

DISSERTATION

UNDERSTANDING SENSE OF BELONGING OF FRATERNITY AND SORORITY  
MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Submitted by

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School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2025

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## ABSTRACT

### UNDERSTANDING SENSE OF BELONGING OF FRATERNITY AND SORORITY MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Research suggests that college students with disabilities benefit from and have a greater sense of belonging because of involvement in student organizations. However, a gap exists within the literature specifically in studies focused on how students with disabilities develop a sense of belonging through their involvement as members of a fraternity or sorority. Using the Social Justice Model of Disability as a theoretical lens, this phenomenological study focuses on the experiences that impact sense of belonging of students with disabilities through their involvement in social fraternities and sororities.

The data were collected from seven undergraduate college students with disabilities who are members of fraternities and sororities and attend a large public research university in the mountain west region of the United States. The study revealed several findings that were organized under three superordinate themes: authentic peer relationships, barriers to belonging, and university environmental impacts. Throughout the study we are reminded of the need to address ableism and create inclusive and accessible spaces on college campuses for students with disabilities. Key implications include understanding the diversity of disability, revising policy and practice for co-curricular programming, and promoting disability inclusion.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I want to acknowledge the students who participated in this study. I learned alongside them, as they displayed enthusiasm for this project and a willingness to share their lived experiences and multiple identities with me and others through this writing. Their participation makes it possible for us to expand our knowledge of disability in higher education, the experiences students have within fraternities and sororities, and the factors that influence a sense of belonging.

To my brilliant wife, Ariel, thank you for your love, encouragement, and support throughout this doctoral journey. I would not have taken the first step to apply for the Higher Education Leadership program if you had not reassuringly and enthusiastically said, “You can do it!” Knowing that you believed in me kept me moving forward, writing one word after another in this dissertation. Thank you for loving me and for your infinite patience and grace.

To my son, Grant, thank you for your love and for being understanding when I needed to do my “homework.” You were born during the span of time that I have been a doctoral student, and now that my program is complete, we will have more time together to do the fun things we love. Let’s get the bikes out and go for a ride.

To my parents, Sue and Dan, thank you for your support and love. You made education something that was important to our family. Mom, your career as a teacher demonstrated that working in the field of education mattered and has the potential to change the lives of those around us. Dad, you served as a role model for achieving a doctorate and the research and writing you do inspire me. To my sister, Cathy, and brother-in-law, Jason, thank you for always being there and wanting me to succeed.

To my dissertation committee, Drs. Michael Ellis, Linda Kuk, Pat Sample, and Alex Lange, thank you for your guidance, support, and wisdom. You inspired and challenged me to be a scholar who is rigorous in my research and thoughtful in my writing. I am a better scholar-practitioner because of each of you. To Dr. Lisa Miller, thank you for serving on my committee and supporting me through the research proposal process.

Mike, thank you for agreeing to be my advisor, supporting and guiding me through my analysis and the writing of my final chapters. Our regular conversations about student leaders, co-curricular programming, and creating inclusive campus spaces not only helped me with my study, but they made me better at my student affairs day job. You kept me going on this dissertation and I am forever grateful to have had you as an advisor and know you as a colleague.

Linda, thank you for being my first advisor and for continuing to serve on my committee. You provided me with so many ideas and asked such excellent questions that shaped this research project and dissertation. I have felt your support since our very first conversation when I spoke with you on the telephone about the doctoral program. I learned a tremendous amount in the classes you taught and from the advice you gave on this study.

To the 2015 Higher Education Leadership cohort, thank you for being an incredibly supportive and energizing group of classmates and colleagues. I especially want to thank my dear friends, Drs. Miriam Bocchetti, Jon Cleveland, and Brianna Douglas. I have learned so much from each of you. I could not have gotten over the “finish line” with this dissertation without the reinforcement and not-so-subtle prodding you gave me on our group text.

To my dear friends and colleagues, Drs. Jeremiah Shinn, Leslie Webb, and Blaine Eckles, thank you for being among the first people who encouraged me to pursue a doctorate. I certainly would not have gone on this doctoral journey if you had not shown it was possible. Your

mentorship and advice have made me the student affairs professional that I am. To my friend Sarah Shinn, thank you for your encouragement and positive support along the way. To the colleagues I get to work with at Boise State University, thank you for showing interest in my research, checking in to see how the dissertation was going, and being incredible, caring professionals. You demonstrate to me how to show up for our students.

To the scholars who encouraged me, Drs. Nancy Evans, Ellen Broido, Kristen Brown, and Autumn Wilke, thank you for every conversation we had about research and disability in higher education. I so appreciate that you listened to my ideas for a dissertation topic and that you encouraged my curiosity to conduct research. I am a better scholar and writer because of you. To Nancy especially, thank you for being there at the start of my journey as a student affairs professional, supporting me as a graduate student at Iowa State University. You invited me to start conducting research and I learned so much in your classes and in our conversations.

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## Chapter One – Introduction

Fraternities and sororities hold unique roles and significance in higher education, both historically and in the present. They may be social, professional, or service-based (Anson & Marchesani, 1991) and are among the oldest types of involvement for students at universities, with some chapters being more than 200 years old (Kimbrough, 2003; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998). Research has explored the positive impact of fraternity and sorority involvement on academic performance, mental health, and graduation rates (Bowman & Holmes, 2017; Grace et al., 2022; Long, 2012) while also examining concerns associated with fraternities and sororities such as hazing, high risk use of alcohol and other drugs, and sexual misconduct (Biddix et al., 2014; Biddix, 2016).

Higher education administrators and professionals frequently pursue ways to strengthen the positive qualities of fraternity and sorority involvement while seeking innovative solutions to address associated challenges (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2023). Studies have shown that involvement in fraternities and sororities can contribute to students' sense of belonging (McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Schutts et al., 2017) which is a key factor in success for any student (Strayhorn, 2019). Limited research has explored fraternity and sorority members with disabilities. This study seeks to reduce this knowledge gap by examining the impact of fraternity and sorority involvement on the sense of belonging of students with disabilities.

This chapter begins with an overview of the study's purpose and its significance in the context of higher education. Next, the researcher's perspective and the problem and purpose statements are presented, and the research questions are explicitly stated. Following this, the

study's language usage is clarified, and research terms are defined. Finally, the chapter highlights the study's significance and ends with an overview of the subsequent chapters and their contents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

College students join fraternities and sororities for several reasons. Many join for community, friendships, and participation in social events and activities. Fraternities and sororities are often thought of as single-gender social organizations; however, the wide array of these organizations may also include those focused on professional education or service, with many open to members of any gender. For most members, joining is a lifetime commitment (Cokley et al., 2001) and on many college campuses students who are members and non-members have distinct views on the benefits of joining fraternities and sororities (Malaney, 1990).

Fraternities and sororities have also received significant and justified scrutiny for numerous behavioral and misconduct issues within their membership. Because of this, their space in higher education and the larger culture is contested. There are many high-profile examples of sexual misconduct, hazing, alcohol and drug misuse, and campus incivility in chapters (Biddix et al., 2014; Biddix, 2016). However, studies have demonstrated that involvement in fraternities and sororities can also be linked to some benefits for college students.

Fraternity and sorority involvement has been highlighted as a contributor towards engagement and psychosocial development (Astin, 1999). For women, membership in sororities has been associated with greater college satisfaction, improved grades, better retention, and improved four-year graduation rates (Bowman & Holmes, 2017). Another study of academic performance revealed a positive relationship between men's and women's involvement in a chapter and their cumulative GPA and engagement in academic activities (Long, 2012). In other

research, members of a fraternity and sorority community were found to report higher levels of positive mental health and lower levels of depression than non-affiliated students (Grace et al., 2022).

Studies have also linked fraternity and sorority membership with developing a sense of belonging (Harrel-Hallmark et al., 2022; McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Schutts et al., 2017). Research on the sense of belonging among college students has received attention from scholars in recent years. The growing body of studies on this topic has included extensive research examining the relationships between belonging and student success (Strayhorn, 2019). Further, having a sense of belonging has been linked to a variety of key success metrics, including academic achievement (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002), persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rhee, 2008), and adjustment and transition to college (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

Involvement in student organizations and college students' sense of belonging has been positively associated with various factors of student success (Strayhorn, 2019) and researchers have continued to explore the relationship between involvement and belonging in fraternities and sororities. This has extended to studies of the experiences of students from historically or currently minoritized groups. For instance, involvement in fraternities and sororities may positively impact the sense of belonging of students of color, such as Latinx students (Garcia, 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and Black students (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Despite this research into belonging in fraternities and sororities for diverse identity groups, there is a lack of studies investigating the experiences of students with disabilities. In fact, there is a scarcity of empirical research overall for students with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). Some evidence suggests the importance of involvement for students with disabilities,

despite the limited research on the topic. Johnson (2000) wrote that co-curricular activities for students with disabilities, including clubs and other organizations, should be enhanced and made more inclusive by institutions. Involvement has been shown to foster belonging for students with disabilities (Vaccaro et al., 2015). The campus environment has been explored for the ways it makes involvement probable or possible for students with disabilities (Evans et al., 2023). Additionally, first-year disabled students who were socially engaged had an almost 10% higher likelihood of persisting to the next college year compared to disabled students who were not involved (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011).

Enrollment in college by students with disabilities is increasing and there is a need for administrators and higher education professionals to remove barriers and identify ways to create more inclusive and accessible campus environments for students with disabilities. Since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, the United States Department of Education has recorded an increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in college. The National Center for Education Statistics (De Brey et al., 2021) reported that approximately 19% of undergraduates in the United States disclosed having a disability. However, as suggested by Brown and Broido (2020), the actual percentage of students with disabilities is most likely higher because many college students choose not to disclose their status. By examining the role that belonging, determined to be a key to student success, may play through students with disabilities' involvement in fraternities and sororities, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge in this area for both scholars and practitioners.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

My work with fraternities and sororities began in 2005 with my first professional student affairs job at Pacific University of Oregon. I was hired to be a resident director in the Housing

and Residence Life department, which included a collateral assignment advising 120 student members of the institution's seven fraternities and sororities. I am non-affiliated with a fraternity, so this experience provided me an introduction to the culture, values, and activities of fraternities and sororities.

My career brought me to Boise State University in 2008, where I have continued to advise social, professional, and service fraternities and sororities through roles in the Office of the Dean of Students and the Student Involvement and Leadership Center. I was responsible for overseeing a fraternity and sorority community that grew from fewer than 100 members to more than 2,000 in 17 years, while supervising staff in responding to the emergent needs, challenges, and opportunities of a rapidly changing community.

Twenty years of professional experience with fraternities and sororities has helped me see the impact that involvement can have on students. I have seen students in fraternities and sororities grow in their capacity to lead, become more altruistic, caring, and compassionate towards others, and develop essential employability skills. I have also seen the gamut of unsafe and risky behavior at both the organizational and individual student level. However, my belief is that when the experience is positive, fraternities and sororities have the potential to be transformative for student development and crucial to students' sense of belonging, retention, and persistence on campuses.

Parallel to my work with fraternities and sororities has been an interest in disability in higher education. I am interested in how we might remove organizational, physical, and human-related barriers that impede success for college students with disabilities. My passion for this began when I was as a graduate assistant in the Office of Disability Resources at Iowa State

University while I completed my Master of Education from 2003 to 2005. In Disability Resources, I assisted students with individualized disability accommodations for classes.

Before working in Disability Resources, I had not given a lot of thought to disability. I am a nondisabled person, and I recognize that my identity has privileged me and given me both knowledge and experience gaps. My role at Iowa State expanded my understanding and instilled in me a social justice approach to disability in higher education. Students shared stories with me about faculty who questioned their academic accommodation requests, challenges navigating old buildings and classrooms, and experiences with ableism and stigma around disability. They also told me what made success possible in college, such as helpful staff and faculty, and the ways that involvement in clubs and student activities made a positive difference to them. During this period, I began engaging in research on disability in higher education. I continue to do research with a team of scholars with whom I became associated with through this program.

This study is an intersection of my passion for fraternity and sorority involvement and disability in higher education. At heart, I am a scholar-practitioner, and this research connects aspects of my professional interests and the commitment I strive to make supporting an inclusive environment in which all students can belong and thrive.

### **Problem Statement**

The overarching research problem examined in this study explores what factors of campus involvement in fraternities and sororities enhance or inhibit the development of a sense of belonging among college students with disabilities. Involvement in fraternities and sororities has been demonstrated to foster a sense of belonging for college students (McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Schutts et al., 2017), a factor that researchers have said contributes to student success

(Strayhorn, 2019). While a body of research has grown to understand how minoritized students experience belonging, students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities remain understudied.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors contribute to a sense of belonging for students with disabilities who are also members of fraternities and sororities.

### **Research Questions**

As previously stated, the research problem examined the experiences of students with disabilities and the role involvement in fraternities and sororities has on their sense of belonging. This problem statement defines and guides the rest of this qualitative research study. Research questions include:

1. What factors of fraternities and sororities impact the development of a sense of belonging for college students with disabilities?
2. In what ways do university programs and personnel impact the sense of belonging for college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities?
3. How do interactions between college students with disabilities and their peers in fraternities and sororities impact their sense of belonging?

### **Language Application in this Study**

According to Evans et al. (2017), the language used to describe people, disabilities, and impairments should be carefully considered due to values-based historical elements with social, political, and moral dimensions. Students with disabilities are among those groups that have been minoritized in higher education. People differ in numerous ways, including their preferences regarding language related to their identities. In this study, I have attempted to be both intentional and deliberate in using inclusive language.

Person-first and disability-first language appear throughout my writing. Brown and Broido (2020) wrote that person-first language (e.g., *student with a disability* or *students with psychological disabilities*) was first used by those who wanted to lead with language that centers the individual, foregrounding the person over their disability. Conversely, disability-first language (e.g., *disabled student* or *disabled woman*) grew from disabled scholars and activists to showing pride by demonstrating that disability is part of their identities and drawing attention to ableism (Gabel, 2001). To honor the reasons for both person-first and disability-first language, I chose to use both in my writing. When writing about participants of my study, I have used person-preferred language, opting for the ways participants talked about themselves.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following definitions of terms describe concepts found throughout this dissertation and the literature which will have significant meaning for the research study. Each appears with references to the literature within which definitions appear.

*Ableism* – a term that describes a system of discrimination, oppression, and exclusion directed at people with disabilities which unfairly privileges able-bodied individuals (Castañeda et al., 2013).

*Belonging* – an essential human need that can motivate and influence one’s behavior (Strayhorn, 2019).

*Disabled* – the ways in which a person’s activities are limited by their environment (Evans et al., 2017).

*Disability* – people with disabilities are those with “long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments” to which interaction with barriers is hindered and impacts their full participation (United Nations General Assembly, 2007, Article 1).

*Disability Resource Office* – specific campus administrative units designated to address accommodations for people with disabilities (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2012).

*Fraternalities and Sororities* – student societies formed by college students, characterized by shared values, common bonds of friendship, and a name typically composed of Greek letters. They may be professional, social, or service-based in nature. Many, but not all, have (inter)national headquarters and chapters at multiple institutions (Anson & Marchesani, 1991).

*Impairment* – specific physical, psychological, sensory, cognitive, or health conditions that differ from what society deems as “normal” (Evans et al., 2017).

*Involvement* – a type of behavior on the part of students that demonstrates varying levels of investment of psychosocial and physical energy in and out of the classroom (Astin, 1999).

*Universal Design* – the design of products or environments to make them accessible and useable by the broadest range of individuals to the greatest extent possible (Center for Universal Design, 2008).

As noted by Biddix (2010), I have eschewed the use of ‘Greek’ in reference to fraternities and sororities because Greek refers to a nationality and not an organizational affiliation. The only time the word Greek appears is when it is a direct quotation or in reference to letters of the Greek alphabet.

### **Statement of Potential Significance**

Published research on college students with disabilities in mainstream peer-reviewed journals is lacking. Peña (2014) conducted a critical content analysis reviewing articles on students with disabilities, examining the number of articles published in four top-tier higher education journals as well as the depth and breadth of the research. The results of this study

found that between 1990 and 2010 only 25 articles, which represented one percent of the total articles published, were about college students with disabilities.

Kimball and Thoma (2019) expanded this with an ecological synthesis of higher education and student affairs literature. In their study, they found that the literature about college students with disabilities has grown within scholarly journals since Peña's (2014) study; however, they note that there is room for ongoing improvement to scholarship and its practical application. An opportunity for new research exists by exploring what factors within the college environment, such as co-curricular or involvement opportunities, might support success for students with disabilities.

Additionally, while there is some limited research on students with disabilities and their involvement in student organizations (Bialka et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2023), there is scant published research on the experiences of students with disabilities in social fraternities and sororities. This study seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature.

### **Chapter Summary**

In summary, the literature on both sense of belonging and fraternity and sorority involvement is rich but lacking in studies that investigate the experiences of students with disabilities. My experience as a master's student at Iowa State University working in the Office of Disability Resources, a professional working with fraternities and sororities at Boise State University, and a scholar-practitioner have led to my passion for research. This is an important study because of the clear knowledge gap and the necessity to address barriers to success for students with disabilities.

This dissertation includes five chapters. In chapter one, I have introduced the overall study. Chapter two provides a review of key relevant literature. In chapter three, I describe the

conceptual framework as well as the methodology for the study. Chapter four includes my data collection and data analysis. Finally, chapter five provides a discussion, implications, and conclusion to the study.

## **Chapter Two – Literature Review**

This review of the existing literature includes three sections. The first is a review of literature on the concept of sense of belonging. Key theoretical frameworks are explored along with an examination of sense of belonging studies and a theoretical model of belonging. The relationship between belonging and other factors and behaviors, such as persistence, adjustment and transition, and academic success are reviewed in the literature as well as studies that delve into the sense of belonging for minoritized students.

In the second section, research focusing on fraternities and sororities is discussed. This includes a review of the history, context, and position of fraternities and sororities within higher education. The benefits of engagement are explored, including the relationship between joining a fraternity or sorority and academic success, sense of belonging, and retention. Additionally, studies on the challenges and disadvantages of fraternity and sorority experiences are reviewed.

Finally, in the third section, literature on students with disabilities is discussed. This includes an overview of the context for disability in higher education. Dimensions of impairment and disability are explored, followed by literature that describes aspects of the campus environment. Concluding this chapter is an argument that involvement in fraternities and sororities for students with disabilities should be examined to better understand how factors may influence one's sense of belonging.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Researchers of human development have described the importance of belonging. Maslow (1954, 1962) explained that when a person's basic physiological needs of water, food, shelter, safety, and security are met they may then seek higher levels of need, including aspects of social

connection, love, and belongingness. Baumeister and Leary (1995) linked feelings of belonging to many positive emotional and cognitive outcomes. Their research also connected a lack of belonging to poor effects on health, adjustment, and well-being. Based on these findings, the researchers called belonging a strong human motivator.

Strayhorn (2019) described belonging in similar ways, calling it a “basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior” (p. 28). The researcher’s theoretical model of college students’ sense of belonging stems from the research of Maslow (1954, 1962), suggesting that college students’ ability to reach their fullest potential is also dependent on their ability to connect, make friends, and find community on their campuses. According to Strayhorn’s model, this type of care, support, feeling of mattering, and achievement of friendships will aid students in their success.

### **Benefits of Belonging**

In higher education, the benefits of belonging include academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rhee, 2008), academic success (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002), adjustment and transition to college (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), self-esteem (Dixon & Kurpius, 2008), and feelings of joy, happiness, and satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Additionally, many researchers have identified connections between belonging and relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hoffman et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019).

Belonging has been associated with other desired aspects of academic success in the classroom. Freeman et al. (2007) found that students’ sense of belonging was strongly associated with academic task values (the perception that what they did in class had value, use, and importance) and their self-efficacy for academic success (the belief they could accomplish their

goals). Some behaviors by instructors, such as encouragement to participate in class, were linked to fostering students' belonging. Similarly, Zumbrunn et al. (2014) found that students' perceptions of academic and social support from instructors were positively associated with feelings of belonging. When faculty demonstrated characteristics of enthusiasm, passion, and caring in their classrooms, students reported higher levels of belonging. Hoffman et al. (2002) found that academic living and learning communities served as spaces in which students could form bonds with both their peers and faculty, facilitating a sense of belonging for those participating students.

### **Involvement and Belonging**

Campus involvement has been examined for its role in fostering belonging among college students. For instance, Strayhorn's (2019) research has indicated that involvement in student organizations has a direct correlation to the fostering of a sense of belonging. Many studies have also shown the role that organizational involvement can play in belonging, especially for students of color and other underrepresented student groups (Bialka et al., 2017; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

### **Underrepresented Students and Belonging**

Not all students experience belonging in the same way. A growing area of study in higher education research examines the ways in which students from underrepresented groups or diverse social identities experience belonging (Alejandro et al., 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro et al., 2015). These studies provide insight into research that may allow institutions to invest time and resources into programs that close equity gaps and support the success of all students.

For example, the research of Johnson et al. (2007) examining first-year student experiences in residence halls indicated that belonging was felt less strongly by African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian Pacific American students than White students. This research found that the social dimensions of transitioning to college and residence hall climate played significant roles for connection, particularly for underrepresented students and their sense of belonging.

Hurtado and Carter's (1997) study tested a conceptual model of the antecedents of sense of belonging amongst college students. The researchers examined the extent to which Latino students' background characteristics and college experiences in the first and second year in college influenced sense of belonging in their third year. This study sought to also clarify the theoretical underpinnings of Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. The researchers found a positive effect within first-year experiences and that perceptions of a negative and hostile racial environment are detrimental within the third year for students. Additionally, they found that involvement in religious and social-group student organizations (those organized around a social identity) have a positive effect on belonging.

Further studies have explored involvement's impact on belonging for college students of color. For instance, Harper and Quayle (2007) found that involvement in Black and other minority student organizations provided a sense of belonging and allowed African American college men to engage in greater levels of Black identity expression and development. A study by Moreno and Sanchez Banuelos (2013) presented and analyzed data from two separate qualitative studies of academic and social experiences among Latina/o college students involved in Latina/o fraternities and sororities. Participants reported that involvement in their organizations provided family-like environments in which they felt they belonged on campus.

Connections to cultural identity make a difference for belonging for some college students from underrepresented populations. Museus and Maramba (2011) found that when Filipino American students can maintain strong connections with their cultural heritage, they also have a stronger sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, in a study by Tachine et al. (2017), connections to culture through family and a Native student center were important for Native American college students to develop belonging and a sense of ‘home away from home.’

Studies have also highlighted the importance of belonging for college students with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identities. For instance, Vaccaro and Newman (2017) conducted a qualitative study examining how queer students experience belonging. Data were collected through interviews with 51 college student participants who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and queer (LGBPQ). Using grounded theory methods, the researchers explored how sense of belonging for developed for LGBPQ students in their first year of college. Findings from the study suggested that belonging was fostered in the contexts of university, group, and friendship with factors influencing belonging including sexual identity and outness, university messaging, and meaningful social interactions with authentic friends and groups. While this study found that individual sense of belonging can be experienced on a university level, further research by Duran (2019) found that queer students of Color struggle to develop belonging at predominantly White institutions.

Strayhorn (2019) examined sense of belonging of gay students of color, describing three themes: the compelling need to belong while understanding ones’ sexual orientation, common steps and pathways to exploring belonging as gay college men, and methods of developing healthy sense of self once needs for belonging were satisfied. In another study, Ostrove and Long (2007) researched social-class and belonging for college students, finding social-class

background as being strongly related to belonging and predicting adjustment to college, quality of experience, and academic performance.

The campus environment is a context that researchers have explored for its potential impact on sense of belonging. Museus et al. (2016) explored the impact of culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) on belonging, concluding that a CECE model might be used to build programs, curriculum, or interventions to better support belonging for a diverse student body. Additionally, research has explored campus residence halls and living learning communities for their potential impacts on belonging (Johnson et al., 2007). In one of few studies on belonging and students with disabilities, Strange (2000) concluded that the campus environment's physically accessible spaces combined with psychological features have potential to engender belonging.

### **Fraternity and Sorority Involvement**

An extensive body of literature has examined fraternities and sororities and the places they occupy in higher education. This section of the literature review provides an overview of these types of student organizations to enhance the overall context for this study. Literature surrounding fraternities and sororities has indicated some positive outcomes for student learning and development. Researchers have also linked membership to undesired or negative outcomes. In recent years, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been among some of the most important and debated social issues on college campuses. Researchers have examined the nature of fraternities and sororities within increasingly diverse universities.

### **Historical Background**

Fraternities and sororities are some of the oldest forms of co-curricular involvement for college students in the United States, dating to the 1776 founding of Phi Beta Kappa Society at

the College of William and Mary (Anson & Marchesani, 1991). While many of the first fraternities and sororities began with a focus on academics and scholarship, they also developed organizational characteristics that included secret rituals, naming conventions, use of symbols, exclusive membership, and shared values and beliefs, which continue to this day (Whipple & Sullivan, 1998).

More than 200 years since the founding of the first fraternity, hundreds of thousands of undergraduates are members of thousands of collegiate chapters at colleges and universities of all types, both nationally and internationally. Most social fraternities and sororities are single-gender organizations governed under nationally organized bodies and trade associations, such as the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC), National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), and the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC).

Professional fraternities and sororities are organizations with a focus around a field of study or profession. Many of these organizations are open to all genders. It is not uncommon for professional groups to restrict membership to students who are studying a particular professional discipline, such as accounting, dentistry, education, journalism, law, nursing, music, or pharmacy, to name a few. Additionally, many professional fraternities and sororities are members of the Professional Fraternity Association, an American association of professional, collegiate fraternities and sororities founded in 1977.

A third type of fraternity and sorority, service organizations, can frequently be found at universities in the United States. Service fraternities and sororities have the primary purpose of engaging members in volunteerism and community service. They typically do not restrict the

gender of their membership. Some service organizations are also members of the Professional Fraternity Association.

### **Joining Fraternities and Sororities**

Whipple and Sullivan (1998) described the outsized importance that fraternities and sororities play in the student social culture of many campuses, something that was true two centuries ago and continues today. Fraternity and sorority membership typically begins through formal recruitment processes held at the start of a fall term on university campuses with some organizations continuing to recruit during subsequent terms or engaging in year-round recruitment.

Baird wrote that in the earliest fraternal organizations, membership was limited to undergraduates with senior class standing (Anson & Marchesani, 1991). As competition for members grew over time, chapters began admitting students from all class level standings. Today, recruitment of new members typically focuses on students in their first year. Membership costs for members can range in the hundreds of dollars each term to over \$1,000, particularly when housing is included in the cost.

### **Student Learning and Development**

Engagement in educationally effective practices by college students has been shown to lead to increased levels of learning and personal development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Hayek et al. (2002) compared levels of engagement between fraternity and sorority members and non-affiliated students. Using data collected from the National Survey of Student Engagement, the researchers used statistical analysis to examine a wide variety of engagement measures for fraternity and sorority members in their first and senior years of college from the assessment's sample. The researchers concluded from their analysis that students affiliated with fraternities

and sororities fared equal to or better than non-affiliated students in their engagement with educationally effective practices, time spent studying, interacting with faculty, and participating in extracurriculars. Additionally, they found that this applied to students across fraternity and sorority membership with regards to class standing. Living in fraternity and sorority housing did not generate a negative effect on engagement levels in this study.

Additionally, researchers have examined the ways fraternity and sorority involvement influences college student experiences. Fraternity and sorority members are more likely to be involved than their peers who are non-affiliated (Baier & Whipple, 1990; Pike & Askew, 1990; Thorson, 1997). For proponents of the fraternity and sorority experience, this is encouraging given that involvement has long been positively associated with student development while in college (Astin 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Additionally, membership provides students access to myriad opportunities to participate as volunteers within their communities as well as fundraising for charitable philanthropies, introducing fraternity and sorority students to service which has been identified as an engagement outcome that can contribute to success in college (Astin 1999; Kuh, 2007).

In some studies, no impact on certain outcomes of student learning have been noted by researchers. For example, Martin et al. (2011) sought to examine first-year students' development in their chapters, noting that relatively few researchers had explored the effects of fraternity and sorority membership on educational outcomes. Their study used data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, a longitudinal, multi-institutional study. An initial sample consisted of 4,501 first-year students from 11 institutions and who were affiliated with fraternities and sororities. The researchers used a comprehensive range of measures that represent a conceptual model of liberal arts outcomes in their analysis, such as moral reasoning,

critical thinking, intercultural effectiveness, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, and psychological well-being. Their findings revealed that affiliation with a fraternity or sorority had no substantial impact on their growth in these outcomes in the first year of college.

### **Academic Achievement**

Nelson et al. (2006) explored the relationship between fraternity and sorority membership and the semester of a student's recruitment on their GPA and overall retention. In this quantitative study, the researchers looked at longitudinal data for two cohorts of affiliated fraternity and sorority students, using statistical analysis to examine impacts on their GPA scores and persistence over time in college. This study found that membership had a significant positive effect on persistence for students in the study's sample. Additionally, while the researchers found that affiliation had a negative effect on the GPA of fraternity and sorority members during their recruitment semester, it ended up having a negligible effect on mean GPA over time for future semesters.

Pascarella et al. (2001) explored academic success of fraternity and sorority members as well. In this quantitative study, the researchers used a sample of students participating in the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL), with data gained from the NSSL precollege survey and a follow up critical thinking instrument. Additional data was collected through a multi-year follow-up with the NSSL sample, which provided longitudinal data. In their analysis, the researchers found that in the first year of college, membership had negative effects on reading comprehension and overall achievement for sorority women and negative effects on critical thinking, reading comprehension, mathematics, and overall achievement for fraternity men. However, the negative effects diminished by the fourth year of college for these students. Studies such as this one and those by Nelson et al. (2006) seem to suggest that negative effects to

academics appear in the first year of college for fraternity and sorority members but may dissipate in later years.

Pike (2000) examined data from the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) to explore the relationship between fraternity and sorority membership and college students' gains in cognitive development. Using a conceptual model, the researcher found that fraternity and sorority members reported high levels of social involvement and gains in cognitive development associated with general learned abilities. Pike indicated that these gains were directly related to their social involvement as affiliated members of fraternities and sororities.

### **Calls for Reform**

Fraternities and sororities have received significant scrutiny and calls for major reform in recent years. For instance, four students died at fraternity parties in 2017 (Brown, 2021). Several universities responded by suspending their full fraternity and sorority communities for months. Some administrators began to act in calling for reform, such as the presidents of Pennsylvania State University, Louisiana State University, and Florida State University.

In the fall of 2021, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst calls for racial justice across the nation, college students on nearly 20 university campuses were engaged in anti-fraternity protests over alleged sexual misconduct, sexist and racist behavior, hazing, and alcohol and drug abuse. Leveraging social media, students organized protests and asked for the abolition of fraternities at universities (Brown, 2021). University administrators, student affairs practitioners, and headquarters staff engaged with student protesters on fraternity misbehavior.

### **Alcohol**

Alcohol consumption and misuse by fraternities and sororities have been an area of focus for campus administrators, student affairs practitioners, and researchers. In a study to better

understand the drinking habits of fraternity and sorority members, Pace and McGrath (2002) analyzed data collected from the Core Survey, developed by the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention. In analyzing a sample of 321 college student participants, they identified that fraternity and sorority members drank more heavily and more frequently than non-affiliated students.

Significant resources have gone into educational programming designed to address alcohol consumption as it relates to fraternity and sorority communities. National organizations have stepped up to make change as well. For instance, because of excessive drinking and alcohol-related injuries and deaths at fraternity parties, the North American Interfraternity Conference passed a ban on hard liquor at its organizations' activities and houses in 2018.

### **Hazing**

Several high-profile hazing-related deaths and injuries have spurred further research into hazing in fraternities and sororities and its prevalence on university campuses. In a study to better understand students' attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs about hazing, Campo et al. (2005) surveyed a random sample of 2,000 undergraduate students. They found that 36% of respondents participated in hazing, with three factors identified as significantly increasing the likelihood of hazing: being male, belonging to a fraternity or sorority, and seeking approval from friends. In their findings the researchers concluded that not only is hazing occurring on campuses, but it is also happening in ways that are not always recognized as such by students. They recommended that universities leverage subjective norms to change hazing behavior.

Allan and Madden (2008) conducted a quantitative study of hazing by surveying 11,482 undergraduate students from 53 postsecondary institutions. The analysis of their data demonstrated that hazing activities were prevalent in organizations beyond social fraternities and

sororities and illuminated some reasons why hazing may be so difficult to prevent. For instance, students reported more positive than negative outcomes, and nearly all who acknowledged at least one instance of being subjected to an activity identified as hazing did not consider themselves to have been hazed. This research highlights the gap between experiencing and identifying hazing.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Higher education has changed vastly since the first fraternal organization was established in 1776 (Anson & Marchesani, 1991). Fraternities and sororities were organizations on predominantly White, male, and Christian campuses for predominantly White, male, and Christian students (Boschini & Thompson, 1998). The historical exclusivity of fraternities and sororities has received scrutiny and calls to better reflect the diverse campus demographics of today with an emphasis on inclusion and belonging.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) have emphasized the need for inclusive environments within fraternity and sorority communities. For instance, CAS' Standards for Fraternity and Sorority Advising Programs established a guiding principle titled Advocating for Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Communities. This principle describes a wide array of recommended actions, including addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the organizational aspects of advising, managing facilities, resources, and digital spaces, and the development of programs, policies, and procedures. Regarding advising recruitment specifically, the principle calls upon staff to “advise councils and chapters to promote recruitment and intake processes that are inclusive with regard to race, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, disability status, and student status” (CAS, 2023, p. 604). Fraternity and sorority advisors are also asked to establish goals for DEI and to assess and update them on appropriate timelines.

Fraternalities and sororities have been rebuked on their behavior for racial and cultural insensitivity in incidents that have garnered national exposure, such as culturally themed parties in which members wear racist and offensive attire (Brown, 2021). Studies on diversity, equity, and inclusion in fraternalities and sororities have found varying impacts on membership in terms of developing intercultural competencies.

Pascarella et al. (1996) examined factors that influence the openness of students to diversity and challenge within their first year of college. Using a sample of 3,331 students from the National Center on Education Statistics database, the researchers used statistical analysis to identify variables related to openness to diversity and challenge. Living on campus and participating in racial or cultural awareness workshops had a net positive effect for White students; however, fraternity and sorority affiliation had a strong negative effect on openness to diversity for White students.

Martin et al. (2015) sought to better understand the question of whether fraternalities and sororities inhibit intercultural competence. Using data from the longitudinal, multi-institutional Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, the researchers found that fraternity and sorority members did not differ in significant ways from non-affiliated students in terms of their intercultural competence development while in college. This study contradicts that of previous research, such as Pascarella et al. (1996).

Encouraging fraternalities and sororities to engage in inclusive practices, such as multicultural training, cross-racial interactions, and cross-cultural communications, can better enhance these communities as co-curricular learning environments. Bureau et al. (2011) encouraged the leaders of fraternalities and sororities to involve their members in enriching educational experiences because of the positive outcomes that are associated with doing so in

these organizations. Developing culturally competent members also means challenging organizations to adopt inclusive practices for their members, including those that are minoritized or part of underrepresented populations on college campuses, such as students with disabilities.

Although many students with documented disabilities are involved in fraternities and sororities, the actual percentage is unknown. Additionally, no published research examines how fraternity or sorority involvement shapes their experiences or sense of belonging. This gap highlights an opportunity to explore how aspects of fraternal membership may foster belonging among students with disabilities.

### **Fraternity and Sorority Summary**

Many researchers, administrators, and practitioners have made note of the controversial space fraternities and sororities have inhabited in higher education. Significant debate continues to take place about the relative value that these organizations have for college students. Some studies, not to mention media headlines, provide detractors with plenty to argue from regarding their reform or removal from campuses. However, still other research gives evidence to the educational and developmental significance of fraternities and sororities.

As campuses become more diverse, university administrators, student affairs professionals, and fraternity and sorority advisors can explore ways to enhance the overall diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts of these organizations. Doing so may help enhance overall institutional goals related to increasing persistence and retention, enhancing student belonging, and closing equity gaps.

### **Disability in Higher Education**

The rich and diverse history of people with disabilities in higher education includes the early schools of deaf education, the influence of war veterans to expand access, and decades of

activism (Evans et al., 2017). For educators, it is important to understand the historical and legal environment for students with disabilities so that campus environments and programs might be shaped to serve all students. This section also provides an overview of the disability and impairment types seen increasingly in college populations; an exploration of how the organizational, physical, and human aggregate environments can create barriers for disability; and examinations of literature around co-curricular involvement and sense of belonging.

### **Historical Background**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was one of the first civil rights laws in the United States prohibiting non-discrimination of people with disabilities. It specifically protected the rights of students with disabilities in higher education, requiring that their needs be met as adequately as those without disabilities (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 was a civil rights law that provided a federal mandate to end discrimination against people with disabilities. The law meant that colleges and universities must adapt to provide services and programs to people with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). Language in the law was expanded with the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) in 2008 which clarified definitions of disability and other language in the original ADA law.

The National Center for Education Statistics (De Brey et al., 2021) reported approximately 19% of United States undergraduates disclosed having a disability in the 2015-16 academic year. Further, the number of universities at which one out of every 10 college undergraduates disclosed having a disability has grown 50% since 2020 (“Which Types of Colleges Have the Most Undergraduates with Disabilities?”, 2025). Despite the growing numbers of students with disabilities on college campuses, they remain an understudied

population. For example, published research on this population in mainstream peer-reviewed journals is severely lacking. As mentioned in chapter one, a critical content analysis reviewing articles on students with disabilities revealed that top-tier higher education journals published just 25 articles on disability between 1990 and 2010 (Peña, 2014).

### **Impairment and Disability Types in College Populations**

According to Harbour (2008), there are no agreed upon practices in any United States organizations that currently collect statistics about all students with disabilities in higher education. This illuminating statement, reported in the 2008 Biennial AHEAD Survey of Disability Services and Resource Professionals in Higher Education, reveals the complexity and challenge in quantifying and reporting accurate statistics about students with disabilities. A significant part of this deficiency lies in the differences in the type of data requested and where the requests originate at the time they are reported. For example, some national data on higher education and disability is reported by disability resources offices, some of which use National Center for Educational Statistics data while others use self-reported data (Evans et al., 2017).

Although disability statistics reported by institutions and organizations varies, there is value in trying to quantify which disability and impairment types are commonly seen on college campuses. Evans et al. (2017) collected what they believed as some of the best data available to provide context to current student populations. The disability types listed in Table One are those that the researchers identified as most prevalent as well as two disabilities, acquired brain injury and autism spectrum disorders, that are rising in university students. Of course, these not the only student disabilities or impairments found in college students and, as the researchers note, some statistics may be imprecise. I have provided the source citations for each disability type presented in Table One.

**Table 1***Percentages of all College Students Reporting Particular Disabilities*

| <b>Disability Type</b>   | <b>Description of Impairment</b>   | <b>Percentages of all College Students Reporting Disabilities</b>   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Acquired Brain Injury</b>                                   | Includes traumatic brain injury (TBI), cerebral vascular accidents, and injuries resulting from lack of oxygen, concussions, or other causes.  | 16% experiencing TBI (Krause & Richards, 2014)  |
| <b>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</b>                | Defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as combination of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that is developmentally inappropriate for age.                | 4% (Higher Education Research Institute Survey of College Freshmen, 2011) and 8% (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2014)     |
| <b>Autism Spectrum Disorders</b>                               | A class of neurodevelopmental disorders affecting social and communication skills, behaviors, and sometimes cognitive development.   | Between 0.7% and 1.9% (White et al., 2011)  |
| <b>Chronic Health Conditions</b>                               | Refers to variety of disabilities (e.g. asthma, diabetes, Crohn’s Disease, epilepsy). Impairments may be stable, episodic, or progressive.   | 5.2% (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2014)   |
| <b>d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing</b>                              | People who identify as Deaf (capital “D”) claim a culturally distinct identity in use of sign language. People who are deaf (lower case “d”) refer to the audiological condition of not hearing. | 4% (Raue and Lewis, 2011)   |
| <b>Learning Disabilities</b>                                   | A disorder in one or more of basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written. Common examples: dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia.            | 2.9% (Higher Education Research Institute Survey of College Freshmen, 2011) and 4.5% (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2014) |
| <b>Psychological Disabilities and Mental Health Conditions</b> | Like chronic health conditions, the range of disabilities can be stable, episodic, or progressive. Examples include substance abuse, personality, anxiety, or mood disorders (e.g. depression).  | 3.8% (Higher Education Research Institute Survey of College Freshmen, 2011) and 6.7% (American College  |

|                            |  |   |
|----------------------------|--|---|
|                            |  | Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2014)  |
| <b>Mobility Impairment</b> | People with mobility impairments may intermittently or consistently use equipment such as canes, walkers, or wheelchairs. May be congenital or arise at any point in life. | “Orthopedic/physical” 2.7% (Higher Education Research Institute Survey of College Freshmen, 2011) and 1.0% (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2014) |

*Note: Adapted from Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach (Evans et al., 2017, pp. 133-139).*

**Campus Environment**

The campus environment is of interest to university administrators, faculty, and staff as it relates to student success, educational outcomes, and overall mission. Strange and Banning (2001) wrote, “The capacity of any postsecondary institution to carry out its educational mission depends, in part, on how well its principal environmental features are understood and shaped accordingly” (p. xii). While it is important to consider how environment impacts all students, campus leaders seeking to close equity gaps must also understand the impacts on underserved and underrepresented student populations.

For example, the environment of a college campus often has a direct impact upon students with disabilities and their success in college (Evans et al., 2017). University leaders who have embraced equity mindsets and seek to create more inclusive spaces should be courageous in leading change as it relates to accessibility of the campus environment. Moos (1979) defined environment as a social ecology that is composed of three features: the organizational

environment, the physical environment, and the human aggregate. Barriers to success for students with disabilities exist within all three environmental features.

### **Organizational Environment**

Federal law requires universities to provide access and reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). However, even when universities follow the letter of the law, access and transition in college can continue to be difficult or unfamiliar for students with disabilities. Students will need to navigate admissions, financial aid, and registration processes. Students with disabilities transitioning to college may find they are advocating for themselves for the first time and in a new framework and context than they are used to in high school (DiMaria, 2008). They will also navigate a different legal environment than they may be accustomed to from high school to receive accommodations. Finally, they must also learn where to go to receive accommodations. These examples make up what might be thought of as the organizational environment, that which includes policies and practices and the ways in which institutional goals are achieved (Moos, 1979).

### **Physical Environment**

According to Moos (1979), the physical environment includes both human-made and natural elements. Moos described human-made elements as including architectural design and location, pathways, parking lots, furniture and equipment inside of buildings, and noise and air pollution. Natural environmental elements include weather, population density and crowding, and the use of space. Evans et al. (2017) wrote, “the physical environment can be particularly troublesome for individuals with mobility, sensory, and health impairments” (p. 226).

Lawsuits have been filed on behalf of college students with disabilities in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), highlighting many kinds of inaccessible spaces, such as

slopes too steep to navigate, lack of handrails, rough surfaces and pathways, and inaccessible classrooms, auditoriums, and other campus spaces. For example, Mills College reached a settlement with the U.S. Attorney's Office to bring it into ADA compliance after an investigation and compliance review found barriers to access throughout buildings on its campus (U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of California, 2013). As a result of the agreement, Mills was required to make significant changes to many spaces in the physical environment, including installing or adjusting the slope of ramps, installing handrails, creating more van-accessible parking, and adjusting the heights of surfaces, such as lab counters and equipment.

### **Human Aggregate**

The human aggregate is the third feature of the university environment that has an impact on students with disabilities. Strange and Banning (2001) described the human aggregate, saying that "environments are transmitted through people, and the dominant features of a particular environment are partially a function of the collective characteristics of the individuals who inhabit it" (p. 35). Negative attitudes within the human aggregate on a college campus can create significant barriers to success for students with disabilities. For instance, it is not uncommon for students to encounter ableism on their university campuses.

Ableism is a form of oppression, one that creates hostile environments for people whose abilities fall outside of the range of what is defined as "socially acceptable" (Rauscher & McClintock, 1997, p. 198). Students may experience disbelief from faculty when they request accommodations or have their requests viewed as giving an unfair advantage in the classroom. Faculty and staff with disabilities also experience barriers that can involve ableist attitudes. "Assumptions about what a 'normal' educational setting and 'normal' workers are like also

create barriers for faculty and staff with disabilities,” wrote Evans et al. (2017, p. 205). Ableism is experienced in many forms and is not limited to people with certain impairment types.

Researchers of disability in higher education have drawn attention to the need for moving from simply fulfilling accommodations to more inclusive work that is conscious of intersections in student identities. Abes and Wallace (2018) explored and provided critical analysis of intersectional ableism as it is experienced by students with physical disabilities. Narrative inquiry was used to investigate the inner selves and experiences of two participants who shared stories about searching for home within their bodies and on their campuses. Each participant had experienced intersectional erasure, being made to feel removed through their intersecting social identities. The study contributes to the social justice work around disability in higher education.

There are potential solutions that can be considered to improve the transition process of students with disabilities as they enter colleges and universities. Some educators recommend that greater evaluation is needed of a school’s transition services to determine if it improves student outcomes (Grigal et al., 2012). To address transition issues, states and educators in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education must look at how students with disabilities transition between all levels of schooling and education.

### **Persistence, Retention, and Graduation**

Obtaining a college degree is indispensable, and higher education administrators and leadership should consider the factors that will positively impact persistence, retention, and graduation of students with disabilities. Mamiseishvili and Koch (2011) conducted a longitudinal study using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study survey. They aimed to identify factors that influenced first-to-second-year persistence of college students with disabilities. The researchers found that students with disabilities earned fewer credits and had

higher rates of non-persistence and lower graduation rates. In looking at what seemed to make a difference, their analysis revealed that on campus living, full-time enrollment, degree expectations, first-year GPA, and net price of attendance were significant predictors of persistence of students with disabilities.

### **Co-Curricular Involvement and Disabilities**

While research into involvement and disability in higher education has been limited, some researchers have begun to fill this gap by conducting studies looking at the impact of the co-curriculum. Evans et al. (2023) explored environmental influences on disabled students' co-curricular involvement. After conducting individual and focus group interviews with 33 disabled students, the researchers analyzed the data and identified factors that create barriers to co-curricular involvement, factors that make involvement possible, and those that encourage involvement. Among the findings, the researchers learned that the behaviors and attitudes of others created more barriers to involvement than physical or organizational barriers for their participants. Additionally, they found that accessible physical spaces, flexible organizational policies, and assistance from others made involvement possible as did active support from staff and peers encouraging involvement.

Social integration has been understood to be an important factor for all college students. Involvement in co-curricular activities is understood to be one such behavior by students that can contribute to their social integration. Using Tinto's (1993) theory of integration and retention as a theoretical framework, Bialka et al. (2017) explored how students with physical disabilities become socially integrated into college. The purpose of their study is to understand how students with physical disabilities are affected by their participation in a student organization called LEVEL. This group is a recognized student organization associated with the Office of Disability

Services at the private university at which the study was conducted. The qualitative study involved pre- and post-program interviews conducted with five participants, all students with physical disabilities. Data from interviews was analyzed the researchers divided their findings into three themes. First, they learned that participants experienced social isolation before their involvement in LEVEL began. Second, the student organization gave participants a space in which they could dismiss ableist assumptions and fallacies. Third, participants gained friendships with other students in LEVEL. The researchers highlighted that the organization served as a safe space in which the participants could develop meaningful relationships and challenge the stigmatization and ableism they experienced as students with physical disabilities.

### **Belonging and Students with Disabilities**

Seeking to understand how students with disabilities develop a sense of belonging as they moved through their first year of college, Vaccaro et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed students with non-visible disabilities about their transition experience. Findings from their study suggest that there exist interconnections between developing a sense of belonging and self-advocacy, social relationships, and mastery of the student role. Although their study only focused on students with non-visible disabilities in their first year of college, the researchers noted that belonging is little studied among students with disabilities. Further research should look at belonging experiences for students with different impairment types over other lengths of time, perhaps in longitudinal studies.

Belonging has also been examined for its possible influence on satisfaction and retention for students with disabilities. Fleming et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study looking at belonging as a primary contributor to satisfaction for college students with disabilities. Additionally, they explored whether environmental perceptions and students' self-advocacy

skills impact belonging and student satisfaction. Participants at three large public universities completed a survey administered electronically. In their sample, the researchers found that a higher sense of belonging was associated with greater satisfaction with the college experience. They also found that campus climate plays a significant role in sense of belonging and overall satisfaction for college students with disabilities, as does the ability for students to practice self-advocacy skills once in postsecondary educational environments.

### **Chapter Summary**

Having a sense of belonging is a key to success in college for any student (Strayhorn, 2019), as is now well-understood and established by numerous studies. This chapter began with a summary of the literature surrounding our understanding of belonging, from its roots in higher education research, to recent studies examining belonging as it is experienced by minoritized student populations. Involvement in ones' campus community through student clubs and organizations can serve as a pathway to experiencing belonging for many students.

Studies of belonging because of participation and membership in fraternities and sororities has been shown to have a relationship with other metrics for student success (McCreary and Schutts, 2015; Schutts et al., 2017). While belonging has been studied for some student populations through their involvement in fraternities and sororities, there is no research on the experiences of student members with disabilities. The gap in the research is what this study addressed through its purpose and research questions. Chapter three gives an overview of the methodology for this study.

## **Chapter Three – Methodology**

The overarching research problem of this study is to explore the experiences of students with disabilities and the role involvement in fraternities and sororities has on their sense of belonging. Additionally, the study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What factors of fraternities and sororities impact the development of a sense of belonging among college students with disabilities?
2. How do interactions between college students with disabilities and their peers in fraternities and sororities impact a sense of belonging?
3. In what ways do university programs and personnel impact the sense of belonging for college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities? These questions and the research problem statement guide the study.

In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the overall design of this research. This includes the approach and research rationale, theoretical framework, participant recruitment, and methods of data collection and analysis. Delimitations and limitations are also discussed. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a statement about my positionality as a researcher.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of sense of belonging as a phenomenon. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) write that phenomenological research seeks to depict the essence or essential element of an experience. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of an experience or phenomenon. Accordingly, as I am interested in the phenomenon of belonging, I have decided to take a qualitative phenomenological methodological approach.

Guba (1990) describes three key questions that are explored within the philosophical perspective of a researcher. The first is ontological, focusing on the nature of what is knowable or what is real. The second is epistemological and examines the relationship between the knower and the known. The third is methodological, exploring how the knower should seek knowledge. My overall philosophical approach includes answers to these questions in relation to this study.

For my research I have adopted a constructivist perspective. The epistemology of a constructivist approach involves closeness and subjectivity for a researcher (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Qualitative researchers often seek to observe participants in their own environments when they are collecting data. Axiology, the role of values, states that research from a constructivist perspective is biased, meaning that I have acknowledged my positionality as a researcher. My perspective and lens through which I see the world is informed by my experiences and my social identities.

My methodological approach is inductive, meaning that as a researcher I begin with the participants' viewpoints and build outward from there to gain understanding of their experiences. This is closely related to my phenomenological approach. Crotty (1998) wrote that phenomenology invites researchers to “engage with the phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately” (p. 79). Understanding the phenomena at the center of my research questions is where I can gain the most insight towards understanding the overarching reality for college students with disabilities and their sense of belonging in fraternities and sororities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework applied to this study is the Social Justice Model of Disability. The model brings together concepts from various social justice and civil rights movements.

Additionally, the model takes a non-deficit approach to understanding the experiences of students with disabilities, views disability as a social construction, and centers the experiences of ableism as being directed at people with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). Ableism is recognized as contributing to an environment of oppression towards people with disabilities. I have selected this theoretical framework for my study because it emphasizes that all individuals have the right to be respected and that education is key to creating change, particularly within higher education.

### **Methods**

This study utilizes the qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Smith et al. (2009) wrote that IPA is chiefly concerned with the lived human experience as it is expressed on its own terms, without linkages to predefined categories or systems. What sets IPA apart from other types of qualitative research is the focus on examining individual experiences as situated within their contexts. In some ways, this is like a researcher looking closely at snapshots that have captured moments in time and space. Inherent in IPA is a recognition that the individual has experiences that are uniquely their own and derived from their life, their motivations, and their distinct personality.

Research questions have specific features, depending on the way a researcher asks them. This, in turn, dictates the type of qualitative approach that a researcher will select. For instance, a general phenomenological approach would be appropriate for a study in which a research question explores the key features of sense of belonging shared among participants. However, I determined that IPA is appropriate to my study because my research questions focus on personal meaning-making in a particular context by participants who will also share a particular experience. In this study, that experience is membership in a fraternity or sorority. This approach is consistent with the epistemology of my research questions.

## **Research Site**

This study was conducted at a large public research university in the mountain west region of the United States. The institution has an enrollment of more than 28,000 students, about 18,000 of whom are full- or part-time degree-seeking undergraduates. It is designated as a doctoral research institution by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education and offers students approximately 200 programs of study.

Student services relevant to this study include the institution's Disability Resources Office and Fraternity and Sorority Life program. The Disability Resources Office coordinates academic, housing, and dining accommodations to students with documented disabilities. On average, the office supports approximately 1,600 student accommodation requests per year. Fraternity and Sorority Life, located within the Department of Student Activities and Leadership, is staffed by two full-time employees and provides individual and chapter advising, support for chapter recruitment, and delivery of an array of educational programs such as leadership development, officer training, and harm reduction resources.

The institution has an active fraternity and sorority community of more than 2,700 student members, with chapters in social, professional, and service categories. There are more than two dozen social fraternities and sororities, falling under three governing councils: Panhellenic Council, Interfraternity Council, and Multicultural Greek Council.

A unique feature of this community is that they are unhoused, meaning the institution does not offer fraternity- or sorority-specific places of residence on or off campus in which chapter members can live. In the absence of institutional fraternity and sorority housing, a culture has developed in which many chapter members choose to live in so-called "satellite houses,"

rental properties which may include houses or apartments, and which are leased to students in fraternities and sororities who chose to live together or live with unaffiliated roommates.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I began the process of recruiting participants using purposive sampling and referrals. Purposive sampling methods give researchers insight into participant experiences and are frequently used in interpretative phenomenological analysis studies as opposed to probability sampling methods (Smith et al., 2009). Researchers who seek participant referrals work with relevant gatekeepers at their research site to gain access or assist in communication. This is the approach I took with my study.

On approval of their director, staff in the Disability Resources Office sent an email on my behalf to approximately 1,000 students registered for accommodations with the office. The recruitment email summarized the study's purpose, participant criteria, and interview process (Appendix A). I also asked DRO and Fraternity and Sorority Life staff to personally refer students, as they often build relationships and trust with students through their advising and student support responsibilities.

Included in the recruitment email was a link to a Qualtrics screening survey in which I asked potential participants a series of questions about their demographics (Appendix B). These questions invited students to share their disability or impairment type and whether they self-identified as a person with a disability. Additional questions focused on identity-specific characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Screening questions also focused on class standing in college and fraternity or sorority council affiliation.

The recruitment email was sent a total of three times by the Disability Resource Office to students with documented disabilities at the university. When initial recruitment yielded few male-identifying students completing the screening survey, a staff member was compensated to cross-reference a list of fraternity members provided by Fraternity and Sorority Life with male-identifying students registered for accommodations. The staff member made personal phone calls to men in fraternities who were registered with the office, inviting them to consider completing the screening survey and participating in the study.

A total of 57 students completed the screening survey. Of those who expressed interest, only students who self-identified as having a disability or impairment and were involved in a social, professional, or service-based fraternity or sorority were considered. Demographic questions on the survey enabled me to further narrow a potential pool of participants that was diverse in terms of their identities and involvement.

### **Participant Characteristics**

Seven participants were selected and accepted invitations to be interviewed for the study. Four participants identified as female and are members of social sororities, three affiliated with the Panhellenic Council and one in the Multicultural Greek Council. Three participants identified as male and are members of social fraternities, all affiliated with the Interfraternity Council.

Participants' disabilities ranged across the following types of impairment: acquired brain injury/traumatic brain injury (ABI/TBI), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), chronic health condition (CHC), deaf/hard of hearing (DEAF/HOH), learning disability (LD), and psychological disability/mental health condition (PSYCH). Some participants held more than one disability type, and all participants had non-visible disabilities.

Table Two shows participants by their disability types while also indicating gender next to the pseudonym they selected for themselves for the study. More information on the backgrounds, campus involvement, and relevant characteristics of each of the participants can be read in chapter four.

**Table 2**

*Participants by disability type*

| Participant (Gender) | ABI/TBI | ADHD | CHC | DEAF/HOH | LD | PSYCH |
|----------------------|---------|------|-----|----------|----|-------|
| Brick (m)            |         |      |     |          | X  |       |
| Cece (f)             |         |      | X   | X        |    |       |
| John (m)             |         | X    |     |          |    |       |
| Kaitlin (f)          |         | X    | X   |          |    | X     |
| Steve (m)            |         | X    |     |          | X  |       |
| Summer (f)           |         |      |     |          |    | X     |
| TJ (f)               | X       | X    | X   |          |    | X     |
| Total                | 1       | 4    | 3   | 1        | 2  | 3     |

**Data Collection**

Once participants agreed to join the study, I emailed them the informed consent form (Appendix C). To ensure authenticity and confidentiality, each participant either physically signed the consent form or provided an electronic signature using Adobe Signature. Participants were invited to request accommodations to support their participation in interviews and I was prepared to support requests, such as altering the interview modality. No requests for accommodations were made by any of the seven participants. Interview dates and times were set collaboratively with participants.

As noted by Smith et al. (2009), studies using interpretative phenomenological analysis are best suited to data collection methods that create space for participants to give detailed, first-person accounts of their experiences. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were scheduled with each of the seven participants for up to 90 minutes each. Interview questions allowed for in-

depth responses, including questions that elicited descriptive and narrative answers, those that allowed participants to compare or contrast their experiences, questions that involved evaluating their own feelings, and prompts and probes to dig deeper into their responses. Interview questions were designed to avoid leading responses in a specific direction or eliciting closed responses, such as yes or no replies (Appendix D).

With participants' permission, interviews were video- and audio-recorded using the Zoom conferencing tool for record-keeping purposes. This allowed me to return to the recording for my analysis and ensure that I was able to revisit any nuances in what was said during the interviews. Additionally, I used Otter.ai, a web-based speech-to-text transcription application, to create automated real-time transcriptions using artificial intelligence. When interviews were completed, I emailed copies of the interview transcripts to the seven participants, inviting them to review and verify them for accuracy and authenticity (Appendix E). To thank them for their time, I emailed each participant a \$20.00 electronic gift card to an online shopping platform.

### **Data Analysis**

The analytic process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) follows a series of steps that can be thought of as an iterative and inductive cycle. According to Smith et al. (2009), researchers begin with close line-by-line readings of the data and making initial notations before exploring emergent themes and finally searching for connections among themes. IPA processes often move from the particular to the shared and the descriptive to the interpretative.

I began my analysis after asking participants to verify their interview transcripts. Once verified, transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, a cloud-based application with tools for data analysis. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that it is helpful to approach each interview as its own

“case” which receives a close reading and interpretation before moving on to the next case. I assigned each of the seven interviews its own case number, one through seven.

The following steps for IPA analysis were recommended by Smith et al. (2009). Beginning with case one, I conducted a close line-by-line reading of the interview. This allowed me to enter the world of the participant, becoming familiar with the incidents, stories, and experiences they shared with me. Next, I began an initial noting process, using tools in Dedoose to highlight certain excerpts of text. Following this, I wrote brief, exploratory comments attached to each excerpt that were descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual.

Using Dedoose’s coding tool, I began to identify emergent themes for case one. These themes were focused on discrete sections of the transcript. Once I had a set of emergent themes, I used abstraction to identify patterns across the themes. This meant grouping and re-grouping them in different ways until I could identify superordinate themes. I found it helpful to copy and paste emergent themes from Dedoose into a Word document, including the relevant interview excerpts, to better develop the local analysis of themes.

After completing this process with case one, I moved on to case two. The entire analytic process was repeated for each of the seven cases. Superordinate themes that most accurately described how students with disabilities experience a sense of belonging in fraternities and sororities began to emerge across cases. I tracked these themes in a spreadsheet, including the relevant excerpts and transcript lines for easy reference within the cases.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

Enhancing the trustworthiness is important as a means of demonstrating research validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) write that trustworthiness can be established through a focus on four criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Using strategies

recommended by Creswell (2003) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) I conducted member checking with my data following interviews. Participants were contacted via email with preliminary themes from data analysis and asked to verify if the themes and analysis are an accurate representation of their background and experiences (Appendix F). Further, participants had an opportunity to correct any misrepresentation or add additional information.

As I am non-affiliated with a fraternity and I identify as nondisabled, it is important for me to consider the ways in which I may be biased in the process of data collection or analysis. Throughout the process of the research design, data collection, and data analysis I kept detailed researcher notes and memos, including thoughts written after each interview was completed. Notes and memos were primarily maintained within Dedoose during coding and analysis of data; however, I tended to make handwritten notes following each interview. Each of these methods were ones in which I could refer to how I was feeling or what I was thinking about at various points in the research process to check myself for trustworthiness as the researcher.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are restrictions that a researcher places on their study to intentionally focus the scope (Creswell, 2003). This study confined itself to interviewing college students who are members of fraternities and sororities and who identified as having disabilities. Additionally, participants in the study were selected from a single institution.

Limitations are conditions that restrict the scope of the study and, in turn, may affect the outcome (Creswell, 2003). In essence, these are potential weaknesses that a researcher should identify before the study begins. An essential limitation of this research is that the scope and range of disability type and impairment type cannot possibly be represented by participants in this study. This study is limited to student members of fraternities and sororities; however,

students may have different experiences as they relate to their sense of belonging in different kinds of organizations (i.e. student government) and through different types of involvement (i.e. intramural sports). Additionally, limiting the research site to one type of institution impacts generalizability to students whose experiences may vary or differ at other institution types.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As I wrote in chapter one's researcher's perspective, I am a student affairs professional with twenty years of professional experience in higher education, working in the areas of student involvement and fraternity and sorority programs. Additionally, I have professional experience from a graduate assistantship coordinating academic accommodations to college students with disabilities. My interest in student development and disability in higher education has led me to work alongside fellow scholars who are similarly motivated to conduct research on these topics. My researcher's perspective provides thorough insight into my motivation for this research topic.

While I have a strong desire to contribute to the literature on students with disabilities, it is important that I recognize my positionality as someone who does not identify as having a disability. In doing so, I recognize that I likely brought biases and assumptions to the research because my identity and lived experience differ from those of my participants. Knowing that I cannot set aside my biases, I strove to openly acknowledge them, carefully using strategies to check the validity and trustworthiness of my data collection and analysis.

### **Chapter Summary**

I have designed this qualitative research study to utilize an IPA approach as a means of examining the unique experiences of my participants in a shared context. Participants were recruited via referral and invited to complete a screening form if they had interest in the study. The screening questions allowed me to identify a pool of diverse participants, given their

demographics, disability type, and involvement experiences in fraternities and sororities. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, transcribed, coded, and organized into themes, categories, and sub-categories.

Additionally, I entered this study with an understanding of my own identities and where they are similar and different from my participants. My positionality as a researcher, including the biases and assumptions that I carry with me, were important to both acknowledge and challenge in my role throughout the study. Implementing thorough validity and reliability checks enabled me to engage my participants in member checking of the data and my analysis, further enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the study.

## Chapter Four – Findings

This chapter provides an examination of the findings from an empirical qualitative study investigating the experiences of college students with disabilities. After the lengthy and complex analytic process described in chapter three, the following presents an attempt to illuminate what was shared by the participants in my study. As I conducted close line-by-line readings of each participant's case, I developed initial codes. Eventually, codes were organized into emergent themes. When moving on to other cases, the process was repeated until I began looking for patterns across cases which became superordinate themes. My understanding of these themes and the ways they address my research questions are presented here.

The overarching research problem examined in this study was to explore the experiences of college students with disabilities and the role involvement in fraternities and sororities plays on their sense of belonging. Through my analysis, I have attempted to address three research questions: What factors of fraternities and sororities impact the development of a sense of belonging among college students with disabilities? How do interactions between college students with disabilities and their peers in fraternities and sororities impact a sense of belonging? And in what ways do university programs and personnel impact the sense of belonging for college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities?

When conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research with large samples, Smith et al. (2009) recommend that researchers use recurrence to identify themes. They considered six or more participants a large sample for an IPA study. For the purposes of this IPA study, which had a large sample of seven participants, I classified themes as recurrent when they appeared in 50% or more of the sample (Appendix G). While I could have been more stringent,

for instance, setting recurrence at 100% of cases, recurrence of themes in at least 50% allows for a balance between recognizing commonality and individuality in participants' cases.

As cases were analyzed, I identified seven emergent themes which could be organized underneath three superordinate themes. The first superordinate theme is Authentic Peer Relationships with the emergent themes of Intrinsic Need for Community, Mattering to Others, and Positive Social Support. The second superordinate theme is Barriers to Belonging with the emergent themes of Ableism, Stigma, and Accessibility and Negative Social Dynamics. Finally, the third superordinate theme is University Environmental Impacts with the emergent themes of Program Design and Interactions with Faculty and Staff. Superordinate themes and their corresponding emergent themes are presented in Table Three.

**Table 3**

*Table of Themes*

| <b>Superordinate Themes</b>         | <b>Emergent Themes</b>   |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Authentic Peer Relationships     | 1.1 Intrinsic Need for Community<br>1.2 Mattering to Others<br>1.3 Positive Social Support |
| 2. Barriers to Belonging            | 2.1 Ableism, Stigma, and Accessibility<br>2.2 Negative Social Dynamics                     |
| 3. University Environmental Impacts | 3.1 Program Design<br>3.2 Interactions with Faculty and Staff                              |

### **Participants Overview**

The stories and experiences shared by participants were rich and full detail. As a qualitative approach, IPA invites the researcher to deeply investigate individual stories, pouring over them for the meaning they have in participants' lives. While my analysis is presented in detail throughout this chapter, first I provide an overview that profiles each participant with details of their backgrounds, demographic information, and additional context to their lived

experiences. Participants are presented in alphabetical order by the pseudonym they selected for themselves.

Brick (White, male, heterosexual), a junior, was a business major who loved biking, camping, hiking, and snowboarding. He described himself as social and placed high value on friendships and new experiences. Brick was an out-of-state student who joined a fraternity his sophomore year primarily for the social experiences. He was diagnosed with a learning disability, dyslexia, in the second grade.

Cece (Hispanic and White, female, heterosexual) was a sophomore studying Spanish secondary education. She was an in-state student who worked several jobs on campus, including Resident Assistant for the Housing department, TRIO program mentor for STEM, and lab assistant in an academic department. She also lived on campus as part of her Resident Assistant position. Cece was a member of a multicultural sorority. Outside of her sorority membership, she was part of a Latino/a club. Cece had been diagnosed as deaf/hard of hearing in her left ear since birth. Additionally, she was diagnosed with a chronic health condition, epilepsy, in high school.

John (Hispanic and White, male, heterosexual) was in his junior year and studying Business Administration. He was a first-generation college student from out of state. John described himself as both outgoing and social. During the second semester of his freshman year, he decided to join a fraternity to find community and make friends. He lived off campus in a rental house with fellow fraternity men. John was diagnosed with ADHD in the second grade.

Kaitlin (White, female, heterosexual) was a freshman who lived on campus in a first-year student residence hall. She was an out-of-state student studying elementary education. Kaitlin joined a Panhellenic sorority in her first semester of college. Additionally, she was involved in several clubs and worked as a university tour guide. Kaitlin had several disabilities, including

ADHD and renal failure, a chronic health condition, diagnosed in the sixth and seventh grades. She was also diagnosed with generalized anxiety, depressive, and post-traumatic stress disorders in the first semester of her freshman year of college.

Steve (Multiracial and White, male, heterosexual) was a junior majoring in communication. He was an out-of-state, first-generation college student. Steve joined a fraternity during his first semester as a freshman after being encouraged to do so by friends. He described himself as shy, but his fraternity experience helped him become more social and confident. Steve held several leadership roles in his chapter. Additionally, he lived off campus with members of his fraternity in a rental house. When Steve was in the third grade, he was diagnosed with a learning disability. Later, he was diagnosed with ADHD while in college.

Summer (White, female, heterosexual) was a first-year graduate student pursuing a master's in athletic training. She was also a first-generation college student. Summer transferred back in-state during her junior year after experiencing inadequate support at a previous university. After transferring, she joined a Panhellenic sorority that at the time was new to the community and undergoing extension. As an undergraduate student, Summer held several leadership roles in her chapter. She was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder during her freshman year of high school.

TJ (White, female, heterosexual), a junior, was studying Business Administration. She was a first-generation college student from in-state. TJ joined a Panhellenic sorority during the first semester of her freshman year to find community and make friends. She lived in an honors student residence hall during her first semester. Just before the start of her second semester of college, she was in a snowboarding accident which resulted in a traumatic brain injury. After the accident, she began living off campus in a rental house with sorority sisters. TJ held several

leadership roles in her chapter. Outside of her sorority, she managed the men’s club sport volleyball team. In addition to her TBI diagnosis, TJ was previously diagnosed with anemia in high school and ADHD in her freshman year of college.

Table four shows a summary of participant disabilities. For clarity, each time a participant is introduced in this chapter I included the following abbreviations for disability diagnoses: acquired brain injury/traumatic brain injury (ABI/TBI), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), chronic health condition (CHC), deaf/hard of hearing (DEAF/HOH), learning disability (LD), and psychological disability/mental health condition (PSYCH).

**Table 4**

*Summary of participant disabilities*

| <b>Participant (gender)</b> | <b>Summary of Disabilities</b>   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Brick (m)                   | 1. Learning Disability (Dyslexia)  |
| Cece (f)                    | 1. Chronic Health Condition (Epilepsy)<br>2. Deaf/Hard of Hearing  |
| John (m)                    | 1. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder  |
| Kaitlin (f)                 | 1. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder<br>2. Chronic Health Condition (Renal/Kidney Failure)<br>3. Psychological Disabilities/Mental Health Conditions (Anxiety, Depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)  |
| Steve (m)                   | 1. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder<br>2. Learning Disability (Diagnosis Not Shared by Participant)  |
| Summer (f)                  | 1. Psychological Disabilities/Mental Health Conditions (Anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder)  |
| TJ (f)                      | 1. Acquired Brain Injury/Traumatic Brain Injury<br>2. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder<br>3. Chronic Health Conditions (Migraines and Anemia)<br>4. Psychological Disability/Mental Health Condition (Anxiety) |

**Superordinate Theme 1: Authentic Peer Relationships**

The first superordinate theme that emerged from my analysis is Authentic Peer Relationships. Participants talked about several significant factors in which they found a sense of belonging within their fraternities and sororities, each of which was centered around the kinds of

bonds and relationships they built with their peers in chapters. These factors included an intrinsic need to make friends and join a community, the perceived sense that they mattered to others, and the tight-knit nature of their communities which served as environments for strong social support. Three emergent themes were identified related to Authentic Peer Relationships: Intrinsic Need for Community, Mattering to Others, and Positive Social Support.

### **Emergent Theme 1.1: Intrinsic Need for Community**

Every participant described their reasons for joining their fraternity or sorority chapters as opportunities to seek community and friendship, equating this with an internal drive to belong. In their interviews, they shared stories of the importance they placed on personally pursuing community in their decisions to join fraternity and sorority chapters. Additionally, three of the seven participants were encouraged to join because friends also suggested they explore the opportunities. Whether they knew they wanted to join a fraternity or sorority when they arrived on campus or received encouragement from friends, every participant devoted physical and psychological energy to getting involved to satisfy their goals of feeling that they belonged.

Brick (LD) spoke about his sense of belonging in his fraternity as one rooted in the friendships and opportunities the group provided. He put it simply, saying, “I can confidently say that these are lifelong friends.” Brick indicated that his motivation to join was specifically centered on finding like-minded individuals who wanted to have fun and active experiences on campus, such as playing sports and attending social events together. “I met some cool people that I ended up liking, and then went to the rest of their events, and then joined. No regrets. It’s been a good time,” said Brick. Even though he maintained friendships and a social schedule outside of his chapter by playing soccer, Spikeball, and volleyball, Brick’s motivation to join was a means to find belonging through the active social life a fraternity could provide him.

Cece's (CHC, DEAF/HOH) decision to join a sorority occurred when a friend invited her to consider the opportunity. At the time, she admitted to her friend that she did not know what a sorority was but was intrigued by the idea of joining a multicultural group whose members were almost entirely Latina women. Cece said about the experience:

[My friend] was telling me how she loves it and it's one of the multicultural sororities here on campus. And so, I think that's what caught my attention was that it was multicultural. And I was like, 'Oh, wow, cool.' And then she was telling me how it wasn't like other sororities. She said, it was basically kind of like a sorority where we kind of empower each other, how we kind of embrace all different cultures, and how we just try to find a little home and safe space for all of us to embrace our differences. And I feel like when I heard that, I was like, 'Oh, my goodness, that's so cool.' I would love to be part of that. And so, then I just joined.

For Cece, joining a multicultural sorority was a way she could affirm aspects of her identity, satisfying a need to belong to a group that was not just purely social, but also one that represented her values, her interests, and her broader community.

As a graduating high school student, TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) prioritized applying to universities with strong fraternity and sorority communities because of her motivation to find community and belonging in a chapter. Involvement in a sorority was something she envisioned being part of her college life:

I had kind of always felt like I would want to rush wherever I went. I was really enthralled with [this university's] Greek Life. I loved, like, the camaraderie and how tight knit it is. You know, fraternities and sororities, IFC and Panhellenic, do a really great job

of just kind of bringing everybody together. And it's just a very close-knit community that I wanted to be a part of.

TJ knew going into the Panhellenic formal recruitment process that it would be modified significantly to comply with public health requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, including many virtual meetings over Zoom. However, she was undeterred by these changes, feeling motivated to participate because she wanted to find a community to which she could feel she belonged.

Going to college was not always on the radar for Steve (ADHD, LD). However, he was encouraged by a friend from home to enroll at the same university, which would be out-of-state for the two of them:

One of the main decisions I came up here is with my friend. I didn't really have a plan after high school. So, I just decided to apply. And I'm really am proud that I applied and got into a school here.

While he made friends in his first semester on campus, joining a fraternity was not something Steve was interested in initially. However, the same friend from home who encouraged him to go to college also invited him to investigate joining a fraternity. Further, he said that several other close friends he had made in his residence hall convinced him to join fraternity recruitment:

When I came to college, I didn't really want to [join a fraternity], but the same friend wanted me to join one with him. And, I guess, I got in my dorm, I had really good friends I made and they convinced me to join as well.

The final decision to sign up for recruitment was Steve's, indicating that he had an intrinsic desire for the community a fraternity could provide. However, in his case it was important for friends to encourage him so that he could overcome his shy nature to take these steps to join.

Encouragement from friends was a part of the intrinsic need for community for two more participants. Like Steve, Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) decided to join her sorority when a friend at a different university encouraged her to consider going through recruitment. Kaitlin's experience with her peers was overall both positive and negative, but when asked what she would be missing if she had not joined her sorority, she described the close, meaningful friendships that she developed within the chapter. "I wouldn't have some of the best friends that I have right now. I don't know how that would be," she said. Affiliating with her sorority was a way to make friends both in and out of the chapter, including those in other sororities and fraternities:

And then I think it's also allowed me to meet a lot more people because of mixers and socials. So, there's some girls and I say, I probably wouldn't have met them if I didn't go to that mixer. And during recruitment too, I met girls as well that I'm friends with and they're in different sororities. And I think it's also given me ways to connect with people. Like there's a fraternity here, [name of chapter]. And, I mean, I met all those people through a party, but you didn't have to be in a sorority to go to, but I think me being in that sorority gave common ground and kind of ways to chat more and connect more. And now a lot of those brothers I'm really close with, they call me the 'unofficial sweetheart.'

Kaitlin concluded by saying that most of her closest friends are those she made within her sorority. She was thankful that her membership had brought her so many connections in and out of the organization.

In the fall semester of his first year in college, John (ADHD) decided he would try to join a fraternity. He saw joining a fraternity as a way he could engage in social outlets on campus, such as playing intramural sports and going to parties, as well as being in a community that

would encourage him to focus on his schoolwork or take on a position of leadership in the group. “I wanted this community where I could be myself. And where I could find some good friends,” said John.

Although he went through the recruitment process, he was not offered a bid by a fraternity to join that semester. John tried again the following academic year, during his fall semester as a sophomore. Once again, he was unsuccessful in being offered a bid. While other students may have given up on this opportunity, John was encouraged by a roommate who was in a fraternity to try a third time. On the third try, he was successful in becoming a member of a chapter. John described it as a moment in which he felt he belonged:

I showed up there. And it just felt like it was kind of what I wanted at the time. I got along with some of the dudes pretty well. And I was just excited because it was uncharted territory. And I was always like, they really serve the community. They really like to give back and only give back, they just gave me this idea and persona of like, brotherhood, ‘rah, go, let's do it together.’

With encouragement from a friend and his internal drive to belong, John was impelled to participate in fraternity recruitment three times before he found an organization to join.

Unlike other participants, Summer (PSYCH) joined her organization later in her college career. As a junior who had just transferred to the institution, Summer was looking for friendship and community. However, she ended up missing the formal panhellenic recruitment process, which she initially took as a sign that she would not be joining a sorority. As it turned out, there was a new chapter undergoing extension which started their recruitment after the formal process for other sororities ended. This provided her with an opportunity to join a group at the ground-level as a founding member:

And it ended up being the perfect fit for me, where I found that there was a lot of opportunities to expand my leadership skills to meet other people within both the student community, the Greek community, and as a new transfer student. While I didn't know people here, I was older for my age, for my class standing. So, people I went to high school with that went here, had just graduated. So, it's like, okay, I'm in a new pool of people that I don't know. So, it was a great social opportunity to grow as a leader, to be a part of something bigger than just my academics. And it just felt right. The chapter that I found, the people that I'm around, it all fell into place. And just similar to when I came to this institution and felt like I belonged like this, I found my home away from home.

Summer's intrinsic drive to join a sorority helped her to build strong social connections and a sense of belonging. "I came here wanting to find a social community and people around me and people that I could be best friends with," she said. Summer added that she had formed friendships with women she could not picture her life without.

### **Emergent Theme 1.2: Mattering to Others**

Getting involved in leadership roles fostered a sense of belonging among students in their fraternities and sororities, as reflected in four of the seven participant interviews. Summer, TJ, Steve, and John all held leadership positions in their chapters. Regardless of title or scope of responsibilities, each indicated that being in a positional role supported their feelings of connection and sense of belonging. To them, mattering to others meant that someone in your organization was counting on you.

In her sorority, Summer (PSYCH) held leadership roles that included being a chapter delegate on the Panhellenic Council and ritual chairwoman for her sorority. She spoke about it as it related to her obsessive-compulsive disorder:

I held multiple leadership positions throughout my time, and they definitely pushed on some of my OCD tendencies, because it was hard. But it definitely pushed me to work with others. And better than I do, because sometimes I just do it myself. So it's done. I know, it's done right then, to kind of let someone else do it. But it pushed me out of my comfort zones in those aspects.

Although she did not always achieve the leadership positions she ran for, such as her unsuccessful campaign for sorority president, the opportunities Summer did receive allowed her to enhance her leadership skills and experience meaningful personal and social growth. Being a leader exposed her to the greater council structure of leaders across campus, enhancing her sense of belonging within a broader community. Of this, she said:

And then also, just collaborating with my chapter as well as the Panhellenic community for some of my position's responsibilities, required me to go outside of my chapter and go with Panhellenic as well as IFC and work with the fraternities on campus. So, it gave me a sense of the small kind of leadership opportunities in a smaller, tight-knit group, whether that be a committee versus my chapter as a whole, and then Greek Life as a whole on campus. And so, it helps me grow and helped me gain confidence. And also helped me gain confidence in others.

Although at times she felt discomfort, Summer saw each of these experiences and the experiences of others as ones in which she grew self-confidence and contributed meaningfully to her chapter.

TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) had recently become the recruitment director for her sorority, a leadership experience that helped her feel a greater sense of connection beyond

her immediate community. Because of her position, TJ was invited to attend an out-of-state conference about recruitment hosted by her sorority's international headquarters:

With me going to the recruitment program that I attended, I met girls from all over the country in my chapter, and it was incredible to be able to really hone in and see people from all over the nation, we're all a part of this.

Attending the conference exposed TJ to the bigger leadership structure of her international sorority as well as her place within it. As a result of being there, she gained context for how she could make an impact as a leader on her campus, serving others in the sorority.

Leadership positions, like those held by TJ and Summer, helped participants feel that others were counting on them. Working together alongside peers was a key to feeling that one mattered within not only the larger structure of a chapter but also within the broader fraternity and sorority community. Steve (ADHD, LD) expressed similar sentiments, reflecting on his involvement as philanthropy chair on his fraternity's executive board, which found him working with a local non-profit partner for a volunteer project, tracking members' service hours and overseeing the completion of philanthropic events. Steve shared that his peers showed gratitude and recognition for his leadership in these aspects of fraternity life. "It just felt like something. They really appreciate you for what you do," he said.

John (ADHD) shared many examples of his involvement in the fraternity beyond just active membership. These included getting involved with planning for the chapter's participation in Greek Week activities, joining the fraternity's Rush Committee to make decisions on potential new members, being part of the intramural team in the fraternity and sorority league, and attending a sorority's flag football philanthropy fundraiser. When asked what these experiences meant to him, he commented that they both challenged and tested him in new ways:

I'm the type of person to want to put in the work, but only if I'm interested. So that got me out of my comfort zone and pushed me to learn how to get my life a little more structure and get things to where I'd be more outgoing.

Because others were counting on him to meet his responsibilities, John felt compelled to follow through. These experiences facilitated his personal belonging and connection to the chapter.

### **Emergent Theme 1.3: Positive Social Support**

Nearly every participant interviewed in the study described belonging that was facilitated by the positive social support of peers in their fraternities and sororities. Summer, TJ, Steve, Brick, Cece, and Kaitlin found belonging through personal, individual-level relationships with their peers as well as through small, close-knit groups that made a chapter feel smaller and more intimate. Summer (PSYCH) put it this way:

You also feel a sense of belonging in your smaller groups, like your executive committees, or your groups working at chapter [meetings] together that day, like you have a sense of belonging in a lot of different communities within that one community.

Small group experiences, like those described by Summer, made it easier to belong.

Additionally, some participants talked about the positive relationship-building they found when they were paired one-on-one with other women in their sororities. In this common Panhellenic sorority practice, older chapter members are identified as "big sisters" or just "biggs," and assigned as mentors to new members, "little sisters" or "littles." These pairings were ones in which several of participants shared contributed to strong feelings of belonging.

For example, Summer also talked about the meaningful relationship with her sorority-assigned little sister. At first, she hoped to be paired with a different new member with whom she

had already felt a connection. She was disappointed when the organizing committee assigned her someone else, but eventually she grew a strong bond to her little sister:

I think the biggest sense of belonging was getting my little. Having that 'Ride-or-Die' partner. That was like, okay, I never expected to get this little. I wanted a different one. But again, the chapter knew who I would be best paired with, and it's like, I felt like I belonged.

Additionally, Summer described her relationships as more than surface-level friendships; they were deeply authentic and important to her as supports when she experienced personal challenges related to her mental health diagnoses of anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder:

And I don't know if I would be as mentally and academically thriving as I am. Because when I've hit roadblocks, or kind of darker times, in my collegiate experience, my sisters are the ones that have been there, to support me, to pick me up, to help put me back on track kind of, and I don't know that I would have had those connections to those relationships if I wouldn't have joined Greek Life, because I don't think I would have ever crossed paths with these people or even more so been forced to be around them so much. And forced to kind of create relationships, whether it be very kind of general relationships, there's surface level versus those other ones that we went really deep and they're my best friends. I consider them my actual sisters, not just sorority sisters.

Not only did friends in her sorority provide support during challenging times, but they were also important to Summer's overall retention at the university. Summer described this saying:

And I don't know if I would have stayed in [this city] to pursue a graduate degree, I don't know if I would have pursued a graduate degree necessarily, or if I would have gone

elsewhere, like maybe transferred and seen a new community, but I felt so welcomed in this community that I wanted to stay.

Involvement in her sorority enabled Summer to make authentic, supportive relationships that carried her through some of her more difficult experiences as an undergraduate. They were also important to her decision to remain at the same institution to pursue her graduate degree.

Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) described overall mixed feelings regarding her sense of belonging in her sorority. However, when asked to name a time she felt she belonged, she talked about an event the chapter put together for new members during which they learned who their big sisters would be:

That day when we got our bigs, they were just all over the new members. ‘Oh my gosh, so excited to have you, welcome home, welcome home, welcome home.’ I think that might have been one of the only times that I felt a sense of belonging within the chapter.

Kaitlin felt that the attention she received from older members during the big sister and little sister reveal event was one that conveyed a powerful sense of belonging.

Social support was also crucial to TJ’s (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) sense of belonging, particularly following the snowboarding accident that caused her traumatic brain injuries. The accident occurred at a ski area near the university at the end of winter break, just before the start of her second semester as a college student. Despite her newness to the sorority, TJ’s peers provided immediate and long-term support. For example, her big sister was among the first to arrive at the hospital she was transported to following the accident. “My big, the immediate support was her trying to jet down to the ER that I had just been transferred to after my second ambulance,” said TJ. As it turned out, her sorority big sister arrived at the emergency room even before her own parents.

Additional support from the sorority followed. When TJ had healed sufficiently to return to campus, a sorority member referred her to the Disability Resource Office for academic accommodations. As she prepared to re-join sorority activities, TJ was worried she would be placed on probation having missed attendance points from being absent from many activities and chapter meetings. The message from her sorority was overwhelmingly one of support. ““Please focus on your health.’ ‘We love you.’ ‘We miss you.’ ‘We want you to come back,’” TJ described them as saying to her.

After the accident and when she had healed, TJ moved into a rental house with several chapter members, including her sorority big sister. The opportunity to live off campus was new to her, having lived in a residence hall for first-year students in the fall semester prior. However, she said she appreciated the chance to live with her big sister after being away:

The opportunity to live with my big especially as a freshman isn't something that comes very easily and often for girls in Greek Life I think. My big was older than the normal ‘sophomore-gets-a-freshman’ little. She was a junior, so I was like, ‘let's make up for lost time,’ and jumped on that opportunity.

The living arrangement with older sorority members off campus supported TJ’s sense of belonging. “I really got to absorb a lot of advice and wisdom,” she said, describing the deeper connections she felt living with older sorority members.

During his first semester, Steve (ADHD, LD) was invited to join a fraternity by friends from home and in his residence hall. However, making friends did not always come easy to Steve. “I guess it’s hard for me to meet new people because I’m really shy,” he said. Steve found that joining a fraternity was a pathway to belonging because the friendships he made provided him with a significant sense of support and encouragement. Steve’s roommates, who were also

members of his fraternity, provided a close-knit community, and the social activities he participated in through his membership played a key role in fostering his sense of belonging.

Brick (LD) joined his fraternity with interest primarily in the social aspects: meeting people, hanging out, and having fun. As he explained it to me, he was not looking for leadership development or skill-building. The fraternity was a social outlet for Brick, and his sense of belonging was rooted in the friendships and activities the chapter provided. Brick described it this way:

I would go kick it at one of the houses and then we just played basketball for a little bit after getting out of class. And then at some point, I'd be like, 'Okay, I gotta go back to reality, but that was so much fun.'

Brick valued the flexibility his fraternity provided for social support and friendship.

Cece (CHC, DEAF/HOH) was a member of a multicultural sorority, a group which she proudly said had 13 active members, a significant contrast to some of the university's Panhellenic sororities with nearly 200 women. To her, the small size of her chapter was a benefit. "Personally, I really liked that it's small just because I know everyone. I can hang out or call anyone at any time. And I know that they'll listen to me," she said. The size enabled Cece to feel a sense of belonging quickly within the organization.

Additionally, the multicultural aspect of her chapter was important to her sense of social support and belonging. Cece identified herself as multiracial, being half Hispanic and half Caucasian. "Being Hispanic is probably a big part of my identity," she said. While her sorority was open to women of any race, her chapter's membership was composed entirely of students of color. When asked what would be different if she had not joined her sorority, Cece said:

I wouldn't have that many Hispanic friends like how I do now. Because I feel like I've made relationships with all of them. But there's two individuals that I've made really close relationships with. And so, if I hadn't joined the sorority, I would have never met them.

Cece valued the small, tight-knit sorority with women who shared an identity like her own.

Cece's support from her sorority sisters extended to understanding her needs as they related to her disabilities. According to her, the functional limitations of her chronic health condition impacted her involvement more than her hearing impairment. For example, Cece's medication for her epilepsy diagnosis prevented her from consuming alcohol at parties. She said:

But epilepsy, I feel like that was a bigger disability that I had to bring more awareness to with my sorority sisters. Because, obviously, in Greek Life, there are parties and stuff, and people do drink. But because of my medication, I can't drink. And so, I always had to make sure that I communicated that clearly with my sisters. And in the beginning, it was kind of rough, because they didn't really understand like, what epilepsy was, they kept saying, 'Oh, what if you just don't take your medication?' I was like, 'Well, I can't do that, because then I would have a seizure.'

After she explained her needs, her sorority sisters were supportive, ensuring she was not pressured to drink or stay out late due, behaviors that would impact her health due to her epilepsy. This kind of understanding and support continued to cement her multicultural sorority as a source of belonging for Cece.

### **Superordinate Theme 2: Barriers to Belonging**

Not all experiences within fraternities and sororities were positive for participants. The second superordinate theme that emerged from my analysis is Barriers to Belonging. Participants

shared experiences in which they encountered barriers to feeling that they belonged because of the attitudes and actions of their peers as well as the design of programs and social expectations to participate in specific ways. Two emergent themes summarize the factors that were described by participants: Ableism, Stigma, and Accessibility and Negative Social Dynamics.

### **Emergent Theme 2.1: Ableism, Stigma, and Accessibility**

Six of seven participants interviewed in the study described ableist attitudes or comments, highlighting the lack of understanding and support students with disabilities sometimes encounter within fraternities and sororities. Others reported feeling stigmatized by their peers who did not have disabilities. As a result, the overall climate of fraternity and sorority chapters can be one in which members with disabilities encounter ableism and stigma in such a way that it impacts their sense of belonging.

TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) felt stigmatized by peers in her sorority when they questioned the fairness of her academic accommodations, implying they were special treatment and an unfair advantage. When her symptoms flared up, TJ accessed her testing accommodations, which included restroom breaks during exams, limited distraction in the testing environment, wearing tinted eyeglasses, double exam time, and proctored exams. However, her peers would sometimes question her usage of accommodations without seeking to understand why she needed them. “And you hear how people react to things, and it’s like, okay, so you don’t care about why things are the way they are. You just care that they’re different than yours,” she said, describing the reactions of peers who did not understand why TJ’s testing arrangement was different from their own.

Summer’s (PSYCH) disabilities were known to a few in her sorority, primarily those on the executive committee and her close friends. She preferred transparency with her leadership

team to avoid misunderstandings about her behavior as it related to her obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), but she didn't feel the need to make her disability widely known. For the most part, her peers were supportive, but Summer sometimes encountered ableist attitudes regarding her personal challenges presented by her OCD diagnosis when taking exams. At these times, Summer would second-guess herself or look for patterns that were not there in multiple choice questions. "And some people think, you know, 'get over it.' 'Like, study more.' I've probably studied more than any of you combined," said Summer. The ableism she experienced negatively impacted Summer's belonging.

Many participants in the study practiced selective disclosure of their disabilities to protect themselves from perceived judgement of their peers, which directly impacted their sense of belonging. This was true for all three male identifying students in the study. For example, John (ADHD) avoided disclosing disability to his fraternity brothers out of a fear of being ostracized or being viewed differently. When he stopped taking medication for his ADHD for several months, John noticed symptoms occurring more frequently, such as difficulty sleeping and a negative impact to his mental health. He said that around this time, some of his fraternity brothers learned about his diagnosis:

And some of them found out that I was just, I had to get back on my medicine to take medication actively, which I didn't take for three months. And they were supportive. And yeah, it was an interesting time, but I think only a couple of them knew. But I didn't like to inform people because I didn't want to, just, look at me different and stuff.

Regardless of feeling support from those he disclosed to, the fear of being different was a stigma that held John back from sharing further with his fraternity brothers.

The other male participants in the study had similar approaches to selective disclosure to their fraternity brothers. For instance, Brick (LD) chose not to disclose dyslexia to anyone in his fraternity, describing it as a personal challenge rather than something to disclose or share broadly. When asked if he had disclosed his disabilities to others in his fraternity, Steve (ADHD, LD) said he had not done so either. “I just felt like it would be better to keep to myself,” he said. When asked to explain why he wanted to keep this aspect of his identity unknown to his fraternity brothers, Steve indicated he worried about how others would view him. He said, “I feel like they would think of me different, I guess.” Although his fraternity was a deep source of belonging and friendship for Steve, his concern about being thought of differently meant that he was unwilling to open fully to others and disclose his disability, even those he was closest to in his chapter.

Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) noted that many of her sorority sisters were unaware of or insensitive to the realities of living with mental health disabilities. For example, when attending an educational workshop for her sorority on the topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), Kaitlin decided to speak up and disclose aspects of her mental health and disability diagnoses. As she talked openly about her challenges with mental health, she saw peers “check out,” looking at their phones and talking to one another. Kaitlin was devastated by her perceived lack of support from the other women in her own organization. She left the event early, an action that prompted chapter leaders to call her before the standards board for what they interpreted as her disinterest in the DEI workshop. This administrative action from the sorority made Kaitlin feel further ridiculed. Afterward, her big sister had a conversation with her to check in:

We talked about that DEI event. She knew about it. And she was just telling me, she's like, ‘Yeah, they all suck, these girls are not what you think they are. But you just have to

focus on the girls that you do get along with and focus on that and that. Only then, just be nice and just keep your mouth shut. Don't let them have anything against you.' And I took that to the heart, and I stick with it.

In this conversation, Kaitlin's big sister communicated just how the social dynamics worked in the sorority. While she felt supported overall by her "big," the event was isolating to Kaitlin within the larger community of the sorority and serves as an example of how ableism can contribute to a diminished sense of belonging.

### **Emergent Theme 2.2: Negative Social Dynamics**

Four of the seven participants interviewed indicated that negative social dynamics within their chapters negatively affected their sense of belonging. While fraternities and sororities can foster a sense of community, they may also contribute to feelings of isolation when the environment is not inclusive. The competitive, clique-driven nature of some chapters influenced whether participants felt they truly belonged. Additionally, the pressure to participate in fraternities and sororities in certain ways became negative dynamics for some in the study.

Brick's (LD) dyslexia provided impacted his reading comprehension and spelling. He shared that his academic accommodations were helpful, particularly receiving additional time for exams. However, Brick also shared that the limitation of his disability was contradictory to the academic goals of his fraternity. "There's always that push at chapter [meetings], like, 'let's get our grades up,'" he said. Brick worked hard to achieve the grades he did, but doing well on tests was a challenge. He described this as a disconnect between his academic life and social life, with his fraternity situated in the latter.

Social pressure to participate in sorority activities was also experienced by TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH), which presented challenges as it related to the limitations and health

impacts of her disabilities. She described feeling disheartened when she could not attend sorority events due to her episodic migraines or other health challenges:

But in the back of my mind, there's always that, like, you have to go to this because what if you want to go to something and next week and you actually can't, you're gonna regret it, you're gonna beat yourself up because you didn't take that time to just go say hi and grab coffee with one of your sisters, or you didn't go to chapter and take advantage of the fact that it's mandatory for you to dress in business casual, but, for the next two weeks you get sick, and you're stuck in sweatpants, and you would have loved to have gone and had that time, you know hanging out and representing your chapter.

Overall, TJ demonstrated resilience in managing her health challenges while balancing a busy schedule of coursework and sorority social and leadership commitments. She spoke about ways that she could manage her symptoms, such as taking her medication, but she would often push herself to meet her sorority obligations which resulted in negative health issues.

Joining a fraternity provided John (ADHD) with several strong friendships which supported his sense of belonging. However, he found that the functional limitations of his ADHD diagnosis also affected his social interactions in the fraternity. Impulsive statements and a lack of social filters led to misunderstandings with peers. John explained this:

One of the things that has [been] affected is networking. I'm very, very outgoing, very loud. I don't have this net, where it's like, if I say this out loud, other people are listening. I really think that at times I get into my own head and saying, 'I can say what I want. First Amendment.' Whatever the reason, which is not how an individual should process thoughts, but it's how I do at times. So, I was like, really so it almost felt like I was outed, because I was willing to express myself, going back to the ADHD thing, I will take

matters into my own hands, because I don't have a social filter of what to do and what not to do. I'm willing to get out there, I'm willing to set the record straight.

His difficulty with social cues and maintaining focus meant that John sometimes encountered miscommunication and conflict with others in his fraternity. Additionally, it impacted his relationships with his fraternity brothers and at times left him feeling unsupported.

Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) utilized therapy, medication, and support from close friends to manage the mental health symptoms from her disabilities. However, she still encountered negative social dynamics. Kaitlin's sorority big sister and a few close friends within the chapter offered support and empathy, but others lacked awareness or showed insensitivity toward the challenges of living with mental health disabilities. Kaitlin expressed frustration and voiced the impact that it had on her sense of belonging, saying:

First and foremost, I just feel out of place. Like I feel like nobody wants me to be around them. And then if my friends aren't there, then I have nobody and then I just leave because it's just not worth it. And like some of the girls, if they're older than me, they'll talk to me like I'm stupid. Because before all of this, I'm well, the ADHD me, I'm very loud and talkative. But it's not in an annoying, negative, rude way. It's like, my voice is louder. I like to talk, I like to take time to catch up with people, tell them things. And it's almost like they just want me to shut up. So, I just don't really talk much when I'm with them. I kind of keep to myself. I don't give them any details on my personal life. Because if I do then they'll just use it against me somehow. So, I just kind of keep to myself, do what I need to do and then get out.

These experiences helped Kaitlin to feel judged and ignored by some of her sorority sisters, leading her to frequently withdraw from group interactions. She went on to share that this was at odds with the way the chapter had presented themselves when she was first recruited:

The way they advertised it was a big sisterhood. Everybody loves each other. You hang out with everyone all the time, you have a bunch of new friends. Everybody loves you, you love everybody. Conflicts are easily solved. No biases, just like, love and friendship. So, as I was expecting, because, I mean, they really sold it.

The image of the organization was not aligned with Kaitlin's experience when others were less understanding of her as an individual, regardless of whether they were aware of her disabilities.

For some students with disabilities, their experiences in fraternity and sorority chapters are shaped by their ability to self-advocate and navigate spaces where they face challenges related to their functional limitations. Every participant in this study had a non-visible disability, meaning impairments lacked physical indicators and were not immediately apparent to others. For two participants in particular, TJ and Cece, they were impacted by accessibility in chapter activities as it related to the limitations of their disabilities.

Cece (CHC, DEAF/HOH) talked about how her hearing impairment affected her experiences in group settings in K-12 schooling, but less so in college. However, her epilepsy diagnosis impacted her ability to drive, participate in late-night events, and manage energy levels due to medication. Cece talked about how this challenge influenced her social life within her sorority:

Sometimes with our sorority, we do have to stay up late, just because we're trying, like, last semester we planned a gala. And that was a lot of fun. But there were a lot of nights where we had to stay up late and trying to finish centerpieces and make sure that all the

budgeting was all organized and whatever. And so that did kind of create a big problem. Something I had to keep in mind is I can't stay up for 24 hours, I have to sleep for at least a good seven hours. And so that is just kind of hard because I was, like, 'I have to go,' and they were understanding about it. But it also is hard because they don't have epilepsy, so they can't really 100% understand. But they've always been understanding and always been accepting of it, and no one's ever been like, I don't know, rude or condescending about it.

While Cece noted that her sorority sisters in her chapter were understanding and supportive, the activity's design and its accessibility for a student with her disabilities warrant reconsideration.

Similarly, TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) talked about the impact long days participating in formal recruitment activities had on her health as it related to her disabilities. As someone with non-visible impairments, TJ could choose when or if she wanted to disclose her disabilities. However, she was disappointed when she could not attend events due to her episodic migraines or other health issues. TJ wanted to be fully involved in her organization, but following her accident, the functional limitations of her disabilities often meant that there was a tension between involvement and her health. She spoke about this as it related to the formal sorority recruitment process, which she was involved in coordinating through her leadership role:

We pulled all-nighters. Like, literally, we would be done with the work that we were doing at 5:00 a.m. and you have to be there at seven. So, you're redoing your makeup and getting ready and changing to leave. So, you know, it's a rigorous aspect. And that was a big challenge for me, having my disability. And knowing that we don't know what's gonna happen, but you have to do this because you weren't, you know, I don't want to let

anybody down. I was just fortunate that I had my medication at that time and didn't have any, like migraine, actual flare ups.

Involvement in formal sorority recruitment has such an outsized importance on these close-knit communities, that missing even part of it due to her health was not something TJ wanted to consider. She said:

When people depend on you, it's really difficult because you don't ever want to be the one to let somebody down or to be the person that causes a problem, because you weren't able to hold up to responsibilities or goals or whatever you had previously, kind of taken and set for yourself or the position. But that's a really difficult aspect of like, still being in a leadership position with disabilities. It doesn't affect just you. It affects so many people. And that's a lot of responsibility and something to, you know, it could your mind could kind of get away from you with anxiety about that. And I probably had a couple days here and there where I was like, 'Oh my gosh,' but yeah, you just kind of got to push through and be positive.

The social pressures of TJ's sorority, such as during recruitment, added pressure and difficulty to managing her impairments while also being in a leadership position. Further, experiences of all the participants illustrate the complexities of navigating the social structures of fraternity and sorority life as students with disabilities. Additionally, they highlight the need for better awareness, inclusivity and support within organizations.

### **Superordinate Theme 3: University Environmental Impacts**

The third superordinate theme that emerged from analysis is University Environmental Impacts. The environment of a university includes not only the physical aspects of an institution but also the policies and the human aggregate, such as faculty, staff, and administrators.

Participants reported a mix of positive and negative impacts on their sense of belonging when discussing their involvement in university programs. Additionally, participants reported a mix of positive and negative impacts to belonging as it related to their interactions with departments, staff, and faculty.

### **Emergent Theme 3.1: Program Design**

The university's co-curriculum is a part of the environmental aspects of an institution. This may include workshops, trainings, social events, and campus traditions planned by a range of departments, such as student activities, orientation, and housing and residence life. For some participants, engaging in university programs was a positive experience that enhanced their sense of belonging.

Steve (ADHD, LD) shared that organizing his fraternity tailgate, held during the university's parent and family weekend, provided him an opportunity to build self-confidence. "When the Parents Weekend was here, I went up and got to meet the other parents, so that was really nice to get to know them and see where they're from and stuff like that," he said. In his words, Steve said this was a time when he had "really gotten out of my shell from being really super quiet to, I guess, less quiet." This was meaningful to Steve, who had described himself as "really shy." The opportunity for the fraternity to time their event with the institution's parent and family weekend served as a space for him to build confidence and feel he belonged.

Several participants interviewed for the study said that the design of some fraternity and sorority programs presented accessibility challenges for them as students with disabilities. Cece, TJ, and Summer shared their experiences attending programs such as recruitment events and leadership development workshops facilitated by fraternity and sorority advisors. These activities sometimes presented barriers to them in terms of accessibility related to their disabilities.

For example, Cece (CHC, DEAF/HOH) shared an experience tabling at a fair for fraternity and sorority chapters held at the beginning of the semester. This event was organized by staff at the university and served as an opportunity for prospective new members to stop by tables and talk to current members about their experiences. Because the fair was held indoors, there were many people in an enclosed space which became loud as she talked to students who stopped by the table to speak with her about the sorority. Cece explained the impact on her as someone with a hearing impairment:

But since it was so loud in there, I couldn't do a good job. Because I couldn't hear their questions. Like, the people who were asking questions, couldn't really hear them, I would stand on the outside of the table so that if they could come, I would just turn my face and have my ear towards them, so I could hear them.

In contrast, Cece also talked about a leadership training for new officers that she attended and which was also organized by staff at the university. Her experience at this event was different than others. She said:

That was a little bit easier. Because even though it was loud, it was like a lecture kind of a thing. So, when the head fraternity-sorority guy was talking, it was easier to hear him because everyone else was quiet. And there wasn't that many people there compared to the Greek fair.

Cece's experience illustrates the need for program planners on a college campus to consider the accessibility of events for all students.

Summer (PSYCH), appreciated participating in university-sponsored programs for fraternities and sororities. Reflecting on her participation, Summer said she liked the opportunity to engage in a weekend-long leadership development retreat for chapter officers, facilitated by

university staff. “It was really intriguing to hear from the guest speakers, the community, the university faculty that support Greek Life talking about it, and then also getting to interact with other executive members from both Panhellenic and IFC,” she said.

TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) also described an experience attending a leadership development program, this one offered by staff in the Fraternity and Sorority Life department. During the program, TJ began to develop a migraine, an episodic symptom of her traumatic brain injury. When she asked if she could step away, staff at the event were supportive of TJ’s need to remove herself from the space. TJ said:

I think after we were doing a lot of discussions and there had been some noise changes going outside and inside. I think I asked to go use the restroom and get some water and take a moment by myself outside. And they were super great about that.

The seemingly small act of allowing her to step out of the event with no questions asked was meaningful to TJ. Although it was not a more significant health-related incident that she experienced, she felt supported by the staff.

University programming for fraternities and sororities can play a role in not only the leadership and educational development of members, but also in their sense of connection and belonging on campus. Considerations for differences and in-the-moment accommodations for needs related to disabilities were important to three participants in this study.

### **Emergent Theme 3.2: Interactions with Faculty and Staff**

Five out of seven participants spoke about experiences with university faculty and staff that impacted their sense of connection and belonging. Since students’ lives are interconnected, what affects them in the classroom, whether positive or negative, also influences their out-of-

class experiences, and vice versa. A positive experience with an employee in one environment at the university can impact a students' sense of belonging overall at an institution.

Four participants, Brick, Kaitlin, TJ, and John, all spoke positively about encounters with faculty regarding academic accommodations they utilized in their courses. In these cases, faculty went beyond the minimum obligations to support students with disabilities, demonstrating that they had a deeper care for the students and were invested in their success in the classroom. Students felt like they belonged in the classroom because of the actions of faculty members.

For example, Brick (LD) shared about a time when an instructor in his business law class saw him preparing a page of notes that could be used during an exam. The instructor was aware that Brick had an approved accommodation for additional notes through the Disability Resource Office but was surprised that he was attempting to squeeze as many notes as he could onto one-sheet of paper. Brick recounted the story:

She was just kind of like, 'Why are you making this one page of notes and writing so small? I want you taking notes during class and not making this weird note cheat sheet.

Because that's what you're allowed to do, I want you to take notes during class and take in as many notes as you need for these tests.' And that was awesome.

Brick emphasized the way the instructor had actively encouraged him to utilize his accommodation as a meaningful interaction.

Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) told a story about a time an instructor encouraged her to consider being evaluated for ADHD. She said:

I was talking to my English teacher, and I was trying to communicate with her about how, for some reason, I just can't focus. And it's impossible for me to get my work done.

I will lock my phone in a different room and be all by myself and I just can't get anything done.

Kaitlin's instructor encouraged her to be screened for ADHD, referring her to the campus health center for the assessment. Following her instructor's suggestion, she was screened and was diagnosed with ADHD. Kaitlin was referred to the Disability Resource Office for academic accommodations, which she then found to allow her to be more successful in her courses. Kaitlin was thankful that her instructor had demonstrated she was invested in her success and saw accommodations as a key to academic achievement.

TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) also felt supported by her instructors when it came to implementing academic accommodations. "My teachers have been really great about it. So, I think that's the main point you need is the teachers are good with it, then it works out," she said. This point reflected the sentiments of other participants who expressed relief when instructors in their classes had no complaints or concerns about accommodations approved through the Disability Resource Office.

John (ADHD) said that a memorable moment came in a supply chain class when a professor talked about resources on campus for students experiencing personal challenges, such as depression or substance abuse. The information was also in the syllabus, which John found helpful as he was looking for support. "I went to a syllabus. I open that up. And I found where I could go and what outlets I could use to advance my grades and help assist me," he said. This moment provided him with recognition that a faculty member cared for his students, furthering his connection and belonging at the institution.

Sometimes, university staff may be unaware of how their actions can create barriers for students with disabilities. In her job as a Resident Assistant, Cece (CHC, HOH/DEAF) was not

comfortable disclosing her disabilities to her supervisor, peer teammates, or students living in her residence hall. This contrasted with her involvement in her multicultural sorority in which she disclosed to all the members. Her reasons for not disclosing as a Resident Assistant came down to her comfort in those spaces. Cece said:

I think the level of comfort, or me being comfortable to tell them that, as well as them knowing it, because it is important. Whereas with [club involvement], or with the RA [job], I don't see them that much. So, it's not something that they need to know. Whereas with the sorority, I see a couple sisters almost three times a week, or sometimes almost every day, whereas well I see them almost like once a week, for like an hour. And that's pretty much it. So, I just think the level of the relationship, and if it's a close and personal friendship, then I let them know. But if it's just kind of a friend, kind of like a coworker, it's not that important.

Cece shared that because her supervisor and fellow Resident Assistants were unaware of her hearing impairment, she would find ways to accommodate herself in work meetings rather than ask for accommodations. She recognized that this created more responsibility for herself, saying:

So, I always sit in the front. And I have my ear to the other RA coworkers. And then my body is facing towards my boss because he'll talk or give a spiel about events and stuff. So yeah, I definitely find myself accommodating to my needs, which I guess makes sense. But also, I guess it would be helpful if I did tell people who are my coworkers so that they could just make it easier for me and just sit on my right side, rather than having to worry if someone sits on my left side that I had to tell them.

Cece was more willing to disclose her disabilities to her sorority sisters due to the closeness of their relationships. In contrast, she viewed the staff in the Residence Life department, including

fellow Resident Assistants, as coworkers, and did not share the same level of openness with them. Although Cece did not explicitly identify this as a barrier to belonging, it highlights an opportunity for departments that hire students to consider how they can foster spaces that encourage inclusion and openness, especially when accommodations may be needed in a workplace setting.

University personnel, such as faculty and staff, play an integral role to student success and their sense of belonging. For fraternity and sorority members with disabilities, this extends from staff who are responsible for leadership and educational programming to the instructors in their classes. Additionally, the interactions that students with disabilities have outside of their chapters with university employees has an influence on the overall support they feel holistically across their college lives.

### **Research Questions Revisited**

The research problem examined in this study was to explore the experiences of college students with disabilities and the role involvement in fraternities and sororities plays on their sense of belonging. To explore this problem, I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine the experiences of seven participants and seek the answers to three research questions. My research questions are presented below with reflection on what I have learned during my analysis.

#### **Question One Revisited**

My first research question asked, what factors of fraternities and sororities impact the development of a sense of belonging among college students with disabilities? Overall, my findings have demonstrated that involvement in fraternities and sororities can contribute to students' sense of belonging. For instance, the intrinsic drive that some students feel to want to

join a community is a factor in finding belonging. Every participant named their innate desire to belong as a motivating factor to seek a community, which they found by joining a fraternity or sorority. Participants said that they arrived in college wanting to make friends, have a social life outside of class, and be part of a community that cared for one another. This was a driving factor to finding a sense of belonging.

Mattering played a role in fostering belonging among participants in the study as well. When students like John, Summer, Steve, and TJ got involved in fraternity and sorority committees, planning activities for their peers, or were elected to leadership roles, they found that others were interested in their contributions. This generated feelings in these participants that others were depending on them, enhancing their sense belonging within the chapters.

Finally, participants like Brick, Steve, and TJ, found a sense of belonging by identifying tight-knit communities within their fraternities and sororities. Others, like Kaitlin and Summer, appreciated the strong connections made with individual members, like their “big,” “little,” or close friends. TJ appreciated living with several older members of her sorority in a rental house after returning to campus following her accident. Although, she cited this as a source of belonging, other participants did not describe their living arrangements with peers from chapters as either a positive or negative to belonging. Cece appreciated the smaller size of her multicultural sorority where she could make meaningful, close connections within and whose members shared her values and racial identity.

### **Question Two Revisited**

My second research question asked, how do interactions between college students with disabilities and their peers in fraternities and sororities impact a sense of belonging? Positive peer interactions were important to participants when they felt that their disabilities were not

understood. Cece disclosed her disabilities to her sorority sisters, so they were aware of her hearing impairment and epilepsy and their understanding, such as health considerations regarding her epilepsy medication, contributed to her feeling accepted. Summer also noted that sharing her obsessive-compulsive disorder with close friends and leaders in the sorority helped her avoid misunderstandings and build trust.

However, stigma and a fear of being judged held some participants back from disclosing their disabilities. Brick, John, and Steve all avoided disclosing to fraternity brothers because they did not want to be viewed differently. Further, Kaitlin faced ridicule after sharing her challenges with mental health out loud to her peers during a sorority workshop. These examples illustrate how ableism and stigma play a role in impacting students' sense of belonging by impacting their trust and connection to peers, as happened with Kaitlin, or holding them back from building deeper relationships, like those who never disclosed to their peers.

Additionally, negative social dynamics in fraternities and sororities contributed to some participants' sense of isolation and impacted their overall belonging. John experienced exclusion due to social competitiveness in his fraternity and Kaitlin felt isolated at larger sorority events. Experiences like these can alienate college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities if the environments are not inclusive.

The design of activities planned by fraternities and sororities can also serve as barriers to belonging for students with disabilities. TJ experienced significant tension between her desire to be an involved leader during formal recruitment activities and the symptoms caused by her traumatic brain injury and chronic health conditions. Similarly, Cece was challenged by the lengthy time commitment needed for some sorority events and their impacts on her epilepsy. These experiences demonstrate that fraternity and sorority activities can present accessibility

challenges for students with disabilities, impacting their overall belonging if they do not consider the needs of all members.

### **Question Three Revisited**

My third research question asked, what ways do university programs and personnel impact the sense of belonging for college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities? The university environment is one that itself impacts the sense of belonging for college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities. This environment includes physical spaces, interactions with faculty and staff, and policies and systems at an institution. Participants shared examples of how navigating the environment impacted their senses of belonging.

Academic accommodations and encouragement to access them were pivotal for many participants. For example, Brick, Kaitlin, TJ, and John, had positive interactions with faculty members and instructors who encouraged them to seek testing for disabilities, speak with staff in the Disability Resource Office about accommodations, or seek mental health support on campus. Faculty's support of accommodations played an important role for these participants regarding their belonging. While these interactions did not take place in their fraternity and sorority environments, the college experience is one that is layered and not compartmentalized. What happens in the classroom impacted the belonging of participants overall, including their feelings of connection to the campus as fraternity and sorority members.

Participants in leadership roles within their chapters sometimes found themselves engaging with programs and fraternity and sorority staff members. Cece, Summer, and TJ had positive experiences attending events and interacting with university staff in these spaces. Interactions with these staff members were minimal for participants, so few links can be made to belonging. Similarly, since fewer participants in this study found themselves engaging in

university-sponsored programs for fraternities and sororities, less was revealed about their potential impact on belonging.

### **Chapter Summary**

Three superordinate themes emerged that further the understanding of the factors that impact a sense of belonging of college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities: authentic peer relationships, barriers to belonging, and university environmental impacts. By examining these themes and their emergent themes, we can better understand that belonging for students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities is influenced by a complex blend of the innate need to belong, positive peer support, social dynamics, and university services.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature surrounding sense of belonging, fraternity and sorority involvement, and disability in higher education. Chapter five presents a discussion of the implications for these findings. Recommendations are made regarding the application of the findings for practitioners in higher education as well as future areas of research and study.

## **Chapter Five – Discussion**

This phenomenological study contributes to literature on disability in higher education, involvement in fraternities and sororities, and the phenomena of belonging. Personal stories told by the research participants provided richly detailed data with which to examine the study's central problem statement: to explore what factors of campus involvement in fraternities and sororities enhance or inhibit the development of a sense of belonging among college students with disabilities. More specifically, this study sought to understand and explore these research questions:

1. What factors of fraternities and sororities impact the development of a sense of belonging for college students with disabilities?
2. How do interactions between college students with disabilities and their peers in fraternities and sororities impact their sense of belonging?
3. In what ways do university programs and personnel impact the sense of belonging for college students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities?

In this chapter, I compare the findings of this study as they relate to the extant literature, provide recommendations for future research, and identify potential implications and considerations for practitioners in higher education. Finally, I provide a personal reflection on my experience conducting the study and its relevant impact on my professional journey as a student affairs administrator.

### **Comparing Findings to Existing Literature**

The following comparison serves as a dialogue between the findings of this study and the present literature on disability, belonging, and fraternity and sorority involvement. In some

examples, my findings further illuminate what others have uncovered in their research. In others, my findings contribute new insights and expand the existing literature. I have applied the theoretical framework of the Social Justice Model of Disability to my assessment of the findings.

The Social Justice Model of Disability, sometimes called the Ableist or Oppression Model, is centered on concepts core to the social justice movement in the United States. This model understands the experiences of people with disabilities through a non-deficit lens, viewing disability as being socially constructed and recognizing ableism as being directed at people with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). Importantly, the model is defined by three tenants: its focus on privilege and oppression in shaping disability experiences in the United States; its emphasis on the diversity and intersectionality of identities, roles, and experiences of people with disabilities; and an explicitly educational mission. The model is referenced through my comparison of the findings from this study.

### **Belonging Through Relationships, Roles, and Social Support**

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of some of the factors that impact the sense of belonging for college students with disabilities. For instance, every participant shared examples of the ways in which relationships with others in their fraternities and sororities contributed to their overall sense of belonging. The superordinate theme Authentic Peer Relationships with the related emergent themes Intrinsic Need for Community, Mattering to Others, and Positive Social Support described these factors towards belonging.

A sense of belonging is widely recognized as a universal human need (Maslow, 1954; Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, scholars have characterized it as a compelling phenomenon that can motivate human behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this study, the emergent theme of Intrinsic Need for Community supports the previous research about the

human need to belong. For example, every participant described their motivation to join a fraternity and sorority as being connected to an internal feeling in which they pursued friendship and belonging in a community. Brick (LD) wanted to meet people who were looking for a fun and an active college social experience, so he sought out a fraternity to find this community. Additionally, TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) said that she was motivated to apply to certain universities because of their reputations for active sorority communities to which she hoped to join. Although she transferred into the university with junior status, Summer (PSYCH) was looking for friendship and decided to join a new sorority undergoing extension.

Three participants, Cece (CHC, DEAF/HOH), Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH), and Steve (ADHD, LD), said they were encouraged by friends to get involved with fraternities and sororities. When their peers took time to intentionally invite them to explore participating, involvement in the groups became more possible. This supports research into the environmental encouragers to involvement for college students with disabilities, specifically human factors (Evans et al., 2023). These stories illustrate how the need to belong can motivate students with disabilities to take the steps necessary to find community and get involved in an organization like a fraternity or sorority.

Mattering to others can positively influence one's sense of belonging. According to research on the concept, mattering refers to the sense that a person is valued or appreciated by others (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). The findings of this study supported the idea that mattering is an important factor that leads to belonging. For instance, some participants experienced mattering when they took on formal or informal student leadership roles within their chapters. Summer (PSYCH), TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH), Steve (ADHD, LD), and John (ADHD) each held leadership positions, served on committees, and led activities in their

fraternity and sorority chapters. They described these experiences and the feeling of mattering as being something that contributed overall to the feeling that they belonged in their organizations. The experiences of these participants supports Strayhorn's (2019) description of mattering as core element of his model of belonging.

In their research, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified five dimensions of mattering, which includes: experiencing positive attention from others; feelings of importance or being cared about by others; feeling dependence from others; feeling appreciated by others; and experiencing ego extension by sharing successes and failures of others. Participants in this study reflected these dimensions in their experiences. They described their positions as roles in which they felt recognized and depended on by their peers, like Steve (ADHD, LD) who said simply and proudly that he felt appreciated for his contributions as the fraternity's philanthropy chair.

The positive social interactions and support experienced by participants was another factor in their feelings of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) identified social support as necessary to belonging but insufficient as a condition to engender belonging on its own. For instance, the presence of friendly fraternity brothers and sisters is not enough to make a peer feel they belong. In his research, Strayhorn found that college students must also feel supported, special, and cared about. Evans et al. (2023) found that students with disabilities noted that the acceptance of others was a motivating factor in their sense they belonged in student organizations.

Nearly every participant in this study shared stories of the meaningful and intentional positive interactions they experienced from their peers, which supported their sense they belonged. This led to the emergent theme, Positive Social Support. For participants like Summer (PSYCH), Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH), and TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH), their sorority big sister and little sister relationships were very meaningful. TJ talked about how her

big sister supported her integration back into the sorority after the snowboarding accident that led to her traumatic brain injury, easing her feelings of nervousness before rejoining the group.

Not all students experience belonging in the same way. Researchers have found that students from underrepresented groups and identities may require additional dimensions of respect and support to feel that they belong (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Cece's (CHC, DEAF/HOH) experience in a multicultural sorority reflected the research around students who can find support in an organization in which they share aspects of their racial identity with peers. Identifying as Hispanic, Cece found that she was supported and belonged in her chapter. She described it as being like a family, a social experience that was important to her and one reflected in the literature (Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013).

Participants in this study also experienced positive support from their peers when it came to the functional limitations of their disabilities. The Social Justice Model of Disability recognizes the rights of people with disabilities and the responsibilities that everyone, including nondisabled individuals, holds in building more inclusive spaces in our communities (Evans et al., 2017). While there are also many examples in which participants experienced ableism and challenges with accessibility, some participants reported positive interactions with their peers in fraternities and sororities related to their disabilities.

Cece disclosed her disabilities to her sorority sisters so they were aware of and could support her in the limitations to certain social activities because of her epilepsy. Similarly, when Summer (PSYCH) shared her obsessive-compulsive disorder diagnosis with her peers in the chapter, they had great understanding and acceptance of the ways she might show up or respond to certain situations in her leadership role. Both women highlighted that this made them feel supported and enhanced their belonging.

## **Ableism and Barriers to Belonging**

While participants in this study had many positive experiences that served as factors for belonging, they also encountered comments, attitudes, and environments that negatively impacted aspects of belonging. Barriers to Belonging was identified as a Superordinate Theme with the connected emergent themes of Ableism, Stigma, and Accessibility and Negative Social Dynamics.

Ableism is a form of discrimination, oppression, and exclusion directed against people with disabilities (Castañeda et al., 2013). It unfairly privileges able-bodied individuals over those with impairments, chronic health conditions, and disabilities. The findings of this study support previous research that has shown it is common for college students with disabilities to experience ableism on their campuses (Rauscher & McClintock, 1997).

Six out of seven participants in this study reported experiencing ableism directed at them. For example, TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) talked about her sorority sisters questioning the fairness of her academic accommodations when they learned of them. Summer's (PSYCH) disclosure of her disability prompted some support but also ableist comments from her peers. When Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) disclosed her disabilities during a workshop about diversity, equity, and inclusion, she was ridiculed and felt dismissed by her sorority sisters. Research indicates that when student organizations educate members about disability and foster inclusivity, students with disabilities experience greater social integration and belonging (Bialka et al., 2017). In contrast, ableist attitudes and behaviors experienced by many participants in this study served as barriers to feeling they fully belonged within their chapters or on campus.

Some participants shared comments that may be indicators of internalized ableism, a deficit-driven viewpoint that exists in the disability community (Campbell, 2009). Stigmatization

and problematic messaging about disability that young people receive as they grow up with an impairment can facilitate the internalization of negative feelings and sentiments about one's own disabilities (Campbell, 2009; Evans et al., 2017). Brick (LD), John (ADHD), and Steve (ADHD, LD) all said they did not disclose their disabilities in their fraternities out of a fear of being seen as different, regardless of the support they espoused to feel from their fraternity brothers.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that universities provide accessible spaces and environments for people with disabilities. Further, accessibility has been well-documented in the existing research as important to creating inclusive physical and organizational environments for people with disabilities. Research has also demonstrated that a university environment's physically accessible aspects combined with various psychological features may engender belonging for college students (Strange, 2000). Student organizations, like fraternities and sororities, are part of the campus environment, yet little work is done to educate student leaders on how to make accessible and inclusive spaces for their peers with disabilities.

For instance, when TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) helped with her sorority's formal recruitment process, she felt a pressure to show up and be present, even though the long hours and bright lights exasperated the migraines caused by her traumatic brain injury. Similarly, Cece (CHC, DEAF/HOH) said that the late nights of her sorority's gala preparations created challenges due to the sleep she needed because of her epilepsy medication. When his fraternity created pressure to get members' grades up, Brick (LD) felt discouraged because of the functional limitation of his learning disability. In these cases, the fraternities and sororities were not overtly trying to present barriers for their members with disabilities. However, the result is organizational environments in which each of these participants could not participate or engage

in ways more supportive to them given their limitations. Student organizations that educate an understanding of disabilities among their leaders may result in more inclusive environments for all students (Bialka et al., 2017).

Negative social dynamics in their chapters adversely impacted the sense of belonging for some participants. Experiences like these affected the ability for participants to be authentic, meaning they were less likely to share their thoughts and feelings, being open and honest in their outward behavior and relationships with their peers. The experiences of these participants indicates that more work has yet to be done to encourage inclusivity in fraternities and sororities.

### **Serving Students**

University staff, faculty, and programs offered at the institution had an impact on participants in this study. The superordinate theme University Environmental Impacts included two corresponding emergent themes, Program Design and Interactions with Faculty and Staff. These are related to two of the three areas of the social ecology of the campus environment, as defined by Moos (1979), specifically the organizational environment and human aggregate.

Participants spoke about their interactions with campus programs for fraternities and sororities, including social events, recruitment activities, and leadership development workshops and retreats. For several students, these were positive experiences that contributed towards their belonging. Steve (ADHD, LD) said that helping organize a fraternity tailgate during the university's Parent and Family Weekend helped him to stretch himself and build more confidence in his leadership skills. TJ (ABI/TBI, ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) shared the growth she experienced alongside her peers when attending a workshop for emerging fraternity and sorority leaders facilitated by university staff. Opportunities to be part of programs like these can serve as

positive co-curricular experiences in which students learn outside of the classroom and feel greater connection to their campus community.

Positive interactions with faculty and staff fostered a sense of belonging in participants as well. All but two participants shared stories about experiences with university employees who demonstrated care beyond the minimum, like Brick (LD) whose business law professor encouraged him to utilize his notetaking accommodation. Kaitlin (ADHD, CHC, PSYCH) also experienced a helpful instructor who encouraged her to explore being screened for a disability after noticing that she was not completing her assignments on time. Opportunities for faculty to step out of their roles as instructors and show care and compassion can help students with disabilities feel a sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002).

Although she enjoyed her job as a Resident Assistant, Cece (CHC, HOH/DEAF) said that she did not disclose her disability diagnoses to her supervisor or peers at work, in contrast to her sorority in which she was comfortable disclosing to others. University staff may be unaware of how their interactions can make student employees with disabilities uneasy or uncomfortable with disclosure. Even faculty and staff who have a desire to create an inclusive environment in their departments for students with disabilities may unintentionally create barriers (Evans et al., 2017). There is an opportunity for department leaders to consider how they can create more accessible spaces for students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Researchers are encouraged to continue to explore and expand the scholarship on fraternities and sororities, sense of belonging, and disability in higher education. This study on the factors influencing sense of belonging for students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities included a design and scope with certain limitations. Based on the literature and

findings from this research, several recommendations are proposed for further study: expand research into more disability categories and other identities; explore disability and belonging in more types of student organizations; and examine disability in fraternity and sorority housing.

### **Expand Research to Other Disabilities**

The findings from this study were limited to participants with specific disability types and could not possibly include the wide range and impairments and diversity of disabilities. Additionally, all participants had non-visible disabilities, meaning they were not immediately apparent to others. Researchers exploring disability in fraternities and sororities should consider recruiting a wider range of disabilities in future studies. This should include participants with visible disabilities as well as disability types that were not present in this study, such as participants who are blind or have vision impairments, have physical or mobility disabilities, have speech or language disabilities, and those with autism/autism spectrum disorder.

Additionally, factors that influence belonging for students with disabilities may differ across other aspects of their identities. Future research should also consider race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, first generation status, and other demographic differences during the recruitment of participants. The complex interaction of social identities and demographics may also be explored in future studies of disability in fraternities and sororities to provide a richer understanding of the role of intersectionality.

### **Disability Across Student Organizations and Roles**

This research expanded our understanding of belonging for college students with disabilities in social fraternities and sororities. However, future research should explore belonging and disability within other types of student organizations. This could include

exploring disability and belonging in student government, marching bands, club sports, debate teams, religious clubs, honor societies, and affinity groups.

Similarly, future research should consider the experiences students with disabilities have in different types of leadership roles. These may include being club presidents, intramural team captains, or serving in student leader jobs in campus departments, such as resident assistants, orientation leaders, and peer mentors. Leadership skills are sought after by employers hiring recent college graduates. Further, developing the capacity to lead can help students feel they matter and belong. More can be understood about how students with disabilities experience leadership and its impact on belonging.

### **Disability in Fraternity and Sorority Housing**

Living with fraternity and sorority members in a shared house is a common experience for thousands of college students in the United States each year. However, a limitation of this study was its scope focused to a campus community without fraternity and sorority housing. Future research into fraternity and sorority members with disabilities should examine how factors of a housed experience impact one's sense of belonging. Housing is part of the physical environment of a college campus. For fraternity and sorority members with disabilities, future research may want to explore the overall accessibility of housing. Additionally, the organizational and human aggregate aspects of the housing environment can be explored for their impact on belonging for members with disabilities.

Several participants in this study lived with other members of their fraternities and sororities in satellite houses, rental houses and apartments that are not managed by the university or housing corporations affiliated with their (inter)national organizations. Another future study of fraternities and sororities may explore factors that impact belonging or other experiences for

members with disabilities in these types of satellite houses. This institution as unique in that it had no large chapter houses; however, the experience of renting together is not uncommon for fraternity and sorority members at other institutions. While housing was not a focus of this study and there were no findings about renting and living together, future researchers are encouraged to explore both fraternity and sorority chapter housing and satellite housing for their impacts on belonging for students with disabilities.

### **Masculinity and Disability Identity**

None of the three male participants disclosed their disabilities to other members of their fraternities, in contrast to the four female participants who did disclose. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, comments made by the men may indicate their choice not to disclose was influenced by a combination of stigma around disability and internalized ableism. However, the hypermasculine culture sometimes found in social fraternities may have also played a role in the unwillingness of the male students with disabilities to disclose to their peers.

Hypermasculinity is a construct that describes men whose behavior includes sensation-seeking, aggression towards others, intense competition, an emphasis on self-reliance, and pursuit of higher levels of status (Burk et al., 2004). Hypermasculinity has been noted for its presence in fraternity culture in the United States (Corprew III & Mitchell, 2014). While hypermasculinity and its relationship to fraternity membership and disability identity was not explored in this study, the apparent gap in the literature on this topic makes it a topic future researchers should examine.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

The essence of research is often around creating new knowledge, then considering how to apply it for future use. The findings from this study provide a range of implications for

practitioners in higher education, including university administrators, fraternity and sorority advisors, and student affairs staff who have a role in shaping the campus environment for students with disabilities. Three insights emerged for me as implications for practitioners: understanding the diversity of disability; improving co-curricular programs; and promoting disability inclusion.

### **Understanding the Diversity of Disability**

The stories told by participants in this study highlighted the wide-ranging and diverse experiences of people with disabilities. However, many administrators, staff, and faculty still lack knowledge around disability. Inclusion for college students with disabilities can be enhanced if those working at all levels in higher education take time to educate themselves, seeking to better understand the language, definitions, and scope of disability present on their campuses.

For example, practitioners should participate in professional development opportunities to learn about visible and nonvisible disability types, accommodations, legal requirements, and inclusive language for people with disabilities. This can be accomplished by engaging with resources on their own campuses or those from professional associations, such as AHEAD-Association on Higher Education and Disability. Additionally, practitioners should take time to read the literature on disability in higher education. Up-to-date research and writing on disability can provide information on disability types that are rising in frequency on college campuses, such as autism spectrum disorder and mental health diagnoses. Reading the literature can also prepare practitioners to explore necessary changes to policy, practice, and programming.

While there are still many gaps in disability research, practitioners who want to support students with disabilities must become familiar with the current trends and data about disability

in higher education. Having a deeper understanding of the diversity of disability on their campuses can also allow administrators and staff to implement strategies to improve the persistence, retention, and graduation rates of students with disabilities.

### **Improving Co-Curricular Programs**

Several participants in this study shared stories in which they met barriers to accessibility and belonging when attending campus programs, including those planned by their chapters or organized by university departments. Takeaways from these experiences include opportunities for practitioners to develop and deliver co-curricular programming for students that considers the broad range of ability of all who attend.

Opportunities abound for program planners to enhance the accessibility of their events and activities. For example, events can be held in spaces that are more accessible to wheelchair users. Transportation can be offered to programs held off campus. Accommodations such as American Sign Language interpretation can be advertised in advance. Staff who lead icebreakers and teambuilders should construct activities in ways that are inclusive of students with a wide range of disability types, such as mobility, visual, or developmental disabilities. Further, assessments and surveys used for events should be evaluated for their accessibility.

Campus-based fraternity and sorority advisors and (inter)national headquarters staff are encouraged to consider how to improve accessibility of programs for chapters. For instance, because recruitment is an event experienced by every member in a fraternity and sorority, modifications to improve accessibility can make a significant positive impact. Reflecting on TJ's story of the long hours at formal Panhellenic recruitment triggering her episodic migraines, program planners might identify ways to shorten the days of programs or provide more opportunities for breaks. Adding basic accessibility features to recruitment, such as captions for

videos or use of microphones, can also expand accessibility. Finally, changes to the delivery modalities for recruitment could make it easier for all students to participate.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many student activities were moved to virtual platforms, modified to observe social distancing, or relocated outdoors. This demonstrates that co-curricular programming for college students is not so rigid that it cannot be altered in terms of program format and delivery. Doing so can improve the overall accessibility activities for all students, not just those with disabilities.

### **Promoting Disability Inclusion**

Every participant in this study experienced ableist attitudes and behaviors in their fraternity and sorority chapters. These experiences had a negative impact on their sense of belonging. Practitioners who work closely with leaders in student clubs, student government, intramural and club sports, and fraternities and sororities, should seek ways to educate around disability inclusion.

For example, educational opportunities on disability can be offered to fraternity and sorority chapters through partnerships with departments that offer workshops and trainings about accessibility and accommodations. Disability Resource Offices may be natural partners on this type of training, as well as offices connected to Federal TRIO Programs. Fraternity and sorority staff should offer to help student leaders brainstorm modifications to regular events, like philanthropy activities, chapter meetings, retreats, and socials, so that students are not left to figure it out alone.

Promoting disability inclusion in student organizations must involve engaging with conversations around diversity. Fraternity and sorority (inter)national headquarters often have it within their missions to support diversity, equity, and inclusion in their chapters by offering

training and development. As partners with institutions, headquarters staff could be included in efforts to educate members about disability inclusion.

### **Researcher's Reflection**

I came to my research topic for several reasons: to better understand what makes college students feel that they belong; to explore removing barriers and enhancing success for students with disabilities; and to identify how social fraternities and sororities can better support all their members. This research has encouraged me to reimagine how we design co-curricular programming and how we advise and support student organizations. I also hope to apply what I have learned to help create more inclusive environments for college students with disabilities.

As a practitioner and student affairs professional, I currently have responsibility supporting an array of programs that make up the co-curriculum at my institution. This includes advising fraternities and sororities as well as supporting programs for the student government, clubs and student organizations, leadership programs, student media, and service and volunteer programs. As I reflect upon what I have learned from this study, I recognize new ways to approach programming in each of these spaces. To build a more just and accessible co-curricular experience, the stories of participants in this study have challenged me to rethink how we design programs and activities for college students.

Training and development for student leaders is one way in which I can advance inclusive practices to support students with disabilities. Participants' stories encountering negative social dynamics and ableism in their fraternities and sororities is a reminder to me that work can be done preparing students in all kinds of organizations to understand disability and think about ways to improve the accessibility of their activities for members. Additionally, I can encourage colleagues to adopt universal design principles to enhance the accessibility of

leadership workshops and trainings. Universal design is sometimes thought of as a classroom-only strategy; however, I want to challenge this assumption by inviting staff to center it in our programs. Doing so can foster welcoming spaces that promote equitable opportunities for learning and growth.

The diverse experiences of my participants taught me about the multifaceted and complex nature of disability. Participants in my study had many salient identities and experiences, which in some cases included multiple disabilities as well as other aspects of identity like race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. If we are to design campus spaces and programs to enhance belonging for student with disabilities, we must also consider the many social identities beyond disability that students carry with them. There are opportunities, for instance, that I hope to encourage collaboration across departments to support students in the intersectional aspects of their identities. Additionally, as a scholar, I hope to conduct future research in areas of student development as it relates to intersectionality of identities and disability.

There are times of year at my institution when we practice an “all-hands-on-deck” approach to a program, initiative, or campus tradition. Helping new students move into their residence halls is one such example, an annual event that involves hundreds of staff, faculty, and student volunteers. While conducting the research for this study, I was reminded of this and wondered how I might encourage my colleagues to think of promoting an inclusive campus for disability as an “all-hands-on-deck” collective responsibility. This is at the heart of the Social Justice Model of Disability, the theoretical framework I used in this study. Recognizing that improving campus accessibility is the responsibility of all staff and faculty requires both education and a change in culture. I see this as an opportunity to invite colleagues across campus

into conversations about student success that includes action and moves beyond just simple awareness and acceptance of disability.

My experience writing and conducting research for this dissertation has been a transformative educational journey. The inspiration to pursue a PhD came years ago from mentors who encouraged me to explore the prospect as one for both professional growth and an opportunity to contribute new knowledge to our profession. As a scholar-practitioner, I have a passion for understanding students so that I can work to support the best possible environment for them to be successful. This journey has reinforced my dedication to ensuring that students with disabilities are not only included but supported. Additionally, it has strengthened my resolve to be an advocate for social justice in the ways we remove barriers to student belonging and success.

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## Appendix A – Participant Recruitment Email

Dear [Insert Name]:

My name is Charlie Varland. I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University, and I am conducting dissertation research on members of fraternities and sororities who identify as having disabilities, which explores the factors of their involvement on their sense of belonging. I am conducting a study with supervision and guidance from Dr. Mike Ellis, a member of the university's faculty, my doctoral advisor, and the principal investigator (PI).

The proposed title of my research is “Understanding Sense of Belonging of Fraternity and Sorority Members with Disabilities: A Phenomenological Study.”

I am seeking volunteers to participate in a qualitative study, which is a component of a doctoral program. Specifically, I am in search of participants who meet the following criteria:

- Enrolled as a student at the university serving as the site of this research.
- Affiliated with a social, professional, or service-based collegiate fraternity or sorority.
- Has a documented or diagnosed disability.

Each participant will spend approximately 60 to 90 minutes in a one-on-one interview setting, either in person or virtually via Zoom, responding to questions about collaboration experiences. With their advance permission, the interview will be audio recorded and an application called Otter.ai will generate a transcript of the interview. Following the interview, participants will be asked to review their interview transcript for accuracy and will have the opportunity to make any changes they consider necessary. The full interview will be confidential; the transcript will be seen only by the student researcher and the principal researcher.

If directly quoted content is used in the dissertation, no identifying information will be included. Participating in this study is voluntary. If at any point they participants experience unforeseen discomfort, they may decline to answer specific questions or withdraw from the study entirely.

If you are interested in participating, please click this link to complete a screening survey: [Link to survey]. This survey will allow me to identify a diverse pool of participants.

You will receive a response from me after completing the survey. If you are selected to participate, we will schedule a day and time for the interview and discuss the informed consent process.

Sincerely,

Charlie Varland

## Appendix B – Screening Survey

### Screening Survey Introduction

This survey will ask a series of brief questions focused on your demographics. It is designed to provide this study with a diverse pool of participants.

This research study is focused on the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education related to their involvement in fraternities and sororities. The purpose of this research is to understand what factors of involvement in fraternities and sororities influence the sense of belonging of students with disabilities.

This screening survey should take less than 15 minutes to complete.

This study aims to position students with disabilities as experts on their lived experiences. Participants will be invited to participate in an interview that will last between 60 to 90 minutes. The interview questions will ask about experiences with disability, involvement in fraternities and sororities, and experience with university programs and services for fraternities and sororities. Interviews can be scheduled and conducted via Zoom, phone, or through the participants preferred means of communication. Your responses are private and confidential and identifying information will not be included in any of the study materials.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at 208-891-4600 or email [charlie.varland@gmail.com](mailto:charlie.varland@gmail.com). You may also contact Dr. Mike Ellis at 970-491-6395 or [mike.ellis@colostate.edu](mailto:mike.ellis@colostate.edu).

### Screening Survey Questions

1. Age Range (check one):

- 18-24
- 25+
- Prefer not to say

2. Gender (check one):

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary/third gender
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

3. Ethnicity (check one):

- Asian/Asian American
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latinx
- White/Caucasian

- Indigenous/Native American
- Multiracial/Multiethnic
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

4. Race (check one):

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

5. Sexual Orientation (check any that apply):

- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Gay
- Heterosexual
- Intersex
- Lesbian
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Questioning
- Transgender
- Two-Spirited
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

6. Are you the first member of your immediate family to go to college? (check one):

- Yes
- No

7. Do you self-identify as having a disability or chronic health condition? (check one):

- Yes
- No

8. Disability/Impairment Types (check any that apply):

- Acquired Brain Injury/Traumatic Brain Injury
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Autism/Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Blind/Visually Impaired
- Chronic Health Condition
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing
- Learning Disability
- Mobility Impairment

- Psychological Disability/Mental Health Condition
- Speech/Language Disability
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

9. Class Standing (check one):

- First Year
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate Student
- Prefer not to say

10. Fraternity/Sorority Council Affiliation or Organizational Type (check one):

- Interfraternity Council
- Multicultural Greek Council
- Panhellenic Council
- Member of professional fraternity or sorority
- Member of service fraternity or sorority

## **Appendix C – Informed Consent**

### **Colorado State University Consent to Participate in Research**

#### **Title of Study**

“Understanding Sense of Belonging of Fraternity and Sorority Members with Disabilities: A Phenomenological Study”

#### **Introduction and Purpose**

My name is Charlie Varland. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University working with my faculty advisor, Dr. Mike Ellis, in the School of Education. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which looks at the sense of belonging of fraternity and sorority members with disabilities.

#### **Procedures**

If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct an interview with you at a time and location of your choice, either in person or virtually via Zoom. The interview will involve questions about disability, fraternity/sorority involvement, belonging, and university programs and services. It should last between 60 to 90 minutes. With your permission, I will take an audio recording and create a transcript using Otter.ai during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be recorded, either on audio or through the Otter.ai transcription app, I will take handwritten notes instead. If you agree to be recorded but feel uncomfortable or change your mind for any reason during the interview, I can turn off the recording at our request. Or if you do not wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

I expect to conduct only one interview; however, follow-ups may be needed for added clarification. If so, I will contact you by email to request this.

#### **Benefits**

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study.

#### **Risks/Discomforts**

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, we will ask you to identify yourself with a pseudonym of your choosing. Access to the records of this study, including interview transcription data, will be limited only to the investigators and saved in files only accessible to the investigators.

The audio recording will be transcribed live during the interview using Otter.ai. The audio recordings will be permanently deleted will be permanently destroyed within 3 years after the research project is complete. I will save the transcriptions and other study data for possible use in future research done by myself or others. The same measures described above will be taken to protect confidentiality of this study data. We may be asked to share the research files with the sponsor or the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes.

### **Compensation**

To thank you for participating, you will receive a \$20.00 gift card.

### **Rights**

*Participation in research is completely voluntary.* You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you choose to answer any questions or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at 208-891-4600 or email [charlie.varland@gmail.com](mailto:charlie.varland@gmail.com). You may also contact Dr. Mike Ellis at 970-491-6395 or [mike.ellis@colostate.edu](mailto:mike.ellis@colostate.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 970-491-1553 or email [CSU\\_IRB@colostate.edu](mailto:CSU_IRB@colostate.edu).

### **Participant Consent**

#### **Permission to audio record interview(s):**

I, Charlie Varland, would like your permission to audio record your interview to be sure that your comments are accurately recorded. Once transcribed, only the principal investigator and co-principal investigator will have access to the recording. The recording will be destroyed 3 years after the research project is finished. Do you give the researchers permission to audio record your interview? Please initial next to your choice below.

Yes, I agree that my interview can be audio recorded. \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

#### **Permission to use direct quotes:**

I, Charlie Varland, would like to use direct quotes when presenting findings of the research in order to provide rich details of your experience collaborating to better understand the sense of belonging of students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities. All identifiable information will be removed from the data and only the principal investigator and co-principal investigator will have access to identifiable data. Do you give permission for the researcher to use direct quotes without identifiable data associated?

Yes, you can use my data for research and publishing, but do not associate identifiable information within direct quotes.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and voluntarily wish to participate in this research. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (please print)

## Appendix D – Interview Protocol

**Study Title:** Understanding Sense of Belonging for Fraternity and Sorority Members with Disabilities: A Phenomenological Study.

|                            |
|----------------------------|
| <b>DATE:</b>               |
| <b>INTERVIEWER'S NAME:</b> |
| <b>PARTICIPANT'S NAME:</b> |
| <b>LOCATION:</b>           |
| <b>TIME OF INTERVIEW:</b>  |

Research Study Summary:

*This study seeks to explore the experiences of students with disabilities and the role involvement in fraternities and sororities has on their sense of belonging. The goal of the study is to document experiences as told directly by the participants of the study.*

*With your permission, this interview will be video recorded using Zoom for record-keeping purposes. Additionally, I will use Otter.ai, a web-based speech to text transcription application, to create a transcription of this interview. I will share the transcript with you. The recording is being made so that I am able to revisit any nuances of what was said during our interview. If you feel uncomfortable or change your mind for any reason during the interview, I can turn off the recording at your request. If you find yourself not wanting to continue, you can stop the interview at any time. A follow-up interview may be requested with you for added clarification. If so, I will contact you after the interview by email.*

### Interview Questions:

*I will ask you questions related to your experiences within your fraternity/sorority as well as questions about your disability. Data collected will be used to answer the research question: what role does involvement in fraternities and sororities have on the sense of belonging of students with disabilities?*

**General:** I would like to get to know you better. Please me a little about yourself and your time here as a student at this university, including your year in school, areas of study, where you have lived while attending, and what influenced your decision to attend.

**Disability:** I would like to hear about your disability. Please tell me about when you were first diagnosed and how your disability has affected your experience in college?

Possible probing questions:

- How do you describe your experience with disability to others?
- What accommodations (residential, academic, dining, etc.), if any, have you used to mitigate the impacts of your experiences in college?
- Is disability something you consider to be an important part of your identity?

**Fraternity/Sorority Involvement:** I would like to learn about your involvement in your fraternity/sorority. Please tell me about your decision to join and your overall experience.

Possible probing questions:

- How would you describe your fraternity/sorority?
- What did you expect fraternity/sorority life would be like?
- What does your membership in your fraternity/sorority mean to you?
- How do you think your life would be different if you had not joined your fraternity/sorority?

**Disability and Involvement:** Tell me a bit about what it is like having a disability in your fraternity/sorority. I would like to hear about all aspects of your involvement as a person with a disability.

Possible probing questions:

- Can you tell me, in what ways has or hasn't your disability impacted your experience with your fraternity/sorority?
- Is your disability something others in your fraternity/sorority are aware of?
- What impacts your level of access to activities/events?
- Can you describe any impacts you have experienced from not attending/not being able to attend events you didn't have access to?

**Belonging:** Describe what a sense of belonging means to you in relation to your fraternity and sorority.

Possible probing questions:

- How would you define sense of belonging?
- How does your disability or your connection to a fraternity/sorority influence your definition of sense of belonging?
- Could you tell me about a time when your fraternity/sorority made you feel a sense of belonging?
- Could you tell me about a time when your fraternity/sorority made you feel that you didn't belong?

**University Programs and Services:** Describe any university-sponsored activities, events, or services for fraternities/sororities that you currently attend and/or have attended. Tell me about your access to those activities, events, or services.

Possible probing questions:

- Are there university-sponsored activities, events, or services for fraternities/sororities that you would like to attend or engage with, but don't have access to?
- Are there other activities outside your fraternity/sorority that you would like to tell me about?

## Appendix E – Interview Transcript Review Email

Dear [Insert Name]:

Thank you again for your interest in my doctoral research which explores factors that impact the sense of belonging of students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities.

As we discussed, I would be grateful if you could review the transcript of my interview with [pseudonym].

I made a few small changes to the transcript to better disguise [pseudonym's] identity, such as removing specific references to people, places, or things that would have compromised the anonymity. If you are aware of any additional corrections, changes, or modifications, I would be grateful for feedback, ideally within the next week. You can email your feedback to me directly.

In the transcript you may see the word “inaudible” written in certain spaces. This is due to technical issues with the recording. I have not tried to recreate the transcript in those spaces. Any assistance that you can provide to fill in the missing word or phrase would be appreciated.

Thank you again for your participation.

Sincerely,

Charlie Varland

## Appendix F – Member Checking Email

Dear [Insert Name]:

Thank you again for your interest in my doctoral research which explores factors that impact the sense of belonging of students with disabilities in fraternities and sororities.

This email provides you with an opportunity to review the themes I have preliminarily identified for this research study. You can find the themes attached to this message. I invite you to review them and respond to the following questions:

1. To what extent do the proposed themes resonate with you?
2. If you have experiences that I have added under a particular theme, does the way in which I have categorized them fit with how you meant them during the interview?
3. What additional examples (if any) would you add?

You can simply reply to this email with your responses to these questions.

If you expressed interest in the results, I will reach out to you again when the research is complete so that you can see the outcome.

If at any time you have concerns or additional comments, please contact me at [charlie.varland@gmail.com](mailto:charlie.varland@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

Charlie Varland

## Appendix G – Recurrence of Themes

### Recurrence in Superordinate Theme 1: Authentic Peer Relationships

| <b>Emergent Themes</b>       | Brick | Cece | John | Kaitlin | Steve | Summer | TJ  | Present in at least half of sample? |
|------------------------------|-------|------|------|---------|-------|--------|-----|-------------------------------------|
| Intrinsic Need for Community | YES   | YES  | YES  | YES     | YES   | YES    | YES | YES                                 |
| Mattering to Others          |       |      | YES  |         | YES   | YES    | YES | YES                                 |
| Positive Social Support      | YES   | YES  |      | YES     | YES   | YES    | YES | YES                                 |

### Recurrence in Superordinate Theme 2: Barriers to Belonging

| <b>Emergent Themes</b>             | Brick | Cece | John | Kaitlin | Steve | Summer | TJ  | Present in at least half of sample? |
|------------------------------------|-------|------|------|---------|-------|--------|-----|-------------------------------------|
| Ableism, Stigma, and Accessibility | YES   | YES  | YES  | YES     | YES   | YES    | YES | YES                                 |
| Negative Social Dynamics           | YES   |      | YES  | YES     |       |        | YES | YES                                 |

### Recurrence in Superordinate Theme 3: University Environmental Impacts

| <b>Emergent Themes</b>              | Brick | Cece | John | Kaitlin | Steve | Summer | TJ  | Present in at least half of sample? |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------|------|---------|-------|--------|-----|-------------------------------------|
| Program Design                      |       | YES  |      |         | YES   | YES    | YES | YES                                 |
| Interactions with Faculty and Staff | YES   | YES  | YES  | YES     |       |        | YES | YES                                 |