PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

**Fraternity and Sorority Life Engagement
Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Brief 2 of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19
Environment* Research Series

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
RESEARCH CENTER

Based in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education, Health & Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the mission of the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) is to identify, conduct, and coordinate research on initiatives and ideas designed to enhance higher education at the institution, state, and national levels to enhance policy and practice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had monumental impacts on higher education institutions and the ways in which colleges and universities operate. Notably, there have been major shifts in how student affairs professionals facilitate meaningful student engagement in a time when in-person experiences are not possible. To date, the primary focus of most institutions has been on shifting instruction. Yet, researchers consistently have demonstrated that instructional practices alone are not sufficient to engage and ultimately retain students. The study aims to address the following question: **How is student engagement practiced in the age of a global crisis?**

How student engagement is practiced varies when examining the many functional areas that work to promote student engagement on a campus. One such area is fraternity and sorority life, which engages students with the common goals of providing opportunities to build meaningful interpersonal connections with others, develop important academic and leadership skills, and give back to the local community through service and philanthropy.

This brief will provide research insights for fraternity and sorority life engagement plans and practices for summer and fall 2020:

Four key themes emerged from the data:

1. A large proportion of institutions have not announced operating plans for fraternity and sorority life. Of those who have announced plans, hybrid models are most common so far.
2. There are stark differences between public and private institutions with private institutions having a greater likelihood of not having operating plans announced. Public institutions are predominantly planning for hybrid models.
3. Inter/national governing councils are providing additional guidance and support for assisting chapters and campuses in planning for operations in the fall through providing online resources and guidelines.
4. Social connection and relationship building remain a priority even through digital and hybrid means.

The brief concludes with a "Promising Practices" section that focuses on programming philosophies, strategies, and initiatives that present potential for creating innovative and engaging fraternity and sorority life experiences.

For more details, read the full report available at perc.utk.edu/covid-19.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, COVID-19 began to spread quickly through the United States. With many dangerous side effects and threats to health and safety, the spread of COVID-19 necessitated pause and/or adaptation in strategies for postsecondary education. By late March 2020, most institutions had ceased in-person campus operations and transitioned classes to online settings for the remainder of the term. As faculty transitioned academic and support services online, student affairs practitioners worked to maintain core engagement functions supporting student extracurricular and co-curricular experiences.

In June 2020, the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, embarked on studying institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding plans for programming, services, and initiatives that occur beyond the classroom and aim to promote and facilitate student engagement.

The purpose of this project is to understand and to inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement (Appendix A):

Traditional: Delivered on-campus, typically through in-person or face-to-face experiences

Online: Delivered through fully online, virtual, or digital strategies

Hybrid: Delivered through a combination of traditional in-person or face-to-face experiences and online or digital experiences.

Figure 1. Institution-Wide Fall Engagement Plans

Institution Fall Engagement Plans

- Traditional — 35.6%
- Online — 8.9%
- Hybrid — 44.4%
- Plan not announced — 11.1%
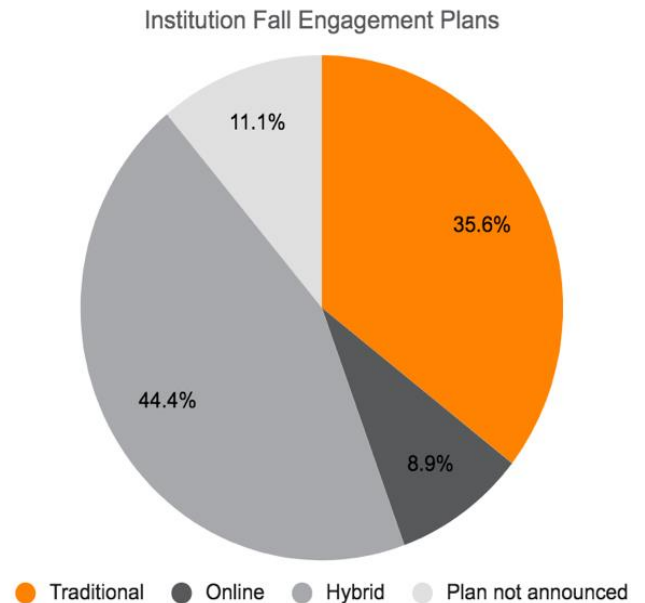
At the time of initial data collection, nearly half of colleges and universities in the sample (46%) planned to engage in hybrid engagement models at the institution-wide level in the fall. Just over a third (35%) reported plans to re-open in the fall with fully traditional engagement models. Few institutions had not announced their re-opening plans yet (11%), but even fewer announced plans for fully online (9%).

Institution-wide engagement plans will critically influence each functional area and will serve as a foundational base to address the primary study question:

How is student engagement practiced in the midst of a global crisis?

Leading student engagement scholar, Dr. John Braxton weighs in on the importance of student engagement:

> **"Student engagement constitutes an important vehicle for college student success. Engagement and involvement are interchangeable terms (Tinto, 2012) that both pertain to the amount of physical and psychological energy students put into their college experience (Astin, 1984). Academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular stand as some of the forms of the college student experience in which student involvement takes place (Mayhew, et al., 2016). Interpersonal involvement includes faculty and student interactions and peer interactions (Mayhew, et al., 2016).**
>
> **Student involvement fosters such aspects of college student success as first year persistence (Braxton, et al, 2014) and graduation (Tinto, 2012). Without persistence and or graduation, student attainment of other forms of success unlikely occur. These other forms of student success include cognitive growth, career development and a wide array of types of personal development. For the types of student development, readers should consult *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works, Volume 3 by* (Mayhew, et al., 2016).**
>
> **The COVID-19 Pandemic places major constraints on the various forms of student involvement in general and those in the form of face-to-face interaction in particular. The pandemic will likely result in some students not returning to their college for the fall 2020 semester. Put differently, institutional student persistence rates at some colleges and universities will decrease. Perhaps, some of the lessons learned from extensive use of remote teaching during the 2020 spring semester may suggest ways in which colleges and universities can offer alternative approaches to student engagement during the fall 2020 semester and beyond as we continue to cope with the enormous challenges of the pandemic.**

Fraternity and Sorority Life Engagement

Fraternities and sororities have long existed on college and university campuses as meaningful opportunities for student engagement that provide environments for members to build interpersonal connections, develop leadership skills, and participate in community service initiatives. In the sample of 45 institutions included in this study, 32 institutions had fraternities and sororities on campus.

Fraternity and sorority engagement involves a variety of activities and experiences throughout the school year, but the pandemic will require revisioning and restructuring how fraternity and sorority life engagement is practiced. Parice Bowser, Director of the Greek Life Leadership Center at the University of Arkansas shares the following:

> **"On college campuses across the country, fraternities and sororities play a vital role within their respective communities and beyond. These organizations**

provide collegiate members sisterhood/brotherhood relationships through bonds of ritual which go well beyond the undergraduate experience. Members are exposed to common fraternal principles which include values-based curriculum, leadership development, scholarship, service, and philanthropic efforts.

Being part of a Greek organization provides students with ample opportunities to participate in activities that will enhance their personal development, promote academics, and advance their leadership skills. This type of student engagement makes a tremendous impact on their respective campuses, local communities, nationally, and as well as abroad. Members develop a sense of belonging and a greater connection which often lead to giving back to their institution after graduation.

COVID-19 has caused campus-based fraternity and sorority life professionals to think differently in all aspects related to duties and responsibilities. FSL professionals along with chapter/council leadership teams have worked diligently to create interactive video presentations to market and promote the Greek student experience. Creativity and innovation have played a major factor in creating virtual models for both recruitment and new membership intake. For campuses that are still planning in-person options, FSL professionals are having to navigate within strict CDC guidelines, and state and local restrictions to create a meaningful

experience. Health & safety will continue to be a primary concern in these challenging days ahead. In addition to typical alcohol and hazing risk management efforts, FSL professionals are not only being challenged to create plans, as well as enforce guidelines related to reducing large gatherings, but also how to properly wear face coverings and to social distancing. Most fraternity and sorority life offices are creating hybrid models to create educational learning opportunities to promote membership engagement. FSL professionals are working with Greek governing councils and chapters on how to effectively run virtual meetings and events. Greeks giving back to their communities through philanthropic and community service efforts will also look drastically different. Greek housing plays a major role in creating a sense of community for members. FSL professionals are also spending time working with various stakeholders to cultivate a plan of action for the safety of their Greek housing residents. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, FSL professionals must continue to create change in combating issues focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion to move their respective communities forward. This academic year will be one to remember with hope and determination for an expected end on how we survived."

This brief will provide high-level findings regarding the planned practices for fraternity and sorority life operations for summer and fall 2020. The findings presented in this brief

are sourced from a sample of institutions that represent diverse governance structures, size classifications, geographic regions, as well as minority-serving institutions. Benchmarking methods were conducted utilizing publicly available data (i.e. institution websites, press releases, online communications, etc.) to identify proposed engagement models for fraternity and sorority life at each institution. Additionally, many campuses hold recruitment and intake processes during the fall semester to engage incoming new students. However, some opt to defer recruitment and intake processes to the spring semester. As recruitment and in-take is often the first major engagement point for fraternities and sororities in the fall semester, it is a focal point of findings and discussion in this brief.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

At the time of collection, half of institutions in the study sample had not announced a planned model of engagement for fall recruitment or programming (Figure 2). Among the institutions that have not announced plans, five institutions have recruitment regularly scheduled for the spring semester.

Many institutions have delegated recruitment planning to campus-based councils and individual chapters, under the guidance of national governing councils. This is due to the differing methods and mechanisms of recruitment and intake utilized by various councils and organizations. For example, some campus-based councils, such as IFC, may typically operate an informal recruitment period allowing each member organization of the council to plan their recruitment processes with little involvement by council leadership. The variety of recruitment and intake

methods utilized by fraternity and sorority organizations on campus would make it difficult to create a uniform engagement plan that would suit the needs and operations of each chapter. Therefore, the variety of operations among different fraternity and sorority organizations may be an indicator of why the majority of institutions in the study sample have not yet announced plans for the fall semester.

Of the institutions that have announced plans, 28% plan for hybrid engagement models (Figure 2). For recruitment, a commonly reported hybrid practice for organizations is to hold the first two recruitment rounds virtually through video-based platforms, and the remaining rounds in-person while adhering to social distance guidelines and CDC recommendations. Additionally, a few institutions have hosted virtual information sessions about recruitment throughout the summer to provide opportunities for engagement for incoming and interested students.

At this time, most fraternity and sorority life (FSL) offices have focused on creating and communicating plans for recruitment and intake processes, while also maintaining advising and program planning. Despite campus closures throughout the spring and summer, many FSL offices and professionals continue to provide support through online technology. Several offices hold virtual office hours hosted by FSL staff or campus governing council leadership to ensure support and guidance is still provided for chapter leaders and members throughout the pandemic and in preparation for the fall semester. With some institutions having large fraternity and sorority communities, the chapters on campus can have hundreds of members in each organization, making living in-residence and holding chapter programming a challenge while adhering to social distancing guidelines. While FSL professionals prepare for fall recruitment, they are also still

providing guidance and working to compile resources from their respective universities and national governing boards for online member engagement. In most compilations, resources included links to care and support offices on campus such as the Dean of

Students office, Counseling Center, and Student Health. Best practices on social distancing when in-person and how to engage students via an online platform are often included in resource guides.

Figure 2. Fraternity & Sorority Life Engagement Models
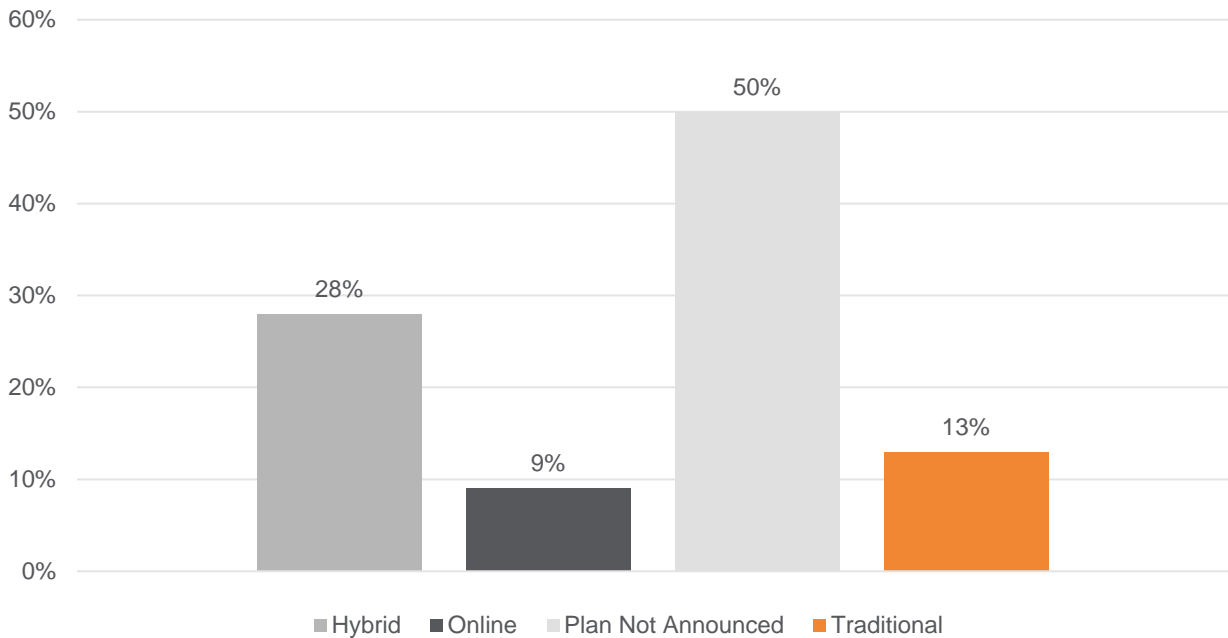
Fraternity and sorority chapters are faced with balancing the guidance and policies of campuses, as well as those of their inter/national organizations and governing councils. Both governing entities have a vested interest in the welfare of fraternity and sorority chapters. Therefore, fraternity and sorority engagement practices will be influenced by the guidance of these entities. Crafting operational plans will necessitate finding an intersection that adheres to the policies of both campus and inter/national organization or council governance.

III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

There seem to be notable differences in fraternity and sorority engagement and recruitment planning based on governance and size. There are numerous factors at play that may influence how fraternity and sorority organizations may operate and engage members in response to the pandemic. While local chapters are governed by inter/national organizations, as well as inter/national governing councils, their home institution and its characteristics will also dictate planning and operations.

Governance

Among public institutions with fraternity and sorority communities in the study sample, nearly half (47%) plan to operate fraternities and sororities using hybrid models in the fall, that would engage members and students interested in joining in both online and in-person experiences (Figure 3). However, nearly a third (29%) have not yet announced plans for operations in the fall semester (Figure 3). There is a greater number of public institutions (18%) planning for online

fraternity and sorority life engagement than those planning for traditional in-person engagement, which is currently just one public institution in the sample.

Notably among private institutions with fraternity and sorority communities, 73% have not yet made announcements regarding fall operations (Figure 3). At the time of collection, a greater number of private institutions report plans to engage fraternity and sorority life through traditional engagement models (20%) than those who plan to operate with hybrid models (7%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Fraternity & Sorority Life Engagement Models, by Governance Type
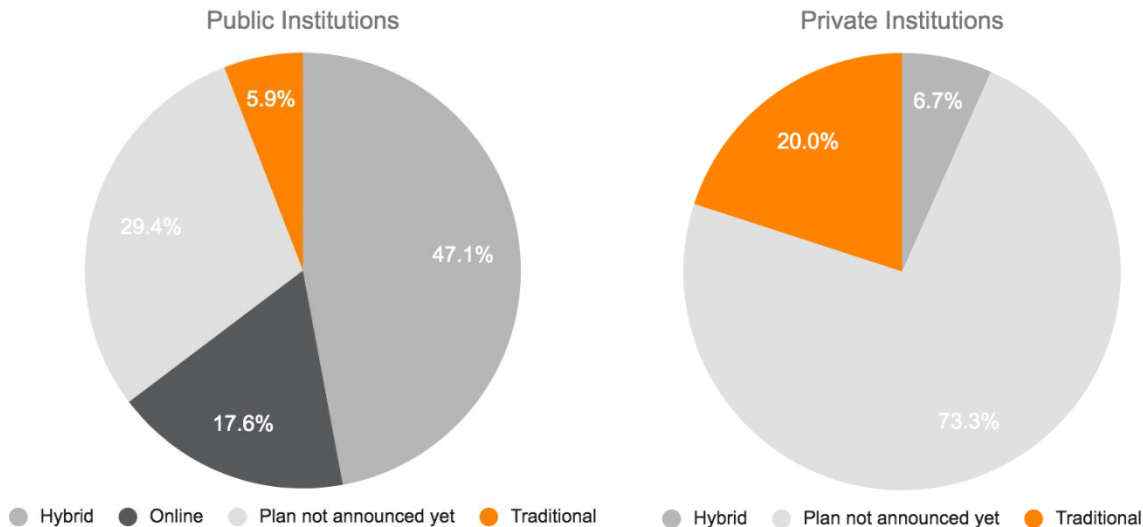
Size

Among large institutions in the sample, nearly half (46%) plan to operate with hybrid engagement models for fraternity and sorority life (Figure 4). After hybrid models, the next largest portion (23%) have yet to announce plans with the few remaining large institutions evenly split to operate in online capacities or in traditional in-person settings (Figure 4).

Among medium-sized institutions, the majority (55%) have not yet announced a plan for engagement in the fall semester (Figure 4). Further, less than a third (27%) have announced plans for hybrid operations (Figure 4).

Finally, small institutions are the most likely to not have announced an engagement plan, with 88% having not reported a plan

for the fall semester (Figure 4). This may be due to having a smaller incoming cohort of new students, which may grant these institutions greater flexibility in planning. This may also allow them more time to identify strategies for engagement that adhere to social distancing protocols. At the time of collection, only one institution in the sample had announced planning for traditional in-person fraternity and sorority life engagement. As summer progresses towards the fall semester, more institutions are announcing engagement plans.

Figure 4. Fraternity & Sorority Life Engagement Models, by Size Classification
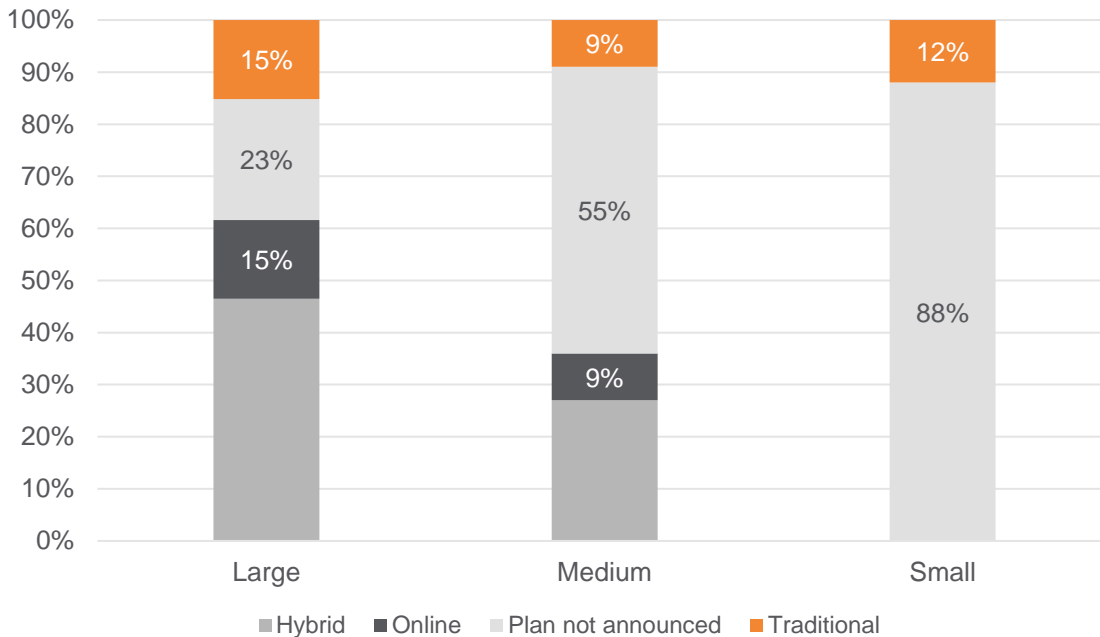
IV. GOVERNING COUNCIL GUIDANCE

On many campuses, fraternity and sorority chapters are affiliated with inter/national organizations, that are members of larger inter/national governing councils. Governing councils are responsible for creating guidelines and policies to assist member organizations and local chapters. Governing councils recommend that member organizations and chapters follow the institution models of engagement, but still have an influence on fraternity and sorority organizations.

National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC)

The National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC) is the umbrella council for 11 multicultural Greek-letter organizations (Appendix B). NMGC has not released specific guidelines for recruitment and intake processes and is directing member organizations to utilize the CDC and local public health guidelines in planning. Many NMGC member organizations have transitioned summer leadership training events and conferences to virtual formats, in which guidance on recruitment, intake, and fall operations are likely to be addressed.

National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC)

The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) consists of nine historically Black Greek-letter organizations (Appendix B). In March, NPHC released a statement from the national president that deferred to and promoted CDC guidelines and encouraged chapters to follow guidance from their national organizations regarding meetings, convention, and intake. Many member organizations have responded and provided support for chapters and members. Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc's North Atlantic Region released a COVID-19 toolkit to encourage virtual community and promote social distancing guidelines and holistic wellness. Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. has created a COVID-19 Relief Fund for members to provide financial resources for undergraduate members impacted by COVID-19. Omega Psi Phi and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. both released statements and guidance to advise against in-person gatherings and to promote connecting via virtual means. Because intake processes and timelines differ for each NPHC member organization and their local chapters, COVID-19-specific information was less publicly available during collection and may be distributed directly to local chapters from their national organizations.

National Panhellenic Council (NPC)

The National Panhellenic Council (NPC), consisting of 26 women's organizations, has announced guidelines for upcoming fall operations and recruitment processes. Several resources have been created for member organizations and local councils to utilize to effectively plan their fall operations and recruitment events, while ensuring social distancing in accordance with CDC and local government guidelines. Resources include General Operations & Community Building During COVID-19; How to communicate to members about recruitment/intake process changes; and a recruitment decision-making map. Additionally, NPC provided a Recruitment Contingencies Task Force Report for College Panhellenics that details how to grow and adapt to new circumstances and provide a meaningful sorority experience. The NPC Recruitment Contingencies Task Force Report provides guidance on numerous scenarios in which recruitment can take place in the fall depending on campus operating plans. These include:

- Fully-structured recruitment hosted virtually
- Fully-structured recruitment with hybrid social distancing measures in place
- Partially-structured recruitment hosted virtually
- Partially-structured recruitment hosted with hybrid social distancing measures in place
- Continuous recruitment hosted virtually or utilizing a hybrid mode

North American Interfraternity Council (NIC)

The North American Interfraternity Council (NIC), which represents over 60 men's organizations, along with compiling resources has created a fraternal think tank to provide operational recommendations for member organizations. In particular, the NIC think tank includes guidelines and recommendations by key areas including Housing, Facilities, and Meal Prep; Recruitment and Chapter operations; Student Life and Gatherings; and Communication. As facilities management is likely to be a challenge and concern, suggestions and resources for cleaning, social distancing, and securing isolation rooms are also given in these guidelines. The think tank resources also present a "watch, review, discuss" model to prepare undergraduate chapter leaders to have planning conversations and implement safe

protocols for fall operations. While many of the suggestions focus on in-person engagement for the fall semester, there are also numerous resources provided to assist councils and chapters to operate in hybrid or virtual environments, such as virtual meeting guides and how to stay connected while socially distant.

V. PROMISING PRACTICES

Virtual Engagement & Community Building

One common theme present in the overall communication from inter/national governing councils and campus-based professionals is the importance of continuing engagement practice and social connection with potential and current members. Through virtual platforms ranging from video conferencing to online gaming, keeping connected and checking on one another is considered paramount during the pandemic. As fraternity and sorority organizations aspire to build and foster relationships and social connections among members, it is no surprise that governing councils and campuses are focusing on relationship building through digital means when physical gathering is not feasible. For example, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. encourages brothers to adhere to state and local guidance by staying home, but to prioritize regular communication among members. Similarly, the NIC recommends

organizations to establish regular touchpoints with new members and those at new colony chapters and to be prepared to maintain brotherhood in various operating scenarios. NPC provides suggestions such as hosting speaker series, holding virtual meetings, and providing other virtual programming that engages campus departments to assist in facilitating personal development.

Online Resources for Chapter Operations

With the inability to meet with chapter members and leaders in-person, inter/national governing councils and institutions are developing resources to help chapters facilitate the fraternity and sorority experience through online settings. For example, the NPC and NIC released member resources such as how to communicate clearly and effectively during the pandemic, suggestions on cleanliness and hygiene, and guidance on maintaining social distance if in-person events resume. Institutions also have released specific COVID-19 resources for students. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, posted a "Virtual Chapter Management Resources" page to give organizations tangible techniques to engage with their chapters and their new members.

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Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

APPENDIX A.

Forty-five (45) institutions of higher education were selected to be included in this sample. The following characteristics were considered in selecting institutions to be included in the sample:

- *Governance*: Determination between public or private governance structure
- *Degree Programs*: Determination institutions granting two-year or four-year degrees.
- *Size*: Classification based on total student population as determined and adapted by the Carnegie Classifications on size.
  - *Small*: Institutions serving less than 3,000 students
  - *Medium*: Institutions serving between 3,000 and 9,999 students
  - *Large*: Institutions serving 10,000 or more students
- *Geographic Region*: Classification based on regions comprised of the following states:
  - *Northeast:* MA, MD, ME, NJ, NY, PA, VA, and Washington D.C.
  - *Southeast:* GA, FL, KY, LA, MS, NC, TN
  - *Midwest:* IA, IL, IN, MN, and OH
  - *Southwest:* AZ, TX
  - *West:* CA, CO, ID, OR, WA
- *Minority-Serving Institution Status:* Whether institution has a minority-serving designation.

The following institutions were included in the study sample:

- Adams State University
- Azusa Pacific University
- Clarion University
- Colgate University
- College of William & Mary
- DePauw University
- Dominican University
- East Los Angeles College
- Emory University
- Florida A&M University
- Gonzaga University
- Howard University
- Ivy Tech Community College
- Lone State College
- Miami-Dade College
- Mississippi University for Women
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Murray State University
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Northwestern University
- The Ohio State University
- The Pennsylvania State University
- Princeton University
- Seton Hall University
- Seton Hill University
- Sewanee, the University of the South
- Spelman College
- St. Mary's College of Maryland
- Tennessee State University
- Texas Tech University
- The University of Arizona
- The University of California, Los Angeles
- University of Central Florida
- University of Idaho
- University of Maine
- University of Minnesota, Morris
- University of Northern Iowa
- University of Southern California
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- University of Texas, Austin
- Valparaiso University
- Vanderbilt University
- Wake Forest University
- Willamette University
- Xavier University of Louisiana

APPENDIX B.

The following organizations are members of the national governing councils included in this brief.

National Multicultural Greek Council:
- Delta Xi Phi Multicultural Sorority, Inc.
- Theta Nu Xi Multicultural Sorority, Inc.
- Mu Sigma Upsilon Sorority, Inc.
- Lambda Tau Omega Sorority, Inc.
- Lambda Sigma Gamma Sorority, Inc.
- Omega Phi Chi Multicultural Sorority, Inc.
- Psi Sigma Phi Multicultural Fraternity Incorporated
- Phi Sigma Chi Multicultural Fraternity, Inc.
- Gamma Eta Sorority, Inc.
- Delta Xi Nu Sorority, Inc.

National Pan-Hellenic Council
- Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.
- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
- Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.
- Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.
- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
- Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.
- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.
- Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.
- Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.

National Panhellenic Council
- Alpha Chi Omega
- Alpha Delta Pi
- Alpha Epsilon Phi
- Alpha Gamma Delta
- Alpha Omicron Pi
- Alpha Phi
- Alpha Sigma Alpha
- Alpha Sigma Tau
- Alpha Xi Delta
- Chi Omega
- Delta Delta Delta
- Delta Gamma
- Delta Phi Epsilon
- Delta Zeta
- Gamma Phi Beta

- Kappa Alpha Theta
- Kappa Delta
- Kappa Kappa Gamma
- Phi Mu
- Phi Sigma Sigma
- Pi Beta Phi
- Sigma Delta Tau
- Sigma Kappa
- Sigma Sigma Sigma
- Theta Phi Alpha
- Zeta Tau Alpha

North American Interfraternity Conference
- Acacia
- Alpha Chi Rho
- Alpha Delta Gamma
- Alpha Delta Phi
- Alpha Epsilon Pi
- Alpha Gamma Rho
- Alpha Kappa Lambda
- Alpha Phi Alpha
- Alpha Sigma Phi
- Alpha Tau Omega
- Beta Chi Theta
- Beta Sigma Psi
- Beta Theta Pi
- Beta Upsilon Chi
- Chi Phi
- Chi Psi
- Delta Chi
- Delta Kappa Epsilon
- Delta Lambda Phi
- Delta Phi
- Delta Sigma Phi
- Delta Tau Delta
- Delta Upsilon
- FarmHouse
- Iota Nu Delta
- Iota Phi Theta
- Kappa Alpha Psi
- Kappa Alpha Society
- Kappa Delta Phi
- Kappa Delta Rho
- Lambda Sigma Upsilon
- Lambda Theta Phi

- Nu Alpha Kappa
- Phi Gamma Delta
- Phi Iota Alpha
- Phi Kappa Psi
- Phi Kappa Sigma
- Phi Kappa Tau
- Phi Kappa Theta
- Phi Lambda Chi
- Phi Mu Delta
- Phi Sigma Kappa
- Phi Sigma Phi
- Pi Kappa Alpha
- Pi Kappa Phi
- Pi Lambda Phi

- Psi Upsilon
- Sigma Alpha Epsilon
- Sigma Alpha Mu
- Sigma Chi
- Sigma Nu
- Sigma Pi
- Sigma Tau Gamma
- Tau Delta Phi
- Tau Epsilon Phi
- Theta Xi
- Theta Chi
- Triangle
- Zeta Beta Tau
- Zeta Psi

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