

FRATERNITY AND SORORITY FOCUS GROUP REPORT

2022

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PennState
Student Affairs

| Fraternity and Sorority Life



Overview

Following several extremely problematic and concerning incidents throughout Penn State's fraternity and sorority community, including the tragic loss of Penn State sophomore, Timothy J. Piazza in February 2017, Penn State made a radical shift in how it approached its relationship with fraternities and sororities. The institution implemented the following dramatic reforms, referred to as the 2017 New Measures:

- **Disciplinary Processes:**
Responsibility for addressing organizational misconduct previously managed by the 4 student-led governing councils (i.e., Interfraternity Council, Multicultural Greek Council, National Pan-Hellenic Council, and Panhellenic Council) was transferred to the University's Office of Student Conduct
- **New Resources:**
14 new student affairs positions were created:
 - Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life
 - Office of Fraternity and Sorority Compliance
8 of 14 full-time positions were dedicated to University social event monitoring and risk management
- **Reinstatement of the Neighborhood Enforcement Alcohol Team (N.E.A.T.):**
A collaborative effort between the University and State College Police Department to enhance police presence and community policing efforts in the State College Borough
- **Deferred recruitment and enhanced eligibility requirements**
- **New Member Education:**
Fraternity/sorority new member processes cannot exceed 6 weeks and must be submitted to and approved by the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life
- **Development of an informational Greek scorecard**
- **Relationship Statement:**
Creation of and expected adherence to a Relationship Statement that clarifies the respective rights and responsibilities of the University, the fraternities and sororities, and their members
- **Greek Membership Fee:**
Implemented to fund new services, including additional staff support and educational programs for fraternity/sorority members
- **Further parent and member education**
- **Semesterly Survey:**
Administered to all new members and interviews of randomly selected new members to inquire about their new member experience and provide reporting options for concerning behaviors
- **Serious and swift response:**
For hazing violations that involve alcohol, physical abuse, or any behavior that puts a student's mental or physical health at risk
- **Implementation of social restrictions:**
Limiting fraternities and sororities to 10 registered social events with alcohol each semester, allowing only beer and wine, and requiring RAMP trained bartenders

Implemented Adjustments

It is important to note that after initial implementation of the 2017 New Measures, Penn State University made the following modifications to some of the reforms after experiencing their impact and receiving informal feedback from various stakeholders:

Deferred Recruitment, Eligibility Requirements

- The University adjusted its on-campus housing contract timeline allowing students that joined fraternities and sororities at the beginning of the spring semester the opportunity to secure an on-campus housing contract following their participation in recruitment activities
- Penn State modified its enhanced eligibility requirement precluding students on conduct probation or with pending misconduct allegations from participating in fraternity/sorority recruitment activities, now only limiting students on conduct probation with a transcript notation or that have been suspended or expelled for misconduct
- The Office of Fraternity & Sorority Life started facilitating an informal process for interested students to apply for an exception to the University's credit requirement under special circumstances

Social Restrictions

- The Office of Fraternity & Sorority Compliance modified their monitoring practices, limiting areas of surveillance to common areas within the off-campus fraternity facilities
- While no "daylong" social events are permitted, fraternities and sororities are allowed to host registered social events during the day with specific beginning and end times





Focus Groups

As a part of the University's further evaluation of the 2017 New Measures, the Office of Fraternity & Sorority Life, under the leadership of Vice President for Student Affairs, Damon Sims, conducted a series of 11 focus groups intended to elicit feedback about the impact of the reforms. Specifically, focus group sessions were conducted with the following constituents:

- Interfraternity Council (IFC) chapter and council leaders
- Multicultural Greek Council (MGC)/National Pan-Hellenic (NPHC) chapter and council leaders
- Panhellenic Council (PHC) chapter and council leaders
- Penn State Parents
- Highlands Civic Association (HCA)
- Panhellenic (PHC) Alumnae/Advisors
- Multicultural Greek Council (MGC)/National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) Alumni/Advisors
- Interfraternity Council (IFC) Alumni/Advisors/Housing Corporations
- Multicultural Greek Council (MGC)/National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC)/Member Organization Inter/National/Regional Representatives
- North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC)/Member Organization Inter/National Representatives
- National Panhellenic Conference (NPC)/Member Organization Inter/National Representatives

Invitations for participation in the focus groups were distributed to more than 860 individuals. Over 230 individuals participated in the focus groups. Many participants were not aware of all of the reforms that were implemented in 2017. As a result, focus group facilitators introduced and presented each New Measure to stakeholders prior to proceeding with questions.

The subsequent report will provide a synopsis of the feedback offered throughout the focus group sessions.

General Points of Interest

The most discussed reforms throughout the focus groups were:

- Deferred recruitment and its impact on housing for Interfraternity Council (IFC) fraternities with privately-owned off-campus facilities and Panhellenic Council (PHC) sororities with on-campus floors
- The administrative tone of the Relationship Statement and the degree to which fraternity/sorority students are aware of what they are agreeing to when signing
- Request for clarification of the use of the Greek membership fee
- The efficacy of additional Office of Fraternity & Sorority Life and Office of Fraternity & Sorority Compliance staff, especially those responsible for monitoring versus advising and education
- The transition of organizational misconduct case management to the University
- The impact of social restrictions and their relevance to fraternities and sororities across all governing councils at Penn State

Focus group participants offered little to no feedback on further parent and member education, the semesterly survey administered to new members, and the University's response to hazing violations. While participants offered little feedback, parents, advisors, and Highlands Civic Association (HCA) participants were interested in seeking clarification on how each of these reforms are being implemented and their overall impact. No feedback or comment was offered regarding the reinstatement of N.E.A.T. by any focus group participant.

Most student participants were not enrolled at Penn State prior to 2017. They expressed feeling challenged to compare the fraternity/sorority experience before and after implementation of the reforms because they do not know any different. MGC, NPHC, and PHC students and advisors generally communicated a significant amount of frustration for the 2017 New Measures. They believe that their organizations are being held accountable to reforms that were implemented largely due to challenges caused by the IFC fraternities.

The subsequent sections provide summaries of the most salient issues for focus group participants.





Deferred Requirements and Enhanced Eligibility Requirements

Deferred recruitment/enhanced eligibility requirements were favorable among student and parent participants, especially the additional time that deferred recruitment allows interested students to adjust to the academic rigor of the institution. Additionally, fraternity/sorority students expressed appreciation for the time allotted to adjust socially to the University and create a network of friends outside of the fraternity/sorority community prior to joining an organization. Fraternity/sorority members also felt positively that deferred recruitment/enhanced eligibility requirements allow interested students more time to learn about their options for joining an organization. While advisors generally remain unfavorable of deferred recruitment, some did express that they have experienced fewer academic issues among fraternity/sorority students during their first year of membership following implementation of the enhanced eligibility requirements.

There were two notable exceptions to the favorable feedback about deferred recruitment/enhanced eligibility requirements. The most notable exception is the impact on IFC fraternities with off-campus housing and PHC sororities with on-campus floors. Advisors, students, parents, and inter/national representatives acknowledge the aggressive off-campus housing market in State College which results in students feeling pressured to sign off-campus leases between October and November of their first semester. Many students engaging in the recruitment process during their first eligible semester, which is typically the spring semester, enter the recruitment process having already committed to an off-campus lease before engaging in recruitment activities. Students accepting invitations to join IFC fraternities and PHC sororities must face breaking their off-campus lease to move to the fraternity facility or sorority floor or choose not to break their lease and forgo the opportunity to live in their organization's housing option during their

first year of membership. The off-campus housing market in State College has also grown substantially in recent years, increasing competition for fraternities and sororities with housing options that have not kept up with student housing preferences and desired amenities. PHC student participants expressed concern for the mental health of their sorority officers in feeling pressure from the University, their advisors, and some inter/national representatives to fill their sorority floors while also facing pushback from their peers who either do not want to live on the floor or must navigate off-campus lease cancellation fees to move onto the floor. PHC student participants shared that they believe the difficulty in managing their floor issues deters their members from seeking leadership roles in their organizations. Many members of the PHC community participate in study abroad as third-year students. When students participate in study abroad experiences, their departure during the spring semester leaves noticeable vacancies on the sorority floors. IFC student participants expressed concerns over the lack of third-year and fourth-year members living in their off-campus facilities and taking on leadership roles, which they attribute to deferred recruitment and the increase of new apartment buildings close to campus with better amenities. The other notable exception is that deferred recruitment/enhanced eligibility requirements have very little impact on affiliate members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and many affiliate members of the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), as the University's requirements align with their national practices for membership. Many MGC and NPHC fraternities and sororities already require advanced standing, prohibiting membership for interested students with fewer than 12 credit hours.

Relationship Statement

While all students are asked to sign and agree to the Relationship Statement prior to participating in fraternity/sorority recruitment activities, many focus group participants expressed little awareness of the document. As a result, focus group facilitators reviewed the Relationship Statement with participants prior to proceeding with questions. Following review, participants expressed still feeling unclear about the purpose of the statement. Parents, advisors, and inter/national/regional representatives recommended adjusting the language in the Relationship Statement to focus more on what fraternity/sorority students should gain from their involvement in their organizations and the community. Participants also felt that the document reads as a punitive outline of expectations rather than developmental guidance.

Concern was also expressed by some inter/national/regional representatives that identified an incongruence between the governance structure outlined in the Relationship Statement and the governance structure of some national umbrella organizations. Specifically, the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) does not endorse local undergraduate councils serving in a judiciary role. However, the Relationship Statement outlines an expectation that each governing council serve as a judicial body for their member organizations.

Greek Membership Fee

Students, parents, advisors, and inter/national/regional representatives sought more information on how funds from the Greek membership fee are being utilized and why the fee amount is different for IFC/PHC members and MGC/NPHC members. PHC advisors, National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) inter/national representatives, and some parents expressed concern for the impact the Greek membership fee may have on access for students that experience financial difficulty or may not be able to afford the fee in addition to local and inter/national fraternity/sorority dues. While focus group participants were largely unclear of how the Greek membership fee is being utilized, students, parents, advisors, and inter/national/regional representatives expressed appreciation for the additional staffing, support, and educational programs resulting from the 2017 New Measures.

Staffing

Focus group participants expressed appreciation for the increase of University staff, especially the ability for fraternity/sorority leaders and inter/national/regional representatives to engage in regular communication and provide timely updates about the local chapter's performance. Stakeholders described Penn State University staff, including the Offices of Fraternity & Sorority Life, Fraternity & Sorority Compliance, and Student Conduct, as some of the most communicative and collaborative in the region. Inter/national representatives from the North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) and National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) member organizations were favorable of the educational programming and social event management expectations established by the University, as they are in alignment with their own organizational standards.

Concern was expressed by students, advisors, parents, and inter/national representatives regarding the designation of the Office of Fraternity & Sorority 'Compliance', as they believe it establishes a policing dynamic between the Compliance staff and the student community. While many participants were largely supportive of the monitoring function, they recommended that the University reconsider the name of the office due to the perceived policing role and potential barriers created for students seeking assistance from the office. Feedback was also offered about the overall ratio of Compliance monitors to Fraternity & Sorority Life staff. A recommendation was shared among NIC member organization representatives to reconsider investing in staff intended to develop and proactively advise chapters rather than investing in the current number of staff responsible for monitoring social events.

MGC and NPHC students, advisors, and inter/national/regional representatives were unclear of how the Office of Fraternity & Sorority Compliance serves the needs of their members. MGC and NPHC students also expressed that while their interactions with Compliance staff are positive, their communications and risk management training have lacked relevance to the operations of their organizations.

Disciplinary Processes

Students, parents, and inter/national representatives were favorable of the University managing organizational misconduct cases. Specifically, inter/national/regional representatives expressed appreciation for the transparency and collaboration between the Office of Student Conduct and their respective offices when addressing chapter related behavioral concerns. Focus group participants were also supportive of the Office of Student Conduct's assignment of cases for resolution through the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Compliance when applicable.

A request was made by IFC students to re-attain some aspects of peer accountability within the IFC community, specifically regarding IFC policy, constitution, and bylaw violations. It is important to note that the IFC Executive Boards for the 2020 and 2021 terms established a goal to revise their judicial structure and establish a process to address violations of IFC standards. Despite ongoing support and guidance from the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life and Office of Student Conduct, IFC leadership has not moved forward with implementing an IFC judicial board structure and process at this time.

Social Restrictions

Student feedback regarding social restrictions was mixed. IFC students expressed interest in working with the University to review and update the institution's social guidelines collaboratively, as they feel that the current restrictions were imposed on them, resulting in a continued sense of animosity toward the University. MGC, NPHC, and PHC students expressed indifference toward to the social restrictions as they feel that many of the restrictions are not applicable to their events and activities.

Highlands Civic Association (HCA) participants were extremely favorable of the social restrictions and expressed experiencing a significant difference before and after implementation of the 2017 New Measures. Highlands residents described having less confrontation with fraternity/sorority students, increased stability throughout the neighborhood, and more opportunity to collaborate with fraternity/sorority students to implement civic engagement and leadership development experiences.

Greek Scorecard

Parents and Highlands Civic Association (HCA) representatives were appreciative of the Greek scorecard and the transparency it provides regarding fraternity/sorority academic performance and conduct violations.





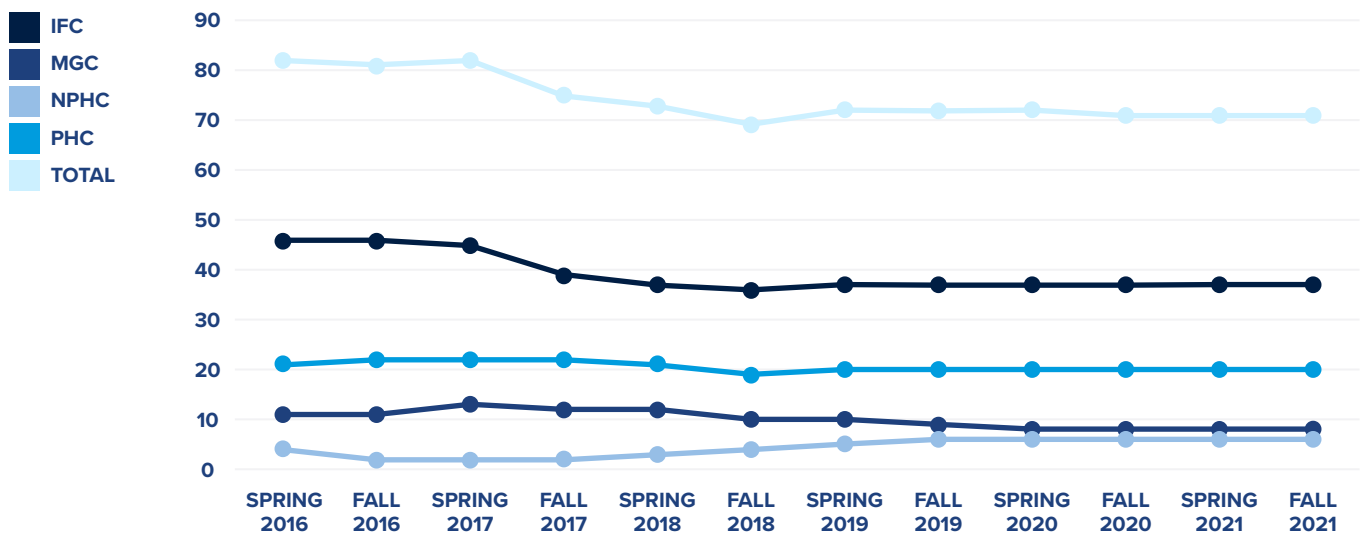
Recommendations

- Address the impact of deferred recruitment on IFC fraternity and PHC sorority housing
 - Action items that are already in progress include:
 - Establishment of a Sorority Floor Advisory Board whose purpose is to provide feedback on the member experience living on the sorority floors and on proposed strategies to market and improve the sorority floor living experience
 - Enhancement of marketing efforts to provide information to prospective members and their families about living options for fraternities and sororities through Accepted Students Day events, Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life and Residence Life websites, the Parents & Families Guide, and a Parents & Families Weekend presentation
- Revisit language in the Relationship Statement to address:
 - Emphasis on what students should gain from their membership and experience in fraternities and sororities at Penn State
 - Adjusting expectations for undergraduate council governance to be consistent with the governing structure for each respective council's national umbrella organization
 - Discuss and implement appropriate, desirable incentives for fraternities and sororities that demonstrate success and exceed communicated University expectations
 - Review and revise educational programs, training, and roles of the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Compliance to improve their relevance to MGC and NPHC member organization operations, events, and activities
 - Provide transparency for stakeholders on how the Greek membership fee is utilized in support of the fraternity and sorority community
 - Involve IFC, MGC, NPHC, and PHC students in reviewing the current definition of a social
 - Review the name and current function of the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Compliance and how both impact the office's relationship with fraternity/sorority students and other community stakeholders
 - Review staff ratio and roles dedicated to monitoring versus proactive organization advising, coaching, and education
 - Enhance information and education available to stakeholders about the rationale and purpose of each 2017 New Measure and continue to regularly assess the progression toward intended outcomes

Fraternity and Sorority Community Statistics

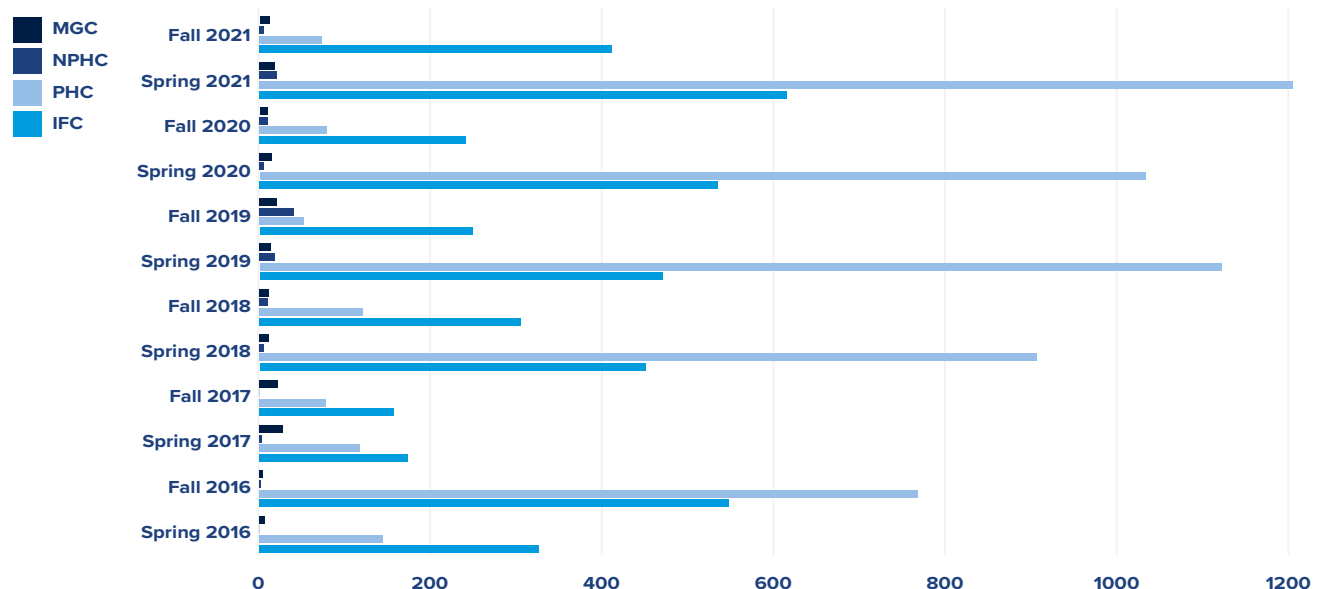
Number of Chapters/Councils Trends

There was a substantial decrease in the number of IFC chapters following implementation of the 2017 New Measures. This number has stabilized over the past several years and remains steady at 36 chapters. The number of NPHC chapters has risen slightly over the same time period.



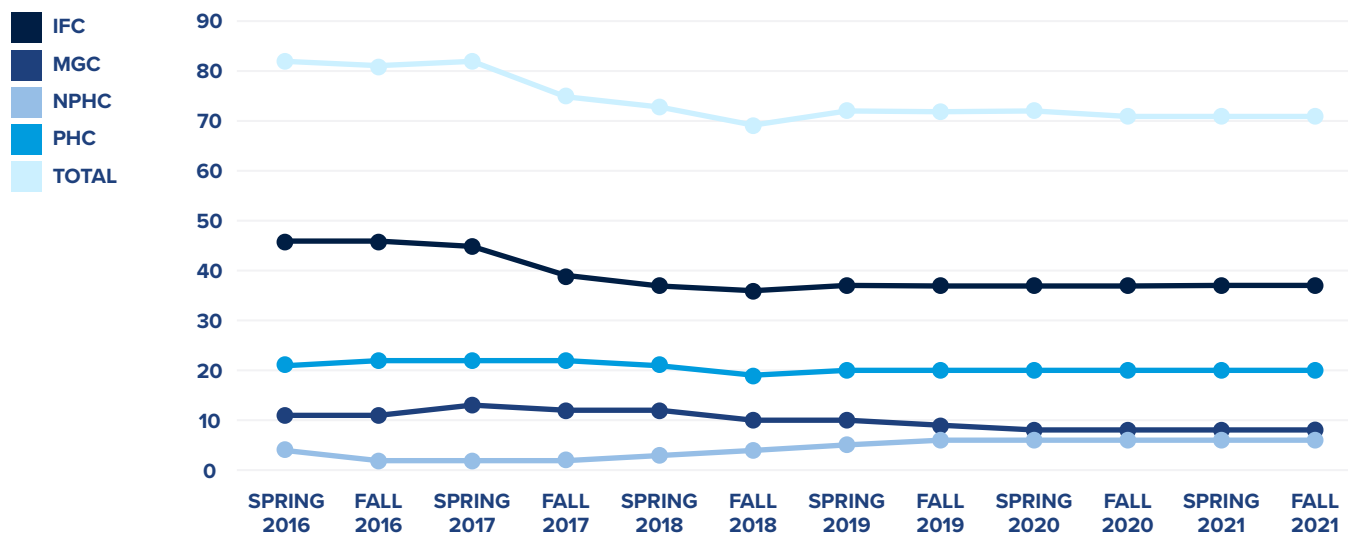
Greek GPA v. All Student GPA

Fraternity and sorority member GPAs have risen in comparison to the overall university GPA since the implementation of the 2017 New Measures. This could be an indication that deferred recruitment is having the desired and anticipated effect of ensuring that students are more prepared academically prior to committing to joining an organization. Alternatively, organizations may be more selective in their recruitment of new members.

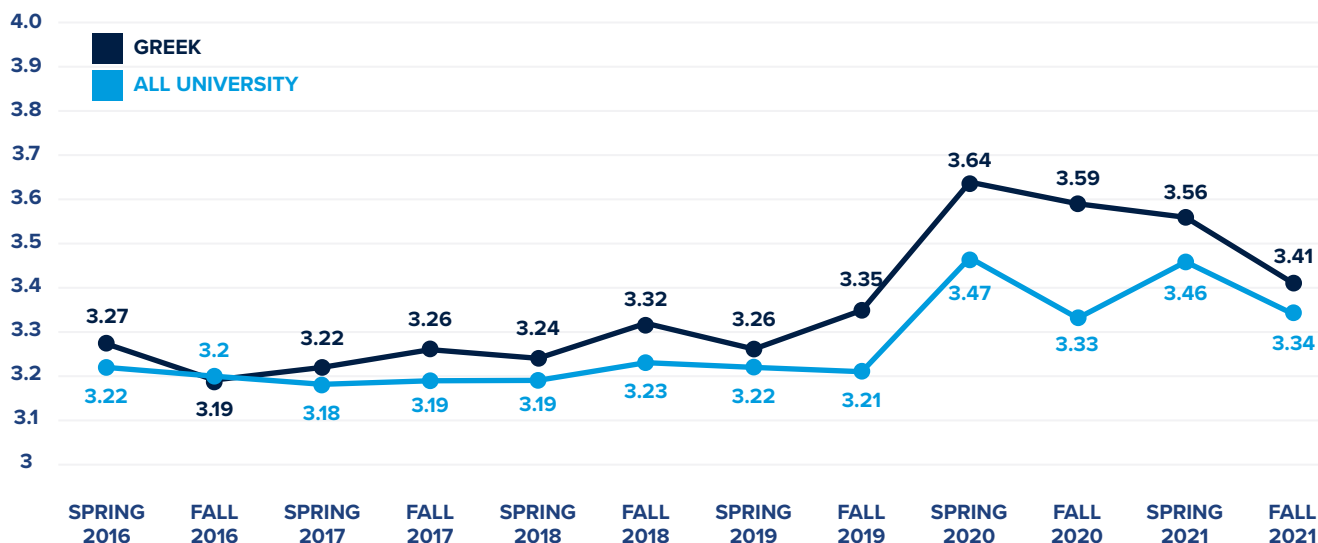


Membership by Council

Membership trends, not surprisingly, follow a similar pattern to chapter numbers, though there is more variability within PHC despite the number of chapters remaining stable over this time period.

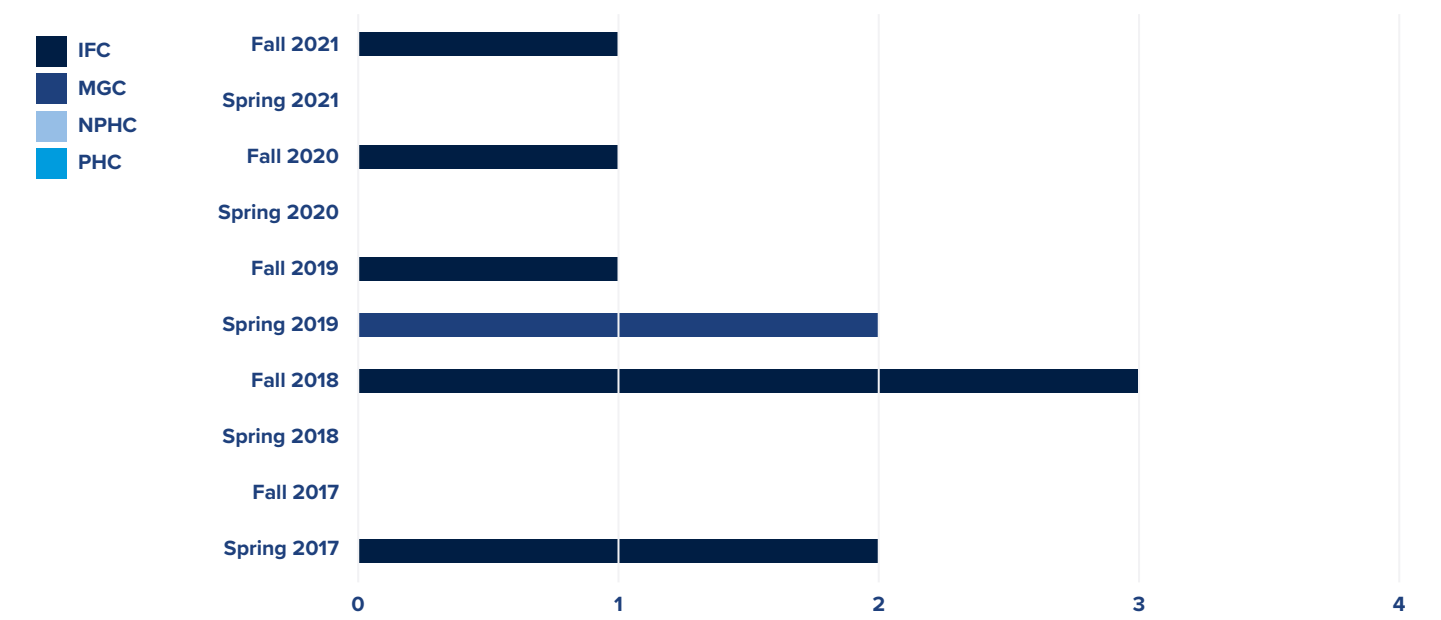


New Member Trends



Organizational Hazing Violations

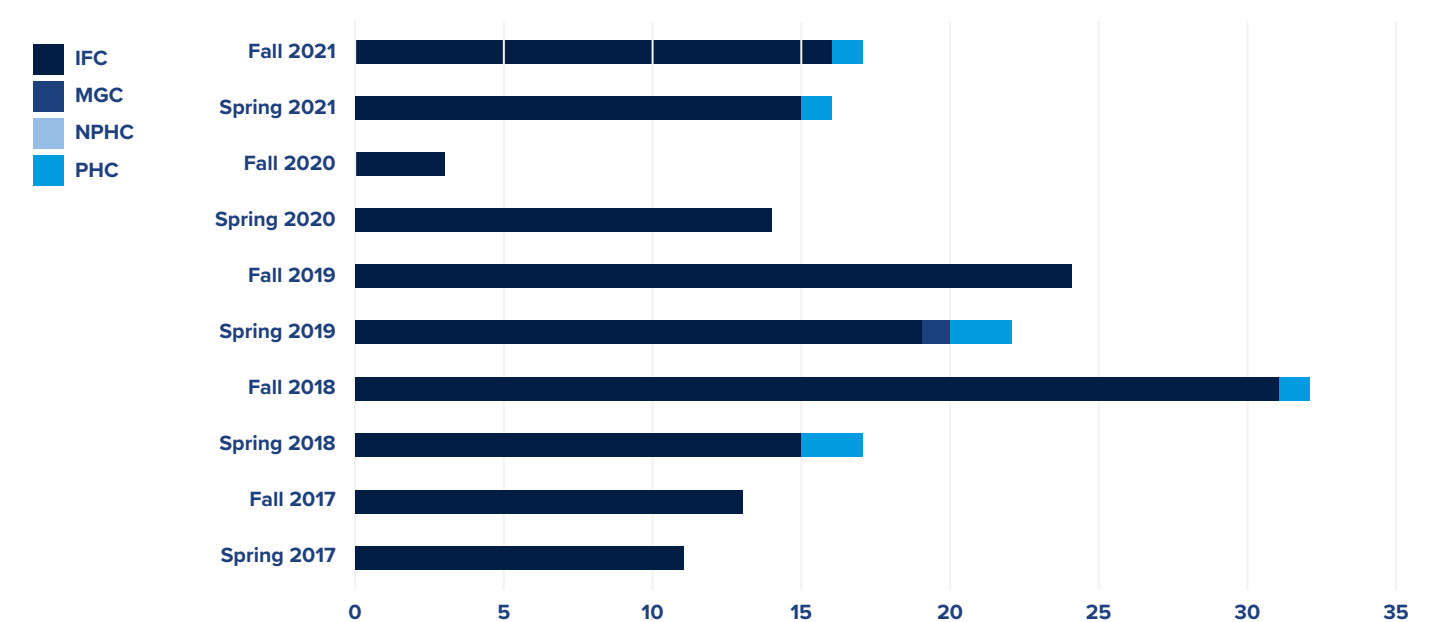
Of the 10 organizational hazing violations since 2017, 8 have been committed by IFC organizations and 2 have been found among MGC organizations.



Other Organizational Violations

Among other, non-hazing violations, the vast majority have been committed by IFC organizations with a handful found among PHC and MGC organizations. NPHC chapters have not had any organizational conduct violations since 2017.

While the number of IFC organizations could partially account for the disparity in organizational violations, it does not explain why IFC organizations account for 95% of all organizational violations within the fraternity and sorority community.





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