

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Fraternity Experience: Three Disturbing Trends

2021 Dyad Strategies White Paper



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Introduction and Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a disruptive force in American higher education. According to the National Association of State Legislatures, more than 1,300 college campuses in all 50 states have shifted to some version of hybrid or fully remote learning during the last year. Almost all of these campuses placed restrictions on in-person gatherings. These restrictions impacted the traditional on-campus experience in profound ways, but perhaps nowhere were these restrictions felt more acutely than within campus fraternities and sororities. Significant restrictions were placed on the activities of these groups, which fundamentally altered the nature of the fraternity/sorority experience.

While a review of headlines can help us understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fraternity/sorority experience, we have little data to help us understand how the changes brought on by the pandemic have impacted the attitudes and behaviors of fraternity/sorority members. The data presented in this report represents some of the first available findings to help us understand some of the deeper, cultural implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The longitudinal data presented in this report were gleaned from three national IFC-affiliated fraternities who are Dyad Strategies partners. The data were gathered during October/November of 2018, 2019 and 2020, and the data gathered in Fall 2020 represents the first large batch of data collected after the campus shutdowns began in March 2020 (Three fraternities are referenced, because the majority of Dyad partners, including all sorority partners, gather data in in early spring and are therefore not included). Table 1 lists the 2020 N and completion percentage of each Fraternity dataset. Surveys were administered electronically via email to all undergraduate members of each fraternity.

Table 1. N and Completion Percentage for 2020 Sample for Fraternities 1-3

| | 2020 N | 2020 Completion % |
|---------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Fraternity 1 | 4,060 | 37% |
| Fraternity 2 | 5,245 | 62% |
| Fraternity 3 | 6,784 | 81% |

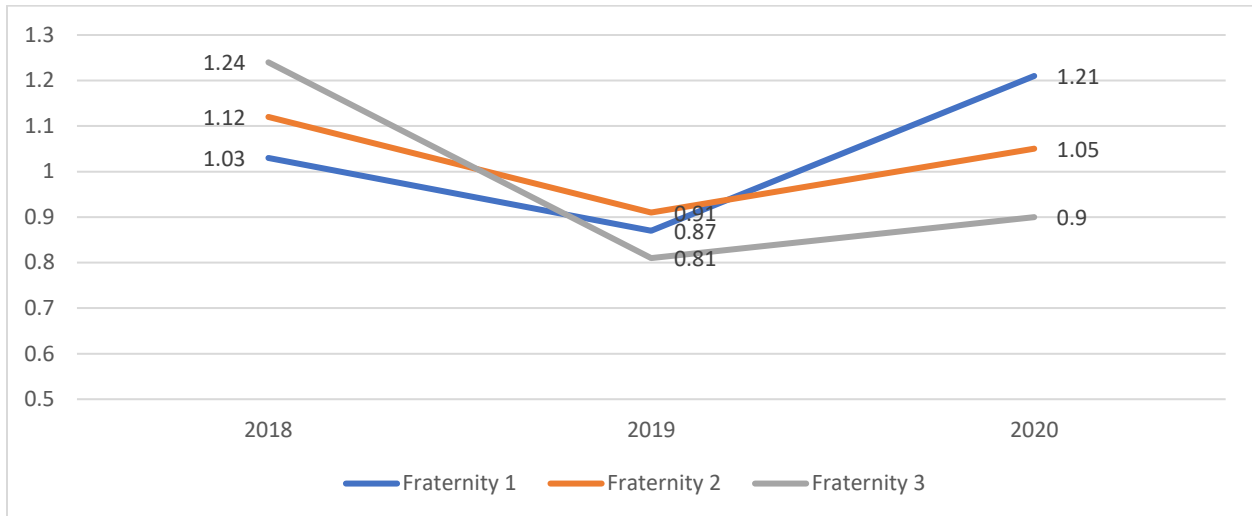
The data gathered in 2020 revealed a number of trends associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many of which were not surprising. Student satisfaction with the fraternity experience decreased. Most forms of brotherhood, particularly brotherhood based on Belonging, decreased. Commitment and identification decreased. During an extended period in which in-person interactions were severely limited, these findings come as no surprise. However, three clear trends emerged in the data, which were both unexpected and problematic. The remainder of this report explores these three trends.

Trend 1 – Increased Alcohol Use

Alcohol consumption among Americans has increased significantly during the pandemic. A recent study by the RAND Corporation found that the frequency of alcohol consumption by adults in the United States has increased 14 percent since the onset of the pandemic. Our data reveal that fraternity members are not immune to this trend. Across the board, members of each fraternity reported increased consumption of alcohol in 2020, both in terms of self-reported

frequency of binge drinking, and in terms of overall consumption. Figure 1 shows the three-year trend in self-reported days per week binge drinking for Fraternities 1-3. Figure 2 shows the three-year trend in overall consumption as reported on the Alcohol Use Disorders Test (AUDIT) Consumption subscale.

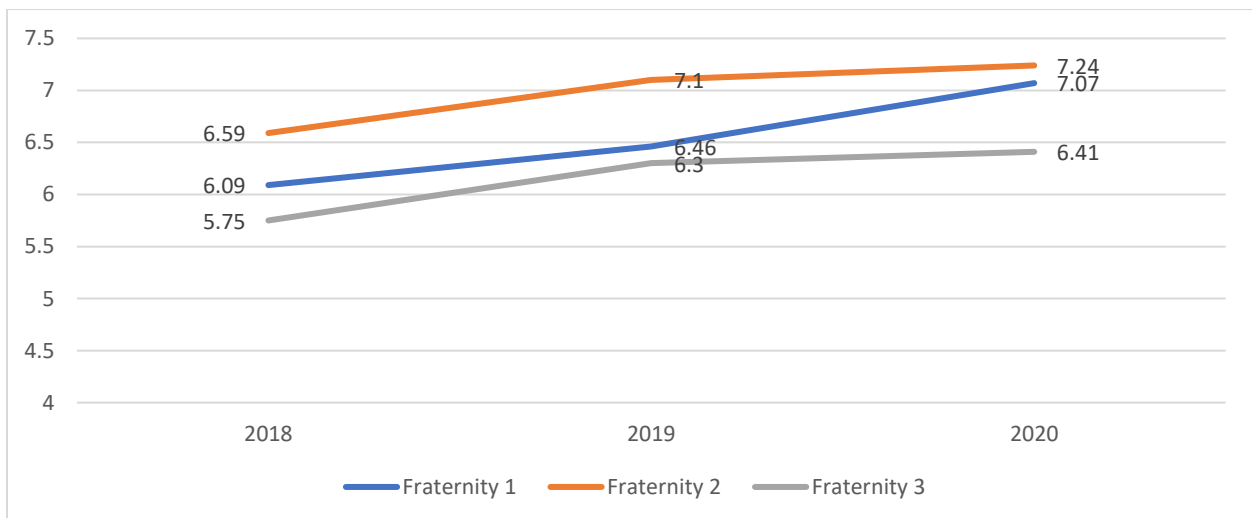
*Figure 1. Trends in Self-Reported Days Per Week Binge Drinking, 2018-2020**



**It should be noted that public health experts consider an AUDIT score higher than 6 as showing signs of alcohol dependency.*

These binge drinking data are especially concerning. Across 12 Dyad Strategies fraternity and sorority clients with longitudinal data, binge drinking has steadily declined every year within every organization since 2016, without exception. These increases in the Fall 2020 data represent the first increases in self-reported binge drinking since we began gathering this data in 2016.

Figure 2. Trends in AUDIT-C Scores (Overall Consumption), 2018-2020

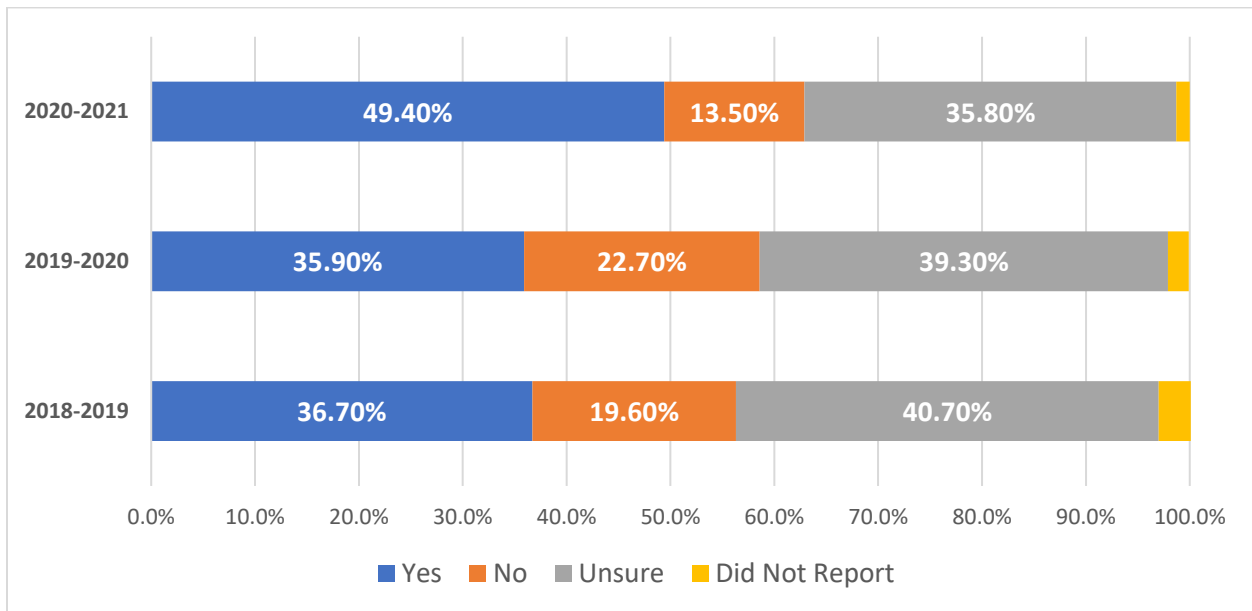


Across all Dyad Strategies partners, the trend with AUDIT-C scores have been less consistent over time – they have increased over time in some organizations, and decreased in others. However, the pattern in the Fall 2020 data are clear – fraternity members are drinking significantly more alcohol and are moving further into the alcohol dependency range.

Trend 2 – Higher Concentration of “Always Joiners”

As part of their Dyad partnership, Fraternity 3 captures data from new members related to their motivations to join, their expectations of membership and their perceptions of fraternities prior to coming to college. One item on this survey asks new members whether or not they knew they wanted to join a fraternity prior to coming to college, to which students may respond “Yes,” “No,” or “Not Sure.” Figure three shows the three-year trend of student motivation to join, and shows significant increase in 2020 of “Always Joiners” – those students who knew they wanted to be in a fraternity prior to coming to college – and corresponding decreases in “Maybe” and “Never” joiners.

Figure 3. Motivation to Join Over Time, Fraternity 1



Previous research has demonstrated that institutional type is a significant predictor of student motivation to join – larger, flagship institutions have higher concentrations of members who knew they wanted to be in a fraternity prior to college. In addition, internal membership data from Fraternity 1 indicated that these large institutions had been the least impacted by the COVID pandemic – most of these campuses hosted some type of virtual recruitment and their membership numbers remained steady compared to smaller regional universities and private colleges, who saw their membership decline. Because of this, we disaggregated the data in Figure 3 by institutional type in order to understand this trend across various institutional types (Power 5 athletic conference institutions, Division 1 institutions not in the Power 5, and all other

institutions). These data are presented in Figures 4-6. To make meaningful comparisons, the data were isolated by semester, and Fall 2020 data were compared to data gathered in Fall 2019.

Figure 4. Changes in Motivation to Join, 2019-2020, Power 5 Institutions

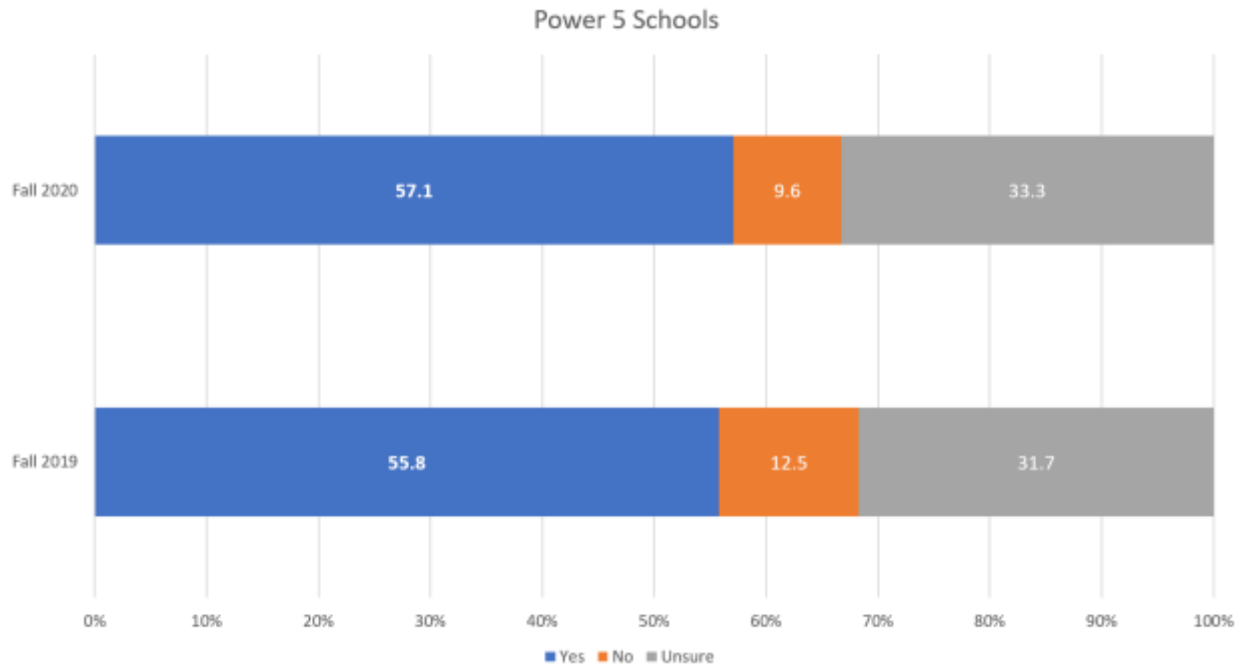


Figure 5. Changes in Motivation to Join, 2019-2020, All Other Division 1 (Group of 5)

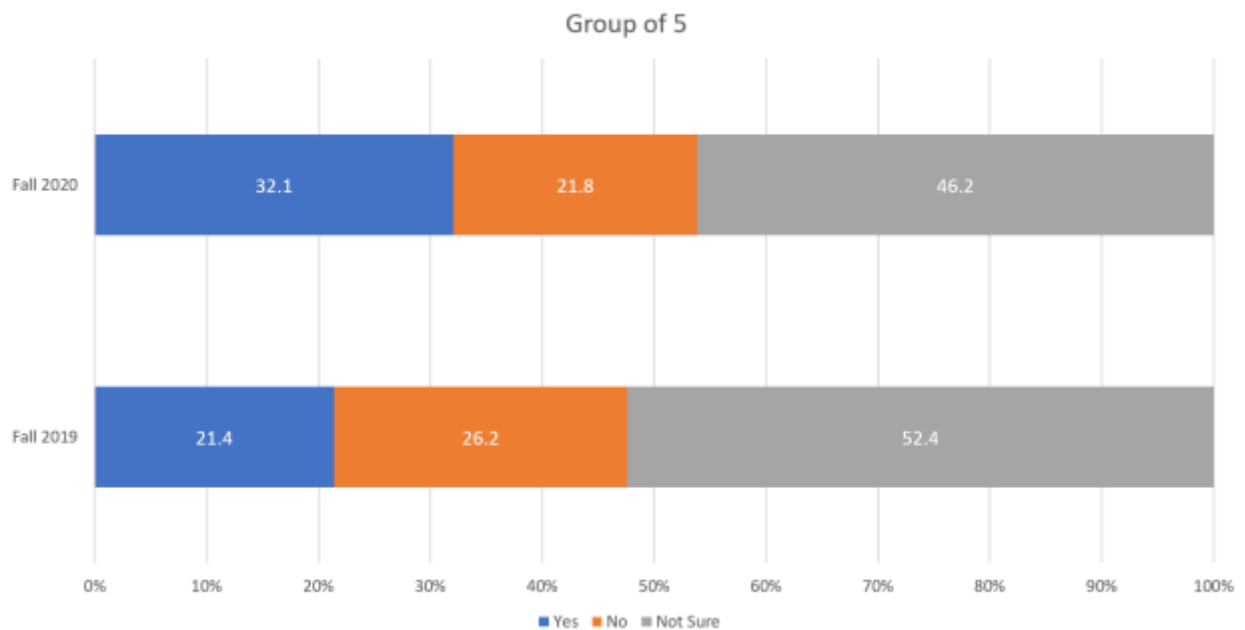
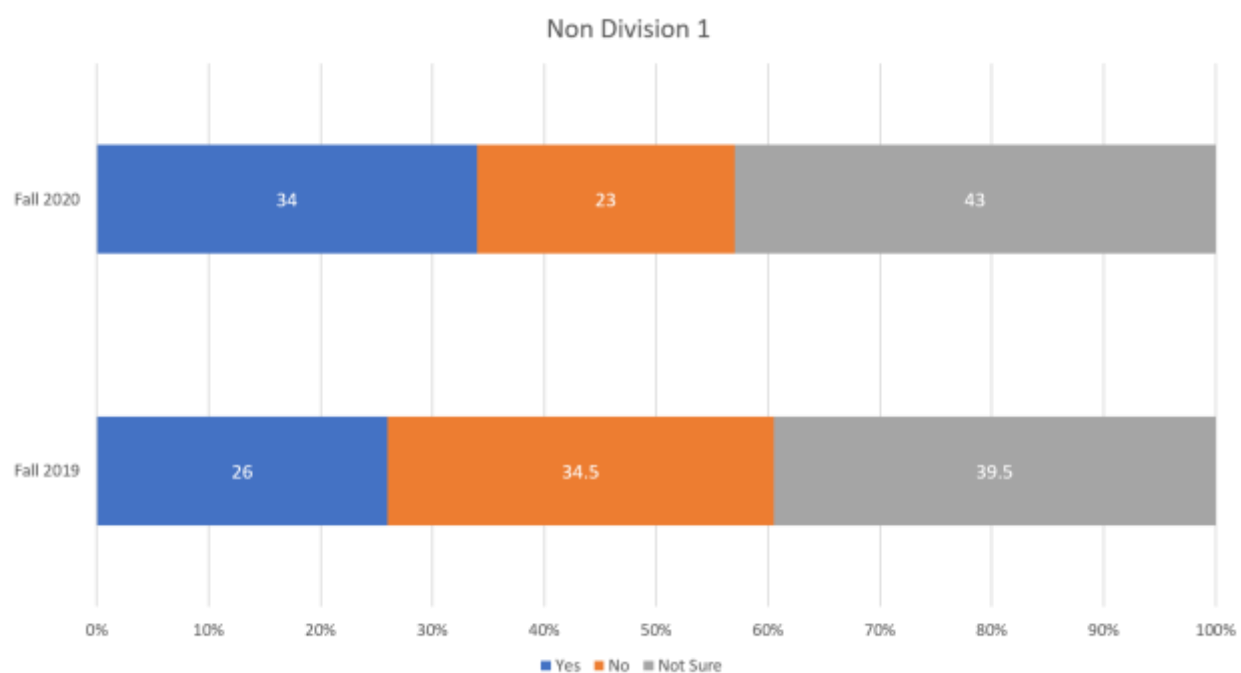


Figure 6. Changes in Motivation to Join, 2019-2020, All Other Institutional Types



The data in Figure 3 are at least partially impacted by the fact that new members at Power 5 institutions made up a larger percentage of the overall number of new members in the fraternity in 2020 compared to 2019. However, the spike in the relative percentage “Always Joiners” cannot be solely attributed to a larger concentration of new members coming from Power 5 Institutions, as both Group of 5 and All Other institutions saw significant increases in the relative percentage of “Always Joiners” in their Fall 2020 new member classes. The increase was the most pronounced in Group of 5 schools, which are generally made up of regional comprehensive public universities.

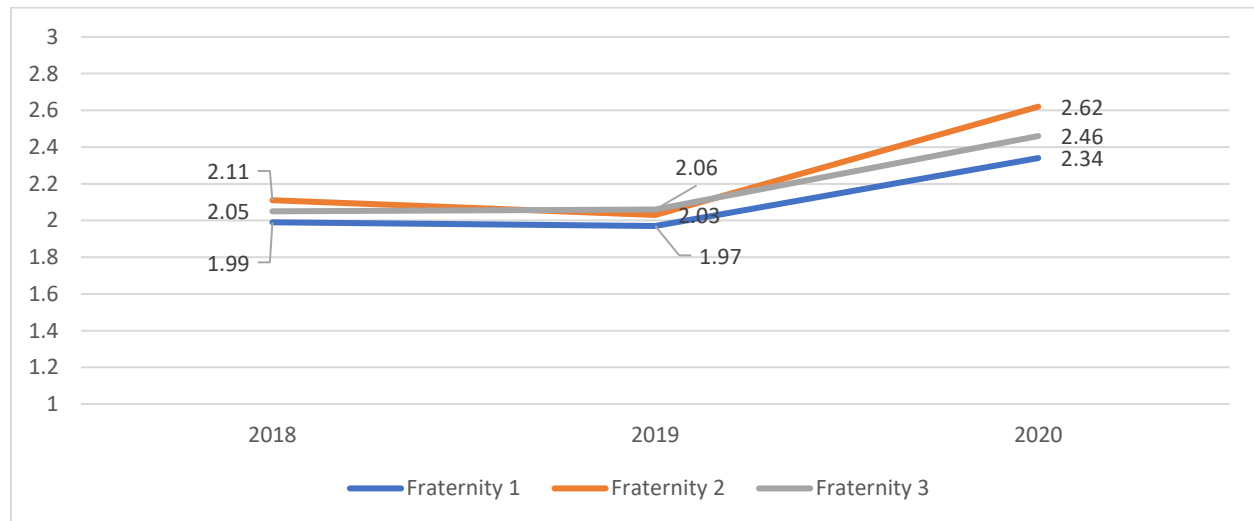
Collectively, these data paint a clear picture – students who were on the fence about joining fraternities were less likely to join in Fall of 2020 because of the pandemic, and as a result, there are higher concentrations of “always joiners” across all institutional types. This is problematic, because our previous research has shown that chapters with higher percentages of always joiners have higher social motivation, drink more, and are more likely to have alcohol-related risk incidents.

Trend 3 – Spikes in Social Dominance Hazing Motivation

Perhaps the most surprising – and concerning – of the trends noted in these data is the significant spike in Social Dominance Hazing Motivation. The Dyad Hazing Motivation Scale measures four different underlying motivations for fraternity hazing – solidarity, loyalty/commitment, instrumental education, and social dominance. Social dominance motivation is connected to feelings that new members must “earn their membership” through activities designed to reinforce the social hierarchy and power structure within the group. Research by McCreary and Schutts (2018) showed that social dominance hazing is the most problematic of the hazing motivations as it is most correlated with hazing tolerance, moral

disengagement, conformity and alcohol use. As noted in Figure 7, social dominance hazing motivation increased significantly in all three fraternities in 2020.

Figure 7. Trends in Social Dominance Hazing Motivation, 2018-2020



Compared to the other post-COVID trends, the spike in social dominance hazing motivation is more difficult to explain. Could it be that fraternity members perceived that Fall 2020 new members “got off easy” and didn’t fully “earn their way in” because of the COVID restrictions, and are now even more motivated to ensure that future new member classes do not have it so easy? If so, this trend could spell trouble for fraternities in the near future.

Implications for Practice

The data in this report provide many implications for practice as well as ongoing research. With regards to increased alcohol use, there are two key concepts that can help us make sense of the potential impacts of this trend. First, alcohol (and drug) use occurs along a continuum. Practitioners must first understand that they have responsibility for all students across that continuum – from abstainers to moderate risk to heavy episodic drinkers to students in long-term recovery. Awareness and understanding of the continuum is important because the data presented in this report highlights a shift – serving as a reminder of the potential long-term implications stemming from the stress and anxiety that many of our students faced in the last year. The most striking potential long-term implication highlighted in this report is the increase of alcohol use towards dependency. The continuum is a useful context for addressing this concern, specifically focusing on recovery. This does not mean every student drinking at higher levels in the last year needs recovery. But it does mean that practitioners need to elevate their knowledge of recovery. In practice, this can be simple – becoming familiar with recovery supports on campus and in the community coupled with learning recovery-friendly language are great places to start.

Secondly, practitioners would be wise to center conversations about alcohol on reasons for use. Our research has shown that all forms of brother/sisterhood decreased over the last year. In general, students feel less connected to one another. Pair this with a report by the Chronicle of Higher Education indicating an increase in student feelings of loneliness, and it becomes clear that ongoing educational interventions should center on healthy coping to help students manage this decrease in meaningful connection in healthier ways. The opportunity exists for practitioners to create space for students to explore their alcohol (and drug) use trends along with their mental health and coping behaviors.

The primary concern with the increased concentration of “always joiners” should center around ensuring chapters reverse this trend in the near future. If the trend is not reversed, an entire generation of maybe and never joiners will be excluded from the fraternity/sorority experience. At the campus level, this involves intentional outreach to the “maybe” and “never joiners” who chose not to join fraternities during 2020 and creating recruitment structures that incentivize and encourage chapters to recruit these students outside of the formal recruitment process. At the national level, this involves incentivizing chapters to work outside of the recruitment process to recruit unaffiliated students, particularly unaffiliated upperclassmen.

Finally, efforts to address the spike in social dominance hazing motivation should center around two concepts. First, it will be important to help students see Fall 2021 as an opportunity to “break the cycle” of hazing within their chapters. Programming should center on rising sophomores (those who joined in Fall 2020), helping them understand the unique opportunity they have to break the problematic cycles in their chapters and to resist temptation to revert to old behaviors. Secondly, programming should directly attack the challenges of the social dominance “earn your letters” mindset, helping students understand the problems with entitlement and apathy produced by such a system. At the national level, groups would be wise to consider policies aimed at reducing the problems associated with social dominance, such as curtailing the length of the new member period, and providing additional guidance/training for new member educators on healthy ways to build brotherhood and belonging through the new member process.

Concluding Thoughts

The trends outlined in this report, while concerning in and of themselves if thought of as independent trends, become even more concerning if thought of as interconnected. That interconnected theory would go something along the lines of, “More socially motivated students joined fraternities during COVID, and because of the stress of navigating college during a pandemic, drank more than they otherwise would have while developing some problematic attitudes about hazing because of a lack of meaningful new member programs during the pandemic.” When thought of in this way, it becomes clear that these trends represent a significant challenge for the future of the fraternity experience that cannot be overstated. To confront these challenges head on, collaboration between and among stakeholders will be key. Never has it been more important that campus officials, national fraternity leadership, volunteers, and public health experts work together to continue to monitor these trends, develop shared strategies aimed at addressing these trends, and help students understand the concern around these trends.

Finally, it will be important to continue to monitor these trends over time, in both fraternities and sororities, to understand the continued impact. As this whitepaper is released, we have multiple organizations and campuses currently gathering what will be the second tranche of post-COVID longitudinal data. This will include the first batch of sorority data. As more datapoints become available, trends will become more clear and the dots between those trends easier to connect. The research team at Dyad Strategies commits to making these data available publicly as they become available, in order to ensure that both campus leadership and national fraternity/sorority headquarters leadership have quality data to help them understand the landscape of the post-pandemic environment for fraternities and sororities.

About Dyad Strategies

Dyad Strategies is a consulting firm specializing in applied research and assessment within the fraternity/sorority industry. They specialize in cultural assessment, measuring student beliefs, attitudes and behaviors related to their fraternity/sorority experience. They are currently partnered with 15 national fraternity/sorority headquarters and have conducted research on over 60 college campuses. For more information about Dyad Strategies, please visit www.dyadstrategies.com.

About the Authors

Gentry McCreary, Ph.D. – Gentry McCreary is the CEO and managing partner of Dyad Strategies. His award-winning research related to hazing, brother/sisterhood and social culture of fraternities and sororities has been published in *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* and the *Journal of Cognition and Culture*. He worked for number of years in higher education/student affairs, including over four years as Director of Greek Life at the University of Alabama. He is a member of Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity.

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Logan Davis, M.A. - Logan Davis is a program coordinator for Dyad Strategies. Logan has worked in higher education for nearly 10 years, working specifically in prevention education with fraternities and sororities for more than 6 years. In addition to his work with Dyad, Logan also serves as the Outreach and Engagement Manager for the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Drug Misuse Prevention and Recovery. Additionally, he assists in the oversight of the National Consortium of State Coalitions, a group of state coalition leaders throughout the country working to advance alcohol and drug prevention in their individual states. Logan is a member of Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity.