

studentPOLL

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Greek Life gets Mixed Reviews from Prospective Students, with the Highest Ability Students Seeing it Much Less Favorably

Publisher's Note

With news about hazing, sexual assault, and racism in Greek organizations dominating the headlines, there's been a lot of soul-searching lately at institutions and in the media about the role of fraternities and sororities on college campuses. With these issues in mind, we decided to survey the perceptions of college-bound students about Greek life.

We surveyed respondents this past February, when most had applied to college but many fewer knew where they would enroll. Given all of the recent negative news about dreadful incidents involving Greek organizations on a number of campuses, the results were somewhat counter-intuitive: our respondents did not have strong negative feelings about Greek organizations on issues such as hazing, hostility to women, or being only for rich kids. Indeed, it appears the unfavorable news has not resulted in notable hostility to fraternities and sororities among college-bound students.

On the other hand, respondents were not very enthusiastic about Greek life in general: only a quarter stated an intention to join Greek organizations in the fall or considered Greek life to be an important part of the college experience, and less than a quarter of students found the prospect of Greek life being the center of social activity on campus to be appealing.

Taken in context, the lack of enthusiasm for Greek life is not entirely surprising, as only a small percentage of full-time students at four-year institutions enroll in fraternities and sororities. But specific subgroup findings from our study should be noted: high-achieving students were more negative about Greek life than all other respondents groups. Whether this should be a matter of concern may largely depend, as we discuss below, on the impact and control of the Greek system on social life at individual campuses.

Where does this leave the impact of Greek life on the application and enrollment decisions of prospects for many institutions? It's possible that having a campus culture where fraternities and sororities dominate social life and mores may very well turn off prospective students, with high-achieving students being particularly affected. Alternatively, the impact of Greek life on a campus culture may not matter or could very well be a positive for some students. It's very much a case particular to each college or university.

We should note that much of Art & Science Group's research with individual clients has shown that students want a balanced social life with a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities. Fraternities

and sororities can certainly be a part of this mix—a significant percentage of respondents believe that Greek organizations are a good resource for meeting people and joining influential networks. However, for some institutions, the impact of Greek life on the application and enrollment decisions of many prospects may be very unfavorable if fraternities and sororities are seen to dominate campus social life. Is your institution in that position or does its social life positively affect the choices made by your prospects? It's a critical question that institutions would do well to consider, as our experience has shown that perceptions of social life on campus is often just as important as—sometimes more important than—perceptions about the academic experience.

Richard A. Hesel

Principal
Art & Science Group, LLC

Wayne Camara

Senior Vice President
ACT

Steve Kappler

Vice President, Brand Experience
ACT

1 Student Interest in Joining Fraternities and Sororities



Findings

- When asked whether they intended to join a fraternity or sorority, 53 percent of respondents said no, 25 percent answered yes, and 22 percent said they were not sure or refused to answer the question.

Commentary

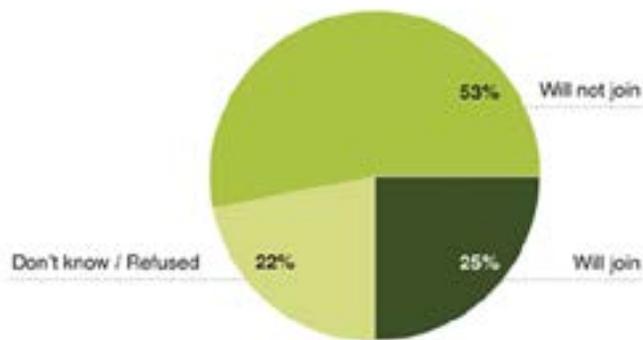
Only a quarter of students stated that they intended to join a Greek organization in college. In what will be a recurring theme for this survey, most respondents were either negative or ambivalent about the prospect of participating in Greek organizations.

Does this represent a turning tide in perceptions of Greek life among college-bound student populations, a reflection of the increasingly negative coverage in the media regarding fraternities and sororities?

Longitudinal data about entering Freshmen's intentions regarding Greek life, suggest interest has been quite stable over more than a decade, even increasing somewhat in recent years: [The CIRP annual Freshman survey](#) has documented the number of incoming students who've expressed a "strong" intention to join Greek organizations. Over fifteen years, this interest has ranged from 10-14 percent, with the number actually *increasing* since 2009 from 10 to 14 percent. It short, appears that interest in Greek life is not diminishing in the face of all the unfavorable news.

CHART 1

Intention to Join Greek Organizations



However, intentions and actual behavior often prove to be divergent for students entering college: in our study, a higher percentage of students stated their intention to join a Greek organization (25 percent) than one would expect based on actual membership numbers. Data from Chronicle of Higher Education indicate that only [11 percent of male full-time undergraduate students are members of fraternities, totaling 372,090](#) . Of female undergraduates, only [302,792 are enrolled in sororities](#) , about 10 percent .

Why are the percentages higher for those who state they intend to join fraternities and sororities, versus the percentage of the population who actually joins once they are enrolled in college? First, it is very possible that once many students learn more about Greek life while on campus, they discover it's not for them or they don't fit into the culture. Secondly, college-bound student ambitions tend to clash with reality once the students are enrolled, as many find that they find they don't have the time or the resources to engage in activities they expected to. We have seen this same contrast in study abroad, for example, where far more incoming students expect to go abroad than actually do. Similarly, [our last studentPOLL](#) found that 90 percent of students expected to graduate in four years, which was vastly higher than the actual percentage of students who achieve this goal. Overall, however, the college-bound population simply does not express a predominant interest in joining Greek organizations, but as we'll find in more our comprehensive data, this lack of interest cannot be reliably attributed to any particular perception about Greek life.

2 Perceptions of the Importance of Greek Life as Part of the College Experience and Social Life



Findings

- Respondents were asked how they felt about the prospect of Greek life being the center of campus life. Only 18 percent of respondents agreed that this would be appealing.
- Respondents were asked whether they believed that Greek life was an important part of the college experience. Twenty-eight percent agreed.

Commentary

Although Greek life is strongly associated with the college experience in pop culture, very high majorities of respondents simply do not view fraternities and sororities as an essential or appealing part of the college experience. Again, this makes sense when you consider that relatively small

proportions of the college-bound students we surveyed actually intend to enroll in a fraternity or sorority.

How should institutions interpret these findings? At the very least, they should take the overall ambivalence toward Greek life into careful consideration, because for some institutions perceptions and expectations about campus social life can often have a major influence on college choice. In fact, we've seen in a few instances for our own clients when a perception that campus culture is dominated by Greek life has a substantial negative effect on application and enrollment decisions. It's also possible that in some cases having a reputation for high levels of participation in Greek life could have a positive effect on enrollment decisions.

When we study student perceptions of campus life for our clients, it is common for us to find that most students want a balanced social life and the opportunity to make friends and participate in social activities in various settings, such as traditional residence halls, theme residence halls, residential colleges, academically focused residential experiences, and community based housing. For many institutions, fraternities and sororities can certainly be a part of this ecosystem; as our findings show, college-bound students do not have overwhelmingly negative feelings about them. Where most institutions have to be careful, however, is allowing a conviction to build where Greek life seems to disproportionately control social life to the detriment of other options. In other words, if prospective students believe that membership in a fraternity or sorority is essential to social acceptance and fulfillment, it is possible that many may not choose your institution.

3 Student Perceptions of Fraternities in Regards to Hazing, Hostility to Women, Exclusivity, and Academic Achievement



Findings

- One third of respondents agreed that fraternities abuse students with hazing practices.
- One quarter of respondents agreed that fraternities create an atmosphere that is hostile to women.
- 28 percent of respondents agreed that fraternities are only for rich kids.
- 36 percent of respondents agreed Greek involvement gets in the way of academic achievement.

Commentary

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently published a [multi-part series](#) debating whether fraternities, given recent scandals, have a place on the modern campus. Strikingly, though, the recent alarming news about [hazing](#), [sexual assault](#), and [binge drinking](#) incidents in fraternities on a number of campuses do not appear to be registering on the perceptions of college-bound students. Given the recent intensity of the news cycle on this subject, it appears that that the negative media coverage has not had a major influence on how students perceive Greek life overall.

The *Chronicle* does raise a larger question, however, of whether interest in Greek life will diminish over time if such adverse events continue.

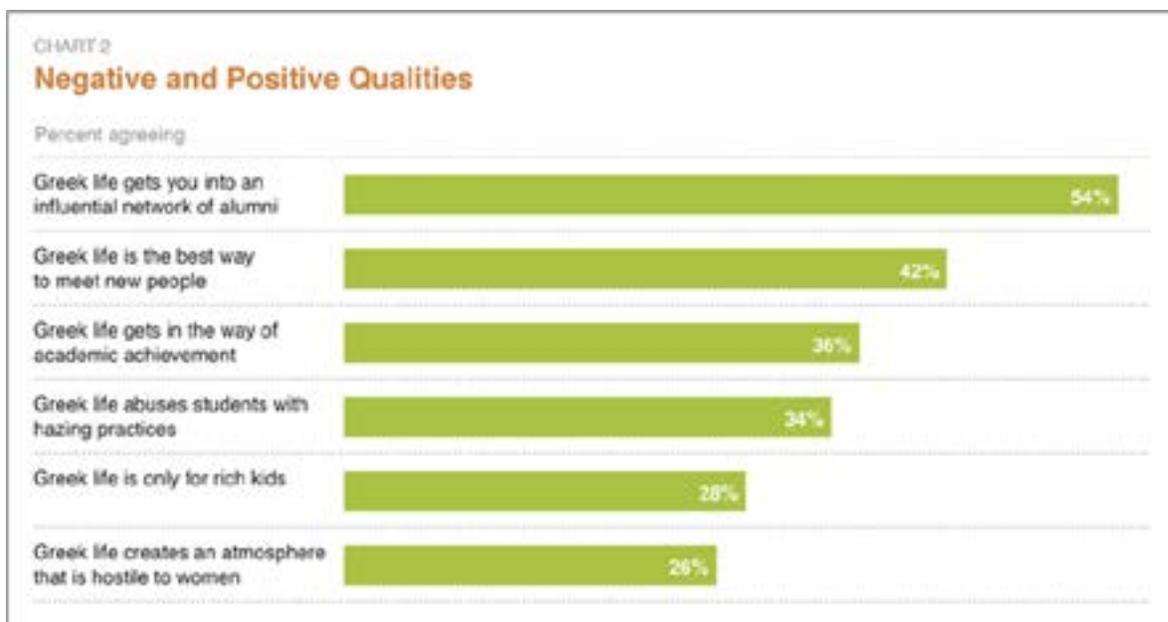
Findings

- 42 percent of respondents agree that getting involved with Greek life is the best way to meet new people.
- 54 percent of respondents agree that joining a fraternity provides access to a network of influential and successful alumni.

Commentary

Interestingly, despite generally not being enthusiastic about Greek life, half of respondents acknowledged the role of the Greek system in providing social and networking opportunities.

It's possible that media sources – more so than on issues specific to hazing and hostility to women – have influenced answers to these questions. There is [documentation](#) that Greek organizations produce a disproportionate share of CEOs, politicians, and other influential figures. Even the highest-ability students, who were more negative about Greek life than any other subgroup, agreed that Greek life provided access to an influential network.



If Greek life is seen as providing access to social opportunities and influential networks, then why are a majority of college-bound students not interested in joining them or find their appeal limited? Although we didn't ask this question directly, it's possible that the demands that Greek system place on students – from costs to time devoted to pledging – turns many off from enrolling. Much like study abroad, where many students state their attention to participate but much fewer actually do when they are enrolled, ambitions to join tend to clash with reality. In addition, it's possible that the incremental edge students think they could get in social opportunities and networks aren't enough to outweigh other things they want more in their college experiences.

5. Perceptions of Greek Life from High-Ability Prospects (Greater than a 27 Composite Score on the ACT Test)



Findings

High-ability prospects were more likely to answer the following as compared to overall respondents:

- State intention *not* to join Greek organizations (63 percent vs. 53 percent).
- Agree that Greek organizations create an atmosphere that is hostile to women (35 percent vs. 26 percent).

High-ability prospects were less likely to answer the following as compared to overall respondents:

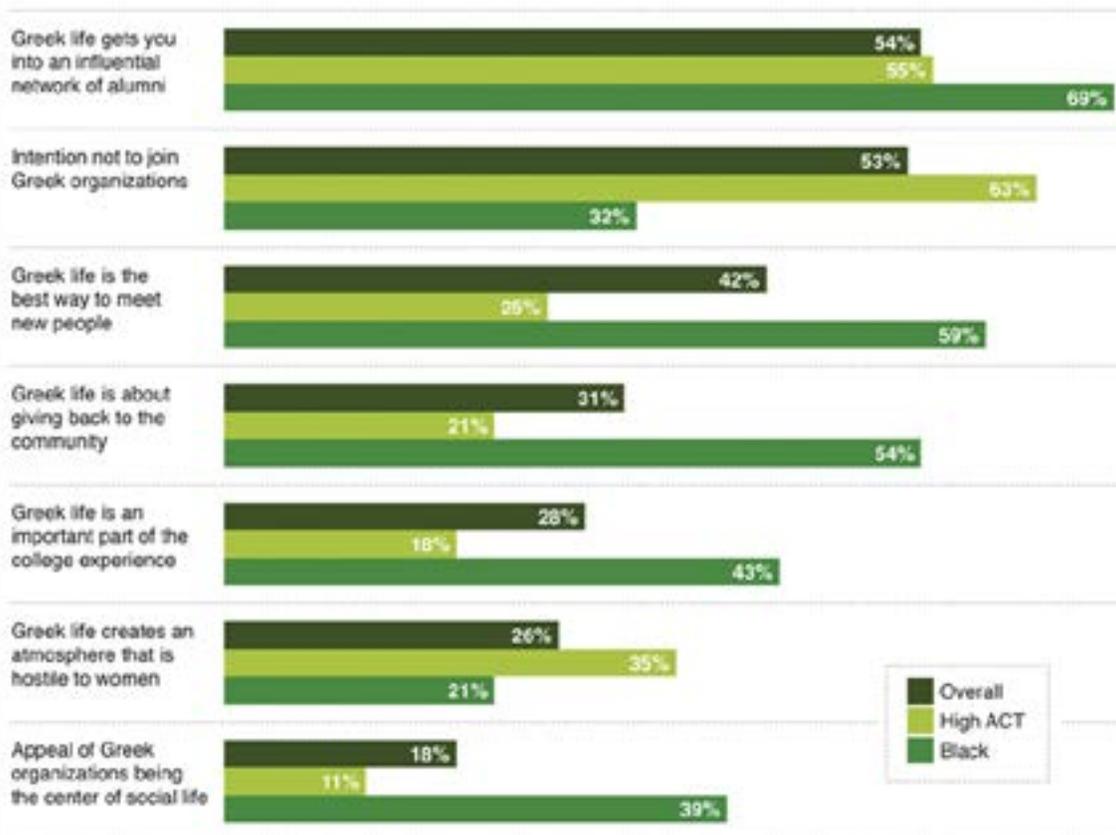
- Agree that the prospect of Greek life being the center of campus culture would be appealing (11 percent vs. 18 percent).
- Agree that Greek life is an important part of the college experience (18 percent vs. 28 percent).
- Agree that Greek life is the best way to meet new people (25 percent vs. 42 percent).

Commentary

High-ability students (using the proxy of those with the highest ACT scores) were more negative about Greek life than the lower-scoring respondents in nearly every category, in some cases significantly so (hostility to women, appeal of Greek life as the center of campus culture, best way to get involved, etc.).

CHART 3

Perceptions Among Subgroups



These findings align with what we've seen in a few examples of our client work: whenever we've studied the impact of Greek life on student perceptions, high-achieving students tend to be the most negatively affected.

6 Perceptions of Greek Life from Black Respondents



Findings

Black respondents were more likely to answer the following as compared with overall respondents:

- Intention to join Greek organizations (43 percent vs. 25 percent).
- Agree that Greek life is an important part of the college experience (43 percent vs. 28 percent).
- Agree that Greek life being the center of campus culture would be appealing (39 percent vs. 18 percent).
- Believe that joining a fraternity gets you into a successful network of alumni (69 percent vs. 54 percent).

Commentary

Black respondents were significantly more positive about Greek life than other respondent groups. One possible reason for this higher regard is the popularity of Greek life at HBCUs. According to CIRP's annual survey, a significantly higher percentage of incoming HBCU freshmen expressed stronger intention to join Greek organizations than average: over the past three years, 30 percent of HBCU respondents expressed this intention, more than double that for students at non-HBCU institutions.

7

Perceptions of Greek Life by Region



Findings

Respondents from the South (including Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky) were more likely to answer the following:

- Intention to join Greek organizations (33 percent to 25 percent).
- Say that half of the students at the school they intend to attend are in a Greek organization (21 percent to 14 percent).
- More likely to see "Greek life as the center of social life" as appealing (25 percent to 18 percent).
- Agree that Greek life is an important part of the college experience (32 percent vs. 28 percent).

Commentary

The South has long had a tradition of greater participation in the Greek life, so the findings above should come as little surprise. It's worth noting, however, that Greek-dominant Southern institutions could risk alienating high-achieving students. Our recent work with a reputable Southern institution found that being perceived as having a Greek Life-dominant culture was a major turnoff for prospective students at the enrollment stage, as opposed to being seen as having a balanced social life.

Study Methodology



The findings in this issue of studentPOLL were based on a national sample of ACT test-takers, stratified to allow for an oversample of Black respondents (n=2,500) to compensate for anticipated lower response rates. Including the oversample, 42,500 emails were sent inviting participants to the online survey. Survey responses were collected from February 9 to February 24, 2015 with 1,978 respondents beginning the survey; 75 disqualified because they were not the student who took the ACT; 407 disqualified because they do not plan to enroll in a full-time four-year degree program in Fall 2015; and 975 students completed the survey. Responses are weighted by gender, geographical region, and race and ethnicity data provided by ACT. Because of qualification criteria, such as intent to enroll in college, this sample of ACT test-takers is not representative of all ACT test-takers, but is designed to represent the demographic (race and ethnicity, gender, and geographical region) composition of the broader ACT test-taking population. The margin of sampling error for this population of students is plus or minus 3.1 percent. Margin of error is higher among subgroups.

About *studentPOLL*



A collaboration between ACT and Art & Science Group LLC, *studentPOLL* presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of college-bound high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers as well as secondary school college counselors, *studentPOLL* seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *studentPOLL* has become a trusted and widely-cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. ACT and Art & Science Group have now joined forces to expand the depth and range of the issues that will be explored in *studentPOLL*.

studentPOLL findings and analysis are provided free on both the [ACT](http://www.act.org) (www.act.org) and [Art & Science Group](http://www.artsci.com) (www.artsci.com) web sites.

About ACT and Art & Science Group



[ACT](http://www.act.org) (www.act.org) is a mission-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Headquartered in Iowa City, Iowa, ACT is trusted as the nation's leader in college and career readiness, providing high-quality achievement assessments grounded in more than 50 years of research and experience. ACT offers a uniquely integrated continuum of solutions that help people succeed from elementary school through career, providing insights that unlock potential. To learn more about ACT, go to www.act.org.

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