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Prospectus

**The Culture of Greek Life**

**Introduction**

Social Greek organizations can influence and impact a college students experience during their undergraduate career, as well as help ones quality of life. Greek organizations consist of fraternities and sororities that are commonly single-sex organizations at United States universities (Verster, 2009). They promote scholarship, brother/sisterhood and social activities. Greek organizations “can foster friendship, community service and leadership” (Belkin, 2011, p.2). Each Greek organization has artifacts, rituals and stories that a help create their organizations culture.

Therefore, the communication phenomenon that will be explored is how Greek organization’s cultures influence the member’s perceptions of their grades and academics as a whole. This will impact previous research on the Cultural Approach of Organizations and help analyze the different aspects of the organizations culture by looking at their artifacts, rituals and stories.

**Greek Life**

Social Greek organizations have many positive aspects such gaining leadership skills, friendships and giving great networking opportunities. Many organizations also strongly encourage academics. Greek organization can be one of the most important and influential programs at a university. Students that participate in Greek organizations tend be required to keep a certain average of academic standards and maintain it throughout their membership in the organization (Karas, 2011).

However, Greek organizations tend to have to a negative influence and/or negative stereotypes on college students as well. These negative views are due to events occurring within Greek organizations such as binge drinking, and academic failures. According to Belkin (2011) the Princeton University’s president stated that their school has found that Greek organizations “can contribute to a sense of social exclusivity and privilege and socioeconomic stratification among students. In some cases, they place an emphasis on activities that encourage high-risk drinking”. (p.1-2).

My communication phenomenon is important to study because academic achievements during the course of an undergraduate career prepare students with the tools needed for future endeavors. Often times however, undergraduates tend to be distracted from their academics by being involved in organizations such as Greek life. For example according to Belkin (2011) freshman affiliated in Greek organizations are very vulnerable to pressures involving drinking excessively and are not able to have the full experiences of exploring other interests and academics in college (p.1). The purpose of this study will be to identify and analyze how the cultures within fraternities and sororities influence the member’s perceptions of their own grades and academic as a whole.

**Theoretical Grounding**

Griffin (2009) defines Cultural Approach to Organizations as how ”organizations consist of a particular culture where the meanings are shared between individuals. The culture is constructed between members of the organization through learned stories, rituals and artifacts” (p.240). Therefore the stories, rituals and artifacts throughout Greek organizations are shared through the members (sisters and brothers) thus creating their organizations culture.

There are three types of stories within organizations cultures; however this research will only discuss two types of stories told. The first type of stories are personal stories which are tales told by members of an organization that put them in a positive light. These stories then help identify who the member is within the organization (Griffin, 2009). The second types of stories are collegial stories, which can be positive or negative stories discussing other members within their organization. The stories are descriptions of how things truly are in the organization without putting a member in a more favorable light than another (Griffin, 2009). Miller (2012) has other important key terms that are a part of Cultural Approaches to Organizations such as rituals which are ceremonies to celebrate the values of an organization and then there are artifacts which are things that are produced and/or used by members that say something about the organization collectively, such as a Creed, a pin, etc. (p.86).

The different aspects of Cultural Approaches of Organizations identified by Griffin and Miller will assist in framing the research study. Since members of Greek life have their own culture within their organizations, the different aspects of the theory will properly fit with the research being conducted. By looking at organizations rituals and artifacts such as their Creed, in which Greek organizations say they “live by”, it will help examine how it is used and valued. This theory will also help identify if academics are a part of their stories, artifacts or rituals and if so, if it is enforced. Lastly, it will help examine how the members of Greek organizations culture influence their perceptions of their own grades and academics as a whole.

**The Ups and Downs of Greek Life**

When conducting research concerning culture within organizations, the first step is to review literature and research conducted by scholarly sources pertaining to similar topics. The information gathered by these scholars will then help frame the study and fill the gap. The following literature review is structured by themes that relate and support this study.

**Negatives**

**Alcohol**

One of the main negative aspects associated with Greek organizations is alcohol. Pike (2003) conducted a quantitative study by giving participants surveys to examine how memberships in Greek organizations influence engagement and academics. Through his research he found that “in the past 4 decades, the roles in fraternities and sororities on campus have come under increasing scrutiny. Critics of the Greek system have pointed to research showing that membership in a fraternity or sorority is associated with higher levels of alcohol use (Pike, 2003, p.369).

A qualitative study conducted by Cho (2010), investigated how members of fraternities create problems of high risk drinking and how to solve those problems by communication. Cho did his research by having focus groups with members of different fraternities in each group. “Of college students, members of the Greek community drink more than nonmembers and within the community, fraternity members drink more excessively than sororities” (Cho, 2010, p.212). Similarly, Phua (2010) conducted a quantitative study aiming to examine the pressures of peers and popularity involving smoking and drinking within fraternity members. The researcher found that fraternities are most often associated with alcohol and that students who did not binge drink precollege were three times more likely to start if they joined a social fraternity. Out of the participants studied the average age was 20.1 years old which is under the legal age in the United States. Out of the participants studied, 50% of those participants drink 3 to 4 drinks a day (p.6).

To summarize, researchers found that Greek life, fraternities specifically, tend to influence members to drink alcohol. The members in the organization find drinking alcohol part of their culture, therefore members tend to drink to gain relationships and experience bonds within their organization. The norm of alcohol drinking then tends to become excessive and members start to binge drink.

**Prioritizing**

Sometimes members of Greeks organizations prioritize their organization first before their academics and/or other organizations they are involved in. Yin and Lei (2007) conducted a quantitative study intending to compare how undergraduate student’s involvement on campus affects their satisfaction of academics and their own academic status compared to those uninvolved. The researchers gave their participants surveys and found that overall students who are involved in campus activities have a lower academic success compared to students who do not participate in campus activities. The researchers also found that students who were more involved on campus did not have an increase in their overall happiness in their campus activities. The researchers discussed how students who are overly involved on college campuses tend to not have enough time and energy left for their academics hence the reason why those involved tend to have lower academic grades (p.290). Furthermore, Pike (2003) discussed that in the past four decades, members of the Greek community tend to have “lower levels of academic achievement” compared to students not affiliated with Greek organization; often due to the members being overly involved (p.369). “Students who frequently engage in campus involvement experienced a decline in overall GPAs” (Yin & Lei, 2007, p.282).

To summarize, researchers found that many Greek members found it hard to balance their involvement in their Greek organization and the demands of their academics and/or other obligations. Greek organization often take up a lot of time therefore leading members to lack energy to focus on their academics and which then often affects the members overall grades negatively.

**Positives**

**Social Support/Community**

Students in college tend to experience home sickness and have quite a culture shock when they first attend a college; therefore students often join Greek organizations. The members of the Greek organizations tend to form close bonds due to having a secret connection and ritual that no one else is knowledgeable of, as well as being with their fellow members frequently. This helps prevent students from getting home sick and having the culture shock of college. A qualitative study conducted by Lin (2006), investigated how Chinese’s students deal with culture shock and social support in Chinese organizations on campus. The researcher found through his observations and interviews that student organizations for international student’s help students cope with culture shock because they receive social support and gain friendships quickly (p.118). This study by Lin shows that by joining organizations on campus, students tend to receive more support and friendships, which then leads them to cope with their homesickness and/or culture shock.

Furthermore, a quantitative study conducted through questionnaires by Mehdinezhad (2001) was done to explain how first year student’s engagement affects their college experience. The researcher found that students feel a sense of community within their college or university if they are engaged in activities on campus, such as Greek organizations (p.47). Quantitative research conducted by Woodward, Rosenfeld and May (1996) was aimed to compare the differences in social supports within fraternities and sororities. Through questionnaires given to multiple sorority and fraternity members, the researchers found that sororities were more satisfied with the emotional support of their sisters and listening support; however fraternity members were not satisfied with their emotional and listening support from their brothers. This study explores how important the social supports of Greek organizations are to keep the relationships close and bring organizational members together as a culture (Woodward, Rosenfeld & May, 1996). Similarly, Kuh Cruce, Shoup, Kinizie and Gonyea (2008) conducted a quantitative study by surveying students to see if engagement on campus affected first year student’s grade point averages as well as their chances of returning to campus for their second year. The researchers found that student’s engagement on campus made students happier during their first year; therefore they were more likely to return for their sophomore year of college (p.548). This research study shows how much an organization, such as a sororities or fraternities, can affect a student’s satisfaction with their college experiences and how much closer they feel to the college and their peers.

To summarize, researchers found organizations, specifically Greek organizations, help students feel an immediate sense of community. They have an instant support system and gain friendships easily. This then prevent students from getting homesick and helps cope with the culture shock of living on a college campus.

**Academic Success**

Although academic success seems to contradict the negatives listed above, the following studies have shown that Greek life can truly benefit student’s academic achievements as well. Several Greek organizations are required to maintain a certain cumulative GPA to stay an active member of their sorority. If they do not make the required GPA, the member could potentially be on academic probation and/or not be able to attend social events. Some Greek organizations have to quit their sorority, if they do not obtain the required academic standings (Pike, 2003). By these rules often being enforced, many members have high grades throughout their college career.

According to research conducted by Pike (2003), Greek students who are seniors reported making greater gains in their academic achievements than the independent students. The researcher also found that all Greeks, both first-year students and seniors, tend to be more satisfied with their personal development than non Greek students. The quantitative study by Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinizie and Gonyea found an increase, .04, in the students GPAs that were more engaged in activities on campus their first year in college compared to those unengaged in activities on campus their first year of college (p.548-550).

To sum up, researchers found that although the culture of Greek organizations can often cause a lack of academics success due to over involvement and/or time, Greek organization also help member’s academic achievements. The members that are most successful tend to be seniors and freshman and also those members that are very engaged in their organization tend to have higher GPAs.

**Research Gap**

Present studies have examined how Greek organizations influence the member’s academic success. Some of the influences are positive such as social support and the enforcement of grades, however often times there are often negative influences such as binge drinking. All of these influences are valid and will help solidify my research. However researchers have not looked into how Greek organizations artifacts, rituals and stories influence the member’s perceptions on academics. I believe this to be an important gap in research. This study will dig deeper to analyze how artifacts such as the Creed, rituals such as ceremonies and stories told within in Greek organizations, influence the perceptions of academics. Therefore, it is important to study how Greek organizations cultures influence the member’s perceptions of grades and overall academics.

**Methodology**

For the purpose of this study, the qualitative method has been selected to gather data to help fill the gap in the research. A qualitative study is most practical to this research because it will help analyze and identify how Greek organizations cultures influence the member’s perceptions of academics. This research will go more in depth than past studies and will highlight how artifacts, rituals and stories influence members. Then, I will be analyzing artifacts, rituals and stories within Greek organizations. The research questions below have been created to direct my research and help analyze and identify the cultures within Greek organizations.

*RQ1:* *How is academic success implemented within your Greek organization, if at all?*

This research question was developed to help identify if academics are an importance to the Greek organization. By examining if they are, it will also help identity if the organizations implementations affect their perceptions of academics. This question will also help identify if there are harsh or no rules/regulations involving academics for organizations. Lastly, by asking “how”, this question will help identify what artifacts, rituals or stories implement academics in their organization.

*RQ2: Does your organization influence your perceptions on academics? Please Explain.*

This research question was developed to examine how organizations influence member’s perceptions of academics in a positive or a negative light. This will help identify what artifacts, stories and rituals in the organizations influence their perceptions.

**Participants**

To complete my research I plan to conduct interviews with Longwood University students who are members of social Greek organizations that are nationally recognized. I will interview both male and female members of Greek organizations from ages 18-27 years old. The members can range from being newly initiated members to alumni of Greek organizations.

**Procedure**

Within qualitative research, it is often practical for researchers to conduct their studies through interviews. “Interviews are frequently used for discovering how participants think, feel and for understanding their points of view (Keyton, 2011). This method will be used to help understand the participant’s perceptions of academics for my research.

I plan to conduct face-to-face interviews with as many as 15-20 participants. I choose this amount of participants to interview due to Keyton (2011) stating when populations are very specialized, researchers can gather as few as 10-20 participants for an interview. I plan on conducting interviews because I think there would be a great deal of competitiveness between different organizations if I were to have focus groups. Members would not want to discuss how academics are not enforced and/or important in their culture, etc. if members of other Greek organizations are in sight. This is due to the competitiveness of academics and overall achievement within the Greek life organizations at Longwood University. Another reasoning for conducting interviews is that participants in focus groups tend come to a quick consensus with others because some participants are timid to communicate their opinions that are opposite of the opinions of the other participants (Keyton, 2011). Participants need to feel comfortable so they are able to have deep conversations about their culture face-to-face with the interviewer. Each Greek organization has many rituals, artifacts and stories since most of organizations have existed for many years; therefore it’s better to have interviews with only one member to discuss their organizations rituals and artifacts.

I will focus most of my questions on topics involving artifacts, rituals and stories within their organizations. Many questions will be asking the participants to discuss their Creed and the importance of it and also if it emphasizes academics. This will help fill the research gap by showing the differences between Greek organizations and how each organizations rituals, stories and artifacts influence member’s perceptions on academics. During the interviews I plan on recording the data by typing the notes electronically during the interviews. I will have an assistant there with me to make the interview participants more comfortable and also to help me take notes on the data. I may also use a recorder if my participants approve of being recording during the interview; this way I will not forget and/or miss any important data.

**Conclusion**

Within Greek organizations cultures, there are many positive and negative influences concerning academics. These influences often give members of Greek organizations different perceptives on the importance of academics and their grades. Therefore, it is imperative that Greek organizations cultures be analyzed to see how it influences the member’s perceptions on their grades and academics as a whole. Interviews will be used to discover the data for the research. Filling this gap is important because it will show members of Greek organizations how their artifacts, stories and rituals truly impact their perceptions of academics.

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**Appendix A:**

**Interview Questions**

1. Does your Creed encourage academic success? And if so explain how.

* Explanation: This question will help fulfill my research by examining if organizations Creeds (artifact) discuss academics and if so, if so how does their Creed state it. This question will also help examine if their Creed is implement. Due to some participants not knowing whether of not their Creed discusses academics.

1. What are your organizations policies involving academics?
   1. Do you think they are fair?
   2. Do you think they are appropriate?

* Explanation: These questions will help fulfill my research by investigating the policies each organization has involving their academics as individuals and as a whole organization. This will help me identify how the members feel about the rules they are given within their organization; whether it is rules by their nationals, the university or by their own chapter. This will then also help examine how important the members find these rituals and artifacts to be and how these rules/regulation influence their perceptions of their grades and academics as a whole.