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Bölcsészettudományi Kar

# ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*Amerikai Excepcionalizmus a Felsőoktatás Kontextusában:  
A Görög Élet Kultúrája*

*American Exceptionalism in the Context of Higher  
Education: The Culture of Greek Life*

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A HKR 346. § ad 76. § (4) c) pontja értelmében: „... A szakdolgozathoz csatolni kell egy nyilatkozatot arról, hogy a munka a hallgató saját szellemi terméke...”

### EREDETISÉGI NYILATKOZAT

Alulírott **Molnár Elizabet** ezennel kijelentem és aláírással megerősítem, hogy az ELTE BTK **Anglisztika** alapszak **Amerikanisztika** szakirányán írt *American Exceptionalism in the Context of Higher Education: The Culture of Greek Life* című szakdolgozatom saját szellemi termékem, melyet korábban más szakon még nem nyújtottam be szakdolgozatként/záródolgozatként és amelybe mások munkáját (könyv, tanulmány, kézirat, internetes forrás, személyes közlés stb.) idézőjel és pontos hivatkozások nélkül nem építettem be.

Budapest, 2025.03.17.

Molnár Elizabet s.k.

aláírás

## Table of contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. The Fraternal System and its Defining Characteristics.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Initiation Rituals and Oath of Secrecy.....	3
Chapter-Houses.....	4
Membership and Recruitment.....	5
Social Benefits.....	6
<b>1.1 European College Organizations.....</b>	<b>7</b>
German Fencing.....	7
UK University Societies.....	8
<b>2. The Appeal of Greek Life.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Advertising an Identity.....	9
The College Experience.....	11
<b>3. The Issue of Loneliness.....</b>	<b>13</b>
Understanding Loneliness.....	14
The Death of Real-Life Social Connection.....	16
The Role of Fraternities and Sororities.....	19
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>23</b>

## **Introduction**

"Love of wisdom, the guide of life" is the Greek motto of the group of students who established the first Greek-letter organization on December 5, 1776. The secret debating society began at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. It was given the name Phi Beta Kappa, due to the first initials of the Greek motto. For the first 50 years of its existence, the organization was considered a social group and only grew to become a scholastic honor society in the 1820s. Phi Beta Kappa was unequivocally the foundation for hallmarks of present-day Greek life, or most commonly known as fraternities and sororities; it was able to create a system that is uniquely American (Barber et al.). Despite centuries having passed, Greek life remains a highly relevant part of American college culture to this day. This paper will demonstrate that American fraternities and sororities continue to thrive because young Americans have a greater need for connection and belonging than their European counterparts.

The first section will introduce Greek-letter organizations, and demonstrate their distinctive features. The primary purpose of a fraternity was, and still is to build a strong sense of everlasting brotherhood amongst collegiate men (Clawson). While other Western university organizations may have similar beliefs and practices, fraternities possess certain defining characteristics that set them apart from European institutions; these include, but are not limited to special initiation rituals, fraternity housing, and lifelong membership (Bell). Intense party culture and hazardous hazing practices are also not uncommon traits of Greek life. Both are heavily criticized as they raise serious concerns about safety and ethics within the organizations.

The second section will focus on the relevance and appeal of Greek-letter organizations. Sorority recruitment videos on social media garner millions of views each

year, with thousands of comments stating their eagerness to be part of such organizations. This implies that Greek life is a greatly attractive institution for those in college. Despite America's strong emphasis on individualism, college students do long for a sense of community and belonging. This longing consequently keeps fraternities and sororities alive. Another possible reason behind the appeal of Greek culture is the fact that university students in the U.S. tend to move further away for their studies than their European counterparts. The expectations that follow an independent life away from home, and the desire to build one's own community, could be fulfilled by the opportunities provided by the fraternal system.

The third section will show that the issue of loneliness is a key motivator for joining a fraternity. Loneliness is not restricted to the United States. In fact, it is a rapidly increasing global problem. Nonetheless, recent findings from the American Psychiatric Association indicate that Americans, particularly those aged 18 to 34, do tend to have higher levels of loneliness than young people in other Western countries. The transition from high school to college often leaves young adults with feelings of uncertainty and lack of belonging; the sudden loss of the familiar social network could easily lead to isolation and loneliness. Greek-letter organizations offer support and community during these vulnerable years. Moreover, due to their lifelong membership structure, they may potentially prevent loneliness later in life as well. The need for belonging is especially acute in the United States with individualism being a major part of American culture and identity.

## **1. The Fraternal System and its Defining Characteristics**

From a broad perspective, fraternities and sororities are collegiate clubs built upon the shared values and aspirations of the members. Fraternities are for male students seeking brotherhood, while sororities provide female students with a place to foster sisterhood (McCabe). As the core elements do not differ greatly in fraternities and sororities, this section will focus solely on fraternities as a means of demonstrating the inner workings of Greek life.

The first Greek-letter organization, Phi Beta Kappa, introduced certain characteristics fraternities must possess: “an oath of secrecy, a badge, mottoes in Greek and Latin, a code of laws, an elaborate form of initiation, a seal, and a special handshake” (PBK - History of Phi Beta Kappa). The most significant of these will be discussed in greater detail, along with additional defining attributes.

### **Initiation Rituals and Oath of Secrecy**

Initiation plays a crucial part in the fraternal system. Each organization will have its own secret initiation ritual which is an indication of new members transitioning to full-fledged ones. These members are then entrusted with the secrets of the organization. Although the set details of these ceremonies are treated with secrecy and loyalty, there are certain customs that can be disclosed publicly. For example, they tend to incorporate the dramatic portrayal of narratives from biblical or classical literature, along with the utilization of costumes and robes. Additionally, they include symbolism that is intertwined with the beliefs and historical background of the specific organization (Bell).

Performing these rituals ensures that one is worthy of joining the brotherhood and can become an equal member in the organization (Clawson). The ritualistic activities are

generally harmless, however, the complete initiation process is often accompanied by dangerous hazing practices. Practices such as excessive alcohol consumption, sleep deprivation, humiliation, and sexual acts are regarded as the most common forms of hazing. New members are willing to participate in these hazardous activities in order to be fully accepted into a fraternity (Allan and Madden). According to researcher and professor Hank Nuwer, at least one hazing-related death has occurred every year since 1959 up until 2021, with 76% of these being within fraternities.

## **Chapter-Houses**

Chapter-houses are a staple in the fraternal system. Chapters, which are local groups of the larger national organization, have their own houses or housing areas in which members live and work together. As Baird states in his *Manual of American College Fraternities*, chapter-houses have existed ever since the establishment of Greek-letter organizations. Initially they were lodges or temples with boarding rooms, solely for the purpose of holding meetings, or occasionally private theatricals. Then came the time of “complete club houses” with added living spaces and sleeping rooms that could accommodate the members. This model quickly replaced the lodges, and is now the standard practice for fraternity housing. The houses are mostly funded by current and alumni members, as according to Baird, people naturally express more interest in things they have put money and effort into.

On the one hand, chapter house life could prove to be greatly advantageous for those experiencing it. Living together nurtures the brotherhood element of fraternities and promotes mutual helpfulness and understanding between the members. The improvement of social skills is also an important factor, especially in the development of young minds. On the other hand, it is an expensive lifestyle mostly for the privileged, and it gives a rise to exclusiveness. Members may become secluded, narrow, and arrogant in such an environment (Baird).



## **Membership and Recruitment**

The process of membership and recruitment in Greek-letter organizations is another factor that sets the fraternal system apart. In the initial stages, fraternity membership was granted strictly to senior students, but the growing rivalry for quality candidates opened the gate for junior men and lower (Baird). Grade was not the only restriction fraternities started out with; Greek life is historically the society of white protestant men. As a response to the discrimination, women established sororities, and black students created their own black greek-letter organizations (Clark). Today, every individual has an equal opportunity to join the fraternity of their choice, regardless of race, religion or social background. However, despite the limitations being lifted, white members remain the majority in both fraternities and sororities (McCready et al.).

Fraternity recruitment consists of four steps: rush week, bidding, pledging, and lastly initiation. During the first week of each semester fraternities have four days to set tables on campus and gather interest for the following rush week. As tabling ends a banquet is held where organizations showcase their rush videos. These videos supply an overview about the values and beliefs of the specific fraternity. Rush week itself is an eight-day period after the banquet, in which fraternities organize different kinds of social events to attract potential new members. Then these potential new members, or rushees, will receive “bids” from the fraternities, which they can accept or decline. Those who accept the offer can begin the pledge process. The pledging acts as a training, this is where new members acquire most of their knowledge about the history, values, and expectations of their chosen organizations (Silas). Lastly, successfully completing the pledge process leads to the aforementioned initiation ceremonies. It is important to note that once someone becomes a member, they are members for life and are given the alumni title after graduation.

## **Social Benefits**

Fraternities can offer a variety of social benefits to their members. In the words of Judy Reynolds, an instructor at the University of Oklahoma, “A college fraternity is the very place where thousands of young men learn to become adults.”. Thus, these organizations are capable of bestowing necessary life skills upon college men; qualities such as adequate communication skills, efficient cooperation, and taking responsibility. Membership in a fraternity encourages comradeship, creates a sense of belonging, and could lead to lifelong relationships and support systems (Asel et al.). Socialization such as this is especially vital for university students because it helps them navigate through both academic and personal challenges during this uncertain period.

Moreover, fraternities often engage in philanthropic activities and community service events to enhance the members’ social responsibility. This is beneficial for not only the community, but likewise for the members; organizing these events teaches them a sense of accountability and presents an opportunity to practice leadership skills (Bureau et al.). Through actively participating in a culture of giving back and civic engagement, members can grow as individuals and improve themselves (Jenkins).

Finally, fraternity membership can be of aid in the professional sphere as well. Greek letter organizations allow students to build networks valuable for their post-graduation career advancements. With a competitive job market, connections, internships, and mentorships are indispensable. Employers are more likely to hire applicants with fraternal backgrounds as they are expected to be more productive and social (Popov and Bernhardt). A 2017 study also suggests that fraternity members earn 20.1% more than nonmembers, regardless of academic performance (Mara et al.).

## 1.1 European College Organizations

European countries generally do not tend to have college organizations identical to fraternities and sororities. Most nations in Europe are unfamiliar with the exact concept, or their knowledge stems from Hollywood movies such as *Legally Blonde* or *Animal House*. These movies show a rather skewed perspective and suggest that Greek life is all about drugs and extreme parties. As Alpha Delta Pi member Annie Bystrom said, in the European mind fraternities are usually just ‘Greek letters, red Solo cups, big parties and blacking out from alcohol.’ (Sims). However, there are fraternity-type establishments to be perceived in Europe. Although these institutions may share similar attributes with fraternities and sororities, they are in no way interchangeable with them.

### German Fencing

Germany is home to so-called dueling societies, in which members of student associations practice Mensur i.e., academic fencing. “Mensur” is a Latin term that was used in the 16th century, referring to the distance between fencers. It is worth mentioning that these associations do refer to themselves as fraternities. The duels are carried out by two male members from different fraternities, and are fought with sharp weapons; the modernized rules suggest that the first to draw blood is the victor. Most of the body is covered by protective gear so the attacks are mainly aimed at the vulnerable face area. While there is technically a winner, both participants receive a sense of fulfillment as the facial scars (“bragging scars” or “*Renommierschmiss/Schmiss*” in German) gained from fencing radiate courage and pride. Those with scars are even regarded as more attractive, capable of providing. Mensur claims to be neither a duel nor sport since there are no actual winners or losers. Its main purpose is to build a noble character and personality for the members (McAleer).

## UK University Societies

A more common example of how the majority of European colleges encourage communality are the university societies of the United Kingdom. Unlike fraternities and sororities, UK university societies are not secret societies, they do not provide housing, and they do not require rituals of any sort. The societies rather resemble the structure of clubs as they are mostly based on shared interests and hobbies; the emphasis is on socializing and making friends. The recruitment process is similar to fraternities in the sense that the societies advertise themselves by tabling on campus at the beginning of the semester. However, there is no bidding involved, and people can freely choose which society to join. One can even establish their own society if they manage to recruit enough potential members (Lunn).

There are student associations ("*Studentenvereniging*") in The Netherlands as well, which are nearly identical to the UK ones. However, they share one major similarity with the American fraternity system: An initiation period/ritual is mandatory for certain associations ("Student Associations - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam").

## **2. The Appeal of Greek Life**

There are certain statistics that reflect the prominence of Greek life in North American higher education. According to Cause IQ there are approximately 26,940 fraternities and sororities in the U.S. including both active and inactive chapters. In accordance with the University of Arkansas, the Interfraternity Council (IFC) alone is known to comprise 64 Greek-letter organizations with 5500 chapters on 800 campuses nationwide. In addition, around 750,000 college students are estimated to be members of fraternities and sororities, and over nine million alumni members currently reside in the United States (Barshay). It is clear that Greek life is alive and well and there are numerous factors that contribute to the appeal of these organizations.

### **Advertising an Identity**

With social media becoming an integral part of daily life, it is only natural for fraternities and sororities to take advantage of that as well. In terms of social media apps, TikTok is the perfect platform for Greek organizations to advertise themselves; the app is most visited by U.S. residents, and more than half of the users are under the age of thirty (Duarte).

As rush week approaches, some fraternities and sororities are likely to produce recruitment content. The content attracting the most attention usually involves the members performing elaborate choreographed routines with popular audios playing in the background. For example, the 2022 rush week video of Alpha Phi, University of California has gained 14.8 million views and 2.4 million likes as of 2025. The intention behind these types of videos is to promote the entertaining, vibrant, more carefree side of Greek life. Interestingly enough, the organizations are not the only ones creating content during rush week. Rushees frequently share their own personal experiences about the rush process, along with valuable

tips and practical guides for fellow candidates. All this content falls under the “rushtok” hashtag, which has accumulated 1.3 million posts over the years.

The belonging aspect of fraternities and sororities is also marketed in their social media content. Videos demonstrating peers enjoying themselves, surrounded by their fraternity brothers and sorority sisters generate a sense of longing. For an individual to thrive, belonging is essential. U.S. citizens who feel as if they belong have better physical and mental health and they perform better at workplaces. They are also more open to change and diversity and tend to be overall more content with life. Despite this, in 2024, 68% of Americans reported that they feel out of place in their country, 64% in the workplace, and 74% in their local communities (Argo and Sheikh). The transition to college is a stressful experience for many. After graduating high school many students face uncertainty and solitude, coupled with worry about the future. According to a survey conducted by Appily, almost 50% of the surveyed high school students felt increased anxiety about attending college, with 28% even considering delaying enrollment. The community and support system Greek life offers could ease these concerns by creating an environment in which students foster a strong sense of belonging.

The most recent data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) shows that the average number of working hours per week in the U.S. was 38.0 in 2024. In contrast, working hours were all shorter in European countries like Sweden (35.3), Germany (34.2), and the United Kingdom (35.9). Hustle culture in America endorses the idea that working extremely hard and constantly being productive is the only way to truly succeed in life. This can often mean sacrificing mental and physical health in order to prioritize generating wealth and status. According to a 2024 study, this behavior often begins in high school with students not having any leisure time due to several extracurricular activities. Majority of students do all these activities in hopes of getting admission into prestigious universities, and with that

secure success later in life (Jindal et al.). Fraternities and sororities can use this yearning for success as a selling point, as they seemingly breed leaders and highly successful people. As of today, 18 U.S. presidents have been affiliated with Greek letter organizations. Furthermore, between 1910 and 2014, 85% of U.S. Supreme Court Justices have been fraternity members. The list of famous fraternity alumni extends to all walks of life, not just politics. There are numerous American athletes, actors, authors, and businessmen in association with Greek organizations (Hagerty; Konnikova). Although being involved with Greek life does not ultimately guarantee success, the sheer amount of influential people with fraternal backgrounds is an attractive element that could convince one to join.

### **The College Experience**

There is a common sentiment that college is supposed to be the best time of one's life. It is ideally a period of self exploration, filled with new opportunities, freedom, and independence. Growing up, American college themed media plants certain ideas into the minds of young individuals about how university life will be. These include exaggerated, mostly glamorized depictions of actual college culture. While American young adults are able to differentiate between fiction and reality, they still often begin university with the expectation of having the full "promised" college experience (Clinton). Fraternities and sororities fit perfectly into this promised picture as they appear in most, if not all American college movies. Expectations regarding university are of course present amongst European students as well. However, they are prone to be less engaged with campus life due to various cultural differences. Subsequently, they may have a less idealized perspective on university life.

One considerable difference between American and European college culture is on the subject of housing. In the U.S., university students are provided with housing options in

forms of residence halls and dormitories. These dormitories, or more commonly dorms, are student apartment buildings located on, or nearby the campus. The dorms are usually gendered or divided by grade, resulting in freshman-only dorms for example. Usually, the students share rooms and living spaces, which provides an opportunity for socializing and building a close-knit community. As opposed to this, European students prefer to live in rented flats or commute from home if possible. They can opt for dorms as well, as they do exist, but these buildings are not necessarily on campus or even near the institution. Therefore, Americans may spend significantly more time on campus engaging with their peers. This way college becomes more of a lifestyle rather than just classes to attend; these circumstances motivate students to form their social circles through the advantages of a college campus—one being Greek life

Distance is also a major contributor to the dissimilar outlooks on college. Moving to a different city to pursue the best higher education is common both in Europe and America. For many it is even a tradition, signalling the start of adulthood, change, and independence. In a country as sizable as the United States, moving for college could indicate a distance of more than a thousand miles. A 2021 study found that the thousand mile mark occurs mostly in the case of prestigious universities like California Institute of Technology, MIT, or Stanford. For Ivy League colleges such as Yale or Harvard, the distance traveled is around a mean 900 miles. On average, an American student travels 293 miles in order to attend one of the top 200 colleges (Kupriyanov). In contrast, in the United Kingdom, the furthest that students moved on average was 178 miles in 2024 (Oxford Business College). A greater distance may not allow for frequent home visits, resulting in increased feelings of homesickness. Research suggests that 94% of American college students experience homesickness in the first semester, and later occasionally throughout their studies. Anxiety about the new environment and struggle to adjust to an independent life intensify these feelings (English et al.)



Living alone far from home as a student is difficult. It does not only entail separating from family and gaining independence; it also means losing familiarity. One has to adapt to a completely new situation and figure out how to function on their own in an unknown environment. Beyond the emotional challenges, students must also learn to manage daily responsibilities such as budgeting, cooking, and maintaining a balanced lifestyle, which can be overwhelming without prior experience. However, the most tasking part is usually socializing and building a strong social circle. Americans are generally friendly and open people, yet friendliness does not necessarily equate to the intent on being actual friends. It may be easy to acquire surface-level acquaintances but they will not be able to provide adequate mental support during tougher periods. Students require stability in their lives, a community they can rely on to guide them through the hardships. Greek life offers a structured system that helps with adjusting to the new conditions. They manage this not only by fostering friendships but also by providing guidance in navigating the many challenges of independent living.

### **3. The Issue of Loneliness**

As the novelist Charles Bukowski once wrote, “Being alone never felt right. Sometimes it felt good, but it never felt right.”. This sentiment is certainly one U.S. citizens are able to identify with; loneliness has become a growing concern in American society. According to 2021 research conducted by Cigna and Morning Consult, 58% of Americans can be considered lonely. U.S. Surgeon General Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy identified loneliness as a public health epidemic in May 2023, and issued an advisory titled *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* with the aim of effectively combating the issue (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health). The advisory highlights the profound impact of social

disconnection on both mental and physical health, emphasizing the importance of fostering meaningful social connections.

### **Understanding Loneliness**

Dr. Daniel Knopfmacher, Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, states that loneliness is not fundamentally abnormal, “It’s the distressing feelings we have when we have fewer social connections than we want and need. Being lonely is different from being alone, which might not be a bad thing.” - he says. Periods of solitude are necessary for personal growth, self-reflection, and independence. However, since human beings are social creatures, they crave connection. When there is an extensive, constant state of aloneness, it becomes destructive.

It has been observed that individuals with social deficits have a subjectively and objectively higher rate of mortality, regardless of the cause of death. These social deficits include poor-quality relationships, social isolation, and of course, loneliness. Major risk factors, such as smoking, consuming alcohol, obesity, physical inactivity, and air pollution, were all found to be either equally, or in some instances less dangerous for one’s mortality than loneliness (Holt-Lunstad et al.). Substantial evidence suggests that those without proper social support have significantly higher chances of cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes. In addition, chronic loneliness puts older adults at a 50% increased chance of developing dementia, and a 20% acceleration in terms of cognitive decline. Depression and anxiety are also commonly associated with the experience of loneliness, which in extreme cases can lead to suicidal behavior. While there are countless contributors that could cause someone to attempt suicide, years of research has shown that lack of social connection can be directly linked to deaths caused by suicide (Murthy).

The question of loneliness is not a new problem, but in the 1960's and 1970's, it became a topic of major concern. This led to the development of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, which is a tool used in research on loneliness to this day. The scale, and other studies during that time, approached the problem with a formalistic outlook that drew a direct correlation between the degree of social support and connectedness, and experiencing loneliness. This strategy, while sensible, is not exactly perfect, as individuals with stable social circles and considerable amounts of connections, i.e., spouses, friends and family, colleagues or neighbors, still can struggle with loneliness. On that account, it is seemingly more the quality of relationships that matter, rather than their quantity (Franklin).

Loneliness affects everyone, it is not exclusive to any one age, gender, or nation for that matter. However, recent research published by the American Psychological Association (APA) does suggest that American individuals do in fact suffer from higher rates of loneliness than their European counterparts. The research examined adults from the U.S. and 13 European countries; participants from the States reported significantly higher levels of loneliness than those in the West. Within the U.S. there are certain groups which suffer greater degrees of loneliness according to the APA 2024 Healthy Minds Monthly Poll. Out of the 2,200 American adults questioned, 30% of those aged between 18-34 went on to say that they are lonely either every single day or at least several times a week. This shows that the typical university-age demographic is heavily affected. The definition of loneliness they used for the poll was “feeling like you do not have meaningful or close relationships or a sense of belonging.”

When left unaddressed, prolonged loneliness can lead to a sense of isolation and with that a loss of social identity. Meaningful social connections are key elements in public well-being, health, and safety and if one is unable to form these social connections they may feel alienated from their peers and society as a whole (Malli et al.). This alienation results in

an even deeper sense of disconnection creating a vicious cycle of loneliness. The American cultural emphasis on individualism may amplify this issue. The U.S. has long championed a culture of self-reliance and independence, prioritizing the unique individual identity often at the expense of community-oriented values. Personal gain and achievements have become more important than collective success (Weissbourd and Murphy). The shift in priorities is present in how children are being raised as well. Research shows that American teenagers tend to value personal success and happiness over compassion for others, with the belief that these teachings are very prominent in their upbringings. They also believe that good grades make their parents prouder than if they were caring for the community (Cashin). Such a disregard for collective values makes it difficult to admit feelings of loneliness, seek the necessary help, and build social connections.

### **The Death of Real-Life Social Connection**

As political scientist Robert D. Putnam documented in his famous 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, community and togetherness is gradually fading away in American society. The book focuses on the empirical decline of social capital in the second half of the twentieth century. Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”. Seven separate measures of social capital are examined in the book, including: political participation, civic participation, religious participation, workplace networks, informal networks, altruism, and mutual integrity. Putnam found that all fields suffered a significant loss of engagement since the 1970’s largely because of generational differences, urban spread, pressures of time and money, and lastly the television. In 1995, almost 40% of an average American’s leisure time was occupied with watching television, with no particular program in mind. Television sets kept people at home with their families, which at first was an opportunity for family bonding.

However, as the number of TV sets multiplied in households, watching alone became more common. Today, it seems that Americans watch less live television but are more engaged with another technology discussed in Putnam's *Bowling Alone*—the internet (Fitzgerald).

Despite tools like cell phones and social media, forming and maintaining connection seems to be rather difficult. A recent survey by Harmony Healthcare IT found that the daily screen time of an average American is 4 hours and 37 minutes, without the consideration of screens other than phones. While these devices were designed as a means of communication, only 38% of American people use it for such, and the vast majority (70%) utilizes it for entertainment purposes—primarily social media. Social media in itself is not inherently isolating, hence the term “social”. In fact, digital platforms can provide an opportunity for people of all kinds to find each other, form sincere relationships, and build their own community. However, a 2023 study shows that excessive usage of social media is linked to higher levels of loneliness. When lonely, Americans tend to treat social media as a form of distraction, and not as something capable of ending solitude. Encountering other people's success and joy while scrolling, further intensifies negative emotions, such as envy and resentment, leading to an even deeper state of loneliness (Bonsaksen et al.). Users of all ages can be found on social media but a 2024 report from Pew Research Center highlights the 18-29 demographic as the largest user base for several platforms. As these young individuals strengthen their online presence they could simultaneously reduce their face-to-face connection with the world. The lack of healthy, real-life engagement with peers can result in intense feelings of anxiety, isolation, and depression (Plesset). The social benefits of the Internet have been questioned since its early days by Putnam himself; he theorized whether “virtual communities” will replace the ones in real life, or rather they can act as aids in keeping face-to-face contact alive. The latter is achieved only when online communication is not treated as a substitute for, but as a complement to real-life relationships. For many

COVID-19 was a turning point in understanding how much face-to-face contact really means. In the words of Robert D. Putnam “everybody in America realized that hugging Grandma was not the same thing as actually seeing Grandma over Zoom. And it isn’t” (Kennedy and King).

Although loneliness has been a threat to public health long before COVID-19, the pandemic worsened the problem of social alienation. The isolation from quarantine and social distancing accelerated the already present feelings of loneliness in many (Jabbari et al.). In the case of U.S. citizens, in accordance with a 2019 YouGov survey, 21% of adults reported experiencing loneliness “always” or “often”. This number rose to 26% at the very beginning of the pandemic. In 2021 U.S. adults were asked again regarding their status on loneliness, and 35% of those asked, answered they have felt lonelier during the quarantine, blaming the amount of real life interaction they could have with others, or rather the lack thereof (Ballard). Dr. Eric Storch, professor and vice chair in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, also expressed concerns about online schooling and its consequences on the youth. He believes that these children lost crucial opportunities in learning how to effectively socialize with their peers and teachers. Most of these children will be able to adjust appropriately with minimal difficulty, but those who were struggling with socialization to begin with, might become even furtherly disadvantaged. Moreover, the pandemic has changed how adults treat socialization as well; research suggests that communicating online has become the preferred method of everyday interaction. Being in the seclusion of online platforms with solely like-minded individuals during the pandemic, made real life social environments more confrontational, and with that, difficult and less comfortable. Many people act friendlier online and they feel they can be more open and themselves. While virtual communication is still a legitimate form of socializing, it often

does not offer the same satisfactory connection as real life relationships would (Chiu; Morahan-Martin and Schumacher).

Another factor contributing to lessening social connection is the disappearance of so-called “third places”, a term coined by American urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, in his book *The Great Good Place* (1989). Oldenburg explains that a well balanced life should include three essential social spaces. The first place is home, a safe and stable setting, critical in one’s personal development. The second place is the workplace or educational setting, where a person is productive, motivated, and learns how to navigate competition. Lastly, the third place, which is meant to be an environment of public gatherings, completely separate from work and home. It should be a stress-free communal space designed to meet and interact with others, without large financial expenses. In theory, examples of traditional third places include facilities such as cafes, parks, malls, bars, bookstores, and hair salons. However, it seems as if these facilities are not able to fulfill their roles as third places anymore. With costs increasing in all areas of life, people are discouraged from freely enjoying these communal spaces. Most coffee shops and bars only allow the paying customers to linger around, taking away the opportunity of socializing from those who do not want to, or simply cannot afford to make continuous purchases. Furthermore, while malls and retail stores once served as social hubs, nowadays online shopping is widely favored over leaving the comfort of the house; stripping away the social aspects of shopping (Morman). With third places becoming less accessible, people have fewer opportunities to engage in organic, face-to-face communication.

### **The Role of Fraternities and Sororities**

For a lot of young adults, the college experience is the first time being separated from home. Students seek community, support, and connection during this major transitional

period. A 2023 YouGov survey indicates that one of the primary reasons a student joins a Greek letter organization is to make friends and establish lasting relationships. In the survey 65% chose friendship as a main motivator for joining a fraternity, and even more (75%) in the case of sororities. Campus involvement was also a popular reason, with almost 50% in both cases. These statistics reinforce the idea that loneliness and lack of belonging significantly influence the decision to join a Greek organization. The structure of fraternities and sororities ensure that these young people have access to consistent social opportunities and connection.

Greek life plays a crucial part in fostering community, providing an environment where young people can forge strong bonds with their peers. Since fraternity memberships are for a lifetime, they could prove to be an effective method of preventing, or at the least lessening middle-age loneliness by creating a sense of belonging early in life. Even after graduation, alumni members often rely on their organizations for professional advancements and social support.

Fraternities and sororities offer a stable system in which members are respected and surrounded by people with similar values. The traditions, rituals, philanthropic activities, and shared experiences unique to these organizations help members to develop a personal and social identity. For many, their fraternity or sorority membership becomes an integral part of who they are as a person. Finding a secure identity and being able to fill a role in society can help with feelings of loneliness and isolation.

With loneliness on a rise, it has become more important than ever to preserve these institutions that nurture community and sense of belonging. In such an individualistic nation as the U.S., it is vital to remember that there are reliable organizations offering social support. With face-to-face interactions and third places being on the decline, Greek life serves as one of the few remaining methods young people can use to socialize and form meaningful



connections. Their ability to combat loneliness may be why fraternities and sororities remain a vital component of the American college experience.

## **Conclusion**

Fraternities and sororities are undoubtedly strong examples of American exceptionalism. While organizations of similar nature can be found in European colleges, the distinctive traditions, beliefs, and benefits surrounding Greek Life create a system truly unique to American higher education. Joining a Greek letter organization could be rewarding for those young Americans wanting to live through the independent college experience that is so often portrayed in movies. As loneliness increases, especially amongst young individuals in the states, community building early in life is vital. Because of the isolating effect of social media and the rapidly disappearing third spaces, opportunities to organically socialize have lessened significantly. The existence of institutions such as fraternities and sororities provide major aid in the upkeep of genuine social connection.

With loneliness being a global issue, fraternities and sororities spreading to other nations would not be too unrealistic in theory. However, it is highly unlikely that European countries for example would implement the fraternal system into higher education. Introducing a completely unfamiliar concept to already established university cultures would be difficult, if not impossible. Certain elements may be borrowed but Greek Life as a whole will most likely remain an exclusively American tradition.

Although it is a deeply ingrained part of U.S. college culture and history, Greek Life is not immune to change—it cannot be. Diversity in America will keep increasing and with that the pressure of inclusivity regarding race, gender identity, and socioeconomic background will grow for fraternities and sororities. Students may prefer less traditional chapters that are co-ed or multicultural, which might cause these organizations to restructure

and evolve in order to keep their appeal and relevance. If fraternities and sororities are able to adapt to a changing society, they will likely persist in the future of American higher education.

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