to these students if done right. I go into more depth about this during my recommendations.

In reflecting back on how this entire cycle went, I wanted to talk about the demographics of the turn-out of this cycle. Every participant was a first-year woman, and they were all from the same chapter, except one. I felt that this was worth mentioning in terms of my research. Looking back at the literature I gathered, it is a fact that undergraduate women are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities than undergraduate men. (Case, 2011) Furthermore, it is my assumption that men are less likely to participate when you ask them to take time out of their day and participate in something that they may or may not feel strongly about. I also thought it

was interesting that there were only two sororities represented. To my knowledge of the sorority community here at USD, these chapters are generally perceived to be not the ones that everyone so badly wants to join during recruitment. I am not sure if this has anything to do about why these women decided they were willing to talk about the greek community, or if it effected their answers at all. However, they might have a different insight of how they feel their relationships are forming with the overall community. It might have looked different if there were more sororities (and fraternities) represented. Would some of the more “popular” members have the same sentiments about the community? Would they also feel that they don’t have friends in other chapters? However, the data I gathered still related back to my research question. It is clear that people are wanting a stronger community, yet don’t really have strong relationships in different chapters that they formed through greek life. This was mentioned multiple times in the Cycle 1 survey as well. Sure, they are making friends in their classes and other involvement with people that might be in different chapters, but in reality, the greek community is around each other quite often, and there are numerous ways that we can be building that community from within.

### **Limitations**

There were many challenges that I came across throughout this research, and I had many limitations. The biggest limitation was the time boundary regarding my research. Because I decided to focus on primarily the new members, it did not give me a lot of time to conduct my second and third cycles. For sororities, formal recruitment starts in January, right before the spring semester starts. For fraternities, formal recruitment starts in mid-February. In addition, during the months of January and even into late February, some chapters are doing informal recruitment, which bring in more new members. Because of this, my second cycle, the New Member Series, could not happen until March 4<sup>th</sup>. My last cycle took place on March 16<sup>th</sup>. I was

on a tight constraint to collect the data, analyze it, and then base my next cycle on the information I gathered from the New Member Series.

In addition, I think the lack of people that I gathered in my focus group was another limitation. As mentioned above, it could have looked very different if there were more representation from other chapters, and if there were men present. However, I think that the data that I gathered was important because they might have been from voices that don't necessarily feel heard outside of this space. At the end of the focus group, one of the participants Brigid had said "I'm glad that you asked us these questions, because no one else really does". Every other participant nodded in agreement after that statement, and I was glad to hear it. It confirmed my wish to have more people present, because if five people can agree that these questions need to be asked, I can predict that a handful of other new members feel the same way no matter what chapter they are part of.

### **Recommendations**

"Relationships are central to any leadership process...thus, it is imperative that leadership educators devote considerable attention to helping students learn about themselves and others" (Haber-Curran, Allen, & Shankman, 2015). This quote directly reflects the importance of my research question, and why I feel that the recommendations below are worth putting into practice. When leaders start valuing each other and understanding the dynamics of the group they are leading, they can make decisions that will affect that community with confidence because of the trust they have built from creating meaningful relationships with each other. These types of changes take a lot of work and effort, especially from the leadership educators (professional staff, in this situation), so I believe that the best way to start implementing this culture is through the new members of these organizations. One of the more important aspects of

leadership and being able to grow a strong community is to learn the value of human significance, and the best way to understand that value is to get to know each other and start creating meaningful relationships within our systems. (Haber-Curran, Allen, & Shankman, 2015)

From reflecting back on my cycles, the literature I have read, and the data that I collected, I have a couple recommendations on how to move forward with this action research. For starters, I would like to recommend that we make New Member Series something that the Fraternity and Sorority Life professional staff plan. My reasoning for this is that it is a great opportunity for the new members to get extremely valuable information about what being part of a greek organization looks like. When done correctly, I really believe that these students can walk out of their session feeling comfortable about what they just joined, and having built some new friendships in the process. I think it should be an opportunity for these new members to talk about what they want their community to look like, because after all in less than four years they will be the ones that are making the majority of the decisions. It is clear that the current members of greek life do not see any value in this program the way it is right now. As much as I trust the current students to plan events and programs, the information that needs to be given is much too important for it to be not intentionally programmed. Because this is a relatively new program, I think the staff need to lay out a basis of what they want it to look like. I would recommend that they take some of the feedback that I gathered from cycle 1 and 2 and make the first portion of the series more getting to know each other activities, and then maybe a second portion be more informational. Once the staff finds a good grounding of what the series looks like each year, I think then the students can start taking control again and running the program. It is clear from the data that people want to see a change in the community and in the way that USD and the country views Greek Life. I personally believe that one of the only ways to do that is to start making that

change with the new members, and the perfect opportunity to start doing that is through revamping the New Member Series.

In answering my research question, “how to build meaningful relationships with new members in greek life”, I really think it boils down to intentionally programming. It is clear that new members feel lost and like they have to put all of the effort into forming these friendships that will supposedly last a lifetime. However, perhaps the chapter leadership doesn’t know how to plan things where their new students can actually feel wanted and like they belong. One of the patterns I see in my role is that people program what they are used to, and what has been passed down to them from leader to leader. Sure, the way they have done a specific sisterhood or brotherhood event worked for their chapter five years ago, but what about the needs of their new members now? It is important that they are paying attention to their new members because they are the future of their chapter. The leaders in sororities and fraternities are many times involved in other things on campus, and might not have time or know how to come up with new programming. I think it is important that we as staff develop something to help these leaders intentionally program events that will actually benefit their members.

Just like affiliated members have a responsibility to keep their fellow brothers and sisters accountable for their actions, the professional staff also have to hold our students accountable. The majority of the responses that I got from my data collection told me that there needs to be a stronger more cohesive community here, and that no one cares to have valuable relationships with each other outside of their own smaller communities. They all said that they would like to, but clearly the effort to do so is not prevalent with these students. This is where the professional staff must step in. It is so easy to brush aside issues because we pride ourselves on being student run and student driven. But at the end of the day, the majority of these students that are making

decisions on how to run the community that effects a lot of people, are 19 and 20 years old. The university has to be okay with the staff stepping up and planning programs not just when a chapter gets in trouble. I think that a lot of good work can be done if we start implementing programs that are not just for the student leaders that we directly work with. There is a huge untapped population of greek students who are not in leadership positions, who still have a large say of how the greek life culture is run at USD. It is important that they know the value of getting to know one another, having deep friendships with people other than their own brothers and sisters, and valuing each other as human beings. I really do believe that once the majority of the greek-affiliated population starts seeing the value in each other, then they will be more willing to build a community that they, and the university, are proud of. These changes will not happen overnight, but I think that with a little more guidance and support from professional staff, we will start to see major improvements in this community that can give so much to people if done the right way.

### **Conclusion**

Working in Fraternity and Sorority Life this past year has opened my eyes to see the potential of a strong, tight knit community that supports one another and encourages each other to grow into incredible young adults. But the Greek Life community at USD is not there yet. From my own experiences and reading some literature, I knew that a strong community has strong relationships with the people within it that help build up something they are proud of. Using Kolb's Experiential Model in conducting my research, I wanted to hear from both active members and new members of sororities and fraternities about their thoughts on what their community is, and also if they have formed any valuable relationships with people outside of their own chapters. The responses I got were not surprising; the majority of students stated that

they felt that our 'sense of community' on campus was fake, and no one actually felt it. The majority of students also said that they did have friends outside of their own chapter, but they were made by being involved in other activities on campus, and felt that they would have been friends regardless of joining Greek Life or not. The second cycle was something that I originally had big plans to revamp after gathering the data from cycle 1, but realized there was not much I could do besides give the students planning New Member Series my suggestions, and hoped that they followed my advice. They did not, but what I observed through attending and speaking at New Member Series gave me a lot of information that I used and formed my cycle 3 around. Reflecting back on my three cycles, I have realized that the students want a stronger community, and the most obvious place to start is by forming better relationships with each other. Per my recommendation, the easiest route to start this is not by creating more programming, but by changing the New Member Series and having the professional staff plan it. By making this program in the control of the professional staff, we have the ability to tailor it so these students are coming into their new member process with connections with other people, and the information they need to move forward with being an exceptional member of the Greek community. It is clear that there needs to be a change. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in the Fraternity and Sorority Life world, and we need to listen to what these students actually want but may not know how to go about it. By creating programming that forms better relationships between these students, and by holding them more accountable not just reactively, but proactively, I think that the professional staff and students can work together to create a community that everyone is proud of.

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## APPENDIX A

**University of San Diego Institutional Review Board****Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:

*Working with Greek-Affiliated students to improve the Fraternity and Sorority community within University of San Diego.*

**I. Purpose of the research study**

Elizabeth Aiello-Coppola is a student in the School of Leadership & Educational Studies at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this study is to strengthen my own work related to creating meaningful student relationships in a student-led organization, and seeing how that can relate to benefitting the community that those students participate in.

**II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to: be involved in a *five*-month period as follows:

- 1) Participate in Dialogue number #1. In this dialogue, the participants will be asked about their perceptions and thoughts about meaningful relationships and community within fraternities and sororities at University of San Diego.
- 2) Participate in dialogue number #2: The participants will be asked about their perceptions and thoughts about meaningful relationships and community within fraternities and sororities at University of San Diego, after participating in the New Member Series. The New Member Series is an event that is pre-existing in USD's Fraternity and Sorority Life. All members are already required to participate when they join a Greek organization.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 3 hours and 30 minutes.

**III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:

San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

University of San Diego Center for Health and Wellness: 619-260-4618

**IV. Benefits**

Some benefits of this study might be that you create lasting and more meaningful relationships with your peers within your organization. Also, knowing that you helped the researcher learn more about her role in improving student development within an organization.

## **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

## **VI. Compensation**

**You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.**

## **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

## **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

- 1) Elizabeth Aiello-Coppola
  - Email: [eiellocoppola@sandiego.edu](mailto:eiellocoppola@sandiego.edu)
  - Phone: 650-303-6219
- 2) Christopher Newman
  - Email: [cnewman@sandiego.edu](mailto:cnewman@sandiego.edu)

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

Signature of Participant Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX B

Script for Announcement at a Joint Executive Board meeting for USD Fraternity and Sorority Life:

“Hi everyone! If you don’t already know me, my name is Elizabeth and I am a Graduate Assistant for this office. For my Action Research, which is a research study that I need to accomplish in order to graduate, I will be focusing on creating meaningful relationships within this organization, specifically geared towards the new member experience. My hopes for this study would be to improve USD’s Greek life community. If you are interested in participating and would like to learn more about it and the time commitments, please see me after this meeting, or email me at [eaiellocoppola@sandiego.edu](mailto:eaiellocoppola@sandiego.edu). Thank you for your time!”

## APPENDIX C

Survey for Cycle 1, sent out to current active members in Fraternity and Sorority Life at University of San Diego:

1. Thinking back to your time in Greek Life when you first joined, did you feel included and welcomed in your chapter? Please explain.
2. When you first joined, did you feel a sense of community within Greek Life as a whole? (Not just with your chapter) Please explain.
3. Do you consider yourself having meaningful and close relationships with people outside of your chapter?
4. As an active member, do you feel a sense of community with Greek Life? For example, do you feel that chapters get along, people treat each other respectfully within the chapters and outside the chapters?
5. How has your sense of community in Greek Life changed or developed over time since first being initiated into your chapter? Has it gotten worse? Better? Stayed the same? Why or why not?
6. Is there anything that you would suggest for the future that FSL staff/leaders could improve on to further improve creating meaningful relationships amongst each other and finding a sense of belonging within the community?

## APPENDIX D

“Hello, thank you all for being here today. The purpose of this focus group is to have discussions about your experience as a New Member in the Fraternity and Sorority Life community here at USD, and any feedback or suggestions that we can use to help strengthen our FSL community. I will be asking a series of questions, that each of you will answer individually, however discussion in between responses is encouraged. As stated in the consent form you all signed, these responses will be recorded, however the only people that will be listening to the responses are my advisor and myself. To keep anonymity, please refer to each other as the participant number listed in front of you. These responses will not be used as public knowledge, and I encourage all of you to be as open and honest as possible. Does anyone have any questions or concerns before we begin?”

Questions to be asked during focus group:

- 1) How did you feel during recruitment, and how did you feel after you accepted a bid to your chapter?
- 2) How do you feel going through the New Member Process right now?
- 3) What do you wish you would have known going into the New Member process?
- 4) What is your perception of the overall greek community?
- 5) Have you built any meaningful relationships with people outside of your chapter?
- 6) Do you feel like you belong in your chapter? In this community?
- 7) How can we, as professional staff, better support you as New Members through this process to help improve the FSL community?
- 8) What feedback would you give to the next class of New Members as they go through this process?

“Thank you all for sharing. As our focus group comes to a close, does anyone have any final thoughts or questions that they would like to share with the group?”

“Thank you for being here today.”