

THE PROMISE OF NORMS APPRAISAL FOR FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES

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Fraternities and sororities running afoul of institutional rules is deeply entrenched in the cultural perception of higher education in the United States. There are some truths behind such beliefs — chapters around the country have and do violate institutional policies. Fraternities and sororities possess internal group norms that have developed over time, amplifying problematic behaviors (Biddix, 2016; Maples et al., 2019). However, these group norms — defined sociologically as beliefs about expected or desired behaviors shared among a specific social population that present as patterned behaviors among group members (Braxton, 2010; Gibbs, 1981; Rossi & Berk, 1985) — are often overstated by individual group members. Individual members of groups tend to overestimate how much their peers participate in — and support — problematic behaviors (Baer et al., 1991; Borsari & Carey, 2001; Larimer et al., 1997; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004; Perkins, 2002).

In 2019, we published an instrument in [Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association for Fraternity/Sorority Advisors](#) for assessing group norms within fraternities and sororities, focused on such student behaviors as drug use, binge drinking, homophobia, racism, and sexual assault (Maples et al., 2019). For readers interested in receiving a copy of this instrument, email gwmaple2@ncsu.edu. This instrument can be used to appraise the degree to which behaviors are seen as appropriate or inappropriate within a fraternity or sorority. Because we know that individuals overestimate norms of their group, these findings can be used to curb aberrant behaviors of individuals within a larger group — their awareness of the true

norms of the group being incongruent with the norms they perceived may pressure them into limiting their negative activities. For instance, if a fraternity member has begun to regularly use cocaine, but then it is revealed to them that the fraternity as a whole views cocaine use as highly inappropriate, that individual will feel pressure to either stop or lessen their cocaine use to fit within the social norms of the group (Stein, 2007; Wechsler & Kuo, 2000).

For advisors of fraternities and sororities, assessment instruments can provide a way to identify red flags before a major policy violation or incident occurs. Additionally, repeated implementations can allow for tracking changes in group norms over time. While it has been clear that there are norms within individual chapters that need to change, using an assessment instrument can offer a means to enact tangible and measurable change. Previous studies on norms-based interventions have indicated cause for optimism regarding the use of this method to alter behaviors within a group (Bannon et al., 2013; Banyard et al., 2009; Gidycz et al., 2011; Perkins, 2002; Sasso & Schwitzer, 2016)

We hope that the instrument we introduced in Oracle will continue to be valuable for assessing fraternity/sorority group norms; however, potential exists far beyond the norms we chose to measure. For instance, transphobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia are all potential subjects that could be foci of future norm assessment instruments for fraternities and sororities.

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