

Study finds sorority rush process negative, membership positive

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College-age women who participate in sorority rush largely describe the process as negative but report a sense of belonging and support once they're in the group, according to research from University of Pennsylvania psychologist Melissa Hunt and Penn alumna Colleen Kase. It's the first work to empirically analyze and confirm the theoretical benefits of sorority membership.

They published their findings in the Spring 2016 issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*.

Hunt and Kase came at the idea of sorority recruitment and membership from opposing views. As a researcher, Hunt has studied what's called the rejection penalty, the cost to an individual's [self esteem](#) and other areas after being denied entry into a sought-after group. She surmised that rush participants who didn't ultimately succeed suffered adverse consequences. Kase, a Penn senior while conducting the work and now a research coordinator in Drexel University's Psychology Department, was president of her sorority and had a positive experience within the Greek system.

"We put our heads together," Hunt said.

They decided to look at sorority recruitment at Penn, emailing every incoming freshman woman to ask about her personality traits, self esteem, feelings of social support and psychopathology, as well as rush plans for spring semester, when the process at the University occurs.

Immediately, three groups emerged. The first planned to participate. These undergrads tended to be outgoing and extroverted, reporting they already felt an overall sense of belonging on campus. The second, who had no interest in Greek life, varied more than the first in personality but generally didn't express feelings of depression or anxiety and felt inclusion from sources outside the sorority system.

On this continuum, a third group fell directly in the middle. "It was these girls who were the most interesting," Hunt said. "They were lowest in agreeableness and extraversion, highest in psychopathology and lowest in sense of belonging. It seems like those are the girls who would benefit the most, in principle, from a sorority."

But did they actually?

To find out, the researchers polled respondents three more times: just before recruitment, immediately after and a few months later. The answers revealed a nearly unanimous response. It was stress-inducing, demoralizing and for some, Hunt said, "downright demeaning."

"You can see negative effects from just that one week of recruitment. That's really striking," Kase said. "It's talked about anecdotally as being a pretty tough process to go through."

The Penn researchers now had proof. But they also learned, as Kase had hypothesized, that sorority participation confers benefits on members once that initial period ends.

"The girls who were in a sorority did feel a sense of belonging. They felt a sense of support," Hunt said. "The sorority did deliver on the social benefits that, in principle, it is there to provide."

The women who gleaned the most were those in the first group—socially

successful, likely to get those needs filled anyway, regardless of sorority participation. Women from the middle group who did participate in rush were least likely to receive a bid and most likely to experience the rejection penalty. In other words, those who, in theory, could have gained the most were least likely to be able to access membership benefits.

Only about a quarter of incoming freshman women at Penn responded to the survey. Even so, Hunt said the findings could apply to similar universities though she hesitates to generalize to different types of colleges. "I'm not sure how applicable this would be to a school with much more or less dominant Greek life, a much larger school, a much smaller school," she said.

Kase said she believes it's clear that at the national level, the recruitment process must be adjusted. Currently, anyone who wants to join a sorority must visit all options on campus, even those of no interest to her, which increases the opportunity for rejection. Kase suggests removing that mandate. The researchers also propose making new member classes larger or providing more overall sorority spots.

"Thousands of women across the country go through this every year," Kase said. "If this is true more broadly, that it's such a negative process, then something needs to change."

More information: [c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.afa1976...
OracleSpring2016.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.afa1976...OracleSpring2016.pdf)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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