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# Going Greek: Academics, Personal Change, and Life after College

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# GOING GREEK

## ACADEMICS, PERSONAL CHANGE, AND LIFE AFTER COLLEGE

BY WESLEY ROUTON AND JAY WALKER

### In Short

- “Going Greek” has both positive and negative effects during college and after graduation. Greek members are more involved on campus and have higher post-graduation wages (males only) and more graduate-school attendance than non-affiliated students.
- Greek-letter membership also correlates with increased retention and a shorter time to graduation, although it does not have a sizeable impact on GPA.
- Students who were more involved in high school often join Greek organizations. On campus, fraternity and sorority membership leads to greater campus involvement, even after controlling for student background.
- Members’ opinions change as they begin to identify with the group.
- Some negative effects of membership include more drinking during college, more time spent partying, and more excessive drinking post-college (for males).
- After graduation, Greek membership in college is not associated with being employed at greater rates, although it is associated with higher income levels for males.

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**S**ocial Greek-letter organizations, more commonly known as fraternities (male-only) and sororities (female-only), are a long-standing tradition at colleges and universities in the United States. They claim to instill leadership skills in and offer a support network for members.

And indeed, many students who joined Greek organizations during college have gone on to serve their respective communities in important ways, some in powerful and influential positions. The North American Interfraternity Conference (2015) reports that half of the top ten of Fortune 500 CEOs are—and 44 percent of American Presidents, 31 percent of Supreme Court Justices, and 39 senators and 106 Congressmen in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress have been—Greeks.



These accomplishments notwithstanding, Greek-letter organizations, particularly fraternities, are known in popular culture for less positive attributes. Stories about high-profile crimes and misdemeanors are not in short supply: They include alcohol abuse at the University of Tennessee (Jacobs, 2012), student hazing at Baruch College (Connor, 2015), and sexual assault at Wesleyan University (Flanagan, 2014). These and many other examples seem to give credence to the “Animal House” lifestyle that is often associated with social Greek-letter organizations.

So what *are* the effects of joining a fraternity or sorority? The first problem educational researchers and administrators have in addressing this question is untangling causation from correlation. Some researchers, not to mention most journalists, who discuss Greek organizations treat the behaviors of their members as having been caused by that membership, when membership and those behaviors may simply correlate with each other.

For example, it is a well-established finding that Greek members drink alcohol more often and in greater quantities than the average college student. It could be the case that membership indeed results in increased alcohol consumption. But it could also be true, wholly or in part, that students who choose to join these organizations are predisposed to relatively higher consumption levels (they join because they intend to drink more often than their peers and want to be around similar students). Much recent academic research, including our own, has attempted to incorporate advanced empirical techniques that control for relevant factors to more accurately estimate the impacts of Greek membership on students.

Between us, we have completed five studies pertaining to the effects of Greek membership, two of which have been published. One (Routon & Walker, 2014) focuses on the academic and other collegiate effects of membership; another on members’ personal view shifts and self-perceptions of changes in their skills; a third on post-collegiate labor-market effects; a fourth on post-baccalaureate health, marriage, and educational outcomes; and a final one (Walker, Martin, & Hussey, 2015) on the effects of Greek membership on college students at an elite university.

One might expect Greek membership to influence several aspects of a student’s life during college and beyond. Our own research on Greeks, and thus our discussion here, can be divided into three categories: academic and other collegiate effects, view and skill changes, and post-collegiate effects.

## COLLEGIATE EFFECTS

### Alcohol and Partying

With so much media attention focused on alcohol abuse among Greeks and the misconduct often associated with it, we begin our discussion with this troubling issue. There have been at least two studies prior to our own that focused on Greek membership and drinking behavior (DeSimone, 2007/2009). After controlling for prior drinking habits and other variables, these studies found a causal relationship

“Overall, studies seem to confirm the Greek + alcohol stereotype.”

between membership and increased and more frequent alcohol consumption.

In our own analysis of within-college Greek effects, we found that fraternity members are about 14 percentage points more likely to report they drink beer “frequently,” while for sorority members this effect is a bit smaller, at about 9 percentage points (Routon & Walker, 2014). From the same study, we discovered that fraternity members are about 11 percentage points more likely than their non-Greek fellow students to frequently imbibe wine and liquor, while for sorority members this effect is about 8 percentage points. This may be in part because fraternities spend 1.9 hours per week (sororities: 1.1 hours) more than non-Greeks partying (Routon & Walker, 2014).

Our analysis included students from over 450 American colleges and universities. However, a study using only a sample from a single elite institution, Duke University, found that while Greeks do spend more time partying during college, they do not drink and use illicit drugs in greater volumes (Walker, Martin, & Hussey, 2015). Thus, the estimated effects above cannot be considered universal. Still, overall, studies seem to confirm the Greek + alcohol stereotype.

### Campus Involvement

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in one of our studies we found strong evidence that future Greeks place a higher value on a college’s social reputation when choosing an institution than their peers do; they also allocate a greater number of hours to student clubs and organizations during high school (Routon & Walker, 2014). It likely follows that social-life expectations are a significant determinant of selection into Greek organizations (Walker, Martin, & Hussey, 2015).

Alexander Astin’s seminal 1984 article on student involvement argues that the more students are engaged in campus activities, the more they gain from their undergraduate education. Multiple studies show that “going Greek” corresponds to involvement in a greater number of non-Greek campus organizations.

Our own study confirmed that Greek membership is associated with higher student-government participation rates, at about 7 and 4 percentage points for males and females, respectively (Routon & Walker, 2014). Students who go Greek are not only more involved during high school—after controlling for these and other relevant factors, Greek life appears to encourage students to join additional student organizations.

## Academic Outcomes

Recent years have seen increased focus on retention, time to degree, and graduation rates. According to Complete College America (2014), only 36 percent of students at flagship state universities and 19 percent at non-flagship state universities graduate within four years. Indeed, only 56 percent of students finish within six years (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011).

While it is certainly not the solution for everyone, Greek membership can increase the likelihood of graduating within four years by about five percentage points for both genders (Routon & Walker, 2014). The study of Duke students found that going Greek increased the probability that they would maintain full-time status by nine percentage points and their graduation probability by seven percentage points (Walker, Martin, & Hussey 2015).

We hypothesize that the requirement at many Greek chapters that members retain full-time status to remain affiliated, the members' greater involvement on campus, and the support network that the chapters provide these students with all play a part in these positive effects. It is true that Greeks have parents with higher incomes than non-Greeks (Routon & Walker, 2014) and that financial difficulty is the main reason students claim they drop out of college (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). However, both our national study and the Duke study controlled for differences in financial variables such as household (and parental) income, scholarship and student-loan amounts, and labor-market status.

Student grade-point averages (GPAs) are the most commonly used measure of academic success. As mentioned, Greeks generally consume more alcohol than other students, participate in a greater number of extracurricular activities, and spend a greater number of hours partying and socializing. So it is perhaps surprising that we found no difference in the average number of hours spent studying per week associated with Greek status (Routon & Walker, 2014).

We also found no GPA effects for sorority members and only a -0.05 point GPA effect for fraternity members at graduation (Routon & Walker, 2014). The Duke study found no GPA effect for either gender, perhaps because Duke students are of higher academic ability than that of the average student in the national college student pool (Walker, Martin, & Hussey, 2015).

Another measure of academic success is a student's graduate school admission-exam score. Unlike GPAs, these test scores are comparable across colleges, but of course not all students attempt these exams. We examined scores on the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, and MCAT across Greek status and found no statistically significant differences for any of the four exams (Routon & Walker, 2014).

It does appear from our 2014 study that Greek membership slightly increases the desire to attend graduate school. After controlling for relevant student differences, fraternity members were about 3 percentage points and sorority members about 2 percentage points more likely than non-Greeks to report at the time of graduation that they wanted a graduate degree.

## VIEW CHANGES AND SKILL GAINS

### Opinions

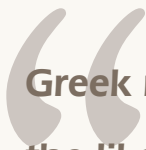
As students join and maintain their membership in Greek organizations, their personal views and opinions change as they begin to identify with the group. Greek organizations are often insular—over time, members associate more frequently with other members than with non-Greeks. DeSantis (2007, p. 21) explains that Greeks can expect a “stable, homogeneous group of brothers and sisters” after joining.

A widely read article by Akerlof and Kranton (2005) offers a review of the literature on and discussion of how personal identity can affect economic and other important outcomes. In short, self-identification affects one's views and decisions. When individuals join a group, Greek or otherwise, and associate with other members, they may begin to change their identities and evaluate their own behavior as appropriate or not from their new point of view (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Champions of Greek organizations also claim that they instill certain “soft skills” (leadership ability, interpersonal skills, etc.) that are rarely captured through traditional academic measures such as grades.

In a soon-to-be-published study, we examined both of these ideas. That is, we estimated the effects of Greek organization membership on several social and economic opinions, as well as on self-perceived skill and knowledge gains during college.

We collected data on well over 100,000 students from over 450 US colleges and universities. As in all of our studies, we controlled for a long list of student variables to better ensure that we were capturing the effects of going Greek—e.g., pre-college student characteristics, institutional characteristics, parental characteristics, and within-college variables such as major and academic success. In this analysis in particular, we added students' pre-college views, as well as variables that are known to affect social opinions such as religion, political leaning, etc.

Our most surprising finding concerned the social opinions of male college students at matriculation—that is, before they had joined a Greek organization. The male students who later chose to go Greek were a *more* diversified group when it came to their social opinions than males who did not do so. For females, differences across future Greek status were negligible.



**Greek membership can increase  
the likelihood of graduating within  
four years.**

But going Greek changed a handful of opinions. As might have been anticipated given prevailing stereotypes, Greek membership leads to more liberal views for both genders on the acceptability of casual sex and the legalization of marijuana. Contrary to stereotypes, membership appears to make male students *less* likely to believe that they are entitled to sex when they have been “led on.” Sexual assault is one of the areas which fraternities receive the most negative attention, and many of their national organizations devote resources to member education along these lines. Perhaps this finding is a result of those efforts.

Another gender-specific social view was shown to be affected by membership. Both male and female members more often rejected the idea that the activities of women are “best confined to the home and family,” and they become even more opposed to this sentiment during college than non-Greek students do.

Another hot-button topic for which fraternities and sororities receive criticism is race relations, perhaps because many chapters have *de facto* segregated membership. In our study of student views, we found that membership increased the likelihood that both males and females believe that racial discrimination is *no longer* a national issue in the United States, compared to almost 90 percent of graduating seniors who believed racial discrimination remains a national issue.

Overall, these view effects of membership are mostly small in magnitude. It seems that variables other than Greek membership are more likely to change student opinions during college, and Greeks and non-Greeks have numerous social views in common.

### Skills

In the same soon-to-be-published study, we found that many changes in the self-perceived skills of fraternity and sorority members are what one might expect, given the nature of these organizations. Fraternity members, more than similar male college graduates, report improvements in their general knowledge, leadership abilities, interpersonal skills, public-speaking skills, knowledge of other ethnicities/cultures, ability to get along with those of other backgrounds, understanding of community problems, and understanding of national social problems.

**“The male students who later chose to go Greek were a more diversified group when it came to their social opinions than males who did not do so.”**

Most of these differences, though, while statistically significant, are small in magnitude. The largest is that eight percentage points more male Greeks than non-Greeks feel their leadership abilities have grown much stronger during college. There was no skill captured where male Greeks report smaller gains than male non-Greeks.

Females report fewer and smaller skill improvements. Sorority members believe more often than their non-affiliated peers that their leadership abilities, public-speaking skills, and interpersonal skills have grown stronger but that their general knowledge and knowledge of different ethnicities/cultures has not kept up with those of female non-Greek graduates.

These are, however, subjective rather than objective measures of skill changes and should be interpreted as such.

### POST-COLLEGIATE EFFECTS

Since life after college lasts not four to six years but for the rest of a graduate’s life, we consider the post-collegiate effects of Greek membership to be more important than the within-college effects. Last year, a report (Gallup, 2014) was released on a study of the post-graduation outcomes of Greeks and how they compare to non-Greek college graduates. While the authors did not account for confounding factors in their analysis, their findings can serve as a good starting point for a discussion of post-collegiate Greek outcomes.

These researchers used a five-category welfare measure, asking respondents about their life “purpose” as well as their social, financial, community, and physical well-being. Across all five categories, former Greek members responded at greater rates than non-Greeks that they were “thriving” and were generally more positive in their responses overall (Gallup, 2014).

In effort to better understand the long-term effects of Greek membership, we currently have two research projects underway that make use of the General Social Survey, a nationally representative longitudinal survey that happened to include questions about fraternity and sorority membership. At this time, both statistical analyses are complete; this article is the first publication of our findings.

The first of these two studies examines post-graduation labor-market outcomes, incorporating respondents at differing points in their professional careers. Raw averages show that fraternity graduates earn about \$6,000 more per year than male non-Greek college graduates, while females are not statistically different across Greek status in this regard. The other notable labor market difference is that male Greeks are self-employed at significantly greater rates than male non-Greeks, while female Greeks are self-employed at slightly lower rates than their non-affiliated peers.

Male Greeks are not statistically different from male non-Greeks, however, in terms of employment/unemployment, job security, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with their compensation (given their jobs). Female Greek graduates are slightly less likely to be employed than female non-Greek college graduates but are more satisfied with their compensation and job security when employed.

**Greek males . . . commanded a wage premium and were about 10 percentage points more likely to become self-employed.**

It appears that for males, the social network granted by membership doesn't increase employment *likelihood*, as might be expected, but it seems to make it more likely that they will find a higher-paying job. After we controlled for other differences across the populations of Greek and non-Greek graduates, Greek males still commanded a wage premium and were about 10 percentage points more likely to become self-employed, although all of the female labor-market differences disappeared.

Our second post-graduation study pertained to the long-term effects of going Greek outside of the labor market, with a focus on marital, health, and education-related outcomes. After controlling for the relevant differences in these subpopulations, Greek membership, perhaps surprisingly, does not appear to make either alcohol or tobacco consumption more common practices after college.

However, there are apparent alcohol consumption *volume* differences for males. Specifically, former male fraternity members are somewhere between 10 and 13 percentage points more likely to report that, when they drink, they drink "too much."

Since Greek organizations are social in nature, and given stereotypes regarding members' promiscuity, we might expect there to be differences in the marriages of Greek and non-Greek college graduates. However, membership does not seem to affect marriage rates, the age of first marriage, satisfaction with marriage, and feelings about the morality of premarital sex.

Greeks are, however, six to seven percentage points more likely to feel extramarital sex is "not wrong." This result does not necessarily imply that Greeks practice infidelity more often than non-Greeks: The survey only asked about the morality of the act, and there is a difference between clandestine extramarital sex and extramarital sex with spousal consent.

Greeks of both genders are much more likely (there is upwards of an 11 percentage point increase in probability) to marry someone with a college degree, and they are approximately 6 percentage points more likely to eventually earn a graduate degree, compared to non-Greek graduates. We note that graduate education was controlled for in our analysis of labor market outcomes: The Greek male wage premium we uncovered is not due to higher education levels but to something else, most likely social-network effects plus the

soft-skills development and leadership opportunities that members had.

Ultimately, these post-graduation studies point to many causal relationships, several of them positive. Earning higher wages, being married to a college graduate, and completing a graduate degree may be considered "good" outcomes. On the negative side, drinking too much is known in the medical literature to be harmful to one's health. But counterintuitively, some previous research (e.g., Auld, 2005) has revealed a positive relationship between alcohol consumption and income: Higher alcohol consumption is associated with premium wages.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Greek-letter organizations' initial stated purpose was to provide support and fellowship for students in an era when significantly fewer high school students chose a college education and when fewer on-campus living situations were available to undergraduates. Over time, though, we would expect any institution to evolve away from its founders' intentions.

Has this happened with Greek organizations? Have these groups strayed too far from their original wholesome purpose of providing students with support and fellowship? Numerous high-profile news stories in recent years seem to suggest that they have. However, it would be unfair to assume that the hundreds of thousands of students who currently belong to these organizations all act this way whenever stories of unscrupulous student behavior emerge.

In the last few years, some colleges and universities have limited or talked about sanctioning or removing Greek organizations from campus. In the realm of public opinion, colleges often share the blame with the individual students involved for Greeks' misbehavior. In response, some national organizations have stated the intention to incorporate, or have incorporated, risk-management practices to discourage inappropriate and illicit student behavior.

If these practices are implemented and successful, then removing these organizations from campus may prevent their members from benefitting from these initiatives. Moreover, misbehavior is, of course, not limited to Greeks. Therefore, administrators may want to focus on decreasing and de-incentivizing specific undesired behaviors (e.g., overdrinking) among both Greeks and non-Greeks rather than on banning fraternities and sororities.

There are other costs associated with ejecting these organizations from campuses. Among them is the concern of some administrators that such a move would decrease enrollment, retention, and graduation rates, at a time when schools are under mounting pressure to increase those rates.

The attention Greek organizations receive will likely not decrease in the years to come. Given that these organizations have both positive and negative impacts on their members, our only current recommendation is that students consider both when deciding if they want to go Greek—and that institutions do the same in determining if Greek organizations should remain an integral part of campus life. ☐



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