The Impact of Second-Year Membership Experiences on Retention Among Panhellenic Sororities

Elizabeth Richardson Newell

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THE IMPACT OF SECOND-YEAR MEMBERSHIP EXPERIENCES ON RETENTION AMONG PANHELLENIC SORORITIES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in Educational Leadership & Research School of Education

by Elizabeth Richardson Newell
B.S., University of Southern Mississippi, 2008
M.Ed., University of Southern Mississippi, 2009
August 2022
“She believed she could, so she did”- R.S. Grey. This quote was my inspiration throughout this process. However, in the many times I did not believe I could, my family provided the encouragement I needed to persevere. I dedicate this dissertation to my partner, Jayson, whose constant support and encouragement kept me going even when I didn’t want to-you have earned this just as much as I have; to Samuel, Joshua and Audrey, thank you for reminding Mommy that the difficult things are often the most worthwhile; and to my parents, you have always believed in me, and I will never be able to thank you enough. I thank God every day for blessing me with each of you, and I love you so very much.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the sorority experience; thank you for giving me a place to learn and grow, a passion that would eventually turn into a professional career, and more friendships than I can count.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am beyond grateful for the many individuals who have supported me throughout this journey. This dissertation is a result of the collective support of many friends, colleagues, and sorority women. Words genuinely cannot express how thankful I am for everyone who helped make this dream a reality.

Thank you to Jackie Mullen and Angela Guillory for your support and guidance; you are two of the most amazing Panhellenic women I know, and I have learned so much from you both. Thank you to the chapter presidents who took the time to refer your members and thank you to the members who agreed to chat with me. You trusted me with your most personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and I am forever grateful to have gotten the opportunity to know you.

There are not enough words to express my sincere thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Eugene Kennedy. While sorority membership retention may not fall within your research interests or areas of expertise, you always provided valuable insight. Thank you for pushing me in a way that felt supportive and encouraging.

Thank you to my committee members, Drs. Kerri Tobin, Joy Blanchard, and Lynne Baggett for your insight and value-added feedback throughout this process. You are an inspiration and reminder of the incredible faculty we have at LSU.

Finally, thank you to my “work” family for your support, encouragement, and patience. Teresia Greer and Angela Guillory, you have shown me what passionate, intelligent, dedicated women can do in this field, and I’m grateful to have had eight amazing years working alongside you. Angela, thank you for always supporting my academic journey; I honestly could not have done it without your encouragement that often went above and beyond.
It truly took a village to make this dissertation possible, and I never take my village for granted. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of the impact you have had in this process, and I am forever grateful.
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ABSTRACT

Sorority membership retention is a newly emerging research topic with little to no existing information on what motivates members to remain. There are countless studies concerning college student retention in general, but there have yet to be studies that focus specifically on sorority women and their membership experiences. One major research question drove this study: What factors and/or experiences influence a second year National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sorority member’s decision to actively participate in their sorority?

Using a theoretical framework developed from the social integration retention model proposed by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon in 2011, this study explored what occurs during sorority membership to increase and/or solidify a member’s satisfaction with and commitment to the organization. The personal experiences of eleven second-year sorority members revealed significant correlations with four of the six social integration factors proposed by Braxton, et al. (2011). I found that the social integration model for retention is a strong predictor of sorority membership satisfaction and commitment, which are indicators of membership retention.

As a result of this study, I recommend that a larger focus be placed in the areas of intentionality and transparency among sororities in order to increase membership retention. Sorority members who are given intentional opportunities to establish community, through which they develop meaningful connections that lead to greater levels of involvement, are committed and satisfied. Similarly, trust plays a significant role in a member’s commitment to her sorority, so honest, clear communication from sorority leaders is key in both establishing and maintaining trust. Finally, this theoretical framework provides a great foundation for future studies of sorority membership retention as well as the exploration of the many other areas of
college life through which students develop a sense of belonging and community (cultural/religious groups, student organizations, living/learning environments, etc.).
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, higher education retention research has shown a positive correlation between involvement, engagement and retention (Astin, 1977, 1984; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 2005; Terenzini, Lorang, & Pascarella, 1981). Fraternity or sorority membership has a substantial positive effect on persistence according to Alexander Astin (1977). In a longitudinal study that followed a cohort of first-time, first-year college students through ten semesters of college, Nelson, Halperin, Wasserman, Smith, and Graham (2006) discovered

Fraternity/sorority membership had a dramatically positive effect on persistence to graduation: 90 percent of fraternity/sorority members compared to 70 percent of non-affiliated students were [still] enrolled during their senior year. This is further evidence that, as a co-curricular experience, membership in a fraternity or sorority promotes involvement and student retention (p. 70).

However, the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), the umbrella organization specifically charged with advancing the sorority experience (NPC, 2018), recently reported a 10% membership decline between 2016 and 2020: the first decline in over a decade.

As a result, NPC and member organizations have poured resources into comprehensive efforts charged with identifying the reason(s) for this decline in membership. Very limited sorority membership retention research exists primarily because NPC sororities have not needed it; for decades, membership steadily increased, which also meant national budgets and resources also increased. Now that the pendulum has shifted, NPC member organizations want to make every effort to retain and/or increase membership if for no other reason than to financially maintain the current infrastructure of people and resources built to support the organizations.

The sorority membership retention conversation involves numerous factors surrounding two main aspects of membership: recruiting new members to join and retaining current members.
throughout their collegiate tenure. This research project focused on the retention of current members, since the existing NPC research efforts have focused heavily on ways to increase recruitment numbers and not as much on retaining current members.

The link between fraternity/sorority membership and student retention created a valuable opportunity to explore membership retention within sororities. The utilization of college student retention frameworks to investigate sorority membership retention produced results that can benefit both higher education institutions and sorority national organizations. Like higher education institutions, membership retention increases make positive social and financial impacts on both local and (inter)national member organizations. If sorority membership in the senior year is correlated with a student’s persistence to graduation as Nelson et al. (2006) suggest, strategies to increase sorority membership retention could also positively impact the overall college student retention phenomenon.

**Statement of the Problem**

NPC member organizations lose an average of 10% of their total collegiate membership annually, and other than independent anecdotal information, the member organizations have little information as to why. NPC member organizations have recently begun allocating resources to explore membership contraction across the nation; however, recruitment and expansion are the foci, not retention. As the number of women who seek to join NPC sororities continues to decline, member organizations are forced to turn inward and alter the focus to include membership retention as well.

Like dropping a stone into the water, once a college student cancels her sorority membership, there is a significant ripple effect. The student is withdrawing from a social connection that retention researchers identify as an important part of the student success
framework (Bean, 1980; Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2011; Tinto, 1975). The local chapter of the sorority and the (inter)national organization both lose the member’s social, intellectual, and financial contributions as both an active and alumnae member. The university has potential retention concerns for the student since sorority members are 20% more likely to graduate (Nelson, Halperin, Wasserman, Smith, and Graham, 2006) as well as a potential financial impact since fraternity/sorority membership has a high correlation with alumni giving (Diaz-Vidal and Pittz, 2019; Harrison, Mitchell, and Peterson, 1995).

Sorority membership retention impacts the local sorority chapter, national member organization, individual member, and the higher education institution, yet minimal research exists on this topic primarily because it was not viewed as a problem until membership numbers declined, which also meant fewer financial resources. This is very similar to the boom in retention research on college campuses; not until financial implications arose did institutions begin to allocate resources to retention research and programs. While there are many pieces to the sorority membership retention puzzle, the financial impact sparked the most recent need for data to inform retention efforts at both the local and national levels.

Each entity values sorority membership retention for different reasons, but the financial impact is the most universal and attention-grabbing. In a study of 1,669 colleges and universities, Raisman (2013) found that “publicly assisted colleges and universities averaged a $13,267,214 loss from attrition; the average private college or university lost revenue of $8,331,593; and for-profit schools lost an average of $7,921,228 annually” (p. 4). While similar data does not exist to reflect the financial impact member departure has on sorority budgets, Raisman’s (2013) research puts the financial losses into perspective.
Sorority members pay dues and fees each semester in which they are an active member, and once they graduate and become alumnae, they have opportunities to continue to give back through alumnae dues, fundraising efforts, etc. While membership retention concerns constitute the major problem addressed in this research, the lack of existing research on the topic is of equal concern. How can local chapters, college campuses, and NPC member organizations make informed decisions about how to address the problem without comprehensive data to guide them?

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research project was to better understand the lived experiences of current, second-year sorority members at four-year university to uncover why sorority members choose to continue their membership. Additionally, I sought to understand if the existing body of research surrounding college student retention could potentially inform NPC sorority membership retention. I also sought to produce results that could provide insight to local sorority communities, college campuses, and NPC member organizations regarding the retention of sorority members.

Membership retention efforts differ across the 26 NPC member organizations, and there are currently no best practices to utilize. Based upon my professional interactions with some of the member organizations, there is little knowledge or guidance surrounding the issue. Some organizations conduct exit interviews, some provide surveys, but most do nothing when a member chooses to leave. The results of this study offer retention insight and resources across the member organizations with the hope that organizations will share ideas and collaborate to further enhance the member experience.
**Research Question**

One major research question drove this study: What factors and/or experiences influence a second year NPC sorority member’s decision to actively participate in their sorority? What began as the desire to look at sorority membership cancellations evolved into the need to instead look at those members who are actively engaged to see if any conclusions can be made from their stories. Additionally, the focus on second-year, or sophomore, members developed from the compelling college student retention research that emphasizes the unique issues impacting sophomores. Because the sorority membership experiences evolve from year to year, the data will be more informative if all the participants are at similar points in their membership journey as well.

**Significance of the Study**

The existence of the fraternity/sorority experience has been challenged by college administrators, legislators, among others because of numerous tragic events involving alcohol, drugs, hazing, bigotry, and sexual assault. In 2017, Katie Reilly of *Time Magazine* described the fraternity/sorority climate through the stories of four college students who lost their lives because of hazing related events. These senseless deaths have public and private universities questioning the presence of fraternities and sororities on their campuses. To address and mitigate the risky behaviors, the body of research involving the fraternity/sorority community has focused on social environments and negative experiences. The literature is saturated with articles about alcohol, hazing, and sexual assault often directed toward the fraternity communities, which is why I chose to turn the focus to NPC sororities and a significant issue they are beginning to face. Until recently, there was very little want or need to address sorority membership retention because no one was really paying attention to it until 2016 when membership numbers began to
decline. At that point, NPC immediately began to pull together a task force of individuals charged with digging deeper into the issue, but the research takes time and lack of existing data to pull from delayed the process further.

This research study was one of the first of its kind and produced results that could be used to make changes within organizations, with an immediate, noticeable impact throughout the national sorority community. With the help of NPC, the results from this study could lead to the development of sorority retention best practices. Increasing the number of women who see their sorority membership through to graduation positively impacts the individual member, institution, local sorority, and national member organization based upon the current research.

**Research Design**

The utilization of an interpretive phenomenological approach within qualitative design presented the opportunity to utilize in-depth interviewing to better understand the lived experiences of second-year NPC sorority members at two four-year universities. (Byrne, 2001; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Noon, 2018). I conducted individual interviews consisting of second-year members who are actively engaged in their sorority experience. The methods followed qualitative data analysis steps to include coding, developing emergent themes, organizing, and categorizing themes. The results are discussed as well as implications for the future.

Due to the lack of theoretical framework on this topic, I broadened the search outside the sorority experience to the larger topic of college student retention, which has been studied for the last century. Social integration on campus has been a focus of retention work since the beginning, but more recently, the work of Juillerat (1995, 2000), Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011), and Schaller (2005) has revealed the role the institution plays in a student’s social integration into the campus community. Juillerat (1995) specifically noted that students’
satisfaction with their college experience plays a major role in their decision to stay or leave. Braxton, et al. (2011) developed six factors that influence retention, and three of the factors focus on the role of the institution, communal potential, institutional commitment to the students’ welfare and institutional integrity. Schaller (2005) emphasized the unique position of second-year, sophomore students since many of them are solidifying their commitment to their institution and every experience plays a role in finalizing their commitment, or not.

The application of the retention frameworks onto the sorority membership experience provides the theoretical framework for this study. The local and (inter)national sorority serves in the institution role, so the questions focused on the current members’ experiences with the sorority and how that impacted their decision to remain. The participants’ satisfaction with the sorority, perceived integrity of the sorority, and the perceived level of care and concern the sorority has/had for the participant provided the framework for the interview questions. Themes emerged that are consistent with the retention research mentioned, so the instrument created for this project could be adapted and used on other campuses for sorority communities as well as other involvement/engagement opportunities.

**Limitations**

Several limiting factors impacted the results of this research project. Interpretative phenomenology, by nature, involves a small sample size in order to go in-depth with interviews. The participants came from two sorority communities on two college campuses within the Southeastern Athletic Conference (SEC). This calls to question the ability to generalize results and/or attempt to apply them elsewhere. The participants discussed factors influencing their decisions to stay in their sorority, which exposed some external factors that are uncontrollable: global pandemic, virtual learning, etc. Specifically unique to the time and place of this research
project, the impact of Covid-19 on the sorority membership experiences cannot be excluded and impacted the research results.

The original proposal included one additional research question: What factors and/or experiences influence a second year NPC sorority member’s decision to cancel their sorority membership? Due to a lack of referrals, I was only able to interview one former member, which resulted in the removal of the question from this study. The future data collected from this question will provide a significant perspective that will greatly enrich the results of this study as well.

**Glossary of Terms**

It is important to have a clear understanding of the terms used throughout this research project, especially since many of them are unique to the NPC sorority experience.

**Active Members** are undergraduate college students who are actively engaged within their local sorority chapter.

**Alumnae Members** are those sorority members who are no longer undergraduate, or active members, of sororities. Alumnae members serve as advisors to collegiate chapters and have the opportunity to lead the (inter)national member organizations.

**Bayou University** is a pseudonym for one of the two universities who provided participants for the study.

**College Panhellenics** are campus-based umbrella organizations responsible with organizing the local chapters on that campus. They are like a mini-NPC on each campus.

**Executive Board** refers to the collegiate leadership entity of the local sorority often comprised of a chapter president and several vice presidents. Some sororities use names such as governing council, leadership cabinet, or other names.
**Fraternity** typically refers to men's only social organizations. Some NPC member organizations use “Fraternity” in their name instead of sorority which dates to their founding.

**Initiation** refers to a nationally endorsed ceremony of induction in which an individual is formally recognized as a full member of the organization. (Callais, 2002, p. 20)

**Local Chapter** refers to the local sorority on each campus. Each local chapter of an NPC member organization has a unique name, its own student and advisory leadership and had a dual responsibility to work with the campus administration as well as the executive headquarters of the member organization.

**Magnolia University** is a pseudonym for one of the two universities who provided participants for the study.

**Member Organization** is an (inter)national, autonomous, women’s-only social organization/sorority. There are 26 member organizations within the NPC umbrella.

**National Panhellenic Conference (NPC)** is the umbrella organization for 26 (inter)national member organizations (sororities) with over 375,000 undergraduate members on over 670 campuses.

**New Member** are those collegiate sorority members who have not yet been initiated. The new member period is typically six to eight weeks in length.

**Release Figure Methodology (RFM)** is a method created by NPC to maximize the number of women placed into sororities through the formal recruitment process.

**Quota** is the number of new members each sorority may take during the formal recruitment process.

**Sister** is a name often used to describe members within the same sorority.
Sorority refers to an all-female, national organization with exclusive membership that identifies itself by a series of two or three Greek letters. (Horvat, 2019, p. 14)
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to examine the membership experiences of current second-year, National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sorority members in order to inform the membership retention efforts of both national member organizations and higher education institutions. A literary analysis of following topics is included in this review: sorority history and membership trends, college student retention and the unique issues affecting sophomores, the link between sorority membership and college student retention, and theoretical frameworks.

History of Sororities and the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC)

“Since their founding in the early 1800s, social sororities and fraternities have been a vibrant but often controversial component of the landscape of higher education” (Nelson, Halperin, Wasserman, Smith, and Graham, 2006). However, research consistently shows that student involvement outside the classroom positively affects the collegiate experience (Astin, 1977; Kuh, 2003; Solomon, 1985), and some of the most beneficial collegiate experiences result from membership within social fraternities or sororities (Thelin, 2011).

According to the National Panhellenic Conference (2017), “sororities are values-based social organizations that were originally founded to provide women a space to gather and share common interests, often in times when women were excluded from other campus organizations and activities” (p. 3). Horvat (2019) described the relationship between NPC, member organizations, and college campuses

The NPC was established to assist collegiate and alumnae chapters of the member organizations to cooperate with colleges and universities and foster interfraternal relationships (National Panhellenic Conference, 2018). Each sorority functions as a national organization that governs and monitors chapters on campuses throughout the United States and Canada. Each chapter is a guest at a particular campus and operates under both the guidelines of the host institution and the national organization with which it is affiliated. The National Panhellenic Conference sororities are located on more than 670 campuses with 411,242 undergraduate members in 3,288 chapters (p. 19)
While NPC currently exists as the largest organization of women worldwide, located on nearly 670 campuses with more than 375,000 undergraduate members in more than 3,350 collegiate chapters (NPC, 2021), the first sororities were founded on a much smaller scale in hopes to create safe spaces and fill voids in female students’ college experiences.

Sororities were originally founded as secret societies to affirm the ties of friendship. Gradually, however, they took over public functions, and to varying extents, became influential forces on many campuses. At coeducational schools, they provided institutional group support for young women. Administrators, early wary of the political power of these societies as a competing authority, at first tried to halt their development. In time, though, they found it useful to enlist sorority leaders along with those of student government, to control social behavior on campus. (Solomon, 1985, p. 107)

In 1851, the first fraternity for women was founded, The Adelphian Society, which would later become Alpha Delta Pi Sorority. Sororities were originally founded as women's fraternities since no word for women’s groups existed. In 1882, Gamma Phi Beta was the first to be named a sorority.

When the two delegates from Alpha returned to Syracuse, Jessie Decker (Syracuse, 1878) hosted a party to announce and celebrate Beta’s Installation. Upon reading the announcement in the newspaper, Professor Frank Smalley of the Latin department remarked to a Gamma Phi, “I presume that you young women feel very elated over being members of a sorority.” Up to that time, the word fraternity had been used in reference to both men’s and women’s organizations. As with many other ladies’ organizations, the young women of Gamma Phi Beta referred to themselves as a “Society” in preference to the word fraternity. Delighted with the feminine-sounding word that meant “sisterhood,” they immediately adopted it, becoming the first Greek-letter organization to identify themselves as such. (Gamma Phi Beta, 2022)

One of the earliest women’s fraternities, Kappa Alpha Theta, was founded in 1870 at Asbury College in Greencastle, Indiana. Diana Turk (2004) described the collegiate environment at the time of Kappa Alpha Theta’s founding.

In 1870, when Kappa Alpha Theta was founded, only 11,000 women were enrolled in institutions of higher education across the United States, a number that paled in comparison to the more than 52,000 men who filled the classrooms of the nation’s colleges and universities. Fewer than one-third of American schools allowed women to
enroll, and those that did treated their female students very much as second-class citizens. (p. 3)

Women were indeed desperate to create safe spaces where they could share common interests and values. To shed additional light into the environment in which women’s social organizations were created, Turk (2004) shared that

the first generation of fraternity women provided one another with support and solidarity. Regarding each sister’s performance as a reflection not just of her own abilities and initiatives but of those of her fraternity in particular and womanhood in general, the sisters placed enormous pressure upon one another to show both their fraternity and their sex in the best possible light. (p. 24)

Just as a woman’s collegiate experience evolved over time, so did the membership experience within sororities. As more women attended colleges, more sororities began to form, which spurred the desire for collaboration amongst groups. According to the NPC publication, Adventures in Friendship: A History of the National Panhellenic Conference (2017), the conference was officially formed as the Inter-Sorority Conference (ISC) in 1902 during a meeting of seven sororities in Chicago, IL. Over the years, the conference name has changed, as has the number of member organizations. In 1957, NPC was at its largest with thirty-two sororities, but has since reduced to 26 member organizations (see Table 2.1) due to mergers and closings (NPC, 2017).

Table 2.1. National Panhellenic Conference Member Organizations

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<tr>
<th>Member Organization</th>
<th>Date Founded</th>
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<tr>
<td>Alpha Chi Omega Fraternity ΑΧΩ</td>
<td>October 15, 1885</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alpha Delta Pi Sorority ΑΔΠ</td>
<td>May 15, 1851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Epsilon Phi Sorority ΑΕΦ</td>
<td>October 24, 1909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Gamma Delta Fraternity ΑΓΔ</td>
<td>May 30, 1904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Omicron Pi Fraternity ΑΟΠ</td>
<td>January 2, 1897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Phi Fraternity ΑΦ</td>
<td>October 10, 1872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Sigma Alpha Sorority ΑΣΑ</td>
<td>November 15, 1901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Sigma Tau Sorority ΑΣΤ</td>
<td>November 14, 1899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Xi Delta Fraternity ΑΞ∆</td>
<td>April 17, 1893</td>
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(table cont’d.)
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member Organization</th>
<th>Date Founded</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chi Omega Fraternity ΧΩ</td>
<td>April 5, 1895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta Delta Delta Fraternity ΔΔΔ</td>
<td>November 27, 1888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta Gamma Fraternity ΔΓ</td>
<td>December 25, 1873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta Phi Epsilon Sorority ΔΦΕ</td>
<td>March 17, 1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta Zeta Sorority ΔΖ</td>
<td>October 24, 1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamma Phi Beta Sorority ΓΦΒ</td>
<td>November 11, 1874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity ΚΑΘ</td>
<td>January 27, 1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa Delta Sorority ΚΔ</td>
<td>October 23, 1897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa Kappa Gamma Fraternity ΚΚΓ</td>
<td>October 13, 1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phi Mu Fraternity ΦΜ</td>
<td>March 4, 1852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phi Sigma Sigma Fraternity ΦΣΣ</td>
<td>November 26, 1913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pi Beta Phi Fraternity ΠΒΦ</td>
<td>April 28, 1867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigma Delta Tau Sorority ΣΔΤ</td>
<td>March 25, 1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigma Kappa Sorority ΣΚ</td>
<td>November 9, 1874</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sigma Sigma Sigma Sorority ΣΣΣ</td>
<td>April 20, 1898</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theta Phi Alpha Fraternity ΘΦΑ</td>
<td>August 30, 1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeta Tau Alpha Fraternity ΖΤΑ</td>
<td>October 15, 1898</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Through annual meetings, NPC has served its member organizations by addressing and engaging in whatever needs arise at those times, including but not limited to, world wars and financial impacts from those, social issues, more recently and relevant to this study-membership retention. “In 2013, NPC commissioned research on the correlation of sorority membership and retention. Findings confirmed the strong impact of sorority membership on women who feel a sense of belonging and community.” (NPC’s Report of the Recruitment and Expanded Membership Model Think Tank, 2018, p. 10).

As the wants and needs of college women continue to change, are NPC member organizations doing all they can to adapt to the ever-evolving landscape? According to NPC’s 2019-2022 Strategic Plan, the three strategic priorities of the umbrella organization are to cultivate strategic growth of Panhellenic Communities, champion the sorority experience, and leverage the collective strength of the member organizations. While these priorities may or may not resonate with college women seeking membership, NPC’s goal is to ensure sororities remain
on college campuses. It is the responsibility of the individual member organizations to offer more relatable priorities for potential members like “do good” or “build confident women”.

It is important to note that the sororities comprising NPC were founded at a time when access to higher education was limited to White students; more specifically, Gillon, Beatty, and Salinas Jr. (2019), described White students during this time “not only as racially White but also as Anglo-Saxon in ethnicity, and protestant in religion” (p. 9). As colleges became more inclusive, many sororities remained exclusive, even to the point of enacting “White clauses” in their organizational policies (Gillon et al., 2019). Exclusion based upon religion, race, and social status was commonplace (Syrett, 2009) and barriers that some would argue historically White sororities continue to grapple with today.

In a brief search of the 26 NPC member organization websites, all 26 highlight diversity, equity, and inclusion as a priority, as does the NPC website. NPC’s website includes the historical actions the organization has made as well as this statement

The National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) is committed to creating a more welcoming, inclusive Panhellenic community, including addressing racism and racial injustice in our community. The Board of Directors continues to work with the NPC staff, among many others, to take action on these commitments and to incorporate a focus on access and equity in everything we do. (“NPC Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion”, 2020, para. 1)

While NPC member organizations have not historically tracked demographical data of members to include race or ethnicity, many fraternity/sorority life professionals have been asked to do so by their university administrators to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion are at the forefront of membership recruitment.

**NPC Sorority Membership Trends**

Sororities were “originally founded to provide women a space to gather and share common interests, often in times when women were excluded from other campus organizations
and activities” (National Panhellenic Conference, 2017). There is no historical documentation that membership size or growth were foundational focal points; however, NPC sororities saw steady growth over time followed by a membership surge in the early 2000’s. Whether intentional or not, significant membership growth occurred. More recently, the first significant decline in membership numbers in decades has brought the issue to the forefront.

For NPC member organizations, membership growth means financial growth, which results in the creation of new programs and opportunities as well as the construction of many large, expensive facilities. On the contrary, membership contraction leads to financial contraction, which has created significant concern among NPC member organizations. As mentioned previously, “cultivating the strategic growth of Panhellenic communities” is one of three strategic priorities within NPC’s 2019-2022 strategic plan.

Membership recruitment has always been a primary focus of NPC member organizations, but for many years, the focus had been on fairness and parity rather than growth. However, in 2003, NPC introduced the Release Figure Methodology (RFM), a new recruiting process for placing women into sororities aimed at growing membership numbers.

RFM began in 2003 with 10 pilot campuses. The methodology is based on a mathematical model to determine the number of invitations issued by each participating chapter in the recruitment process. The purpose of RFM is threefold: 1. Maximize the number of potential new members (PNMs) who ultimately affiliate with a sorority through recruitment. 2. Allow each PNM to methodically investigate realistic options and ultimately match with a chapter for which she has a preference among those options. 3. Enable each chapter to invite a sufficient number of PNMs to each event round to match to quota at the conclusion of recruitment. (National Panhellenic Conference, 2019b). As a result of RFM, Horvat (2019), shares that “sorority membership numbers grew tremendously, but chapters were getting to a size that was unprecedented and sometimes unmanageable” (p. 23). NPC’s response to large chapter sizes was to encourage college panhellenics to bring more sororities to their campuses to spread the numbers out among more
organizations. All this growth resulted in significant financial growth as well. NPC and member organizations were able to grow their staff, resources, experiences, etc., all to better support chapters who were grappling with larger membership sizes.

In 2019, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* shared that “sorority membership has been up over the last decade but has decreased in the last few years, according to the National Panhellenic Conference. More than 384,000 women participated in 2018-19, down from 411,242 in 2015-16.” NPC created a committee to research the membership decrease and make recommendations to the member organizations.

Membership numbers in recruitment saw the first decrease in many years. After an all-time high and years of growth, increases have trended downward. This means decreased revenues from dues and fees plus difficulty in filling houses on some campuses. Costs continue to rise in extension and housing with increased demands (National Panhellenic Conference, 2018, p. 3)

The committee provided numerous recommendations targeted at membership recruitment and driving up the interest in joining sororities, but no recommendations focus on retaining existing members.

I reached out to several member organizations requesting membership retention information, and only one had been tracking membership retention over time. Table 2.2 shows that not only are overall membership numbers declining, but the number of member cancellations is trending upward as well. This speaks directly to the need to shift the focus from either/or to both/and concerning membership recruitment and membership retention.

Table 2.2. Collegiate Membership Numbers and Cancellations of One National Panhellenic Conference Sorority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Collegiate Membership</th>
<th>Member Cancellations</th>
<th>Cancellation Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>24440</td>
<td>1806</td>
<td>7.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>25005</td>
<td>2084</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>22412</td>
<td>2082</td>
<td>9.29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table cont’d).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Collegiate Membership</th>
<th>Member Cancellations</th>
<th>Cancellation Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>21813</td>
<td>2178</td>
<td>9.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td>21227</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>9.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114897</td>
<td>10113</td>
<td>8.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The recent concern surrounding membership numbers in conjunction with the historical information about how sororities were founded speaks to the Goldilocks principle: what membership size is just right? Very small, intimate groups of less than ten women founded each of the 26 NPC member organizations, yet today, some campuses have local chapters of over 400 members each. National organizations have financial bottom lines, but is bigger always better from a membership experience standpoint?

**NPC Sorority Membership Experience**

While researchers have explored the correlation between college factors (grade point average, connection to the institution, social responsibility, etc.) and sorority membership, no research currently exists exploring what sorority members are actually experiencing during each year of membership and their satisfaction with said experiences. The 26 NPC member organizations all follow similar membership experience structures of the four-five years of collegiate membership, but no one has academically researched what these structures are or if they are successful.

Multiple database searches using various combinations of the terms: sorority, membership, experience, expectations, collegiate membership, and so on turn up zero articles describing the sorority membership experience. A simple internet search of the same combination of terms never produces the details of membership from first year through graduation, not even from NPC or member organization websites. General expectations are sometimes listed: financial obligations, time commitment, scholastic requirements, etc., but nothing that maps out the collegiate experiences through sorority membership. Because I
experienced collegiate membership in an NPC sorority and have worked with NPC sororities on college campuses for 11 years, I have anecdotally summarized the collegiate membership journey using generalizations, since each sorority member’s experience is personal and nuanced.

Collegiate membership within an NPC sorority is typically structured around a traditional, four-year, undergraduate, collegiate journey. Some sororities allow members to apply for a fifth year of membership, but that is uncommon. NPC is in the process of developing a uniform membership tracking system across the 26 member organizations. Because this does not currently exist, there is no comprehensive data detailing the exact percentage of new members who are traditional freshmen when they join. At Bayou University, over ninety percent of the new members are traditional freshmen when they join. Women who join as upperclassmen may still have four years of collegiate membership if they remain undergraduate students. Members who complete their undergraduate degree, regardless of the number of years they have been collegiate members, must become alumnae members upon graduation. Alumnae members may not participate in collegiate activities; only those members who are pursuing undergraduate degrees may remain active, collegiate members.

While there is no uniform collegiate membership experience, there is a similar structure across all member organizations. The six to eight weeks from when a new member joins until their initiation into the member organization is called their new member period. During this time, members of the sorority leadership team meet with the new members to teach them everything they need to know about the sorority (history, expectations, opportunities, events, philanthropy, etc.), and the new members are paired with second year members who mentor them and help acclimate them into the sorority. New members are showered with support, gifts, affirmation,
and so many exciting new experiences. Since the new member period is a time of preparation toward initiation into the sorority, it typically requires a significant amount of time.

Once a new member is initiated into the sorority, they are considered an active member until they either leave or become an alumna member. Additional education and acclimation occur post-initiation during the second half of the first year of membership and relies heavily on the sophomore/second-year member mentorship. During the second year of membership, the experience transitions from that of a mentee to that of a mentor, which requires similar amounts of time but often lacks the excitement of support, gifts, and new experiences.

The third year of membership creates a fork in the road regarding membership; some members take the positional leadership route which requires more time and responsibility, while others focus their time and energy elsewhere and have minimal involvement in chapter operations and events. The fourth year requires the least from members, so their focus can shift almost fully to academic opportunities such as internships, preparation for graduate programs, senior level courses, etc. Upon graduation and/or the completion of four years of membership, active members become alumnae members. While there are numerous opportunities for alumnae members, they are all voluntary and rarely intersect with the collegiate chapter.

The lack of research surrounding the sorority membership experience further emphasizes the need to explore this topic. The National Panhellenic Conference and member organizations would benefit greatly from research that could inform member satisfaction and potentially improve retention.

**Benefits of Sorority Membership**

Sororities offer a variety of benefits to members, national organizations, and colleges/universities. Collegiate members benefit from friendship, scholarship, leadership, and
service just to name a few, while the national organizations and colleges and universities tend to focus more on the financial benefits of membership dues, tuition dollars, and future donations from alumnae.

**Member Benefits**

While the list of member benefits may vary depending on the experience, the National Panhellenic Conference (2022) describes sororities as a place for women to gain meaningful friendships, develop leadership and professional skills and be a part of something bigger than themselves (National Panhellenic Conference, 2022). Cohen, McCreary, and Schutts, (2017) share that there are many benefits to sorority membership including academic, co-curricular, life-long benefits, etc.

In a longitudinal study, Long (2012) found fraternity/sorority membership benefits in the areas of scholarship, leadership, service and friendship. Pascarella, Flowers, and Whitt (2001) found that sorority women not only outperform non-affiliated women academically, but also that sorority membership is shown to have continued academic benefits for women during the second and third years of college (p. 32). Sorority members are also exponentially more likely to graduate college than their non-Greek peers (Astin, 1977, Nelson et al., 2006), and data from Gallup and Purdue University’s (2014) recent survey of graduates found that sorority members were more likely than peers who were not in a Greek organization to thrive in their career and personal wellbeing after college.

**NPC Member Organization Benefits**

When membership retention is strong, NPC member organizations benefit in many ways; two of the most significant benefits are financial impact and volunteer support. Each organization member pays both local and (inter)national fees, so for every member retained, the
member organization receives financial resources that would otherwise be lost. (Inter)National budgets are created based upon percentages of membership cancellations, so if a member organization can increase retention, they also increase the financial resources available to support local chapters.

When an active collegiate member graduates with her undergraduate degree, she becomes an alumna member of her sorority. NPC member organizations rely heavily on alumnae volunteers to serve at both the local and national level as elected officers, chapter advisors, donors, etc. The more women a member organization sees through to alumnae status, the larger the pool of volunteers, donors, and women who share their positive membership experiences with future members and their families.

**Institutional Benefits**

Stronger student retention and increased alumni donor opportunities are the two most obvious and significant benefits institutions reap from sorority membership. Routledge Publishing Group produced a faculty manual in 2018 emphasizing the importance of student retention in higher education.

In an increasingly competitive and results-oriented higher education market, student retention is of key importance to institutions as universities look to improve graduation rates and decrease the loss of tuition revenue from students either dropping out or moving to a different institution (p. 4)

As mentioned in member benefits, sorority members have higher retention and graduation rates than non-members, which benefits institutions greatly in a time when student retention reigns.

For decades, colleges and universities have experienced increased dependency on private contributions such as alumni giving, endowment earnings, foundational support, etc. (Ficano and Cunningham, 2002; Gaier, 2005; O’Neil, 2007; Winston, 1999). Gaier’s 2005 study of alumni giving at a Midwest university found that
Alumni participation was 78 percent more likely for those who participated in the Greek system versus those who did not” (p. 285). In another 2005 study, O’Neil evaluated giving trends at the College of William and Mary; the researcher found that “significantly more Greek alumni are donors, give at higher levels, and give more persistently and constantly over time than their non-Greek peers. (p. 48)

Higher education institutions should prioritize ways to support the sorority community on their campuses because of the direct benefits associated with doing so.

**College Student Retention**

Membership retention research is a new focus area among NPC member organizations. NPC only recently began requesting statistical data from member organizations as a result of a slight membership decline, which has revealed a legitimate membership size concern. No grounded theories exist as to why members choose to remain or depart their sorority, so I chose to look to college student retention theories to provide potential insight and theoretical framework for sorority membership retention.

“Student retention has become one of the most important measures of success for higher education institutions” (Dursun, 2011, p. 17). Collegiate retention research dates back to the 1930’s with significant research theories and practices emerging during the 1960’s and 70’s (Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). According to Aljohani (2016)

Before 1970, various attempts were made to study the student attrition phenomenon (Bayer, 1968; Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Marks, 1967; Marsh, 1966; Panos & Astin, 1968; Summerskill, 1962). However, the focus of these studies was principally on the characteristics of individual students, rather than on their interactions with college environments (p. 2)

The theories and framework developed by Spady, Tinto, and Bean in the 1970’s and 80’s expanded the focus from the individual to incorporate societal factors as well.

Spady (1970) noted that retention literature prior to 1970 focused solely on individuals in a vacuum and lacked the necessary environmental factors influencing college students (p. 64).
By focusing his research on college dropout rates, Spady found that “there are two systems in each college (academic and social) and at least two factors in each system that influence a student’s decision to withdraw: grades and intellectual development in the academic system and normative congruence and friendship support in the social system” (p.64). Spady’s theory applied Durkheim’s Suicide Theory (1951) which links suicide to an individual’s lack of social and intellectual integration into the social life of his or her society yet replaces the suicide notion with institutional drop out due to the same lack of integration.

Originally published in 1975, Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model/Student Integration Model builds upon the work of Spady while also applying the sociological research of Van Gennep (1960) regarding rites of passage to that of college students acclimating to both the academic and social environments of college (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto (1975) identifies academic integration as

With respect to the academic system of the college, it is argued here that an individual's integration can be measured in terms of both his grade performance and his intellectual development during the college years. Although both contain structural and normative components, the former relates more directly to the meeting of certain explicit standards of the academic system, and the latter pertains more to the individual's identification with the norms of the academic system (p. 104)

Tinto (1975) describes the social integration of students in this way

Social integration occurs primarily through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college. Successful encounters in these areas result in varying degrees of social communication, friendship support, faculty support, and collective affiliation, each of which can be viewed as important social rewards that become part of the person's generalized evaluation of the costs and benefits of college attendance and that modify his educational and institutional commitments (p. 107)

While both academic and social integration are key in Tinto’s retention work, the scale does tilt in the social integration direction slightly in that “other things being equal, social integration should increase the likelihood that the person will remain in college” (p. 107)
Tinto’s Departure Model has gone through many revisions with the assistance of numerous retention researchers and has heavily influenced the retention models that followed. Tinto’s retention research from the 1970’s to present not only amplifies the importance of retention as a major focus area for universities, but also how commitment to an institution, both academically and socially, makes a significant difference in the retention conversation.

Building upon Spady and Tinto’s work, Bean (1980) developed the Student Attrition Model utilizing research that focused on employee turnover in the workplace. “Bean's model was the first to identify the role that institutional variables have on shaping students’ beliefs and attitudes. The model strongly emphasizes the role student satisfaction has in predicting students’ decisions to reenroll” (Pullins, 2011, p. 17). The emphasis of student satisfaction with the institution as a retention factor introduced the creation and implementation of many of the student satisfaction surveys utilized today. Higher education institutions transitioned from primarily looking outward at the students who were dropping out and began to also look inward at the role the institution plays in the retention conversation.

Researchers have continued to build upon the work of Spady, Tinto, and Bean to develop numerous frameworks used to evaluate college student departure such as: the Student–Faculty Informal Contact Model (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980), Astin’s Student Involvement Model (1984), the Non-traditional Student Attrition Model (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993), just to name a few. More recently, researchers have used these models to look more closely as specific subgroups within the college student population (commuters, sophomores, first-generation, minoritized groups, etc.) and have found that while broad assumptions are helpful as a starting point in retention conversations, institutions must break down student populations into these small subgroups to
really address the unique issues and needs of each group and continue to improve retention of all students (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Braxton and Lee, 2005).

### Social Integration Model

By use of inductive theory construction, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011) found that the social integration portion of Tinto’s Theory is the strongest predictor of student retention. The copious amounts of data and findings available from the previous research of Tinto (1975) and others provide Braxton, et al. (2011) with the foundation to revise Tinto’s Theory and propose six factors that influence social integration at residential colleges and universities: commitment of the institution to student welfare, communal potential, institutional integrity, proactive social adjustment, psychosocial engagement, and ability to pay (see Table 2.3).

#### Table 2.3. Tinto’s Theory Revised: Six Factors that Influence Social Integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Proposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare</td>
<td>Institutions abiding concern for the growth and development of its students; clearly communicates high value placed on students in groups and as individuals; equal treatment of students and respect for them as individuals</td>
<td>The more a student perceives that the institution is committed to the welfares of its students, the greater the student’s level of social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal Potential</td>
<td>The extent to which a student believes that a subgroup of students exists within the college community with which that student shares similar values, beliefs, and goals</td>
<td>The more a student perceives the potential of community on campus, the greater the student’s level of social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Integrity</td>
<td>The extent to which a college or university is true to its espoused mission and goals</td>
<td>The more a student perceives that the institution exhibits institutional integrity, the greater the student’s level of social integration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table cont’d.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Proposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proactive Social Adjustment</td>
<td>A student’s tendency to adjust in a proactive manner to the demands and pressures of social interaction in a college or university</td>
<td>The greater a student’s use of proactive social adjustment strategies, the greater the student’s level of social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial Engagement</td>
<td>The investment of psychological energy in interactions with peers and participation in extracurricular activities</td>
<td>The greater the level of psychosocial energy a student invests in various social interactions, the greater the student’s degree of social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Pay</td>
<td>Can either eliminate or attenuate financial concerns and barriers to student participation in the social communities of college</td>
<td>The greater the level of a student’s satisfaction with the costs of attending college, the greater the student’s degree of social integration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2011)

The social integration model proposes that the higher a student’s level of social integration, which is directly impacted by the six factors in Table 2.3, the more likely the student will be satisfied with and committed to the institution. Satisfied and committed students are much more likely to be retained than those students who are not. A key factor in Braxton, et al.’s (2011) model is the role the institution plays in the social integration process. It is not solely up to the student to find ways to socially engage on campus; the institution must also take responsibility and prioritize programs and initiatives that increase opportunities for students to find community.

**Sophomore Retention Nuances**

College retention research involves an infinite number of variables, with sophomore retention emerging as a more recent focus due to the unique issues affecting them (Pullins, 2011). Based upon the data received from one NPC member organization’s executive office, sophomores are cancelling their memberships at higher rates than other classifications. Freedman (1967) coined the term “sophomore slump” over sixty years ago, so while it is not a new
concept, targeted retention efforts for sophomores have only recently emerged within the last twenty years. With the excitement of the first year behind them, sophomores often become more critical of their experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Juillerat (2000) found that sophomores have higher expectations for their collegiate experience than their peers in other classes.

Schaller’s (2005) research surrounding sophomore students resulted in the creation of a theoretical development model based upon the unique experiences of sophomore students on college campuses. The researcher’s four-stage model focuses primarily on the three parts of life the respondents concentrated on most: how they viewed themselves, their relationships, and their academic experiences and decisions. Schaller (2005) suggests that in each of the three parts, sophomores’ transition through four stages: random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment.

The majority of sophomores Schaller (2005) interviewed fell between the focused exploration and tentative choices stages, which is emphasized as the most crucial transition point. Schaller (2005) describes the need for deep reflection and intentionality while in the focused exploration stage to avoid tentative choices that are too heavily influenced by external forces (parents, friends, etc.).

The key goal for students in random exploration is for them to become fully engaged in the learning process. In turn, the key goal for students in focused exploration is for them to connect with their inner voice, to acknowledge external pressures, and to make decisions about the future that are rooted in a thorough exploration process. If students engage in these processes, the tentative choices, and commitments they make will be solid foundations for their lives. (Schaller, 2005, p. 21)

As sophomores enter the commitments stage of Schaller’s development process, one area of commitment is to the institution, which further emphasizes the Braxton, et al. (2011) focus on
institutional commitment as a two-way street with both students and institutions playing equally important roles in the process.

Similarly, Juillerat’s (2000) Student Satisfaction Inventory research found that sophomores at public institutions value an institutional system that works well, is easy to negotiate, and is responsive to student. Schaller referenced Juillerat’s research by positively correlating higher sophomore satisfaction with greater institutional commitment, and thus, an increased likelihood those students will retain and persist at the institution.

**College Student Retention and Sorority Involvement**

According to Nelson, et al. (2006),

Involvement in a fraternity or sorority has long been linked to college satisfaction and retention (Astin, 1977; Pennington, Zvonkovic, & Wilson, 1989; Tinto, 1993). Astin (1977) found that membership in a fraternity or sorority “has a substantial positive effect on persistence, overall satisfaction with college, and satisfaction with instruction and social life. (p. 222)

While Astin’s Theory of Involvement was not specifically created to address retention, overwhelming evidence positively correlating campus involvement and retention emerged from his research and has provided the foundation upon which numerous other researchers have built their retention theories over the last half century.

In a longitudinal study exploring the relationship between Astin’s Theory of Involvement and Tinto’s Theory of Departure, Milem and Berger’s (1997) findings further connect involvement and persistence by suggesting that previous research has vastly underestimated the positive affect that student involvement, particularly in the first 6 to 7 weeks, plays on student persistence (p. 398). Braxton and Lee (2005) also suggested strong empirical connections between social integration factors suggested by Tinto’s Departure Theory and persistence, but the academic integration factors lacked the same significant connections to persistence.
In a retention comparison study of Greek affiliated students and independent students across 17 institutions, DeBard and Stacks (2011) discovered “if the independent student retention rate were to have been equal to the Greek members, this would have resulted in an increase of 2,745 students, or 9.2% of the independent students, being retained to their sophomore year” (p. 121). DeBard and Stacks (2011) results offer that while it would be unrealistic to expect all college students to join fraternities and sororities, higher education institutions and fraternity/sorority national organizations should make every effort to improve membership retention within fraternity/sorority member organizations. The more students retained within the fraternity/sorority system, the more students who are likely to be retained and persist to graduation.

Retention and Gender

Because this research focuses solely on NPC sororities, which are women’s only organizations, research that explores the role gender plays in connection with retention theories is valuable. Jones’s (2010) retention research found that gender plays a significant role when discussing institutional commitment, particularly for female students.

The importance of social integration on subsequent institutional commitment appears to be much greater for female students than for male students. Female students, consistent with the tenets of gender role theory, appear to have a greater need for the type of rewards and social support that come along with higher levels of social integration. Without this, as the findings of this study suggest, female students have much lower levels of commitment to their current institution and may be subsequently less likely to be retained (p. 697).

The research of Braxton, et al. (2011), Schaller (2005) and Juillerat (2000) emphasized the importance the institution plays in retention work, specifically regarding a student’s commitment to their institution. Jones (2010) revealed that females seek additional rewards and social support
as they develop their commitment to an institution, which offers great insight into how nuanced retention efforts must be to optimize effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

Decades of college student retention research offer many opportunities for nuanced application, which adds great value to the overall goal of improving retention. The deeper the research digs into variances based upon student demographic data, institutional type, involvement, predictor analysis, etc., the more comprehensive the retention toolkit becomes for higher education administrators. I suggest that pieces from existing college student retention models can provide a theoretical framework that is applicable to membership retention within NPC sororities. More specifically, the factors that influence social integration introduced by Tinto (1975), revised by Braxton, et al. (2011), and further emphasized by Schaller (2005) and Juillerat (2000) also influence sorority membership integration, satisfaction, and commitment.

The six constructs posed by Braxton, et al. (2011) that influence social integration map seamlessly onto the sorority membership experience. Through seeking membership and joining a sorority during their collegiate experience, each member has displayed a positive degree of communal potential. Since the research will focus specifically on second-year sorority members, one can deduce that over the course of their first year, each member also experienced some proactive social adjustment since they chose to return as members in their second year.

The ability to pay is a significant retention factor within the sorority community since a member pays dues and fees each semester to remain in good standing. Many internal and external influences impact a member’s ability to pay. Braxton, et al. (2011) defer to Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen’s (1990) research which spoke to a student’s “satisfaction with the costs of
attending their chosen college or university as an ability to pay” (p. 313). From the sorority lens, members who withdraw membership due to financial reasons fall into two categories: dissatisfied with experience, which speaks to Cabrera, et al.’s (1990) theory or inability to pay due to financial insecurities that are often outside member’s control (employment, family financial strain, etc.).

The three most relevant factors that were applied in this research are those that the institution, or in this case the sorority, can influence: psychosocial engagement, commitment of the institution/sorority to student/member welfare and institutional/sorority integrity. Similar to the shift in retention research focus from purely student centered to incorporating the role the institution plays, sororities must turn the mirror onto themselves and open themselves up to feedback regarding member satisfaction. The sorority experience greatly influences the level to which the member perceives her sorority to have integrity and a commitment to her welfare, which as Braxton, et al. (2011) share, directly effects the member’s commitment to the sorority, and thus, her decision to remain a member.

NPC member organizations have only recently engaged in satisfaction surveys of members, so the necessity for this research is significant. Often, assumptions are made regarding a member’s decision to cancel membership rather than taking time to elicit feedback and using the feedback to influence the member experience. It is important to note that sorority membership is not for everyone, and that sometimes a membership cancellation is simply that. Even so, feedback gathered from those members would greatly benefit the organization. This research study focused on members who chose to remain and what experiences influenced that decision.
Chapter Summary

From an extensive review of the relevant literature, there is a significant gap in scholarly research that focuses on the sorority membership experience. As both the level of institutional involvement and desire for data driven decisions grow within the fraternity/sorority community, there is an overwhelming and urgent need to research many aspects of the sorority membership experience. Sororities and fraternities, who were founded during times when higher education was exclusive and elite, must pay close attention to the changing landscape, and find ways to adapt, or they will become irrelevant. As institutions continue to focus recruitment efforts on incoming students who have not historically joined fraternities or sororities (first-generation, low socioeconomic status, rural, underrepresented, and marginalized groups, etc.), every piece of the sorority membership experience should be evaluated to ensure the experience attracts as many incoming students as possible and is accessible to them.

College student retention research serves as a great foundation from which to build a framework to study sorority membership retention. Many retention theories provide models to which the sorority experience easily applies. The research shows that institutions retain, persist, and graduate sorority members at significantly higher rates than their non-affiliated peers, so research that provides recommendations to further increase sorority membership retention has the potential to further increase student retention on college campuses.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to explore the factors that impact membership retention within sororities and to determine if current college student retention theories apply to sorority membership retention. I conducted a qualitative study of college students who are current sorority member using in-depth interviews to address the following research question: What factors and/or experiences influence a second-year NPC sorority member’s decision to actively participate in their sorority? The research design, participants, data collection, data analysis, and ethics precautions are included in this chapter.

Research Design

Qualitative research design is a “do-it-yourself” rather than an “off-the-shelf” process, one that involves “tacking” back and forth between the different components of the design, assessing their implications for one another. It does not begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed sequence of steps but involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 3)

Qualitative Research Method

Qualitative research was used to explore social phenomena in its natural setting with the goal to gain a better understanding of people’s experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Creswell, 2014; Pathak, Jena, and Kalra 2013; Marshall and Rossman, 2014). The use of qualitative methods allowed the opportunity to not only gather content-rich data but also witness the emotional response to the sorority membership phenomena as the participants shared their stories.

Epistemological Stance

“The ability to identify the relationship between the epistemological foundation of research and the methods employed in conducting it is critical in order for research to be truly
Meaningful” (Roots, 2007, p.19). Interpretivism and Social Constructivism are often used interchangeably and describe an epistemological approach to research through which knowledge is a social construct. “Constructivism states that learning is an active, contextualized process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it” (David, 2015). Truth and meaning derive from one’s own experiences and perspectives rather than absolute truth (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Derry, 1999; Ertmer & Newby, 1993; Kim, 2001; McMahon 1998; Miller and Crabtree, 1999). Beaumie Kim (2001) presents three basic assumptions associated with social constructivism: reality is constructed through human activity, knowledge is socially and culturally constructed, and learning is a social process” (p. 2).

Additionally, interpretivism emphasizes the role the researcher’s past experiences, background, and culture play in their interpretation of information (Creswell, 2014). Since my occupation places me alongside sorority women daily, including my interpretation and influence is unavoidable. Grounding the research project in interpretivism/constructivism provided the most appropriate space for participants to respond to open-ended questions and create their own meaning from their lived experiences.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Approach**

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) served as the foundation on which to design this research study. Creswell and Poth (2016), write that, “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 57-58). Edmund Husserl, credited as the father of phenomenology, posed that the researcher must “bracket out” or remove their personal beliefs about a phenomenon in order to best study it. Husserl’s protégé, Martin Heidegger, later
introduced a perspective through which the researchers’ beliefs and experiences should be included since it is unrealistic to remove them (Beryn, 2001). Max van Manen (2016) describes interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology as a six-step research process

1. Finding a phenomenon which seriously interests us
2. Investigating the experience as we live it rather than how we conceptualize it
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon
4. Describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting
5. Maintaining a strong pedagogical relation to the phenomenon
6. Balancing context by considering parts and whole (p. 30-31)

The focus of this research project was the issue/phenomenon of sorority recruitment membership retention: why do members choose to return from year to year? An interpretive phenomenological study of current sorority members allowed the opportunity to identify themes across member experiences in order to inform the future of sorority retention framework.

**Strengths and Limitations**

As with all research design, strengths and limitations play significant roles and should be identified and discussed. Perhaps the most overarching limitation is the lack of previous research regarding sorority membership retention. I spent a significant amount of time developing and adapting both the theoretical framework and interview instrument due to the lack of previous research.

Another limiting factor within the phenomenological approach is that of generalizability. With small sample sizes, the ability to make broad, sweeping generalizations is not possible; however, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011), note that “in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis research, fewer participants examined at a greater depth is always preferable to a broader, shallow and simply descriptive analysis of many individuals” (p. 756). Attempting retention research of any kind during a global pandemic also presents unique possibilities and cannot be fully mitigated.
**Positionality of the Researcher**

The greatest strength was the community selection. My professional occupation placed me in the position to have direct access to the sorority communities that were utilized, so trust was already established. Another strength was my 10+ years professionally working alongside sororities and their members, which uniquely positioned me to develop the interview instrument. Noon (2018) shares that the major strength in utilizing interpretive phenomenological analysis is that of its subjectivity and flexibility which allows the researcher to explore the uniqueness of a person’s experiences and how they make them meaningful (p. 80).

**Participants**

The participants for this study were female, undergraduate students at two, four-year public universities, who were second-year, actively engaged members of NPC sororities. The participants were referred by their respective sorority’s chapter president.

**NPC Sororities Only Included**

As mentioned previously, while there are several types of sorority options on college campuses, I only included the sororities who are member organizations under the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) umbrella. NPC sororities operate in ways that significantly differentiate themselves from other sororities on campus in terms of policies and procedures they are all required to follow. For the sake of this research project, the way in which NPC sororities recruit and retain their members as well as the recent national concern with membership numbers drove the choice to focus on them.

**Population**

The participants were students from four-year, land grant institutions within the Southeast: Bayou University (BU) and Magnolia University (MU), which are pseudonyms for
the sake of anonymity. In fall 2021, Magnolia University enrolled over 9,000 undergraduate females, 2,500 of whom were sorority members. At Bayou University, the undergraduate, female population for the fall 2021 semester was near 14,000 with approximately 3800, or 24 percent, of said undergraduate females who were members of NPC sororities.

Sample

Each local NPC sorority at both BU and MU is governed by an executive board of officers who are responsible for tracking membership statuses along with many other responsibilities. In order to maintain consistency within the member experience/timeline of each interviewee, I specifically selected current, actively engaged second year members as participants. The local executive boards and/or sorority chapter presidents assisted in recruiting participants for the study.

Data Collection

First, I reached out to the chapter president of each of the local NPC sororities and provided details and context surrounding the research project. I also asked for them to recommend two, second-year members who, in the president’s opinion, were maximizing their membership opportunities, which includes but is not limited to (attending meetings and events, goes above and beyond requirements, holds or seeks to hold a leadership position, etc.).

Next, I emailed all the potential participants requesting their participation. Once the potential participants responded, I sent them the instructions to schedule a thirty-minute, virtual interview as well as the consent form so they read through it in advance of the interview.
Instrumentation

The subjectivity of interpretive phenomenological research lends itself to utilize in-depth interviewing to attempt to understand the lived experiences of sorority members. Patton (2015) emphasizes that

Because materialistic inquiry takes the researcher into the real world where people live and work, and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people, qualitative inquiry may be more intrusive and involve greater reactivity than surveys, tests, and other qualitative approaches (p. 356).

No current set of interview questions exists, so I developed a set of questions (see Appendix A) using my professional expertise in the field, along with language pulled from both the social integration model of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011) (see Table 2.3) and the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) created by Ruffalo Noel Levitz in 1973, which is commonly used in college student retention research (see Appendix B). While the SSI is a quantitative survey using closed questions, satisfaction language such as “I found them to be caring and helpful” translates well into open-ended, interview questions. Table 3.1 shows how each interview question connects to the theoretical framework. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the questions focus around the three most relevant social integration factors being applied in this research that the institution, or in this case the sorority, can influence: psychosocial engagement, commitment of the institution/sorority to student/member welfare and institutional/sorority integrity.

Table 3.1. Theoretical Framework Connection to Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communal Potential</td>
<td>Why did you join a sorority?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal Potential</td>
<td>What did you know about sorority membership prior to joining?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial Engagement</td>
<td>What is your most positive sorority experience so far? Most negative?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>Interview Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial Engagement</td>
<td>What do you like most about being a member of your sorority?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Integrity/Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare</td>
<td>What do you like least about being a member of your sorority?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI)</td>
<td>Please rate your level of commitment to your sorority at this point in your membership (Likert scale 1-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI)</td>
<td>Are you satisfied with your sorority experience thus far? Please explain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Integrity</td>
<td>Do you trust that your sorority has your best interest in mind when making decisions? Please explain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Integrity</td>
<td>Does your sorority lead with integrity? Please explain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare</td>
<td>Does your sorority care about you? Please explain. How important is this to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare</td>
<td>Do you feel genuine connections with members of your sorority? Please explain. How important is this to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial Engagement</td>
<td>Are you proud to be a member of your sorority? Please explain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI)</td>
<td>How has your sorority membership impacted your overall college student experience?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Credibility**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative inquiry moves away from terms like validity and objectivity and employs terms like credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (p. 18). The establishment of credibility is incredibly important as Merriam (1998) shared that “being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields, such as education, in which practitioners intervene in people’s lives” (p. 198). I used techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to address credibility: outside sources reviewed the interview questions, participants were provided copy of their transcribed interviews for review and approval, and also included a disclaimer in interview consent forms stating my professional experience and the subjectivity that accompanies it.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is simultaneous with data collection. That is, one begins analyzing data with the first interview, the first observation, the first document
accessed in the study. Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to "test" emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data. To wait until all data are collected is to lose the opportunity to gather more reliable and valid data; to wait until the end is also to court disaster, as many a qualitative researcher has found himself or herself facing hundreds of pages of transcripts or field notes without a clue where to begin. (Merriam, 2002, p. 14)

Individual interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken as well. My initial thoughts and reactions were recorded separately following each interview. Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, a copy of each interview transcript was shared with the respective participant to ensure nothing was misinterpreted and to get the approval of the participant that the information was accurate.

Next, the coding process ensued to look for themes and/or patterns. During the initial analysis, Noon (2018) provides beneficial suggestions:

It was important to go beyond mere description; I considered not only what was said, but also how it was said, and what this actually tells me about the experience – this was central to ensuring I produced a deeper, interpretive analysis. The use of open annotated coding helped to ensure that distinctive voices were able to emerge from participant’s testimonies, rather than pre-existing notions present in the literature (p. 77)

Following the initial open-coding process, emergent themes were developed, and eventually connected and placed into categories. I repeated the process several times until clearly organized themes were finalized.

**Ethical Considerations**

Each participant was provided a consent form that outlined the purpose of the study, risks, benefits, right to refuse, and privacy details. While I anticipated minimal risks associated with participation, Noon (2018) offered useful insight to consider in preparation of the study.

Since IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) studies often involve the exploration of intensely personal experiences, it is possible that interviews can lead participants to feel awkward, ashamed, angry or even emotional, which can present investigators with a range of ethical dilemmas. Should the latter occur investigators must
be prepared to make a tactful decision: are they to continue to discuss the experience in a gentler manner, or are they to discontinue this line of questioning? In such instances, researchers may find themselves faced with role conflict (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008); although many educationalists have received training to assist them in supporting distressed individuals, their current role is not a psychologist, a therapist, a teacher, or a social worker, but an investigator seeking information. Thus, should they deploy their taught skills to both comfort the participant and carry forward the interview, or is this beyond their remit as a researcher? (p. 80)

Questions surrounding negative experiences had the potential to evoke emotional discomfort or distress, which I monitored closely.

**Bias**

The advice of Noon (2018) was particularly poignant as I thought about my personal and professional bias. I am a member of an NPC member organization, so I am aware that my personal membership experience and that of my friends is ever present in my mind. I have worked closely with several sorority communities for over ten years, so I have witnessed an immeasurable number of both positive and negative sorority membership experiences that surely impact my interpretation of information. However, my role rarely, if ever, impacts a student’s sorority membership experience; I simply help connect them with resources should their experiences require my assistance. The interpretive phenomenology approach allowed me to both acknowledge my biases and discuss the roles they play in the research.

**Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the qualitative methods that were used in this research project. Design, participants, collection, analysis, and ethical considerations provide the methodological framework that was utilized, and also acknowledged the flexibility that interpretive phenomenological analysis encourages.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the major findings of the study and includes four main sections: (a) the participants, (b) campus descriptions, (c) interview dynamics, and (d) the findings of the study.

Participants

As discussed in Chapter 3, all participants were second-year sorority members who were making the most of their membership. Chapter presidents from six chapters across two campuses referred members for participation, which is reflected in Table 4.1. The chapter presidents were not given any specific criteria from which to select possible participants other than those second-year members who are actively engaged in the sorority.

Table 4.1. Number of Participants by University and Chapter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Chapter Affiliation</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magnolia University</td>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayou University</td>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All eleven participants joined their sorority through a formal recruitment process during the first semester of college in fall 2020, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The recruitment process for all participants was virtual, which means they joined their respective organizations having never met sorority members in-person. All participants held a leadership position in their respective sorority ranging from a committee director to a vice president. As noted in Table 4.2, nine of the participants were in-state students and two were from out-of-state. No other demographic information was collected.
Table 4.2. Number of Participants from In-State and Out-of-State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>In State Students</th>
<th>Out of State Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magnolia University</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayou University</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Campus Descriptions**

The participants in this study attend two college campuses, Magnolia University (MU) and Bayou University (BU) both located in the southeastern portion of the United States. I intentionally reached out to colleges affiliated with the Southeastern Athletic Conference because the culture on these campuses has many similarities that filter down into the sorority communities as well. Shared traditions, events, student demographics, and athletics provide a common baseline experience to reference during interviews.

**Magnolia University**

Magnolia University (MU) is classified as a Carnegie Classification of RI - Very High Research Activity Doctoral University. With just over 18,000 undergraduate students, MU offers nearly 80 majors and over 400 student organizations. Almost 70% of the undergraduate students at MU are in-state students.

As of fall 2021, MU had a community of over 4,000 fraternity/sorority members. 57% of the fraternity/sorority community are members of National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sororities on campus, which accounts for 27% of the total undergraduate female population. Eight of the Panhellenic sororities have houses, and all NPC sororities have access to a residence hall specifically for sophomore sorority members that houses approximately 266 students. A fraternity/sorority life professional at MU said this of the MU Panhellenic community

MU has a strong Panhellenic community that has done a great job over the past 10 years bringing 3 new chapters to campus and investing over $20 million in Greek facilities to provide more opportunities and space for their students to learn and grow in their communities. I am very proud of how they value scholarship like they do while giving so
much time and resources back to the community through the schools, local charities, student organizations, and endless campus departments and faculty and staff efforts. They are truly the women in the university community leading the way in their various efforts and serving as outstanding role models (personal communication, March 14, 2022)

Bayou University

Bayou University (BU) is classified as a Research Active/Very High and is the state's Flagship University. With just under 30,000 undergraduates, BU offers nearly 80 undergraduate degree programs and over 350 student organizations. Approximately 75% of BU’s undergraduates are in-state students.

In fall 2021, the sorority community welcomed 1,200 new members bringing the total sorority population to just of 3,800 women, which accounts for 24% of the undergraduate females at BU. The BU National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sorority community has a long history with the first NPC sorority founded in the early 1900’s and the most recent sorority recolonized in 2016. The sororities affiliated with NPC have an average of over 300 members per sorority and all sororities have housing for 32-60 members. A former fraternity/sorority life professional said this of working with the Panhellenic community at BU

Women, by nature, value cooperation and collaboration. The BU Panhellenic women demonstrate these values at a gold standard level. The Panhellenic community is the backbone of the BU Greek community as evidenced by their commitment to their respective chapters, each other's chapters, the IFC and NPHC community, the University and the community. This is evidenced by the two NPC chapters successfully returning to BU in the past eight years, providing the lion’s share of the work in building two Habitat Homes in the community for over 15 years, volunteering thousands of hours in the community, serving as campus leaders, maintaining the highest collective grade point average of any student organization, engaging families and parents at university events and providing positive public relations for the University. The BU Panhellenic community is respected by faculty, staff, alumni and students as evidenced by number of women seeking membership each year (personal communication, March 30, 2022)

Interview Dynamics

Prior to scheduling interviews, I emailed each potential participant notifying them that their respective chapter president had identified them as an outstanding member; I then explained
the purpose of this study and requested their participation. Unintentionally framing the correspondence with the outstanding member language evoked a sense of honor from the participants that made them both eager and open to share their experience. One participant shared that framing the request this way made her more willing to respond and participate almost as if she were receiving an award.

Each participant attended a thirty-minute virtual individual interview. The first five minutes of each interview focused on reviewing the purpose of the interview, consent form review, and some background questions to make each participant feel comfortable and settle into the interview. Participants joined the interview from a location of their choice, most of which shared that they were home. Allowing participants to conduct their interview from anywhere they chose appeared to offer an additional level of comfort and confidence. All participants were talkative, engaged, and freely shared about their sorority experiences, often to the point of answering some interview questions before they were asked.

**Findings**

The findings of this study are presented in this section. The participants openly shared extremely personal accounts of their sorority membership and how those experiences impacted their decision to be actively engaged and retain their membership through their second year.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, the sorority experience greatly influences the level to which the member perceives her sorority to have integrity and a commitment to her welfare, which as Braxton, et al. (2011) share (see Table 2.3), directly affects the member’s commitment to the sorority, and thus, her overall satisfaction. This is the framework used to develop the interview questions which, as mentioned in Chapter 3, were developed to elicit responses in three
main categories: psychosocial engagement, perception of sorority concern for member wellbeing, and perception of sorority integrity.

Four major themes emerged as a result of the data analysis process which aligned with the initial design of the interview questions. The codes used to develop the four themes as well as description of each theme (see Table 4.3) are discussed in the following sections.

Table 4.3. Codes used to Define Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Membership Experience Expectations</td>
<td>mattering and belonging, friendships, home/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Communal Potential-Braxton, et al., 2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Involved</td>
<td>saying yes, mentors, positional leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Psychosocial Engagement-Braxton, et al., 2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful Connections</td>
<td>deeper friendships, genuine care and concern, wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Institution Commitment to Welfare of Student-Braxton, et al., 2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust and Integrity</td>
<td>accountability, transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Institutional Integrity-Braxton, et al., 2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Membership Experience Expectations**

While the level of prior knowledge each participant had before joining a sorority varied greatly, what they hoped to experience as a result of membership overwhelmingly spoke to the desire for friendships and a sense of mattering and belonging. One participant shared, “I knew once I got in college, I wanted to meet people, I wanted to make friends, I wanted to like feel that connection”. Another shared, “I joined it to kind of make like fast friends and to meet a lot of people quickly so that I could find like my place at BU”. While the initial response was often friendship, further explanation exposed the deeper expectation to find somewhere they felt like the mattered and belonged

I was amazed whenever they started calling and texting me, I was like oh my God like I’m one of them, basically like they really made me feel included which started out with the satisfaction immediately, because then, I felt like I had a home.
These responses are in direct alignment with the retention framework of Braxton et al. (2011), particularly the communal potential factor described as the extent to which a student believes that a subgroup of students exists within the college community with which that student shares similar values, beliefs, and goals. The participants noted friendships, a home/community, and a sense of belonging as hoped for expectations, and when that is what they experienced once they joined, they all described a high level of commitment.

Getting Involved

The Braxton et al. (2011) social integration model also speaks to psychosocial engagement noting that, “the greater the level of psychosocial energy a student invests in various social interactions, the greater the student’s degree of social integration.” The participants' responses consistently aligned with this factor as they spoke at length about how they engage within their sorority through saying yes, mentoring from older members, and positional leadership opportunities.

The overarching concept discussed within this theme is best described as the “you get out what you put in” philosophy. The more they engaged in the opportunities presented to them, the stronger their connections and commitment became. One out-of-state participant shared a story of being asked to attend a group dinner the first week of membership and “saying yes” led to a membership experience that bonded her to fellow members in ways she never would have imagined.

Right after bid day they made a big group chat and they said if you want to go to dinner this Friday, let’s go. I didn’t know anyone, and I was super nervous, but I decided to take a leap and go. There were ten of us who ended up going to dinner and I made my best friends that night. I actually live with four of them in an apartment this year, and if I wouldn’t have gone to that dinner, who knows if I would have become such good friends. As cliché as it sounds, they are like my family now all because I said yes to a dinner the first week of school.
Participants consistently shared that what really drew them in and established their commitment was engaging in opportunities outside of the prescribed new member requirements such as study nights, dinners, or grabbing coffee. A few participants also spoke of friends who were less engaged and how they never come to anything sharing that “if she would just come to more stuff, she would grow to love the sorority as much as I do.”

Another prominent response involved the power of mentorship from older members of the sorority. These connections were often what led the participants to seek positional leadership within their sororities as well. Having a current chapter leader encourage them to serve in leadership roles, boosted their confidence enough to actually do it. One participant shared

She picked me up as her little sister and I worked under her as one of her directors and she said, you know I really think that you should apply, and I had a few different girls come to me and try to push me into it and I was really encouraged to do it.

Another participant noted that “shadowing older members as leaders made me want to hold the position as well”.

Positional leadership opportunities, whether sought after from the beginning or through encouragement and mentorship of older members, appeared as a significant positive impact within the involvement theme. One participant spoke of her leadership position this way

This is definitely the biggest leadership role I’ve ever had, and every day I feel like I’m gaining confidence in it and it's because people are encouraging me and I have like an amazing programming council that helps me plan, all of these events and everything.

Another participant spoke of the opportunity to get involved immediately. “I started out with director positions when I was a freshman which was one of the most amazing things that I could get involved in as a freshman.”
One unexpected result from a few participants was the connection they made between their leadership opportunities in their sororities and the transferrable skills obtained as a result. One participant shared:

Also in a weird way, I think it teaches me time management, because I stay very busy, and so I have to have kind of a strict schedule. And so, I know like this is when I go to class, this is when I do this, and so it's really helped me figure out like the best time management skills for myself. Another explained, “I think the leadership roles I’m able to hold and all the skills I’m learning and all these trainings I get to go to that I know I can use like way past my time in my sorority.”

Researchers have linked involvement/engagement to retention, and the participant responses were no exception.

**Meaningful Connections**

According to Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011), the more a student perceives that the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the greater the student’s level of social integration. The interview questions focused on member wellbeing elicited responses centered on deeper friendships and genuine care and concern for the participants as individuals and not just as fellow sorority members. When asked if their sorority cares about them, all the participants had positive responses followed by tangible examples like these:

Back right before thanksgiving break, I remember, I had the flu, and it was right after we switched to our new exec. I was supposed to have my directors’ transition dinner that night and I had four people reach out to me. Someone brought me dinner, someone went and picked up the stuff for the transition dinner, because I couldn't anymore; someone went and dropped off the cards we made for the nursing homes because I was a service assistant. It's just like all those things that people were doing and I never would even imagine that, like I would meet people who would want like be there for me.

One of my really good hometown friends passed away over winter break and I came back to school my sorority was just like there-my directors, advisors, my sisters, like everyone was reaching out to me the entire break, and I didn't feel alone. I never felt once that I was alone or going to the memorial and some of my sorority sisters came to the memorial in
my hometown. And they just show up—no matter how big or small they show up for you, if you need them to.

The seniors who just graduated last year, they really took me under their wing. They took care of me and they’re the people who are like always checking on me and that kind of thing, and so I think genuinely my sorority has a sense of community in the sense that you know we’re here for each other we’re here to take care of each other, so if anyone ever needs anything like you, you drop everything and you go and you help them.

I can personally attest to this one. It was a really tough semester for me, and my family and they were there every time, my friends were with me, every time I received bad news. I got gifts and they would constantly check in and text me like how are you doing today let's go do this let's get out the house like let's go get lunch like have you eaten today come to the house like constantly checking in on me to make sure that I was taking care of myself and that if I wasn't going to do it, they were going to do it for me and hold me accountable, so that was a really good thing for me last semester, that really also helped to solidify my commitment to my sorority because they committed to me.

Through the difficult times, these participants had support from their respective sororities, which further solidified their commitment to the organization.

Additionally, several participants spoke about the accountability within their sororities that exist because their sororities want to push them to be the best versions of themselves. One participant shared that, “I mean I don't necessarily have the best grades, but I love the fact that everyone in our sorority cares a lot about their grades, because it pushes me to try to do better.” Another participant shared the experience of having to go before a conduct board because her behavior at an event was not in line with what was expected of her.

At first, I was embarrassed and upset that I got called in, but looking back now, I know that they weren’t just trying to get me in trouble. They actually cared about me and didn’t want me to get hurt or do something I would have regretted because I had way too much to drink at a party. I wish other girls would see that the sorority just wants us to be safe and to take care of ourselves.

Because the participants felt that their sororities truly cared about their wellbeing, they were willing to adjust their expectations of themselves to align more with the values of the organization.
Trust and Integrity

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011) propose that the more a student perceives that the institution exhibits institutional integrity, the greater the student’s level of social integration. The participant responses support that this factor impacts retention within sorority membership as well with trust, integrity, accountability, and transparency used as common language throughout the interviews. This was also the one area where some participants discussed experiences that caused them to question the integrity of their respective sororities.

Numerous participants discussed the importance of transparency and that it can make or break a member’s trust in the sorority. One participant, who is a member of her sorority’s executive board, shared the effort her sorority is making to be more transparent:

I feel like especially this year we're trying to be very like transparent. This is what we are doing, like we shared our goals with the entire chapter, so that they can see like this is what we're working for, and to kind of keep us accountable as well, and so I think like being open with that communication helps with our integrity.

One participant who is not a member of her sorority’s executive board shared that

I just wish they could explain things better like this is why we don't have this, but this is why we do this, you know, so that everyone can kind of have the knowledge and understand why we do things the way we do.

Another participant shared an experience that caused her and a significant portion of her fellow sorority members to question the integrity of chapter leadership:

Trust is extremely important and like, I trust my sorority for the most part. Last semester though, during our big sister/little sister pairing, there was a lot of drama. A bunch of us didn’t get matched with the little sisters we asked for, and we know that the little sisters requested us as well. The girl in charge of the matching refused to share the matching process with us, and the lack of transparency on her part really upset a lot of us. I know she is just one person, but the rest of the executive board stood behind her and wouldn’t give us any explanation. Like, if there was a legitimate reason why they matched the way they did, just tell us, you know? So, we walk away from the situation feeling like it was shady.
The sorority recruitment process creates experiences within chapters where member trust can be impacted both positively and negatively. One participant shared a very positive experience she had during her first recruitment process as a member of her sorority:

Recruitment is difficult when you release PNMs (potential new members), but the chapter makes sure the process is respectful. While you never really know all the behind-the-scenes decisions and what's always going on, for the most part, I would say I trust the decisions that are being made on my behalf.

Alternatively, when a sorority does not do the best job of establishing a culture of respect and trust within the recruitment process, a member can have an experience like this participant:

I wish I knew more about how my sorority makes decisions in recruitment. I mean, we score girls based on conversations and their involvement and stuff, but then the girls who get invited back don’t always match the scores. The rush team tells us to trust the process, but when we don’t know what the process is, how can we trust it? I start to wonder if my opinion matters at all.

Both trust and integrity played a significant role throughout all the participant interviews, which further emphasizes the connection between the sorority’s perceived integrity and the member’s social integration.

**Chapter Summary**

These results offer substantial insight in the member experiences of second-year sorority women on college campuses today. The common themes of member experience expectations, getting involved, meaningful connections, and trust and integrity reveal that there is a clear connection between Braxton et al. (2011) retention factors and sorority membership retention, which establishes a strong foundation on which to build future research.

Several questions emerged both as the interviews were conducted and as the data was analyzed. Are sororities asking members what they hope to gain from their membership experience? Do sororities collect information regarding member commitment, satisfaction, and trust/integrity? Do members receive meaningful education regarding how chapter processes
work and/or how decisions are made? An examination of these questions, a summary of the study, a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the findings, and recommendations for future research are discussed in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study was to examine the social integration experiences of second-year sorority women to determine if existing college student retention models could inform sorority membership retention initiatives. This chapter will offer a summary of the study, discussion of results, recommendations for future research, and a chapter summary.

Summary of the Study

The participants of this study were eleven second-year sorority women who were identified by their sorority president as actively engaged in their membership. For most participants, their chapter president referred them because they held positional leadership positions within their respective sororities; however, that was never mentioned as a criterion for being actively engaged. The participants were from six different sororities on the campuses of either Magnolia University or Bayou University, whose sorority communities share many similarities in regard to membership experiences. I reached out to a total of thirteen members, all thirteen responded to my email, and eleven scheduled and participated in the interview process. I conducted an individual, virtual, interview with each of the eleven participants, during which I used the same set of interview questions. I developed the interview questions using existing retention surveys and frameworks and inserting sorority-specific language based upon my personal and professional knowledge of the membership experience.

Discussion of Themes

Four major themes emerged from the results of this study: membership experience expectations, getting involved, meaningful connections, and trust and integrity. These themes displayed strong correlations with the college student retention model developed by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011), which includes the following six factors that influence a
student’s social integration: commitment of the institution to student welfare, communal potential, institutional integrity, proactive social adjustment, psychosocial engagement, and ability to pay (see Table 2.3). As a result of this study, I conclude that the use of the social integration model of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011), specifically the factors of psychosocial engagement, perception of commitment of the sorority to member welfare and perception of sorority integrity, can be used to inform sorority membership retention initiatives. Sorority members who discussed high levels of engagement and positive perceptions also had strong self-reported commitments to their respective sororities. In the following sections, each of the four major themes is discussed as well as each theme’s connection to the social integration model for student retention.

**Membership Experience Expectations**

While membership experience expectations were not an initial focus of the interviews, they quickly emerged as an important piece of the membership retention puzzle. By asking about each participant’s recruitment experience, I received responses that typically included why the participants decided to participate in sorority recruitment as well as what they hoped to get out of the membership experience once they joined. Overwhelmingly, participants shared that they joined to make friends and find a place that makes a large campus feel smaller, and that ultimately, that’s what they were getting from their membership experience.

Using the Braxton, et al. (2011) model in the context of sorority membership, this refers to this step in the path to social integration as communal potential, or the extent to which a potential member believes that a subgroup of members exists within the sorority community with which that student shares similar values, beliefs, and goals. The more a student perceives the potential of community on campus, the greater the student’s level of social integration. But what
happens when a member ends up in a sorority that does not share similar values or does not offer the experiences that the member expected? This study did not present this scenario as a result, but I am confident that further interviews with more members, especially those not necessarily viewed as actively engaged, would yield this result and be incredibly interesting research.

**Getting Involved**

Braxton, et al. (2011) refer to this next step of involvement as psychosocial engagement and propose that the more energy a sorority member spends engaging in sorority activities and socializing with peers, the more likely they are to be commit to the organization and retain their membership. It comes as no surprise that members identified as actively engaged by their sorority president held various positional leadership roles both in their sorority and in other campus organizations and/or clubs. However, the path that led the participants to these leadership roles is of particular importance from a membership retention focus.

I was surprised to hear several participants speak about the power that “saying yes” and stepping outside of their comfort zones had on their membership experiences. Something that seemed as insignificant as saying yes to a dinner invitation on a Friday evening with people you don’t know totally transformed one participant’s experience. Simple acts like going to study at the sorority house when other members asked and volunteering to help paint a banner created experiences for these participants to make deeper connections and further commit to the organization.

Additionally, the power of mentorship, or chapter leaders encouraging newer members to seek leadership opportunities and invest time and energy into them, affirmed the participants in their choice to join their sorority. Even the participants who did not self-identify as seeking positional leadership ended up in a leadership role because of a mentor within their organization.
The results affirmed that involvement strengthened the members’ commitment to the organization.

**Meaningful Connections**

The participants who spoke about their expectations of membership prior to joining mentioned friendship, involvement, and establishing a community. As the conversations progressed, the participants shared personal stories of the genuine connections they made as a result of membership, and they unanimously expressed that they never imagined that a group of people who were not their families could care so much about their wellbeing. The participant who spoke of her sorority’s internal system through which one member can refer another if she has concerns for her wellbeing was particularly impressive and mirrors a process many college campuses have to identify and engage with students of concern.

Meaningful connections emerged as the strongest indicator of satisfaction and commitment to the sorority and were perceived by participants to be going above and beyond what they expected from the organization. Sororities often focus on requirements and achievements, and many local sorority communities and (inter)national organizations perpetuate a culture of competition. Not one participant shared that these foci made any impact on their experience; it was the knowledge that a group of people genuinely cared for their wellbeing that impressed them the most.

**Trust and Integrity**

Since their founding, sororities have been secretive and exclusive. Sororities can pick their members based on confidential criteria of their own choosing, and once new members join, there is a provisional membership period before a new member gains full access to all aspects of the organization. According to a 2016 report from Ernst and Young, Generation Z, which
includes current sorority members, prioritizes trust and fairness and open and transparent communication, qualities that sororities have not prioritized. The participants’ responses speak to the notion that sororities continue to grapple with how to be as transparent as possible with the membership while also maintaining confidentiality.

As the participants shared stories about trust and integrity, I sensed very strong feelings about the level of transparency they experienced as members. Participants who served in leadership positions spoke positively regarding transparency because they are part of the decision-making process, but what about the average member? When they don’t receive all the information that led to a decision, they are often left to fill in the blanks and potentially question how much they trust the organization.

These four themes provide valuable information that should be used to inform the sorority experience at all levels: locally, (inter)nationally, and for higher education professionals as well.

**Implications for Theory and Practice**

The purpose of this study was to gather information that could provide implications for both theory and practice for researchers, professionals, volunteers, and students who dedicate time, energy, and other resources to move the sorority experience forward.

**Implications for Theory**

While many factors influence college student retention, the utilization of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2011) social integration retention model reinforced the importance that social integration plays in the overall college student retention conversation and sorority membership is no exception. This study focused on three of the six factors that influence social integration and thus retention, but throughout the interviews, there were stories that connected all
six factors back to the reasons the participants were committed, satisfied, and thus retained. Beyond sorority membership, this framework could be applied to other communities on college campuses in similar ways: academic colleges, residential communities, student veterans, commuter students, etc. What spaces and opportunities are universities creating for students to find a community and make meaningful connections within it? This is the key to increasing retention on college campuses.

Juillerat’s (2000) student satisfaction research as well as Schaller’s (2005) research of sophomore students further emphasized the framework through which social integration increases both satisfaction and commitment levels of sorority member to their respective organizations and ultimately to the university as well. Satisfaction and commitment play significant roles in the retention conversation and are both positively impacted the more a student socially engages and establishes community, which in this study was found within their sorority.

**Implications for Practice**

As a fraternity and sorority life practitioner, implications for practice drove my entire research process from developing the research question to structuring the methods. It just made sense to research a question I have had for years in an effort to provide results that would move the sorority membership retention conversation forward.

**Membership Experience Expectations**

Both local sorority communities and (inter)national organizations can benefit from intentional conversations about expectations. Are potential members asked what they hope to experience as a result of sorority membership? If not, they should. If so, is the data used to inform the membership experiences offered? (Inter)national organizations and campus-based fraternity/sorority life professionals are known to provide opportunities and experiences they
think are best for members, but why not combine that with what the members actually say they are looking for? Additionally, sororities should elicit feedback as often as possible to avoid doing things over and over simply because they’ve always been done rather than because the members value them.

Moreover, fraternity/sorority life professionals could cast the net even wider and discuss membership expectations with students who have not sought to join a sorority. A deeper understanding into why students choose not to join could offer insight into the types of communities that college students seek and whether sororities align with those expectations. These conversations would also inform why membership numbers continue to decline. Why aren’t more students seeking membership and what can the community do about it?

**Getting Involved**

Sororities offer a plethora of positional leadership opportunities as part of very complex hierarchical structures, which are beneficial and directly improve commitment and satisfaction of members. However, there are opportunities for improvement regarding the non-positional involvement opportunities. Sororities should offer intentional, yet optional, ways for members to say yes. Not all members respond to the same opportunities so diversify the options and engage as many members in the planning as possible.

Most sororities offer a mentorship type program by assigning an upperclassman member to each new member, often referred to as big sister programs. Both the pairing process and the expectations of big sisters are vitally important for retention and should be reviewed and assessed. Not every big sister/little sister pair will be successful, so I recommend creating multiple ways for new members to connect with potential mentors, including but not limited to academic majors, hobbies and interests, personality types, etc.
While many of these structures exist within sororities, they are often executed with little to no intentionality and many times left to chance. The invite to dinner or coffee was just a member taking the initiative, which is great but not always guaranteed. Ask members how they made their connections and let that inform future processes. While every interaction will not and should not be prescribed, an intentional framework would ensure that all members have something to “say yes” to.

**Meaningful Connections**

Every sorority would benefit from a formalized referral process for members of concern as one participant shared in her interview. Beyond that, it would be relatively simple to put structures in place for regular check-ins for all members and intentional opportunities for members to deepen their relationships with one another. Not just an announcement to text your little sister and check on her, but take the process a step further, and have an expectation for the big sisters to report back.

Another suggestion is to conduct a comprehensive review of the sorority accountability process. What does the sorority’s membership accountability look like? Is it an opportunity to provide support and resources for struggling members or does it negatively impact a member’s wellbeing? Take the extra time to approach every difficult conversation from a place of care and concern first because more times than not, concerning behavior is merely a symptom of a great issue that exists. Members who think their sorority genuinely cares about them are much more likely to stay.

**Trust and Integrity**

Transparency matters to sorority members; it greatly impacts their experiences and retention. Finding the right balance between what information is shared and what is not
continues to plague both local and national sororities. In many cases, trust and integrity are questioned when members are not clear on how a process works or a decision is made. I recommend that if sororities take more time explaining how processes work such as membership selection, elections, accountability, etc., there will be less questions and concerns during and after the process, even if the outcome is not what a member hoped it would be. A former supervisor of mine always said, “You can pay on the front end, or you can pay on the back end”, and time spent on the front end to ensure members understand how internal systems work alleviates issues on the back end after decisions are made. Additionally, several participants indicated to me that members who have strong trust in their sorority leadership rarely question the transparency and integrity of the organization, even if the decisions that are made negatively impact them.

One additional recommendation for practice is to review organizational membership trends beyond just fraternity/sorority organizations. In a 2020 study of 1,231 professional organizations, Wild Apricot found 68% had difficulty growing their organization, 11% of those shrank, and 25% experienced no growth. The remaining 32% only grew 1-5%. It appears as though the want and/or need for organizational membership in general is declining, which may be indicative of a larger cultural shift. It is easier than ever to connect with others, especially through social media outlets, so organizations with membership fees have to work harder than ever to remain relevant. Perhaps the future of sorority membership will be continued shift to smaller sorority sizes, and (inter)national organizations will need to adapt to the changing climate.
Many of these recommendations already exist but lack intentionality and/or the additional steps of follow-through and feedback, which can make significant differences in membership retention.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was intentionally specific, and thus does not address all the questions I originally hypothesized surrounding the topic of sorority membership retention. Furthermore, new questions emerged as the study progressed that deserve exploration and have the potential to further enrich this data as well.

I originally planned to also interview former sorority members who cancelled their membership during their second year. I asked sorority presidents to send me referrals in the same way I asked for the actively engaged members, and I received six referrals. I emailed the six referrals and only received one response. I interviewed the one participant, but because I could not get anyone else to respond, I decided to focus solely on actively engaged members for the sake of this study. I think of this study as one bookend and a study focused on former members and their experiences as the other book end needed to complete the pair. General members would be all the books in between, and they would also offer valuable insight into the membership experience.

For those who choose to research sorority membership experiences, I also recommend overestimating the time it will take to obtain participants. There are several levels of engagement before accessing individual members, and sorority communities are incredibly insulated. I had to connect with local fraternity/sorority life professionals, ask them to pass along my participant request to their sorority presidents, then the presidents had to take the time to refer their members, then I had to reach out the potential participants, and then the participants
had to schedule an interview time. All the layers, response wait times at each level, reminders, follow-ups, and scheduling difficulties took months longer than I anticipated.

Engaging the executive offices of (inter)national sororities in the research would be beneficial as well. What statistical data do they collect regarding membership retention? Are there any membership retention trends? How is member feedback collected? What programs/initiatives are assessed and how is this information used to inform future work? What, if any, retention initiatives exist, and is there any data to show their impact? These are just a few of the future research questions that came to mind as a result of this study. The (inter)national organizations likely have an extensive list of research questions as well, and they would gladly assist future researchers in conducting studies that could help improve the sorority membership experience.

Additionally, research informing the barriers that exist to sorority membership would be incredibly enlightening. The cost of membership is often a barrier; comprehensive data describing the cost associated with membership, and recommendations to reduce costs such as financial assistance programs could reduce financial barriers in significant ways. In a world that makes it so easy for people to connect online through social media for free, does the benefit of sorority justify the cost?

My final research thought surrounding this topic connects the sorority membership experience back to the general college student retention research. What if a college campus piloted a program through which they created a social integration framework based upon the membership experiences of sorority women? It would be similar to living-learning communities and/or residential colleges but with second-year mentors for every new student and a plethora of engagement opportunities outside the classroom. Braxton, et al. (2011) offer a solid framework
that sororities offer without even realizing they are following a framework. Perhaps if this experience could be expanded to the general college student population, similar results could emerge.

Sorority membership research is limited, so the opportunities for future research are endless. The key is finding researchers with interest and time who would be willing to partner with (inter)national organizations who have the resources to assist.

**Limitations**

Sororities have historically been private organizations who would not encourage members to share information that might expose internal struggles or weaknesses. I anticipated that members might struggle to open up, especially discussing trust, integrity, and negative experiences. That turned out to be a non-issue at all with the participants. However, I did not anticipate the lack of response from fellow Fraternity/Sorority Life Advisors, so only having two campuses agree to participate was limiting, delaying my ability to begin interviews, which in turn shrunk my timeline significantly.

Additionally, I knew that connecting with former members would be a challenge, but I did not realize how many local chapters were not willing to offer names. Of those chapters who did provide names, only one former member responded. The inability to find former members to interview significantly limited the study because I did not end up with the other half of the narrative. The experiences of former members play a huge role in the member experience conversation because we often learn more about areas of improvement from our dissatisfied members than from the satisfied ones.

The lack of longitudinal retention data at both the local and national level limits the ability to emphasize the extent of the problem, which would garner additional attention and
interest in future studies. All the focus is on increasing recruitment numbers because that is easier to identify, quantify, and tackle than retention within the organizations. Also, Covid-19 remains a limitation when discussing second-year member experiences because their entire first year was directly impacted by restrictions, virtual classes, etc. Participants went straight to Covid-19 when asked about negative membership experiences, and I consistently had to add the caveat of “with the exception of Covid”.

**Chapter Summary**

The results of this research offer the opportunity for informative discussion as well as numerous recommendations for implementation and future research. The findings suggest that many of the recommendations provided through college student retention frameworks apply to sorority membership retention as well. The more a member is socially integrated into her sorority, the higher both her commitment to and satisfaction with the sorority, and thus, the more likely she is to be retained.

Additionally, as sorority membership numbers continue to decline, (inter)national organizations in conjunction with NPC must focus on membership retention and provide whatever resources necessary to continue research and offer comprehensive membership experience frameworks to local chapters. The participants of this study all spoke to specific experiences that solidified their decision to be in their sorority. If more and more members have the opportunity to share their stories, both positive and negative, the value-added experiences will become clearer, and improvements to the sorority membership experience can be made at every level.
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Current, Actively Engaged Second-Year Sorority Member

1. Why did you decide to join a sorority?

2. Please rate your level of commitment to your sorority at this point in your membership. Explain. 1- Lacking commitment 2- Minimally committed 3- Committed 4- Fully committed

3. What did you know about sorority membership experience prior to joining?

4. What is your most positive sorority experience thus far? Most negative?

5. Are you satisfied with your sorority experience thus far? Please explain.

6. What do you like most about being a member of your sorority?

7. What do you like least about being a member of your sorority?

8. Do you trust that your sorority has your best interest in mind when making decisions?

9. Does your sorority leadership lead with integrity? (Do what they say they are going to do)

10. Does your sorority care about you? Please explain. How important is this part of your experience?

11. Do you feel connections with members of your sorority? Please explain. How important is this part of your experience?

12. Are you proud to be a member of your sorority? Please explain.

13. Does your sorority membership have an impact on your overall college student experience? In what ways?
APPENDIX B. STUDENT SATISFACTION INVENTORY EXAMPLE
1. The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.
2. Counseling staff care about students as individuals.
3. Living conditions in the residence halls are comfortable (adequate space, lighting, heat, air conditioning, telephones, etc.).
4. The intramural athletic programs contribute to a strong sense of school spirit.
5. Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.
6. Computer labs are adequate and accessible.
7. The personnel involved in registration are helpful.
8. Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.
9. It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.
10. Residence hall staff are concerned about me as an individual.
11. Males and females have equal opportunities to participate in intercollegiate athletics.
12. Tutoring services are readily available.
13. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.
14. I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.
15. The assessment and course placement procedures are reasonable.
16. Security staff respond quickly to emergencies.
17. I feel a sense of pride about my campus.
18. There is an adequate selection of food available in the cafeteria.
19. I am able to experience intellectual growth here.
20. Residence hall regulations are reasonable.
21. There is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus.
22. There are a sufficient number of weekend activities for students.
23. Admissions counselors respond to prospective student requests.
24. Academic support services adequately meet the needs of students.
25. Students are proud to feel welcome on this campus.
26. I can easily get involved in campus organizations.
27. Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.
28. Admissions counselors accurately portray the campus in their recruiting practices.
29. There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.
30. Class change (drop/add) policies are reasonable.
31. This institution has a good reputation within the community.
32. The student center is a comfortable place for students to spend their leisure time.
33. Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course.
34. Bookstore staff are helpful.
35. Major requirements are clear and reasonable.
36. The student handbook provides helpful information about campus life.
37. I seldom get the "runaround" when seeking information on this campus.
38. The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.
39. This institution shows concern for students as individuals.
40. I generally know what's happening on campus.
41. Adjunct faculty are competent as classroom instructors.
42. There is a strong commitment to racial harmony on this campus.
43. Student disciplinary procedures are fair.
44. New student orientation services help students adjust to college.
45. Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.
46. Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.
47. Freedom of expression is protected on campus.
48. Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field.
49. There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.
50. Graduate teaching assistants are competent as classroom instructors.
51. Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available.
52. On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.
53. Student activities fees are put to good use.
Your institution may choose to provide you with additional questions on a separate sheet. The section below numbered 74 - 83 is provided as a response area for those additional questions. Continue on to item 84 when you have completed this section.

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(If items 74-83 not available, skip to item 84.)

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How satisfied are you that this campus demonstrates a commitment to meeting the needs of:

84. Part-time students?
85. Evening students?
86. Older, returning learners?
87. Under-represented populations?
88. Commuters?
89. Students with disabilities?

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How important were each of the following factors in your decision to enroll here?

90. Cost
91. Financial aid
92. Academic reputation
93. Size of institution
94. Opportunity to play sports
95. Recommendations from family/friends
96. Geographic setting
97. Campus appearance
98. Personalized attention prior to enrollment

---

Choose the one response that best applies to you and darken the corresponding oval for each of the questions below.

99. So far, how has your college experience met your expectations?
   1. Much worse than I expected
   2. Quite a bit worse than I expected
   3. Worse than I expected
   4. About what I expected
   5. Better than I expected
   6. Quite a bit better than I expected
   7. Much better than I expected

100. Rate your overall satisfaction with your experience here thus far?
    1. Not at all satisfied
    2. Not very satisfied
    3. Somewhat dissatisfied
    4. Neutral
    5. Somewhat satisfied
    6. Satisfied
    7. Very satisfied

101. All in all, if you had it to do over again, would you enroll here?
    1. Definitely not
    2. Probably not
    3. Maybe not
    4. I don't know
    5. Maybe yes
    6. Probably yes
    7. Definitely yes

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CONTINUE TO THE NEXT PAGE

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Choose the one response that best describes you and darken the corresponding oval for each of the items below.

| 102. Gender: | 1. Female | 2. Male |

| 103. Age: | 1. 18 and under | 2. 19 to 24 | 3. 25 to 34 | 4. 35 to 44 | 5. 45 and over |


| 108. Current GPA: | 1. No credits earned | 2. 1.00 or below | 3. 2.00 - 2.49 | 4. 2.50 - 2.99 | 5. 3.00 - 3.49 | 6. 3.50 - 4.00 | 7. 3.5 or above |

109. Educational Goal:  
1. Associate degree  
2. Bachelor's degree  
3. Master's degree  
4. Doctorate or professional degree  
5. Certification (initial or renewal)  
6. Self-improvement/pleasure  
7. Job-related training  
8. Other  
9. Employment:  
10. Full-time off campus  
11. Part-time off campus  
12. Full-time on campus  
13. Part-time on campus  
14. Not employed  
15. Current Residence:  
16. Residence hall  
17. Fraternity / Sorority  
18. Own house  
19. Rent room or apartment off campus  
20. Parent's home  
21. Other  
22. Residence Classification:  
23. In-state  
24. Out-of-state  
25. International (not U.S. citizen)  
26. Disabilities:  
27. Physical disability or a diagnosed learning disability?  
28. Yes  
29. No  
30. When I entered this institution, it was my:  
31. 1st choice  
32. 2nd choice  
33. 3rd choice or lower  
34. Student ID/SSN if requested by your institution:  
35. Write the requested number in the spaces of the box provided. Completely darken the corresponding oval.  
36. Major:  
37. Fill in major code from list provided by your institution.  
38. Item requested by your institution:  
39. SERIAL #
APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for a Non-Clinical Study

Study Title: The Panhellenic Sorority Membership Experience: To Stay or Not to Stay?
Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to seek to better understand the lived experiences of current and former second-year sorority members at a four-year, land grant institution to explain why sorority members choose to continue or cancel their membership. The study will be conducted in virtual one on one interview format. Interview questions should be designed to challenge participants to reflect on sorority experience during the second year of membership. Interviews should allow participants to share in-depth personal experiences within their own chapter. Interviews will be no longer than one hour each. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions will be kept by the researcher and placed in a secure location.

Risks: The only study risk is the inadvertent release of sensitive information shared in the interview. However, every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. Files will be kept in secure cabinets/data storage locations to which only the investigator has access.

Benefits: Subjects who volunteer to participate in the study will receive a $10 gift card. Additionally, the study may yield valuable information about sorority retention strategies to employ in the future.

Investigator: The following investigator is available for questions about this study, M-F, 8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Beth Newell 985-590-7746

Performance Site: Virtual via Zoom Platform (Magnolia University)

Number of subjects: up to 20

Inclusion Criteria: Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who do not report psychological or neurological conditions and who are current or former undergraduate members of NPC affiliated sororities. To participate in this study, you must meet the requirements of both the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Exclusion Criteria: Individuals under age 18 or over age 65. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who are not undergraduate current or former members of NPC affiliated sororities. If you have psychological or neurological conditions.

Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Disclaimer: No participants will be asked to share any information they do not feel comfortable sharing. Illegal activities will not be discussed (hazing, substance abuse, etc.) The focus will be on experiences directly related to organizational programming, leadership, and integrity.
**Signatures:** The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Alex Cohen, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@BU.edu, www.BU.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject

Signature:_______________________________ Date:__________________________
APPENDIX D. IRB EXEMPTION APPROVAL

TO: Beth Richardson Newell
LSUAM | Student Affairs | Greek Life

FROM: Alex Cohen
Chairman, Institutional Review Board

DATE: 03-Nov-2021
RE: IRBAM-21-1185
TITLE: The Panhellenic Sorority Membership Experience: To Stay or Not to Stay?

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application
Review Type: Exempt
Risk Factor: Minimal
Review Date: 02-Nov-2021
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 02-Nov-2021
Approval Expiration Date: 01-Nov-2024
Exempt Category: 2b
Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent: No
Re-review frequency: Three Years
Number of subjects approved: 20
LSU Proposal Number:

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects.
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
REFERENCES


Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis, 1*(1), 1-17.


Schreiner & J. Pattengale (Eds.), *Visible solutions for invisible students: Helping sophomores succeed (Monograph 31)* (pp. 19-30). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and


VITA

Elizabeth Richardson Newell was born in 1985 to Sam and Susan Richardson and lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast until she moved to Louisiana for her first professional position. Elizabeth graduated from The University of Southern Mississippi with a bachelor’s degree in mathematics in 2008 and a master’s degree in college student personnel in 2009.

Elizabeth worked in the Office for Student Engagement at Southeastern Louisiana University from 2009-2013. She took a position in the Greek Life Office at Louisiana State University in 2013, where she is currently serving as Associate Director.

In 2018, The National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) recognized Elizabeth as the Outstanding Panhellenic Advisor. Elizabeth is a member of the Association for Fraternity/Sorority Advisors and recently served on the Fraternity/Sorority Advisory Committee for the National Panhellenic Conference.