Exploring Calling in Fraternity and Sorority Professionals
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The concept of calling has a long history, originating among Protestant reformers in the 1500s. There is a common lay conception that one may be called to serve a higher purpose, and academics have defined calling as “a conviction — often felt as a sense of destiny or fit — that a particular domain of work leverages one’s particular gifts and consuming passions in service of a cause or purpose beyond self-interest” (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019, p. 32). In other words, calling represents the congruence between the purpose one envisions for their life and the work they are doing. Over the past year, our team at Purdue University, comprised of two industrial-organizational psychologists and a fraternity/sorority professional (FSP), investigated the role that calling plays in the psychological well-being of FSPs.

FSPs have a highly stressful job (Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016). Calling is positively related to a variety of beneficial workplace outcomes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, occupational commitment, and work engagement. Further, calling tends to be negatively related to burnout and turnover intentions (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). Therefore, calling may be especially important for the long-term retention of human capital in the fraternity/sorority industry.

We conducted a longitudinal examination of calling and commitment of FSPs at three time points on a variety of measures: Time 1 in August; Time 2 in December; and Time 3 May. These periods correspond to the beginning, middle, and end of traditional semester-based academic calendars. From our preliminary analysis, several interesting trends emerged in the data.

- Calling decreased for FSPs with 6 or more years of experience but increased for those with less than 5 years of experience. This trend is illustrated in Figure 1a.
- Occupational normative commitment, one’s belief that they are morally obligated to stay in their occupation, increased from August to May which means participants were more committed to the fraternity/sorority profession’s mission than they were in August. This trend is illustrated in Figure 1b.
- Organizational affective commitment, one’s emotional attachment to their employer, increased for less experienced professionals from August to May, as illustrated in Figure 1c.
- In the August survey, nearly one-third of FSPs responded that they had intentions to leave their position in the near future.
● Experienced professionals were thinking about leaving their role more around the holidays after the Fall semester, but less experienced FSPs were thinking more about leaving in May, as illustrated in Figure 1d.

It is important to note, the emergence of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, did indeed disrupt most everyone’s lives and therefore, is likely to influence the observed patterns of calling and commitment. For example, perhaps organizational commitment in less experienced FSPs increased as a result of working from home and not having to go into the office.

For FSPs, viewing their work as matching one’s higher purpose in life holds potential to help improve the well-being of FSPs, subsequently improving their retention rates and workplace performance. Moving forward, there are several potential applications of calling to improve the workplace for and retention of FSPs. For instance, when hiring new FSPs, universities may want to consider whether applicants feel called to the profession. If they are called to serve in this capacity, it may improve their ability to succeed and persist in the field. Notably, however, applicants may be willing to “fake” their level of calling if they need the job, so this may require indirect methods of measurement such as asking related interview questions without explicitly stating the goal of the assessment.

Another possibility is to develop interventions to foster calling among FSPs. For instance, researchers have shown that connecting employees with individuals who have benefited from what the organization does can improve productivity (Grant et al., 2007). One potential mechanism through which this effect occurs is by increasing one’s sense of calling. Additionally, when determining functional area assignments, workflow, and job responsibilities for FSPs, supervisors may want to consider whether staff feel called to the larger fraternal movement or perhaps other disciplines embedded in the work of the fraternity/sorority profession. It may be helpful to determine which functional areas within the FSP portfolio are most congruent with each individual employee’s sense of calling. In theory, aligning calling with the work and areas of responsibility would support employee well-being and reduce attrition.

Furthermore, calling is likely to evolve as FSPs develop and advance throughout their careers and can significantly impact occupational and organizational commitment. For example, one participant noted in the eVent survey challenges they were facing:

*SA professionals seemingly forget how prepared we are to transfer skills into other roles. Why must we continue the cycle of putting people in corners thinking they cannot step out*
of their narrow role? This, among other things has me frustrated with my job, this institution, and profession as a whole.

In other words, this respondent recognized that even when one is called to the FSP profession, there may be a mismatch between one’s sense of calling and the specific duties they are assigned in their role.

Note that the eVent survey will remain open indefinitely as a venue for FSPs to voice their significant workplace events and concerns. Administrative units may benefit from greater flexibility in position descriptions, advancement and promotion processes, work assignments, and/or areas of responsibility to improve the fit between one’s role and sense of calling.

We are planning to continue our study next year to enhance our understanding of the role calling plays in understanding the behavior and well-being of FSPs, among other key insights gathered from the first-year survey results. We plan to hone in on more specific research questions, as well as other dimensions of workplace behavior important to the field. We hope you will consider signing up for the second year of the FSP Well-being Study, and you can find additional information using this link: https://purdue.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2tRL7IWH6OcgGBT

Figure 1: Trends over time by level of experience
Brandon Cutler has served the Purdue Fraternity, Sorority and Cooperative Community since April 2013. As the associate dean of students and director, he provides leadership for all areas within the Fraternity, Sorority and Cooperative Community. Brandon received his bachelor’s degree in agriculture studies from Iowa State University, master’s degree in college student personnel from Western Illinois University, and is pursuing a PhD in technology from Purdue University - Purdue Polytechnic Institute. He previously served as the assistant director of Greek affairs at Kansas State University and assistant director of student life/director of Greek life at Ball State University. Additionally, Brandon serves as the Order of Omega Mid-America Regional Chapter director, and he is a member of the Association of Fraternity and Sorority Advisors board of directors and Theta Chi Fraternity.

Louis Hickman is a PhD candidate in industrial and organizational psychology, and he has an M.S. in computer and information technology from Purdue University. Louis’s research focuses on how modern measurement methods can be used to assess job applicants as well as the job attitudes and well-being of workers. He is also interested in applying positive psychology to the workplace to enhance the working experience.

Sang Eun Woo is an associate professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Purdue University. She received her PhD in industrial and organizational psychology from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a minor in quantitative psychology. Sang’s research focuses on how people’s personality and motivation can help explain various psychological phenomena in the workplace. Particular outcomes of interest include work attitudes (e.g., satisfaction and commitment), withdrawal behaviors (e.g., turnover), and interpersonal relationships. Sang extensively publishes in the area of psychology and management, and she currently serves on the editorial board for five leading scholarly journals in this field.
References

