
A Parent's Guide for Surviving Fraternity & Sorority Life

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While Connections' primary readership is the undergraduate sorority/fraternity member, we know sometimes our magazine falls into the hands of fraternal stakeholders – faculty, community members, prospective students to your college, and sometimes parents. We hope this article makes its way to your campus admissions office, parent programs department, or anywhere else parents or other family members might have a chance to see it.

Your son/daughter is interested in joining a fraternity/sorority and you want to support, but you have some questions. Have no fear, we have reached out to some current parents of fraternity/sorority students and a national sorority president to get some answers for you.



Many college students flock each year to sorority/fraternity chapters in search of a home away from home, a sense of belonging, new friends, leadership development, opportunities for civic engagement and of course, fun. Research consistently indicates that a college student can gain all of these skills from joining a fraternity/sorority but the truth is, that fact often gets lost amidst the challenges that these groups face. So as a parent of a college student, you most likely have dozens of questions, maybe even some apprehensions or fears; all of which are normal. Maybe you were never a member of a sorority and do not understand terms like "swap" when they are uttered by your daughter. Maybe you cannot image how your son is going to survive in a fraternity house of 20 other 18-21 year old males college with little to no supervision. Rest assured, students experience these rites of passage and often gain lifelong skills and friendships in the process. One parent of a current sorority student at a midsized, metropolitan, public university mentioned, "As a parent who had not been in a sorority during my college years, I had some initial misgivings. [But] being involved in a sorority provided my daughter with many of the tools that will help on her life's journey. She was encouraged to grow as a leader and as an only child, developed a sense of sisterhood that was very precious to her".

Joining a fraternal organization can benefit your son/daughter, but being informed with the appropriate information so that you can ask the right questions while supporting your child through this process can make the difference. Here are five tips to help you, help your student:

GET INVOLVED...BUT NOT TOO INVOLVED

It is important for you to attend events that are open for parents and support philanthropies to show support for your student. One parent says, "Attend as many activities as you can and get to know the other members (and parents) of the fraternity/sorority." She also advises, "Let your son or daughter know the importance of that trust."

As mom or dad, it is vitally important that your student knows that you will be there when needed, but also that you trust their judgment. This balance of support and trust will greatly enhance interdependence and learning for your student during the successes and challenges associated with fraternity/sorority affiliation. With that said, keep in mind there are campus-based professionals (a director of fraternity/sorority affairs, or director of student activities, perhaps) who want to help your student through their affiliation and are available help you with questions that you may have along the way. However, parents must caution themselves against relying on these professionals to become 'fixers' of individual or chapter issues. They are there to assist in the development of the student and answer difficult questions for parents, but often times, are not able to fix all the challenges that accompany affiliation. Campus-based professionals are partners and supporters, but do not always have the resources to change the outcomes of some challenging situations. It is best for parents to work with their student to arrive to solutions that challenge and empower the student. Mom/Dad, involvement is important, but has to be purposeful and leave space for students to be the center of their own experiences.

PROPERLY PLAN FOR THE FINANCIAL COMMITMENT

When asked about the financial commitments associated with sorority/fraternity membership one mother commented, "Understand the expenses involved in an organization before you make a commitment. Although some organizations are reasonable, others do cost more. Plan for this and budget costs with your son/daughter. Also understand that these costs are spent for the benefit of the members, not to make money for the organization."

It is important to talk your student about how paying for a fraternity/sorority may require sacrifices in other aspects of their collegiate experience. It is best to establish expectations with your student before they go through "recruitment." While some parents pay all fees for their student to be in an organization, many leave some or all of this responsibility to the student. Some college campuses have cultures such that many students are paying all the expenses and on other campuses, it is common that students financially rely on their parents. Work with your student to do research on the campus culture of finances, check to see if there will be many other students in the same financial situation as your student. You both want to know what to expect before the membership recruitment/intake process begins.

Lastly, talk to your student about payment schedules, (are payment plans available, do students pay each month/semester/year), and what happens if a payment is missed. And, mom and dad, get ready to pay for a lot of sorority/fraternity swag – t-shirts, bags, stickers, you name it.

SAFETY FIRST

"Another issue that seems to concern many parents is hazing" said a parent when asked about her fears upon learning that her daughter wanted to be in a sorority. The reality is that some groups (fraternities and sororities and all organizational types) participate in illicit new member practices. However it is important to note, national organizations and universities do not support these practices. The best way to decrease the chances of your student being subjected to unsafe situations is to build a relationship with your student that supports open communication. If hazing does occur during a new member education period, from our experiences, students who are most successful at ensuring that the respondent chapter is held accountable are those who are heavily supported by their parents. You want your student to be able to share with you if they ever encounter anything they know is unacceptable and, on most campuses, students going into fraternity/sorority chapters are aware of rules within the community. Further, while it cannot be ignored that hazing happens, you can find some solace in knowing that the university has a vested interest in protecting its students.

One parent shared her concern that her daughter would be subjected to hazing but now says, "I noticed the exact opposite, the young people in my daughter's group of friends [in the sorority] were incredibly supportive through good and bad times." Know there are many people engaged in the fight against unhealthy fraternity/sorority practices for new members, and your child has support.

EACH ORGANIZATION HAS STANDARDS

While fraternity/sorority chapters receive lots of negative press, in many cases more than we would like to take credit, the benefits of these organizations far outweigh the cons and are rooted in heightened academic, moral, and commitment standards. Each organization expects its members maintain a minimum G.P.A, and most have an older member in the chapter who is specifically tasked with monitoring the academic progress of chapter members. In many cases this individual is the scholarship/academics chair and holds the primary responsibility of developing plans and expectations for members around academics success. It is imperative that you talk to your student about what you expect academically, and what the fraternity/sorority expects of each member. When your child decides they want to pursue membership in a fraternal organization, quiz her/him on the requirements of the organization. One parent of a sorority member encourages parents to research the organizations on campus, become educated about their requirements, academics, and how university officials regard the chapters and fraternity/sorority community as a whole.

Mom and dad, to assist in this process, feel free to request the community grade report. Most campuses and more specifically, fraternity and sorority affairs offices have reports that list all the chapters on campus and how they compare scholastically to one another. Of course, you do not want this to be the only resource you utilize to create your perception of the chapter. Keep in mind there are opportunities for growth in every organization and academic rankings can vary each semester or year. Furthermore, on many campuses the fraternity/sorority average is higher than the all student and/or unaffiliated student averages.

In addition to academic standards, each fraternity/sorority has other core values on which the organization is built. Each fraternity/sorority member vows to live by these standards in their everyday lives during college and beyond. While many students join for friends, social connections, and leadership development, they enter into a commitment to work toward being a better version of themselves.

If you have never joined a sorority/fraternity, we encourage you to ask your students about their rituals and the core values of their organization. Challenge your student on how they understand and apply the values espoused in their organization. The first time you ask, they may not have a response, but continue to ask not only what benefits they receive from the organization, but rather how the organization's value system is making your student a better person. If you do not ask your student this question, or if there are never challenged to think more critically about these issues, they may never be asked, and subsequently might not receive one of the most distinguishing qualities of fraternity/sorority membership.

LET THEM GROW

Campus-based professionals and fraternity/sorority headquarters staff and volunteers understand that a challenging aspect of the college transition process is its impact on parents. Not only are students embarking on a new stage in life, so are parents. The role of the parent begins to shift, and mom and dad must often work through how to best support their son/daughter, but also accept the internal unrest that accompanies not being able to see their son/daughter every day. Most campus professionals find that top concerns parents have for their student while in college is safety and that their student feels like they belong. Sorority/fraternity affiliation can be an adequate avenue to help a student do both. To assure the success of this process parents must challenge themselves to

provide their students with the space to grow while allowing them to make mistakes and work through their personal views. For this to happen, mom and dad have to be willing to let their son/daughter go.

This growth process involves a shift in the parental paradigm, which can be challenging but will help the student grow. This applies as well to the fraternity/sorority experience. The national president of an organization put it best, "Let your student have the experience with minimal involvement from you. The goal is learning, personal growth, and development." This means that the experience will not always be perfect or great. Can you remember when your son/daughter was a young child and wanted to have a lemonade stand, or put on a play, or build a fort? The real value in this type of "play" is not to make a project on lemonade, win a Tony, or build a landmark. Instead, the real value is in the lessons learned as they set a goal and take steps to reach that goal. The same principle applies to the fraternal experience; the goal of the experience is not perfection, the goal is preparation for the next opportunity.

A parent says that her daughters (two of them joined the same sorority and their relationship grew tremendously as a result of their membership) "learned responsibility... the girls learn[ed] conflict management skills, how to organize events, how to manage their time, how to follow rules and regulations, how to work as a team, gain[ed] confidence in their own abilities and lifelong friends." She also said her daughters, made contacts that have been personally and professionally beneficial, including a relocation out of state for a new job.

Fraternity/sorority affiliation, while rightfully daunting to parents, can be an excellent means for students to grow during their collegiate years, have fun, and gain lifelong skills to make them successful. However, in order for this process to work, students need healthily involved parents, opportunities to make mistakes, the freedom to learn from those mistakes, and trust in their decisions. Parents, know that your hard work for the last 18 years is not in vain; you have raised a wonderful individual, not perfect or without failure, but equipped to be successful in a fraternity/sorority chapter with support from you.



Parents...they are tricky characters. Involved? Not Involved? It's a question that has been discussed for years in schools and organizations with no clear cut answer in sight. For leaders in the fraternal community, parent buy-in is something that should be sought and courted. Parents are their student's biggest cheerleaders. That support extends to the organizations in which their children are invested, and you can utilize that support in ways that promote the high standards of the chapter while providing education about the fraternal experience.

When their child decides to join a sorority/fraternity, parents want to know that the chapter is time-tested and upholds the values they have instilled in their child. This is especially important since many parents only know fraternity/sorority life through what they've seen on TV and in movies – a portrayal that is skewed and meant to portray organizations in unflattering ways.

Some parents also see the fraternal organization as a place that all their money goes with no clear return on the investment. Yes, their child loves the organization but what is the long term outcome of being a member? Those are questions parents ask. Chapter leaders should want to portray to the families a group that provides opportunities to the students that they wouldn't necessarily get outside of sorority/fraternity life.

Newsletters, social media outreach and other initiatives are all great ways to accomplish this goal. But for fraternal organizations, family weekends are the perfect opportunity to showcase the chapter's accomplishments and members. Parents love any excuse to come to campus to see their students without looking like they are "hanging on" too tight. Family weekends also provide opportunities for members to help in the planning of activities they know will capture the spirit of the chapter. These activities could consist of a reception, BBQs and picnics or tailgates at football games – anything that encourages active participation by all family members. That's right, ALL family members. Don't forget to include siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles!

An "old school" field day is a great example of an event that encourages participation and can also conjure up images of elementary school for parents (images that mothers especially keep dear to their hearts). A mother relishes the idea of seeing their college student running the three-legged race with their brother or sister, just like they were still young kids. And we all know that families love competition. Events that promote friendly competition amongst families are a huge hit.

Use the weekend to highlight the chapter's philanthropic focus. For example, plan a 5K run/walk for Family Weekend with all proceeds benefiting the chapter's philanthropy. Family members can run the race, donate items for auctions or even sponsor water stations. It's an activity family members can do together and it showcases the fact that fraternal organizations are community-minded, wanting to make a difference locally and worldwide. What better PR is there?

You can also plan a community service event for the weekend. Work with local organizations to schedule a gardening day in which families can participate. Collect food for a local food pantry. Organize a book drive for a local school. These activities invest the family member in the chapter and the community that their child lives in.

But don't stop there. It's a known fact that parents love watching their daughters and sons on stage and will show up when their children are performing. So, capitalize on that and host a chapter talent show during Family Weekend – it's a great way for chapter members to get to know each other better as well as see some hidden talents. You could also host a family talent show where everyone can participate (and parents can get to know other parents and expand their own networks).

A good tip is to work with your campus Office of Parent & Family Programs to coordinate your events with the college's family weekend. Activities and events are already being planned for parents and students, so capitalize on that. Use the activities that are scheduled to show off the campus to your families. It will be much less work for your chapter if you collaborate with other organizations and departments on campus. And if your chapter family weekend coincides with the campus family weekend, you get to spend more time with your family because you don't have to pay attention to every little detail. Your members enjoy their families and let someone else do the heavy lifting.

Most campus family weekends include activities such as rope courses, canoeing, receptions, tailgates, discounted football or basketball tickets, family game nights, movie nights plus much more. It's all planned for you, so take advantage. And trust me, Offices of Parent & Family Programs love working with fraternal organizations.

Family weekends provide the stage to capture the imagination of your members' moms and dad, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and more. Use Family Weekend as a time to showcase friendship, community service, networking, leadership, and of course, fun. Wear your letters proudly and introduce your chapter in a way that opens their eyes to all that fraternity and sorority life offers.

