

Study explores Greek membership on political orientation, activism

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A University of Iowa study finds that fraternity and sorority members are more conservative and less likely to shift their views by graduation than their peers. Credit: Kirk Murray

Colleges are often perceived as leaning left, but research by social scientists at the University of Iowa suggests the reality is more nuanced and that higher education attracts students from across the political spectrum.

The researchers say fraternities and sororities in particular tend to be a locus for students who are more conservative than [classmates](#) unaffiliated with the Greek system. They also provide a buffer from influences that can make students more liberal over the course of their college careers.

Study co-author Michael Hevel, an alumnus of the University of Iowa College of Education and currently an assistant professor of [higher education](#) at the University of Arkansas, are presenting the research on Thursday, Nov. 15, at the Association for the Study of Higher Education conference in Las Vegas along with UI College of Education graduate research assistants Dustin Weeden and Kira Pasquesi.

Both Weeden and Pasquesi are graduate students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs

Program in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, the same program from which Hevel obtained his doctorate.

The researchers say family income and means and the presence of "legacies" in fraternities and sororities that reinforce tradition, combined with the tight-knit environment of the Greek system, may help explain why members enter school with more conservative views and retain them through graduation.

The findings are included in a paper titled, "The Conservative Corner of the Liberal Academy? New Evidence of the Effects of Fraternity and Sorority Membership on Political Orientation and Social/[Political Activism](#)." The paper will be submitted soon to a journal, although the results are being presented for the first time at the conference, which is standard practice.

The UI team sampled 2,092 students who attended 17 different four-year institutions—public and private—between 2006 and 2010. From that sample, the researchers estimated the effect of being in a fraternity or sorority on [political orientation](#) and social or political activism, which was defined using an 11-item scale that included criteria such as the importance of influencing social values, involvement in community leadership and keeping up-to-date with political affairs.

Using quantitative analysis, the team discovered, that on average, fraternity and sorority members enter college with more conservative political views than their peers. And while their peers became more liberal over four years of college, Greeks remained more conservative. Additionally, fraternity men indicated they were less socially and politically active than college students overall.

Weeden says the findings are important because political self-identification is a strong indicator of how people will vote, and because knowing

students' ideological views provides a richer understanding of the country's political makeup.

Hevel says the research also counters the notion that college campuses are uniformly liberal.

"This study reminds us that not everyone affiliated with colleges and universities, and certainly not all students, hold liberal political beliefs," he says. "It suggests that colleges and universities are more politically complicated spaces than the general perception would have us believe."

The most recent major study to explore the impact of Greek membership on students' political affiliation was published two decades ago based on [students](#) who entered college in 1985. Though the study didn't explore voting behavior, it found fraternity and sorority members were more conservative than their unaffiliated peers.

Provided by University of Iowa

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