

CONNECTIONS

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Fraternal Futures: Empowering Students to Shape the Future of Greek Organizations

By *Laura Hayhoe and Dennis C. Roberts*

With the founding of the first social fraternity in 1825, college students were offered a home away from home, a social outlet, high academic and behavioral expectations, and a way to get involved in the community. Since that time, millions of men and women have entered into Greek organizations, which pride themselves on attracting the best of the best of college populations, and fraternity and sorority members often have higher grade-point averages than nonaffiliated students, higher graduation averages and perform considerable community and philanthropic service. In recent years, however, the number of students interested in joining these organizations has significantly declined. While the exact cause of this decline is not clear, it is obvious that fraternity and sorority members need to be actively involved in protecting their future if the survival of Greek organizations is to be certain in the years to come.

There are both significant advantages and disadvantages to affiliation with fraternal organizations. The disadvantages are often so detrimental to members, organizations, and host institutions that the international headquarters personnel and campus administrators who oversee them take them over in exasperation. However, without student involvement, lasting and deep change is unlikely to take place.

Fundamental change is the only way to resolve the persistent problems that have plagued fraternal organizations. Members have to be drawn from passivity to action



Courtesy of Dennis C. Roberts

Dr. Denny Roberts (second from left) and Laura Hayhoe (second from right) talk with students and colleagues about "Fraternal Futures."

and they have to engage in critical and informed analyses in order to secure a promising future.

Recognizing the problems of traditional methods of change, Miami University, Ohio, requested the assistance of the Kettering Foundation, two years ago, to approach the problem from a grassroots level. Since that time, undergraduate students have helped develop "Fraternal Futures" based on the National Issues Forums model. Querying students, both affiliated and nonaffiliated, parents, faculty, community members, headquarters staff, and campus administrators, students at Miami researched the presumed advantages and disadvantages of fraternity life. Emerging

Members have to be drawn from passivity to action and they have to engage in critical and informed analyses in order to secure a promising future.

Through using the concept of deliberation and active citizen involvement, we believe that the Miami community can engage in respectful and important dialogue, preparing students to be more actively involved in the larger community throughout life.

from this research, students found, were three possible directions for fraternal organizations.

First, undergraduate members could make their organizations more accessible. Opening themselves up to a more diverse membership, new recruitment techniques, and positive public relations, would ensure that fraternal organizations would survive and thrive in the future.

A second approach suggests that undergraduate students examine the founding values of fraternal organizations and the accountability practices for which they hold their members responsible. By establishing standards that members should uphold, and enforcing these expectations, fraternity and sorority members can ensure the survival of their organizations.

The final approach asks affiliated students to examine fraternities and sororities as the campus health and safety hazards they have often become. By making fraternal organizations safer and educating the entire campus community on health and safety issues, these organizations would become invaluable to campus communities, and thus ensure their survival.

Since finalizing the Fraternal Futures model a year ago, approximately 400 undergraduate students have participated in forums to deliberate on the future of fraternal organizations. Undergraduate members of these organizations were trained by the Kettering Foundation and have led deliberations at Miami University, Jacksonville State University of Jacksonville, Alabama, Westminster College of Fulton, Missouri, and Kutztown University of Kutztown,

Pennsylvania. Each campus has been remarkably different, some with high percentages of students affiliated with these

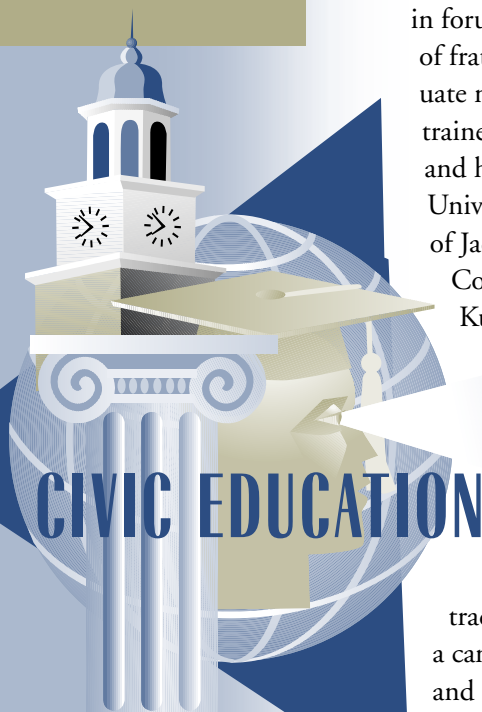
groups, some with Greek populations of less than 1 percent, highly traditional campuses, large campuses, a campus with less than 1,000 students, and commuter campuses. Outcomes of forums on these campuses have varied widely. Despite the difference, however,

each deliberation has demonstrated that students value hearing from others about concerns that affect a system that has become such an integral part of their college experience.

To measure the impact of the Fraternal Futures deliberation, we have utilized pre- and post-forum surveys to analyze the differences in responses elicited before and after the forums. Using a change model based on the writings of educator/consultant A.D. Berkowitz, we ask students to give rated responses to four questions: (1) Do you see a problem? (2) Do you feel you have a role in fixing the problem? (3) Do you believe you have the skills to help solve the problem? (4) Are you committed enough to take action to effect real change? We also ask students to indicate what approach(es) they value, and what tradeoffs they would be willing to accept in realizing positive change for their organizations. Finally, students comment on how their perspectives on fraternal life and citizen participation have changed. On all four campuses, students indicated higher ratings on all four components of Berkowitz's model after deliberating. Additionally, most students were willing to accept tradeoffs entailing longer hours spent with their chapters, but did not want to see the tight brother- or sisterhood bonds they have developed decreased.

As we continue our work at Miami University with the project, we will be reporting results to students, campus staff, and headquarters so that the student voice may be represented in change initiatives on all levels. We are also embarking on a project that uses the "Fraternal Futures" deliberations as a starting point for increased civic engagement on our campus. Through using the concept of deliberation and active citizen involvement, we believe that the Miami community can engage in respectful and important dialogue, preparing students to be more actively involved in the larger community throughout life.

The support provided by the Kettering Foundation in establishing the "Fraternal Futures" initiative provides a way to foster shared leadership for the kind of changes



The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is an operating foundation — not a grant-giving foundation — rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.” The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now — the study of what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required for strengthening public life. Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment.

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