

Addressing Resiliency in Gen Z through Fraternity and Sorority Life

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Introduction

With every new generation of students, fraternity/sorority professionals need to adjust how they respond to various challenges of that generation. Millennials expected advisors to work with organizations more on recruitment in order to get the ‘non-joiners’ to join and see the value of putting their money toward expensive dues for an organization. Generation Z (Gen Z) will prove to bring different challenges to advising work as they join and manage fraternities and sororities. Resilience is one skill set that may prove to be difficult for Gen Z. This article will review resiliency research and educational practices, discuss how resiliency may be challenging for Gen Z, and share implications for fraternity and sorority advising and programming.

Resiliency

Resiliency has been an area of studying in psychology and psychopathology for decades. Researchers have identified personality traits and environmental factors that contribute to an individual’s ability to show resilience. A 2006 study examined resilience and found correlations that indicated “resilience demonstrates a strong inverse relationship with neuroticism and strong positive relationships with extraversion and conscientiousness” (Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein, 2006, p.590). Resilience also showed a small positive relationship with openness (Campbell-Sills, et al., 2006). In addition to personality traits, Hartley (2011) examined the impact of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors such as tenacity, tolerance of stress, and spirituality on academic resiliency. The study found that these intrapersonal and interpersonal factors accounted for variance in GPA. Considering the above connections between certain traits and resilience, Gen Z may demonstrate difficulty bouncing back from adverse situations. Fraternity/sorority life is strategically positioned to assist students in learning these skills. For example, fraternity/sorority leaders can develop conscientiousness and tenacity through program development and problem solving. As Gen Z takes on leadership roles, fraternity/sorority advisors should keep in mind the need to support skill development in these areas.

Generation Z

Generation Z is defined as the group of individuals born between 1995 and the present day (Twenge, 2017). Studies have just begun to highlight some defining characteristics of this generation. It is important to note that practitioners should caution themselves from assigning these characteristics to every Gen Z person. However, Dr. Jean Twenge’s research provides a

starting point to understanding this generation of young people. Twenge (2017) identifies Gen Z as risk averse, experiencing more mental health issues than previous generations, more tolerant, and overall less prepared for the challenges of adulthood. As high school seniors, Gen Z teens are less likely than previous generations to have their drivers' license, to have a paid job, to go out without their parents, to date, to have sex, and to drink alcohol (Twenge, 2017). Or as Malone (2007) described it, "by bubble-wrapping their children, many parents are failing to allow children the opportunities to build the resilience and skills critical to be competent and independent environmental users" (p. 513). With Gen Z seeming to be more protected from the adversity of life, the question of their resilience entering adulthood in college is important to consider. This may manifest itself in an increase in fraternity/sorority members' resignation from organizations due to lack of ability to persist through conflict with others. Additionally, fraternity/sorority leaders may avoid the risks that come with difficult situations and confrontation, resulting in lack of accountability for members.

Resiliency in Generation Z

Inferences can be made between what is known about resilience and what is known about Gen Z. With Gen Z being risk averse, it is possible that many of them have not experienced as much adversity as previous generations. Facing adversity is the first step to developing resilience (Malone, 2007). In addition, Gen Z has more mental health issues than their predecessors (Twenge, 2017). Increased stress and anxiety can make working through difficult situations in college a challenge for Gen Z. On the other hand, Gen Z has been noted to be more tolerant which could be associated with openness and this is positively correlated with resilience (Campbell-Sills, et al., 2006).

Implications for Practice

Regardless of personality traits and generation, resilience can be taught to young people. Coping flexibility is an integrative method of coping with difficult situations by reflecting on and processing thoughts and feelings about the trauma or challenge, as well as having positive future focused thoughts that aid the person to move past the situation (Galatzer-Levy, Burton, & Bonanno, 2012). In addition, Yeager and Dweck (2012) suggest that the mindsets and language of adults/authority figures impacts a younger person's resilience. For example, if a teacher praises a student's intelligence, that student is less likely to want to do more difficult work than the students who receive praise based on their work process. Using these techniques, fraternity/sorority advisors can make adjustments to how they work with Gen Z fraternity/sorority members. For example, fraternity/sorority officer training or leadership

retreats can focus on developing a growth mindset or conduct case studies that allow students to practice positive, forward thinking to strengthen coping skills.

Understanding Gen Z is important for fraternity/sorority practitioners as they advise these young people through organizational and personal development. Gen Z may demonstrate less ability to bounce back from challenges they face, especially in leadership roles. While Gen Z is overall less risky as teens, environmental changes in college may expose them to more situations where they have less experience managing their emotions and their behavioral response. These situations will bring Gen Z face to face with confrontation and conflict management. Add on an additional mental health concern, and the Gen Z individual may struggle to bounce back. Fraternity/sorority life can assist Gen Z leaders by providing additional training and support for mental health, risk management, and emotional coping. Allowing members to struggle through difficult situations and problem solve on their own while advisors support the process will assist in building a growth mindset that can help Gen Z develop resilience. Organizational resilience can be built through coping flexibility; having the chapter reflect on challenges they've faced and also plan strategically for a positive future. Incorporating these strategies will assist fraternity/sorority life professionals in addressing resilience among Gen Z members and leaders.

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