

Trends in the Fraternity and Sorority Experience Survey as Generation Z Joins

Cindy Cogswell, PhD. | Ohio University

Dawn Maynen | Qualtrics

Deborah Lee | Pennsylvania State University

The experiences of Generation Z (or Gen Z) are significantly different from previous generations. Over three years of data (2015-16, 2016-17, and 2017-18), the most commonly cited reason for joining a fraternity/sorority has been friendships (78%). However, as we see the new Generation Z become more involved in these organizations, the second and third reasons for joining seem to shift. For example, when comparing the 2016-17 and 2017-18 data, career networking is up by 3%, social opportunities is down by 4% to 41%, leadership development is down by 2%, and philanthropy and community service opportunities are also down by 2% to 39% and 37%, respectively. These trends suggest a generational shift is occurring from earlier generations.

Generation Z trends suggest the reasons for joining a fraternity/sorority are different for members. In 2017-18, fraternity members were more likely than sorority members to cite social opportunities, leadership development, and career networking. In contrast, sorority members identified friendships, philanthropy/community service opportunities, and “home away from home” more frequently than fraternity members as the main reasons for joining their chapters.

Regarding social experiences, half of fraternity/sorority members reported that “most” or “all” of their chapter’s members used alcohol and a growing percentage of fraternity/sorority members stated that alcohol (15%), recreational (8%) and non-prescription (5%) drug abuse were problems in their chapters. A substantial and growing number of sorority members indicated that body image (35%), mental health (30%), and eating disorders (20%) were significant problems in their chapters. While the negative impact of alcohol, drugs, and mental health concerns are on the rise, Generation Z may be more willing to intervene.

Nearly all respondents reported they believed their organization would intervene on behalf of a member who was unable to. Most students would respect an individual who intervened in a problematic situation (97%), thought they had the skills to intervene in such situations (89%), and felt empowered to stand up against behavior they believed was not right at chapter functions (88%). Furthermore, 95% of fraternity members and 93% of sorority members “agreed” or “strongly agreed” their brother or sister would confront them if their behavior needed to be addressed. Nearly all students wanted to be a member of a chapter that would intervene on someone’s behalf (96%).

Despite willingness and acceptance of intervening for others, Generation Z may be more independent than their Millennial peers. Generation Z may trust friends more than adults. Approximately 88% of fraternity members received mentoring from older chapter members, but the percentage was somewhat lower for sorority members (82%). Similarly, a higher percentage of fraternity members indicated they received mentorship from chapter alumni, professors, and chapter advisors than did sorority members. For both fraternity and sorority members, mentorship most commonly focused on academic success, leadership within the chapter, and participation in other campus activities. Generation Z may be more likely to intervene but less likely to reach out for support.

Generation Z also seems to have clarity on values, as 69% of members stated their chapters always upheld organizational values and 78% believed their chapters always promoted brother/sisterhood. Moreover, 87% of members indicated their chapters “always” or “usually” helped them to be better students, and 84% stated their chapters dealt with conflict between members.

Finally, current fraternity/sorority members indicated their fraternity/sorority experience had several positive impacts. Most respondents reported their experiences positively impacted their sense of confidence, personal values, integrity, sense of campus community, academic success (GPA), coping abilities, ability to develop positive relationships, intercultural competence (race, religion, and sexual orientation), and their commitment to serve the community and to social justice. Relatively few students believed discrimination against others and harassment of other members is part of their fraternity/sorority experience. Generation Z may be the most diverse generation to date and has the potential coping skills to build relationships across differences. While fraternity/sorority members of Generation Z show some increases in problematic behaviors (drug and alcohol abuse), these students also expect a level of respect while they make meaningful contributions to the world.

The Fraternity and Sorority Experience Survey is part of the Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research and Reform. The Piazza Center is a national multidisciplinary research center aiming to provide actionable evidence to practitioners to improve the fraternity/sorority experience and safety of members on campuses across the country.

Cindy Cogswell, PhD – Cindy is a FSES project consultant for the Piazza Center and the Director of Strategic Planning and Assessment at Ohio University. Through her work and research, she

aims to enrich the national dialogue about student learning, engagement, and institutional change.

Dawn Maynen – Dawn is the FSES project director/research analyst for the Piazza Center and a consultant with Qualtrics. As an expert Qualtrics certified administrator, Dawn is responsible for all survey administration, client interaction, data analysis, and reporting of the FSES.

Deborah Lee – Deborah is a FSES project associate for the Piazza Center and the Associate Director of Student Affairs Research and Assessment at Pennsylvania State University. Deborah supports the mission of student affairs and the university by using actionable data to inform decision-making, planning, and improvement efforts.