

## **Social Class Reconsidered: Examining the Role of Class and Privilege in Fraternities and Sororities**

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While research about fraternities and sororities has revealed disparities in students' participation based on their race and sexual orientation, issues of social class identity are noticeably absent within the literature. Chang and DeAngelo (2002) suggested that the profile of fraternity/sorority membership is dominated by privileged groups, including White, affluent, and status-oriented students. Park (2012) and Walpole (2011) suggested social class and socioeconomic status influences the composition of fraternities/sororities, most notably because participants are required to pay dues as a basis of their membership. Yet, definitive studies exploring fraternity and sorority participation rates among students from different social class backgrounds is scant within higher education research.

Social class has an undeniable influence on college students' experiences in higher education; indeed, social class shapes students' eligibility to attend college, influences their choice of college to attend, and negatively affects their persistence in higher education (Soria, 2012). Scholars are growing increasingly interested in the collegiate experiences of students from different social class backgrounds, especially with regards to students' involvement and engagement on campuses. For example, Walpole (2003) found college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent less time in student clubs and groups compared to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Stuber (2011) discovered working-class students were half as likely to participate in sororities and fraternities as their middle/upper-class peers.

In this study, a descriptive analysis of students' participation in fraternities and sororities by their social class identification is provided. The research questions framing this study are as follows: 1) Do students from different social class backgrounds participate in fraternities and sororities at the same rate? 2) Does participation in fraternities and sororities enhance the sense of belonging of students from lower-income/working-class backgrounds?

### **Methods**

In order to draw some conclusions about students' participation in fraternities and sororities, data from the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey were utilized. All undergraduates enrolled spring 2011 who were also enrolled at the end of the prior term were included in this web-based questionnaire. The SERU survey was administered to 213,160 undergraduate students across nine large, public universities classified by the Carnegie Foundation as having very high research activity. The institutional level completion response rate for the first page of the SERU survey was 37.7% ( $n = 80,255$ ). The SERU survey has over 600 items, although students are randomly assigned to complete one of four modules and complete slightly over 150 items. The majority of survey respondents were female, White students.

Students were asked to self-report their social class background and could choose from five categories: low-income/poor, working-class, middle-class, upper-middle/professional class, and wealthy. Among respondents, the majority of students self-identified as middle-class or upper-middle/professional class (41.9% and 31.5%, respectively), compared with working-class (18.2%), low-income (2.6%), and wealthy students (5.8%). Prior research using the same sample has determined that students' self-reported social class is positively and strongly correlated with family income and parental education (Soria & Barratt, 2011).

### Research Question One

Within the survey, students were also asked to indicate where they currently lived on campus, with one of the options being "in a fraternity or sorority." One limitation to using this measure is that students can be a member of a fraternity or sorority without living in the designated housing for these associations. Table 1 demonstrates students' sorority or fraternity residence by their social class identification. Students who lived in a sorority or fraternity residence were more likely to be from upper-middle/professional class, middle-class, or wealthy backgrounds. In fact, within this sample, 11.4% ( $n = 220$ ) of wealthy students reported living in a fraternity or sorority compared with 7.2% ( $n = 1,665$ ) of upper-middle/professional class, 3.5% ( $n = 1,086$ ) of middle-class, 1.5% ( $n = 204$ ) of working-class, and 1.3% ( $n = 55$ ) of low-income/poor students.

Table 1

*Survey Respondents' Sorority or Fraternity Residence by Social Class Identification*

	<i>Does not Live in a Sorority or Fraternity residence</i>		<i>Lives in a Sorority or Fraternity residence</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Wealthy	1717	2.4	220	6.8
Upper-middle or professional	21542	30.6	1665	51.5
Middle-class	29775	42.3	1086	33.6
Working-class	13191	18.7	204	6.3
Low-income or poor	4233	6.0	55	1.7

### Research Question Two

A "sense of belonging" factor was created from three survey items assessing students' sense of belonging on campus. In comparing students' sense of belonging by their social class identification and their residence on campus, it is apparent that living in a fraternity or sorority residence enhances students' sense of belonging across all social class groups (Figure 1). Most striking is that students from low-income and working-class backgrounds who lived in fraternity and sorority residences reported a sense of belonging along the same scale as wealthy and upper-middle/professional class students who did not live in fraternities/sororities.

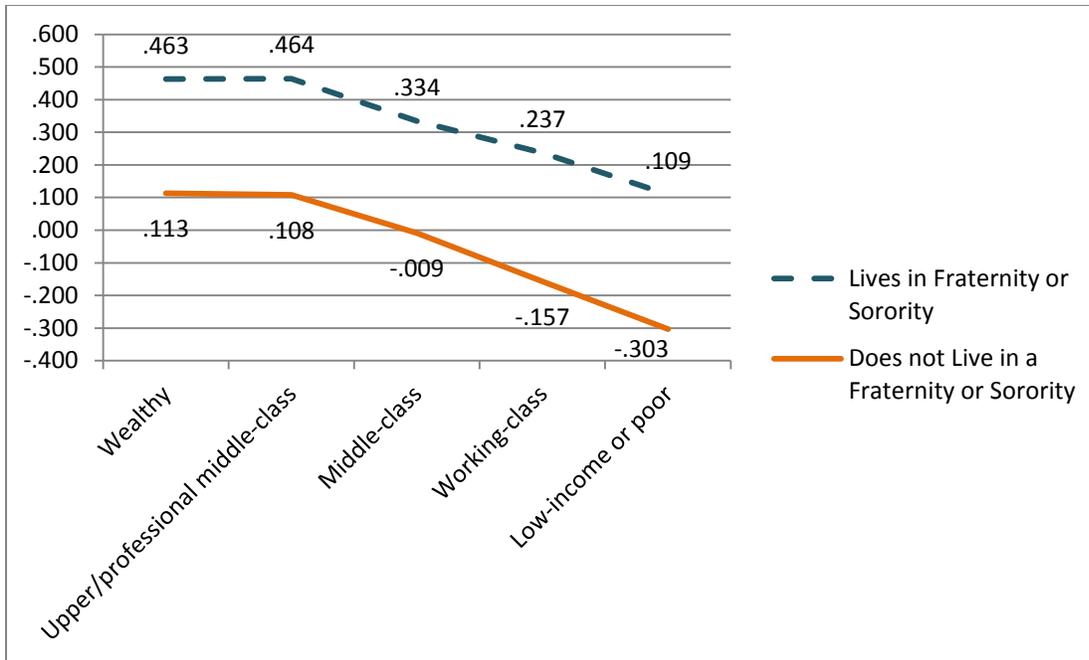


Figure 1. Students' sense of belonging by social class identification and residence.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study suggest disparities in fraternity/sorority participation rates among students from different social class backgrounds, with students from upper-classes and wealthy backgrounds more likely to live in fraternity/sorority residences than students from lower social class backgrounds. Furthermore, the results suggest living in fraternity or sorority residences can enhance students' sense of belonging, especially among students from lower social class backgrounds.

Fraternity and sorority advisors are encouraged to examine policies, practices, and social class climate to ensure they offer a welcoming space for students from all social class backgrounds. The role social class plays in framing and shaping college students' experiences on campus should not be neglected; instead, the needs and experiences of students from lower social class backgrounds should be brought to the forefront of conversations related to the experiences of underrepresented students on campus. Social class is an important element of diversity on college campuses and students from lower social class backgrounds stand to gain from increased participation in fraternities and sororities, including living in chapter houses. Future researchers should also continue to examine the role that social class plays in framing students' participation in fraternities and sororities, especially with regards to the ways in which social class intersects with other aspects of students' social identities, including race and ethnicity (Park, 2012).

## References

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