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# The Tap: An Examination of the Controversy of Secret Societies on College Campuses

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The Tap: An Examination of the Controversy of Secret Societies on College Campuses

by

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## Abstract

Secret societies on college campuses have enjoyed prestige and influence since the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776. Some, like Skull and Bones at Yale University, appear to do their members a great service by connecting them to a network of successful alumni. Others, like the Machine at the University of Alabama, have been accused of crime and discrimination. This study serves to examine what impact these groups have on their members and the surrounding community. It also explores the concept of formalized secrecy within the democratic realm of higher education. This is achieved through historical study of three groups, Skull and Bones, the Machine, and a third unnamed secret society active on a public, doctoral-level research institution in the South. Interviews with members of this Third Society and individuals who were tapped and elected not to join the society are reported upon to provide first hand experiences. The data are analyzed using the sociological lens provided by grandfather of secrecy literature, Georg Simmel, as well as the student development theories penned by Clark, Trow, and Perry. Interviews found that individuals' reasons for either joining or not joining the secret society cannot be explained by difference in college student subculture or moral development. Criteria for evaluating the risk of secret societies are presented, as well as a discussion about the values defining the democratic values of higher education and their alignment or non-alignment with the secret society system.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“There have been secret organizations in the past; there are at present; there will be in the future” (Boutwell, 1928, p. 1). We can only speculate as to whether University of Alabama student body president Albert Boutwell knew his statement would still be relevant nearly ninety years in the future when he wrote these words in an open letter to Alabama’s student newspaper, *The Crimson White*, in 1928. Nevertheless, secret societies continue to flourish on college campuses across the country in various forms and for various purposes. An rudimentary Google search provides a Wikipedia article naming as many as 94 societies at 48 higher education institutions in the United States (“Collegiate Secret Societies in North America,” 2015). This only scratches the surface of the number and depth of these organizations represented across the country.

A collegiate secret society refers to an intentional, persistent social network of students and alumni whose activities (Erickson, 1981), purposes, and sometimes membership (“Secret society”, 2013) are revealed only to those who belong. Entrance to such organizations is by invitation only, as opposed to by free choice by any interested party. Therefore, they maintain an inherent exclusionary quality (Graebner, 1987). These groups are characterized by a profound confidence among members that secret proceedings will be fiercely guarded from those outside the group (Hazelrigg, 1969). What these purposes and activities are and who is tapped for such secret distinction differ from society to society. However, in all such organizations, the secret element is the core

feature. The way in which the group chooses to organize itself is secondary. When characterizing secret organizations, it is important to note the more complex the organization, the more impact the secret has on both the members of the organization and those outside of it (Simmel, 1906).

Gist (1938) posits secret societies can be logically categorized by their fundamental functions. According to his classification system, societies found on college campuses fall into either the “collegiate ‘social’ and recreational societies” category or the “honor society” category depending on the mission of the particular group. Both of these classifications fall under the fraternal constellation. The membership selection process is what defines this constellation of secret societies. Fraternal secret societies admit members based on their achievements in society (Gist, 2009). For collegiate groups this can include accomplishments such as academic excellence, student leadership, or affiliation in other prestigious groups. It is not uncommon for these groups to value family legacy, including both blood and marriage ties (Gist, 2009).

Secret societies in the collegiate setting may be better described as semi-secret, as the greater campus community realizes their presence (Simmel, 2009). However, societies on American campuses demonstrate a range of self-disclosure. Some groups proudly announce their presence on college campuses by hosting campus events and wearing distinctive insignia, such as jackets or pins. In other cases, provisional members are sworn to silence about their selection until they have completed their apprenticeship and received full admittance. The most guarded are the groups that attempt to conceal their existence entirely.

## **Purpose of Study**

Secret societies at higher education institutions have inspired intrigue since the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776. Since that time, a range of secret societies has cropped up at schools across the country. Despite the emphasis on equity and democracy within the realm of higher education, these exclusive groups continue to appear to enjoy elite privileges and power. Some, like Skull and Bones at Yale University, have provided significant benefits to its members by connecting collegians with their distinguished alumni. Others, such as the Machine at the University of Alabama, have demonstrated a threat to the democracy and goals of their institutions, as well as the physical safety of their schools' students.

This study examines what place formalized secrecy holds within modern higher education institutions by exploring the controversy surrounding one particular secret society. The secret organization will be referred to only as the Third Society. It is housed at a public, doctoral level research institution in the South.

## **Implications for Higher Education Administrators**

“Out of this secrecy, which throws a shadow over all that is deep and significant, grows the logically fallacious, but typical, error, that everything secret is something essential and significant” (Simmel, 1906, p. 465). Secret societies generate intrigue and are an interesting topic on which to speculate. However, beyond the inherent fascination, what implications do they have for the work of student affairs professionals?

It is the responsibility of university administration to protect the rights and support the development of all students. Secret societies are dispelled from the category of harmlessly interesting when a minority group damages the democratic nature of the

university system, makes other students feel unsafe, or seeks to rally against university aims. Examples of each of these three threats posed by secret societies will be explored in detail.

### **Threat to Democracy**

Higher education in the US has a duty to deliver on America's promise of democracy. This goes beyond recruiting underrepresented students, to ensuring these students are provided experiences that are inclusive and equitable (Gutiérrez, 2011). Democratic campus cultures affirm diversity and empower all students to take advantage of the unique enrichment experiences college has to offer. They are characterized by equity, transparency, fair play, accountability and freedom of inquiry. The term equity refers to proportional representation. Inequitable situations can be identified when historically dominant groups are overrepresented in systems of high value, such as leadership positions (Witham, Malcolm-Piqueux, Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

An example of an area of student culture that is often inequitable is student government. At the University of Alabama, the vast majority of student government positions are held by Greek Machine-backed students. Approximately 24% of students at the University of Alabama belong to Greek-letter organizations. These students are overwhelmingly white and come from privileged backgrounds (Soldner, 2014). It is inequitable that 24% of students should dominate access to a student experience that all students should have access to through fair play. Further discussion about the Machine will outline the avenues through which this small portion of privileged students creates barriers for other students' involvement.

In “The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies,” Simmel (1906) states “democracies are bound to...the fundamental idea that each should be informed about all the relationships and occurrences with which he is concerned” (p. 469). This relates to the democratic value of transparency and implies all students should be privy to all conversations in which the results will affect them. However, powerful secret societies, like the Machine, have concealed meaningful discussion on topics such as student government budget spending from the greater student population and, consequently, manipulated student politics. Student government associations decide how student budgets are spent. At the University of Alabama, the decisions on important SGA issues are reportedly agreed upon privately before the public meeting without the input of the majority population.

In an article published in *Esquire*, Weiss (1992) described his experience at an Alabama SGA budget meeting where an offbeat fantasy games club came forward to ask the student government for programming funds. The senators responded with derision and did not grant the team the money. Weiss (1992) reported,

It seems mean. There isn't much thought for whether anyone else on campus might enjoy the club. It's obvious that these senators are used to getting their way, and just as obvious that their air of entitlement intimidates other students on campus. (p. 2)

This “government by clique,” characterized by conspiracy and organized elitism, limits the democratic values of higher education (Graebner, 1987, p. 415). These cliques are difficult to hold accountable because of the veil of secrecy they

attempt to conceal themselves with, exacerbating the problem. It is impossible, thus to inquire freely, as is customary in democratic environments.

### **Threat to Safety**

All students have the right to feel safe and protected at their college or university. Emily Aviki did not feel safe at the University of Alabama after she chose to pursue a student senate seat without the approval of the Machine. She endured intense harassment from her peers. Ultimately, even after winning her seat, she decided she had endured enough and transferred to another institution (Beadle, 2004).

Senior Associate Vice President of Student Affairs at the University of Alabama, Kathleen Cramer, described Emily as “without question one of the most outstanding students our campus has ever known” (Beadle, 2004, p. 1). Not only is it wrong that Aviki was so threatened she decided she must leave, it is a detriment to the university to lose an exceptional student. It is the responsibility of the administration to ensure the physical and psychological safety of its population. Further, for the institution to continue to progress, it must recruit and retain high achieving students. When a student like Aviki is lost in this way, a disservice is done both to the student and the institution.

### **Threat to Institutional Goals**

In the age of McCarthyism, secret societies on high school campuses were targeted for removal because administrations feared they might counter school officials’ attempts to rally the loyalty of the student body. While this fear was likely exacerbated by the Red Scare, the concern has been realized by the administration at the University of Alabama (Graebner, 1987). In 1992, University administration designed a plan to force integration in the fraternity and sorority system through a student organization

accreditation plan. Machine leaders quietly gathered Greek leaders to organize resistance. Despite this subversive activity, Greek alumni of the University of Alabama expressed disappointment in the Machine for not handling the situation before the accreditation plan became public knowledge. Charles McPherson, alumnus of a Machine backed fraternity and father of two Machine affiliated sons at the time, expressed, “I’m real disappointed that the Machine has not taken an aggressive, active stand” (Weiss, 1992, p. 6). While the Machine alumni may have preferred the issue handled sooner, the Machine was successful, as the accreditation plan was not implemented and Greek segregation at the University of Alabama has continued to make headlines for the last decade (Wickham, 2001).

Students have a right to be heard if a university policy does not meet their needs. However, the policy proposed at Alabama would have benefitted the majority population at the University. Further, the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution forbids “state action” supporting any type of discrimination. The University of Alabama provides land and housing to Greek organizations that maintain discriminatory membership selection policies. Wickham (2001) argues that this qualifies as state action. Subversive student minority groups cannot be permitted to impede the University’s progress or inhibit policies serving the greatest population of students.

### **Benefits of Membership**

The legacy and impact of secret societies is not one sided. Research has not been conducted to formally examine the benefits secret societies present to their members. However, a quick glance at a roster of Skull and Bones alumni will demonstrate its success as a networking powerhouse. Bones has groomed countless prominent business

executives, athletes, and politicians, including three United States presidents. It is impossible to calculate conclusive numbers, as official rosters were no longer published after 1970. However, the estimates are impressive considering only fifteen students are initiated each year and only about eight hundred Bonesmen are living at any given time (Robbins, 2002). Skull and Bones has been referred to as the most powerful fraternity in America. Therefore, it appears, secret societies can also generate positive outcomes for students who are affiliated with them.

### **Overview of Study**

Given the simultaneous potential for both benefits and threats to the campus community presented by secret societies, the controversy surrounding these mysterious groups is understandable. This study aspired to examine collegiate secret societies through the lens provided by scholarship on the sociology of secrecy to determine what factors students consider when deciding whether to accept the tap to a secret society and how they make meaning of formalized secrecy in the democratic realm of higher education (Simmel, 1906; Hazelrigg, 1969; Marx & Muschert, 2009).

The research questions explored in this study are:

1. Why do some student leaders choose to join the Third Society while others do not?
2. How does the centrality of secrecy affect how students perceive the Third Society?
3. How does membership or non-membership in the Third Society affect a student's leadership experience?

In order to answer these questions, I interviewed student leaders at the Third Society's university. The sample included members of the secret society and student leaders who declined invitations to the secret society. These leaders came from many areas of student life including student government, Greek life, social justice, and student alumni relations.

In order to justify conclusions drawn from the data collected about a single secret society, this study begins by examining the histories of three distinct American collegiate secret societies demonstrating the range of societies currently present in order to provide context. The first is Skull and Bones at Yale University because it is arguably the most well known and about which the most is speculated. While a popular subject of conspiracy theories, the significant number of alumni who have succeeded publicly in their given fields suggests the society has provided notable benefits to its members. The second is Theta Nu Epsilon, otherwise known as the Machine, at the University of Alabama because of the severe offenses attributed to it.

The final secret society is the Third Society, the focus of this research study. It was selected as a contrast to the Machine because of its level of self-disclosure, self-proclaimed purposes, and effects on the university's campus and as a complement to Skull and Bones because, while controversial, it has attracted good press for the services it has provided to its campus and the public successes of its members. This study was not interested in the secret activities and proceedings of these societies, but how students interpret the secret aspect of the groups and how the societies impact their greater campus communities.

### **Following Chapter**

A review of current literature will be presented in the following chapter. First, the three societies examined in this study will be described in detail. Next, the sociological theories guiding this study will be presented and discussed in relation to collegiate secret societies. Then, relevant student affairs theories will be outlined and applied to collegiate secret society members. Finally, the issue of intervening with secret societies will be explained by presenting historical examples of interventions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter examines the current scholarship on secrecy and secret societies, including the history and legends of Skull and Bones, The Machine, and the Third Society. Scholarship by Simmel (1906), Hazelrigg (1969), and Marx and Muschert (2009) on the concept of secrecy will be outlined and considered in relation to collegiate secret societies. Specifically, this section will look at the definition of secrecy, its purpose, and how it relates to intrigue, power, and controversy. Then, student development theories by Clark and Trow (2001) and Perry (2010) will be discussed in relation to student society members. The chapter will end with a review of historical administrative attempts to intervene with secret societies.

### **The Societies**

There is a dearth of research on the topic of collegiate secret societies. A great deal has been written on secret societies in general, but these articles are typically focused on Masonic groups or criminal societies. While these writings do not speak specifically to the collegiate experience, the hypotheses presented are still relevant when examining collegiate secret societies because the structure and functions of collegiate organizations are very similar to Masonic groups.

Interestingly, because of the way these clandestine groups capture the imagination, several works of fiction have been created centering on these topics, such as *The Lords of Discipline* (1980) and *The Good Shepherd* (2006). One might assume these pieces do not provide any trustworthy material about the details of society history.

Strictly speaking that may be true, however, these works provide unique insights of their own. For example, *The Lords of Discipline* is written by a graduate of the Citadel, the collegiate setting of the book. It is written as fiction and thus not meant to serve as a historical reference. However, it does reflect the genuine attitudes of an insider, despite whatever bias he may carry (Anderson & Thelin, 2012). Further, both works illuminate the intrigue these groups cultivate by their secret nature. During the course of this research, these sources were used to immerse myself in the clandestine feeling of secret societies, so I might be able to approach the topic from the perspective of the general public.

At this time there is no scholarly research examining collegiate secret society members. The closest source is a book written by Yale alumna and Scroll and Key Society member, Alexandra Robbins. Robbins interviewed over one hundred Bonesmen in her book *Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, The Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power* (2002). Other than this popular book, the literature on Skull and Bones, the Machine, and the Third Society is limited to student newspaper articles, media speculation, and campus legend.

Never has a member of Skull and Bones written any type of exposé on the Society. Therefore, at this point in time, available literature cannot be truly relied upon as absolutely the entire story. The current reigning source on Bones is Alexandra Robbins' book. It recounts the history of Skull and Bones and the society system at Yale. It shares all that is known about the organization regarding society activities and formal proceedings. It also discusses famous Bonesmen, highlighting how society connections may have played a role in their successes. Her data come mostly from interviews with

Bonesmen. This book is especially interesting because the author belonged to a secret society at Yale, Scroll and Key, and therefore is able to share the unique knowledge of a relative insider. This book is unparalleled in its breadth and depth of information on Skull and Bones and is the most trustworthy source available because the data come from Bones and Yale alumni. Because it is not written by a Bonesman, however, it cannot be taken as the final word in Skull and Bones history.

Scholarly literature on the Machine does not exist. Therefore, to gather information about the organization I relied entirely on national and regional newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and most of all the University of Alabama student newspaper, *The Crimson White*. Consequently, it is difficult to know if all that is written is truly accurate. However, these newspaper articles, dating as far back as 1928, are highly valuable because they illustrate the feelings and attitudes of students at the University regarding the Machine. In many of the articles, students who have had direct contact with the Machine come forward to share their encounters.

No primary documents are available about the Third Society group, as it is so new and still active. The organization maintains a website where it outlines its purposes. Also, a handful of student newspaper articles have been written about the organization. The information presented is derived from these sources, as well as general campus consensus relayed to me from campus gatekeepers and later confirmed by Third Society members.

### **Skull and Bones**

The Order of Skull and Bones is one of the oldest organizations of its kind. Examination of its history provides an understanding of how the institution of secret societies took hold across the country and presents a model for what such organizations

look like from the inside. Further, it illustrates the intrigue bred by this type of institutionalized secrecy.

The secret Order of Skull and Bones is nearly two hundred years old. It was founded in New Haven, Connecticut at Yale College in 1832 (Robbins, 2002). Each spring, fifteen illustrious juniors are tapped to join the ranks of the nearly eight hundred Bonesmen alive today (Pember, 2007). In a 1977 article in *Esquire*, Rosenbaum stated the mission of Skull and Bones was “converting idle progeny of the ruling class into morally serious leaders of the establishment” (Pember, 2007, p. 10). It is not easy to ignore this bitter reference to elitism due to the privileged alumni who have been inducted. Skull and Bones has been home to nearly a score of the United States’ most prominent families, including Rockefellers, Tafts, Whitneys, Bundys, Harrimans, Lords, Phelps, and of course Bushes (Robbins, 2002).

Legend has it that founder William H. Russell travelled to Europe sometime while he was a student at Yale. While in Germany, he came in contact with a society infatuated with death, said to have been an offshoot of the Illuminati. Inspired by the sinister brotherhood and enraged by the disintegration of his own secret honor society, Phi Beta Kappa, Russell returned to Yale and founded the Order of Skull and Bones with his friend, Alphonso Taft, the future Secretary of War and father of future President William Howard Taft. Since that time, Skull and Bones has supposedly “curled its tentacles into every corner of American society” including Congress, the Supreme Court, the Central Intelligence Agency, Wall Street, and the major press agencies (Robbins, 2002, p. 4). Along with robbing the grave of Apache Chief Geronimo, Bonesmen are said to have masterminded the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the Bay of Pigs, as well as

having ties to Watergate and the Kennedy assassination (Robbins, 2002). These theories have never been supported with hard evidence.

What is known is Russell did take an academic sabbatical to travel in Europe, including Germany, in the early 1830s. Also, in 1831 Anti-Masonic sentiment forced Phi Beta Kappa to strip away its secret aspects (Barron, 2005). With the secrecy, so went the prestige. The same year, controversy surrounding Phi Beta Kappa elections caused Russell and several other members to disassociate. Many Bonesmen claim the organization Russell and his comrades founded afterward was a scholarship group meant to supplement learning in the classroom because they felt the faculty at Yale were substandard. The truth behind the founding of Skull and Bones is likely a combination of all three events (Robbins, 2002).

Today, Skull and Bones is formally known as the Russell Trust Association. Fifteen upperclassmen meet in the Tomb on High Street every Thursday night “to buff one’s character” according to Bones conspiracy theorist, Franklin Foer (2000, p. 43). Many of the proceedings of the Thursday evening meetings are now known. At the beginning of the club’s year, the focus of activities is on bonding. Each member shares a ‘Life History’ depicting the challenges and triumphs leading the Bonesman to where he is today. They also each present a ‘Connubial Bliss,’ in which each member shares with the club the details of all of his sexual and romantic engagements. After these bonding experiences, the group turns its attention to honing debate skills and networking with older Bonesmen. The fundamental purpose of the group is to build a rich web of Yale alumni with whom to network (Robbins, 2002).

It did not take long after the founding of the Order of Skull and Bones for other imitation societies to develop. Scroll and Key and Wolf's Head are the two most notable at Yale. However, such replication did not remain exclusively in New Haven. Prestigious secret groups have cropped up at higher education institutions all over the country (Robbins, 2002).

### **The Machine**

“LITTLE IS KNOWN AND WHAT IS KNOWN IS KEPT SECRET.” So reads the motto of the Machine (Koval, 1983). The Theta Nu Epsilon, commonly referred to as the Machine, colonized Alabama nearly one hundred years ago. TNE is a national organization centered on campus politics. It was created by fraternity men who believed it improper to be seen squabbling for leadership positions in public. These men believed decisions about who would pursue which campus leadership positions should be agreed upon quietly, behind closed doors. This “suprafraternity” viewed itself as a public servant sheltering the community from snobbish behavior by candidates and protecting candidates from disgracing themselves in public. These beliefs became antiquated across the country and died out nearly everywhere, except the University of Alabama (Weiss, 1992).

“It controls life at the University of Alabama, but nobody can see it. Its influence extends to the statehouse, but nobody can touch it. It stinks of corruption, but nobody can smell it. It is, simply, ‘the Machine’” (Weiss, 1992, p. 1). Today, the Machine is a coalition of approximately 24 predominately white sororities and fraternities. This group selects and supports candidates for the student government, the sorority executive council, and the inter-fraternity council. Additionally, it unites to support various

initiatives on campus. It controls aspects of the selection process for other honorary societies on campus, such as Omicron Delta Kappa, thus enabling Machine leadership to hand pick its own choices to receive such campus honors (Koval, 1983).

In the century since the Machine's founding at Alabama, only seven individuals have beaten the Machine backed candidate for student body president. In 1989, agents of the Theta Nu Epsilon Interest Group, also known as the Machine, circulated a document titled "Society of 1870." The document stated,

We are proud of our history at the University. Theta Nu Epsilon has elected an SGA president 68 times in the 75 years of the SGA's existence.

This is because the SGA is ours. Our brethren formed it in 1914. (Theta Nu Epsilon Interest Group, 1989, p.1)

This is the only public statement the Machine has made in recent history. This uncharacteristic visibility and brazen taunting of the greater student body demonstrates the confidence and dominance members of the society feel.

Active membership of the Machine consists of one junior and one senior representative of each Machine affiliated Greek organization. Junior members are allegedly inducted without full awareness of the group's aims or their own personal responsibilities as agents of the group. However, after admission, these representatives are expected to carry the group's goals to their brothers and sisters in their respective Greek organizations (Cabamiss, McArthur, Dowling, & Holder, 1928). The core gathering of the Machine also includes the SGA President, SGA Vice-President, and SGA Treasurer, when Machine elected, and the inter-fraternity President and Panhellenic President, which are allegedly always Machine elected. The executive council of the

Machine pulls from senior House representatives (Koval, 1983). It is important to note that this is an exceptionally privileged group of students considering the membership costs of sororities and fraternities at the University of Alabama currently exceed the cost of instate tuition at the university (Soldner, 2014).

Associate professor of English at Alabama, Dr. Diane Roberts, explained involvement in student government is important to students because it serves as a springboard to state politics (Dash, 1999). The previously discussed 1989 document from Theta Nu Epsilon Interest Group described itself as a brotherhood designed to benefit the “business world” (p. 1). It stated its members have gone on to serve in positions such as governor, attorney general, senator, and lawyer. This may explain why the organization takes itself so seriously.

Despite the discretion and solemnity demonstrated by its suspected members, the Machine has made headlines for decades for allegations of threatening and harming other students in the process of fulfilling their aims. In 1993, Vice President of Student Affairs at the University of Alabama, Harry Knopke, shut down the student government after Minda Riley, a member of a Machine affiliated sorority, was assaulted with a knife in her Tuscaloosa apartment. One night, a white male with a panty hose stretched over his head broke into Riley’s apartment. He told Riley, “You fuck with the wrong people. You get fucked.” He then proceeded to physically attack her (Travis, 1993). She arrived at the local hospital that night with bruises, a busted lip, and a slash across her cheek. At the time of the assault, Riley was running for student body president without the approval of the Machine. While the assailant was not wearing anything to link him with the Machine, Minda Riley’s brother, Rob Riley, was certain the Machine was behind the attack.

In 1987, Rob Riley won the SGA presidential election with the help of Machine backing. He said he had “no doubt” the Machine was responsible. “I was in the Machine,” he said. “I was endorsed by the Machine for president. At the time, it was just a political organization” (Travis, 1993, p. 1). The student government was dismantled until 1996, following this incident. This incident is another example of the lengths the Machine will go to in order to maintain their dominance. This level of violence also demonstrates their confidence that they are untouchable. While suspending the student government did eliminate the abuses of power the Machine would typically exercise, it also displays the administration’s inability to keep this small group in check.

In 1999, after SGA had been reinstated, accusations of Machine corruption were still prevalent. SGA presidential candidate and international student from the Republic of Congo, Fabien Zinga, came forward to report anonymous individuals calling his personal phone threatening to lynch him and accosting him with racial slurs (Dash, 1999). Members of his campaigning team also received threats of physical harm via phone (Kraft & Woodbery, 1999). The Machine was immediately suspected though no action was taken to hold any individuals accountable for the incident.

Most recently, in the summer of 2013, the Machine made national news when their suspected involvement in municipal school board elections led to a lawsuit. Supporters of an alumnus of the University of Alabama, Cason Kirby, hired limousines and party buses to pick up Greek Alabama students from their sorority and fraternity houses and drive them to voting sites. Further, free drinks were provided to collegians who arrived at local bars wearing “I Voted” stickers. Greek leadership adamantly stated they were not supporting any particular candidate. However, a significant number of

sorority women showed up to vote wearing Cason Kirby t-shirts. The opponent has accused the Greek students of voter fraud, as several filled out their voter registration inaccurately because they were not truly eligible to vote in the election. Kirby won (Robertson, 2013). The resulting lawsuit and appeals have failed to remove Kirby from office.

These anecdotes present just a few of the incidents reported of coercive and harmful behavior allegedly exhibited by the Machine. In all of the incidents presented, no one was charged or convicted. Throughout the review of the literature, not one article could be found lauding efforts of the Machine at the University of Alabama. Currently, the Machine operates just as it has in the past, pulling strings at the University of Alabama with no administrative oversight.

### **The Third Society**

The Third Society is by far the youngest of the three organizations discussed. On its public website, it describes itself as an honor society for student leaders. The Society was founded by three leaders of diverse student organizations decades ago who believed by combining their strength they could help the university accomplish a goal it was pursuing at the time. When the goal was achieved, the students decided they should continue to use their diverse powers to impact the university in other ways. Following, they founded the Third Society to bring together outstanding student leaders from a variety of organizational backgrounds including, but not limited to, student government, Greek Life, community service groups, international programs, athletics, and student veteran organizations, whose leadership is deemed in alignment with the society's values, including talent and moral fiber. Collegiate membership never appears to exceed forty

members. While the organization reports it was formally founded at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some believe the organization has actually operated in one form or another for a much longer period of time.

The Third Society's ultimate goal, as described by its members, is to help the university reach a top 25 ranking and be admitted to the Association of American Universities. The proceedings of membership selection, initiation, and society meetings are largely unknown. However, the Society's public conduct in the university community sheds light on its purpose and character. The Third Society is the caretaker of an important campus tradition. They host at least two major events for the campus community each year. The first is a formal dinner during homecoming week to connect affiliated and unaffiliated students with prestigious alumni of the university, often including a significant number of Third Society alumni. The second is an awards night honoring one faculty member from each college for their service to students in the classroom.

Society members have been reported to support one another en masse during student government elections, homecoming court voting, and when members are pushing new initiatives on campus, whether they are campus-wide or within a sub-community. These strong campaigning demonstrations by members have caused controversy with unaffiliated student leaders. It is not uncommon to hear, for example, "Oh that's a Third Society initiative" or "The Third Society is conspiring to..."

Alumni involvement is a meaningful aspect of the group. Alumni sponsor the majority of the society's operating costs. Alumni will also often return to share advice

and experience with current collegiate members. Further, notable Society alumni will often serve as keynote speakers at the homecoming banquet.

### **The Sociology of Secrecy**

What qualities characterize secret societies? What are the features that draw people into their shadowy folds? In the following section, the sociology of secrecy is discussed. Principles of secrecy and their impact on individuals inside and outside secret groups are explained and applied to the three societies in an attempt to draw generalizations and illustrate abstract hypotheses on the impact of secrecy on groups with concrete examples. The sociology articles cited in this section were largely written with large, complex groups such as the Freemasons and the Illuminati in mind. However, the principles presented are relevant for evaluating collegiate secret societies.

“The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies” by Simmel (1906) is important because it is the first piece of scholarly literature about secret societies and the foundation of all research conducted on the topic of secrecy. It was written from a sociological perspective at the beginning of the 1900s, soon after Skull and Bones was founded. This article provides principles and hypotheses about all forms of secret societies. While the content of this article provides the scholarly backbone for my research, it leaves much to be desired, as Simmel does not explain how he came to his conclusions. He does not describe where he observed the behaviors and principles he discusses or the individuals he interviewed to learn what he explains in the article. Nevertheless, it has inspired other literature by secrecy scholars.

Hazelrigg (1969) and Marx and Muschert (2009) have published two notable reexaminations of Simmel’s work. These articles further guided my analysis of collegiate

secret societies. Hazelrigg's 1969 article analyzes Simmel's (1906) assumptions and culminates in the presentation of nine propositions regarding secret societies. The propositions provide if/then-like statements hypothesizing how different factors will affect the generation and transformation of secret societies. This article also provides distinct definitions for secret societies. Hazelrigg's propositions are not based in research; they are randomly determined. The results implied cannot be predicted with precision. The research from this project tests their validity by applying them to the three societies examined herein.

Propositions 6, 7, 8, and 9 are the most applicable for this study. Propositions 1, 2, and 3 discuss societal factors that influence the likelihood of a secret society to form. Proposition 1 states that when it is decided that a piece of information is more valuable when fewer people are privy to it, people are more likely to organize into a secret society to maintain the secret and retain its value. Proposition 2 states the more individuals feel their values are threatened by the greater society, the more likely they are to form a secret society to protect their values and themselves. Proposition 4 builds on Proposition 2 suggesting the more highly the values, information, or activity that is the focus of the secret society is valued, the stronger the likelihood the society will demand total inclusion of its members. Proposition 3 explains the more oppressive a government or society is, the more likely people will break away to exercise freedoms in the safety of a secret group. Proposition 5 builds on Propositions 3 and 4 indicating the more the society evolves toward total inclusion, the more likely it will develop the characteristics of the society from which it isolated itself. Often meaning that secret societies turn into microcosms of the oppressive society from which it broke (Hazelrigg, 1969).

Propositions 6, 7, 8, and 9 discuss the behavior of secret societies in greater depth. Proposition 6 discusses how secrecy impacts the self-conceptions of the members. It states the more a society moves toward a model of total inclusion, the more likely its members will possess elitist views of itself. Proposition 7 suggests the more extensive the level of secrecy exercised by the society, the greater the tendency the society will organize its authority centrally. Consequently, the more authoritarian a secret society operates, the more likely the greater surrounding society will react negatively and even violently toward the society, according to Proposition 8. Finally, Proposition 9 hypothesizes, as a secret society comes to emphasize values and attitudes accepted by the greater society, it will lessen its secret qualities and move away from total inclusion (Hazelrigg, 1969). These four propositions hold the greatest meaning for this study because they outline the characteristics that will most likely lead to negative outcomes for college students involved in secret societies and their surrounding campus communities.

The key aspect of Marx and Muschart's (2009) article is the discussion of the concepts of privacy versus secrecy. They define each concept and discuss the impact they have on society in relation to trust. These concepts will be explained in detail further in the chapter.

### **Secrecy and Intrigue**

Using the words of Simmel (1906), grandfather of the sociology of secrecy, if human interface is "*conditioned* by the capacity to speak, it is *shaped* by the capacity to be silent" (p. 349). Humans have the unique capacity to adjust their behavior to make themselves either more or less clearly understood depending on their desire. No other being has the ability to choose to reveal or conceal truths about itself in the same way

(Simmel, 1906). Exercising this capability is the paramount activity of secret societies. The element of secrecy inspires intrigue and the more secret an organization becomes, so too does it become more intriguing (Robbins, 2002).

An anecdote about a class of Skull and Bones illustrates the mystique and fascination such societies can generate and, also, ways in which societies can manipulate their conduct to either disclose, disguise, or deceive. In 2000, Ron Rosenbaum, *New York Observer* journalist and Bones enthusiast, published an article allegedly detailing the initiation ceremony of the Yale society Skull and Bones. Supposed researchers in New Haven contacted Rosenbaum and helped him videotape the presumed initiation proceedings using high tech equipment from outside the society clubhouse, or Tomb. The *New York Observer* article that followed described a ceremony consisting of feigned human sacrifice, young men dancing in animal skins, and an over-the-top tableau featuring a caricature of famous Bonesman George W. Bush. Rosenbaum saw his exposé as a breakthrough in journalism. Later interviews with Bonesmen would reveal the collegians most likely staged the entire ceremony as a hoax because, as one former Bonesman put it, they “wanted to fuck with that prick” (Robbins, 2002, p.103). In this anecdote, the collegians deceived fascinated parties in order to both thwart the efforts of a perceived threat and to increase the mystique of their organization.

One inevitable aspect of secret societies is rumors. Secrecy cultivates intrigue, and intrigue can breed rumors. Campus gossip indicates members of the Third Society hold secret rituals under the university’s football field and promise their first-born child to the society. It is unclear whether this means the child must attend the university or something else. Meanwhile, the Machine allegedly holds their meetings in the woods

near a Confederate train tunnel (Weiss, 1992). Being the oldest and most well known of the three, Skull and Bones has by far the wildest tales associated with them. Rumors range from ceremonial nude wrestling and psychosexual initiation practices to lavish gifts to the tune of \$15,000 for each Bonesman upon graduation from Yale (Robbins, 2002).

### **Secrecy and Power**

Secrecy, or the pretense of secrecy, is used as a means of separation between those entrusted with the secret and those outside. The party who is deceived or from whom information is concealed is always at the disadvantage of the party who holds the secret (Simmel, 1906). In the case of collegiate secret societies, it is the greater campus community that is at the disadvantage.

By keeping certain aspects of the group secret, the society communicates that those aspects are the most valued to the rest of the community. In fact, the content of the secret itself ultimately becomes less important than the mystery assigned to it (Simmel, 1906). In the case of societies, making the group secret grants the society an inherent prestige. The mystery surrounding secret societies is a social power giving the group an exceptional position on campus, whether or not the society aims for this heightened distinction.

This power of prestige is often expanded to involve the power involved with leadership. Secrecy and power can work together to create a synergy. Once a leadership presence on campus is achieved it is easier to maintain it within the secret organization because outsiders cannot study and identify areas of weakness within the group. This results in an undemocratic environment for unaffiliated students seeking leadership positions because of the inequity of access.

## **Visibility vs. Invisibility**

Individuals are capable of hiding themselves temporarily, by remaining absent from a given area. However, without taking extraordinary measures, it is impossible for a human being to fully conceal his existence forever. Secret societies, on the other hand, are more capable of hiding their existence. Nevertheless, the more people included in the secret, the higher the possibility of exposure (Simmel, 1906).

Hazelrigg (1969) posits, “depending upon the extensity of the secrecy, the organization takes one of two forms: Those in which the secret incorporates information about all aspects of the interactional unit, including its very existence; and those in which only some aspects, such as membership, regulations, and goals remain secret” (p. 324). Rather than two distinct categories, the difference among societies’ self-disclosure may be better described as a continuum because there are many facets of an organization, such as membership, purpose, ritual, and recruitment methods to name a few. What is disclosed to the greater community is different for each individual organization based on their specific norms and tradition.

There is no question Skull and Bones, the Machine, and the Third Society exist. Looking at these three secret societies, they each fall on a unique place on the continuum of visibility. The Machine at Alabama is the most invisible. The current collegiate members of the Machine are ever a topic for speculation. While some members have come forward and acknowledged its existence (Boutwell, 1928) and the administration has acknowledged the group’s influence (Arnold, 1991), there are many who believe the group either does not exist or it does not hold any power over campus proceedings. The

group does not display any insignia and suspected members will typically deny the organization's existence when asked about it (Beadle, 2004).

Skull and Bones falls in the middle on the secret to semi-secret spectrum. The purpose of Bones has never been formally presented by the organization itself. However, interviews with graduated Bonesmen and recovered documents have alluded to its aims. In the past, the tapping ceremony took place in the center of campus in broad daylight and the new affiliates' names were published in both the *Yale Daily News* and the *New York Times*. Also, until recently, students would announce their membership through pins attached to their neckties. However, tradition dictates if a non-member mentions "Skull and Bones" or their secret code "322" in the presence of a Bonesman, the Bonesman must abruptly exit the room, thus, denouncing the existence of said society (Robbins, 2002).

The Third Society is the most visible of the three. Members announce their affiliation at public events by wearing obvious insignia. The society maintains a website detailing the outward mission of the group, which they explain is to advance the university by recognizing exemplary students and strengthening campus tradition. Further, they host events for faculty, staff, and students outside of the Third Society throughout the academic year and are the caretakers of an important campus tradition. However, despite their conspicuousness, because of the secret nature, there remains a spirit of taboo around the discussion of the organization at their university.

The more public societies are at an advantage over their counterparts who attempt to remain fully concealed. They protect themselves from the ultimate betrayal of being revealed by affording themselves some degree of visibility. While the secret aspect serves

to build a wall against outsiders, engaging in measured amounts of publicity displays another form of might. It declares the society is strong enough to withstand some degree of probing and dissention. It implies the youthful nature of its clandestineness is not in need of defense due to the sophistication of members, purposes, and activities (Simmel, 2009).

### **Purpose of Secrecy**

Marx and Muschert (2009) explain that the withholding of information from another party may be used for a variety of reasons and typically depends upon the social context. One reason secret societies, such as Skull and Bones and the Third Society, are able to have a public facet is because the secrecy is not a necessity. Secrecy is not being used as a mechanism for reducing a risk threatening the organization (Erickson, 1981). Rather, such groups adopt a secret aspect to generate a feeling of sacredness. It is difficult to define the curious charm of such mysteriousness. However, it is clear secrecy is utilized as a sociological technique as opposed to a protective one. This sociological technique serves to bond its members in a profound way. Because the meaning of the secret is shared only among those inside, the secret comes to characterize all interactions between members. It inspires a deep confidence that, from the moment of inclusion in the group, is ever present (Simmel, 1906). E. E. Aiken, Bones class of 1881 wrote,

Secrecy may be used to create and strengthen friendship. The binding force of a common secret is a well-known fact; it rouses the instincts of fidelity and honor, and marks off its possessors as a circle by themselves, more or less distinctly according to its nature... The sharing of a secret makes a bond, but it is a very different one from that of a generous friendship. It is like the external force which

holds two soldiers together in the ranks, while they may be hating each other in their hearts. (Robbins, 2002, p. 196-197)

Secret societies further imprint the bond of uniqueness by creating common language. Classes of Skull and Bones give each member a unique code name only to be used when enshrouded in the privacy of the Tomb. Further, all meetings and activities take place on Skull and Bones Time or SBT. SBT simply translates to five minutes faster than Eastern Standard Time. However, it implies the proceedings of Bones are above and disconnected from the mundane goings-on of others outside the society. Also, it expresses that Skull and Bones is ahead of the times, forward thinking (Robbins, 2002). The Machine utilizes the code word “downstairs.” A fraternity or sorority is said to have “gone downstairs” when they have been invited to be a voting member of the Machine (Koval, 1983). An individual is said “go downstairs for the house” or “go underground” when he or she is secretly tapped to serve as a Greek organization’s Machine representative (Weiss, 1992). These types of common language are another sociological feature serving to bond members closer together and unite members under a shared mode of thought (Simmel, 1906).

### **Secret Societies’ Demands on the Student**

Simmel (1906) suggests secret societies desire to claim the whole person into their keeping, much like a military or religious organization. Consequently, in open society, members will conduct themselves identically and their personalities fade behind the veil of their association. This theory is truer for some organizations than others. Hazelrigg (1969) addresses this notion in Proposition Six of his nine propositions regarding secret societies. Proposition Six reads, “The greater the tendency toward total

inclusion, the more likely the members will possess aristocratic self-conceptions” (Hazelrigg, 1969, p. 328). This refers to societies demanding the whole person, including members’ talents, value systems, modes of thought, and loyalty. Literature suggests the Machine requires absolute submission to the group, especially in regards to campus voting. Third Society members appear in public to cheerfully agree with one another’s campus initiatives, but there is no evidence to suggest members are coerced into obedience. Therefore, it appears Proposition Six fits the Machine, but not the Third Society. Skull and Bones is likely in the middle. The activities of the club requiring full personal disclosure to members indicate the group demands total inclusion. However, the practice of debating in the Tomb demonstrates tolerance for differing opinions (Robbins, 2002).

Proposition Six also explains the more all encompassing the group is, the greater the significance affiliation holds for each individual member. Former President of the United States and Bonesman, George W. Bush, represents an example where the secret society may hold little significance for the member. When asked about his affiliation in an interview with ABC News he responded, “Does it even still exist?” In another conversation, he stated, “I was fairly nonchalant. I didn’t view it as a great heritage thing. I didn’t take it all that seriously.” However, one of the first, perhaps the very first, social gathering President Bush held in the White House was a reunion of his Skull and Bones club mates. Some speculate President Bush feigns indifference about his Bones affiliation because such elite connections may polarize voters. The fact remains he has never visited the Skull and Bones Tomb since graduation, as is custom for Bones alumni (Robbins, 2002).

Another reason Skull and Bones and the Third Society may not fit with Simmel's theory about secret societies washing members of individuality is because they both select members based on their individual qualities and achievements. They collect distinguished individuals to add to the variety of thought and skill to the group. Conversely, Beadle's 2004 article in *The Crimson White* describes Machine representatives as generally average, unexceptional students. They are not inspiring leaders; they are generally depicted as bullies. In contrast to the members of the Third Society and Skull and Bones, Machine representatives are not highly engaged students. Typically their time at Alabama is solely spent serving the Machine (Beadle, 2004). Koval's 1983 exposé on the Machine in *The Crimson White* declares credentials play no part in their selection of students to run for leadership positions on campus. Allegedly, when the members of the Machine meet to agree upon candidates to back for Student Government, Panhellenic Executive Council, or Interfraternity Council "qualifications...have nothing to do with a person's getting on the ballot" (Koval, 1983, p. 3). It has been suggested that the individual's Greek affiliation is what is most important when determining who will run for each position (Koval, 1983). Numerous allegations of harassment and violence against the Machine further suggests the organization does not seek out remarkable students to advance their missions, but merely any agent willing to ignore morality in the name of the Machine.

### **Secrecy and Controversy**

The unknown is psychologically threatening. Therefore, secret societies appear dangerous and conspiratorial simply because they are secret (Simmel, 1906). Consequently, one of the key contentions regarding secret societies is, does secret

necessarily mean bad? Simmel (1906) says no. “Secrecy is a universal sociological form, which, as such, has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents” (p. 463).

Secrecy includes a range of ideals. At one extreme, it is utilized by the humble, who do not want to boast about their achievement or position. At the other, it is used by the devious, to conceal nefarious activity. Therefore, it is inaccurate to differentiate between privacy and secrecy on the grounds that secrets necessarily conceal negative information, while privacy refers only to harmless information. Privacy and secrecy can both refer to benign concealment (Marx & Muschert, 2009).

In his 1928 open letter to *The Crimson White*, newly elected Student Body President Albert Boutwell writes, “It is not a malfeasance to belong to a secret organization” (p. 1). However, because it cannot be known whether a secret organization may turn from its respectable aims toward an undesirable activity, suspicion is a natural reaction to purposeful concealment (Simmel, 1906). Yale professor Thomas Thatcher concurred that it is not the central secrets that create negative consequences in a letter he wrote in the late 1870s.

I should be glad if the whole system of petty perpetuated societies in this college should perish...But I feel bound to add that it is not their secrecy which makes them an evil. Almost all the evil which they cause here, except the waste of time and money, would cease, if everyone of them should become really secret, if their places and times of meeting, the names of their members and even their very existence were absolutely unknown except to the members. It is what is known about these societies, not their secret doings, which works evil among us.  
(Robbins, 2002, p. 47)

Simmel (1906) posits that controversy regarding secret societies stems from jealousy. While this may account for some individual instances, anecdotes from Yale and from the secret society movement in the secondary schools of the 1960s point beyond simple jealousy to a theme of privilege and elitism vs. democracy and access. In 1968, a Houston high school principal denounced secret societies as “restrictive, clannish, selective, aristocratic, snobbish, narrow, conceited, class-distinction conscious, thoroughly undemocratic, and anti-American” (Graebner, 1987, p. 429). During the same time period, the society system at Yale was forced to change as more minority students were admitted to the university and university policies evolved to match the public mood. The country was ripe with social unrest condemning all things elite and exclusive. Yale professor and historian Gaddis Smith said of the time period:

Seldom was there such rapid change at Yale. The climate of the sixties was one that looked down on distinction, elites, and special privilege. The societies experienced a withdrawal from self-congratulatory publicity because there was embarrassment over that. There was some discussion that the societies were in their last years because they were so out of touch with the new cultural-social climate... With the [Vietnam] war going on, people wondered why they should give a damn about whether they got into a society. (Robbins, 2002, p. 71)

Yale University received attention from the media in 1953 when the societies abolished public Tap Day in response to negative public sentiment. Further, society members were forced to recruit new members more aggressively, as many students were apprehensive about joining these elite clubs, many choosing to turn down their taps. The challenge for society members at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to convince impressive students the

society system was still relevant and beneficial, while remaining to appear cool and aloof. The society system did persist, however. Lanny Davis best sums up the mixed feelings regarding the society system during the 1950s and 1960s in his submission to the 1968 Yale yearbook, the *Yale Banner*.

Come 'Tap Day' that last Thursday in April if you're a junior, despite the fact that you've banged your fist at the lunch table and said, "This is 1968," and have loudly denounced societies as anachronisms, when the captain of the football team is standing by your door and when the tower clock strikes eight he rushes in and claps your shoulder and shouts "Skull and Bones, accept or reject?" you almost always scream out "Accept!" and you never, never, pound your fist at the lunch table, not for that reason ever again. (Robbins, 2002, p. 111)

A letter written from a Bones club of the 1990s to their association of alumni describes some continued ambivalence after accepting the tap for membership during that decade.

Being a part of Bones is often an embarrassment, a source of ridicule and occasionally a good way to lose a friend. Very rarely is Bones still seen as an honor, and never is it seen to represent the mainstream of Yale. (Robbins, 2002, p. 157)

Mixed feelings regarding society taps and membership continue to be a factor for modern secret societies. Though despite the controversy, these groups prosper across the country. To many students, the invitation to join a secret society is intriguing due to the impressive mysteriousness (Beadle, 2004) and celebrated as an acknowledgement of collegiate success when received (Henig, 2006). Robbins (2002) describes the sentiment

of unaffiliated students at Yale as “a mixture of respect, revulsion, and haughty ambivalence. But most of all there remains the intense curiosity” (p. 74). It is the intention of this study to further illuminate the complex attitudes students hold toward collegiate secret societies and identify the key factors influencing students to either accept or reject the elusive tap.

### **Student Development**

For student affairs professionals, understanding how involvement in a secret society corresponds with the level of development of the students in question is essential. The theories of Clark and Trow (2001) and Perry (2010) provide some insight. Clark and Trow’s theory of student subcultures provide context for what type of student joins what type of secret society. This information can be used to make hypotheses about the potential impact of a society by what subculture of student they attract. Perry’s theory discusses students’ decision-making processes. Reflecting on the stage of ethical development demonstrated by secret society members may indicate to student affairs professionals how the society makes decisions as a whole.

#### **Clark and Trow Subcultures**

The subcultures defined by Clark and Trow (2001) describe a student’s orientation toward his or her university through four distinct subcultures. Each defines a pattern for how students engage and identify with different aspects of the institution. The four subcultures are the Academic, the Nonconformist, the Collegiate, and the Vocational. This theory has been selected for understanding what type of student chooses to join a secret society and potentially provide some understanding as to why. Further, it

may aid in illuminating how membership in a secret society impacts a student's leadership experience in college.

Members of secret organizations likely fall into two of Clark and Trow's subcultures (Strange & Banning, 2001). The members of Skull and Bones and the Third Society appear to belong to the Academic subculture, while the Machine members better fit in the Collegiate subculture. Differences in the missions of the groups and criteria for membership explain the difference in subculture categorization.

The Academic subculture is made up of students who identify strongly with their institution and are highly engaged with ideas. These students are typically high achieving in both academic and campus life. They recognize their course work and leadership engagement as opportunities for learning (Strange & Banning, 2001). These characteristics fit the members of both Skull and Bones and Third Society. Members of both groups are often tapped for their outstanding engagement outside the classroom and their commitment to high ideals. The Third Society recognizes students who have translated their passion for institutional values into community action. Bones demonstrates its commitment to higher level thinking through the debates it stages during club meetings.

Both organizations are also highly committed to their universities. Bonesmen regularly reference the prestige of Yale when discussing their collegiate experiences. Further, the organization has a unique passion for Yale history. Bonesmen have been known to steal important university artifacts for safe keeping in their Tomb (Robbins, 2002). While this behavior is illegal and highly discouraged, it nonetheless demonstrates zeal for their institution. Passion for the university is at the core of Third Society. The

group was founded to help the university continue to grow into a leading academic institution.

Like the Academic subculture, the Collegiate subculture identifies strongly with its institution. However, it does not have the same involvement with ideas. These students are loyal to the university, but demonstrate indifference toward higher-level intellectual pursuits. They value social engagement, university athletics, and extracurricular activities over scholarly endeavors. Greek students are a prime example (Strange & Banning, 2001). Machine representatives fall into this category. Their membership is exclusively Greek. Students tapped to be house representatives are not chosen for their leadership capacity or values. Further, when selecting students to support for campus leadership positions, the Machine does not consider the qualifications or ideals of the candidate. In fact, the individual is not discussed at all, only their Greek affiliation (Koval, 1983). This demonstrates that while the Machine is dedicated to campus involvement, it is not concerned with aligning with the University of Alabama's institutional mission. It is likely these attitudes contribute to the negative outcomes and impressions of the Machine.

The Nonconformist student is highly involved with high level thinking, but does not identify closely with his institution. These students often remain detached from campus culture and maintain feelings of hostility toward university administration. The Vocational student neither identifies with their institution, nor engages with idealistic thinking regarding their collegiate experience. These students are often focused on career training (Strange & Banning, 2001). Neither of these subcultures reflects the character of

the typical American collegiate secret society, which typically center on fraternal or scholastic values.

### **Perry's Theory of Moral and Intellectual Development**

William G. Perry Jr.'s theory of intellectual and ethical development discusses students' process of meaning making. This theory is being used to provide a framework for understanding why some students choose to join secret societies while others do not, as well as how students make meaning of the concept of formal secrecy. Perry presents four positions on a continuum of development, from the least developed, duality, to the most developed, commitment, with multiplicity and relativism in between (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

When viewing Skull and Bones, the Machine, and the Third Society through Perry's lens of intellectual and ethical development, the Machine again diverges from the other two organizations. Representatives of the Machine appear to fit the description of dualistic thinkers. Dualism is characterized by dichotomous decision-making, where the student sees the world in black and white (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). At the University of Alabama, members of Machine affiliated Greek organizations are presented with one choice, the Machine choice. During Machine meetings, executive members direct representatives in the way they are to vote and behave; the floor is not opened to discuss the decision as a group or explore other potential avenues. The Machine answer is the only answer. Any contention or disagreement is met with contempt (Koval, 1983). The lack of diversity in the organization, also, supports this hypothesis. In the opinion of the Machine, there is the Greek perspective and then there is everyone else.

Skull and Bones and the Third Society appear to align more closely with relativistic thinking. Relativism recognizes there can be more than one valuable opinion on a subject and even like-minded individuals can disagree at times. Relativistic thinkers support their arguments with evidence (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). When examining the intellectual development of Bonesmen, it is important to again note debate is welcomed and practiced within the Tomb (Robbins, 2002). This expresses the underlying principle there is more than one way to evaluate any topic and in order to have one's views accepted one must support his argument with evidence. The Third Society's premium on diversity of involvement indicates that it falls within the realm of relativism. Third Society members feel that diversity of opinion helps the group reach the best decisions for the university. Because the societies do not have any literature outlining their belief systems there is not enough evidence to evaluate if, as a group, they have reached the commitment stage of moral and ethical development.

### **Intervening with Secret Societies**

Educational institutions have reacted differently toward secret societies throughout history. Robbins' (2002) book provides one significant example of administration attempting to reign in Skull and Bones and its fellow secret societies. There are several examples of attempts to control Theta Nu Epsilon both at the University of Alabama and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Lohr, 2005; Arnold, 1991; Kraft & Woodbery, 1999; and Beadle, 2004).

### **Past Policies in Higher Education**

From 1844 to 1884, the administration at Yale University passed several resolutions to try to dissuade students from joining secret societies (Robbins, 2002). First,

in 1844, the administration voted to make their opinions about the negative effects of society membership known among the student body. To give their advisement not to join societies some teeth, in 1849 they voted any student who did not receive permission to join a secret society would be barred from receiving any financial aid. This policy was amended in 1857 to give preference to non-society members when distributing financial aid. It was further amended in 1862, announcing members of secret societies that did not collect dues would receive half the usual financial aid and members of societies that did collect dues would not receive any financial aid at all. These measures did little to discourage students from accepting their taps for membership. The policies were eliminated not long after, as by 1884 approximately half of the faculty and staff at Yale were society members (Robbins, 2002).

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln also has a chapter of Theta Nu Epsilon (Lohr, 2005). However, it does not have the impact on campus that the Alabama society does. Nonetheless, the University administration has taken measures to ensure the organization does not attempt to manipulate university affairs. Many student leadership organizations, including the inter-fraternity Council, require a pledge from all council officers stating, “I have never been, am not now, and will never become associated with any sub-rosa organization” (Lohr, 2005, p. 1).

In contrast to the preventative policy at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the University of Alabama administration has intervened only after a society has had detrimental impacts on the university. In an effort to get a handle on Theta Nu Epsilon at Alabama, in 1991, the staff of the Office of Student Life attempted to bring the Machine above ground and register the group as a student organization. The administration felt this

would allow them to hold the Machine accountable under university regulations for student organizations, especially related to unethical election behavior (Arnold, 1993). Ultimately, the Office of Student Life was unsuccessful, likely due to subversive interventions by both Machine students and powerful alumni. The Machine remains faceless and out of the direct reach of administration.

The University of Alabama has been successful in some intervention strategies to thwart harmful Machine activity. In 1993, after the attack on Minda Riley, the University of Alabama shut down the student government until 1996 (Kraft & Woodbery, 1999). After SGA was reinstated, administration attempted to prevent Machine instigated voter fraud by extending polling days and changing the method for submitting paper ballots (Beadle, 2004) and eventually implementing online voting systems (Robertson, 2013).

### **Following Chapter**

In the next chapter, the methodology of the study will be discussed. I will outline how the study was developed including sampling strategy and interview protocols. I will also outline the measures taken to ensure research compliance with the University of South Carolina. Finally, I will describe the process for evaluating the data and the intended implications for the study.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

Ashley and Rory are sorority sisters aged approximately five years apart. Their experiences in college appear very similar. Both were members of the same sorority; both served as sorority council president; both engaged in student government; both were tapped for Third Society membership. Why did Ashley choose to accept her tap while Rory did not? This is the core question this study aims to answer.

### **Overview of Study**

This study seeks to answer the following three questions.

1. Why do some student leaders choose to join the Third Society while others do not?
2. How does the centrality of secrecy affect how students perceive the Third Society?
3. How does membership or non-membership in the Third Society affect a student's leadership experience?

Due to the complex nature of these questions, a qualitative approach was selected. Quantitative methods, such as a survey, would not have allowed me to probe into respondents' answers in the same way. Building relationships with respondents through personal communication prior to the interviews and during the interview processes allowed me to engender a deeper level of trust, which I believe inspired

some respondents to reveal more about their experiences and feelings than they might have in an impersonal survey.

Answers were sought by interviewing two distinct groups, Third Society members and student leaders who were tapped for Society membership and elected not to affiliate. Third Society members are students and alumni of a particular public doctoral level research institution in the South who were selected for membership in the elite leadership honor society, the Third Society. This population is important to this study because the respondents were able to speak of their personal experience within the Third Society, including why they joined, what meaning secrecy has had for them as an insider, and how their membership has affected their student leadership experience.

The second portion of the research sample is made up of distinguished student leaders at the same institution who were tapped for membership by the Third Society, but elected not to join. These respondents provide contrast to the Third Society group because they chose not to join and will be able to explain their reasoning. Also, they were able to explain if and how not participating in the Third Society affected their student leadership endeavors.

I first became interested in secret societies after learning about the conspiracy theories related to Skull and Bones in high school. Then, after reading extensively about the racial recruitment scandal at the University of Alabama, I became captivated with stories about the Machine. I looked deeper into the theme of secret societies on college campuses and found them to be prominent at dozens of higher education institutions across the country. I read books about Yale, Free Masonry, and Greek Life. I watched movies featuring nods to Skull and Bones, the Illuminati, and famous Masons. Through

this informal research, I found that while Skull and Bones and the Machine are fascinating case studies, I was interested in learning more about the more commonplace secret societies and the impact they have on their members and others at their institutions.

Through a contact in student life, Nick, I learned about the Third Society. I was intrigued by the influence it appeared to wield, as well as the apparent contradiction they demonstrated by proudly announcing their existence and membership through insignia, while maintaining a clandestine aura about their group. Nick served as an initial gatekeeper. At first, I was interested in how university staff members, particularly in student affairs, made meaning of secret societies and how they adapted their advising style for affiliated students. However, Nick shared more about how he saw society membership impact his students and encouraged me to explore the student experience. Then, he provided me with a list of students and alumni inside and outside the Third Society who he thought might be potential respondents for this study.

I targeted some respondents from this list and others from students who were distinguished on university websites and in newspaper articles. Further, I asked for recommendations for other respondents at the end of each interview. This led to some snowball sampling. After targeting an individual, I learned everything I could about him or her from the university websites, student newspaper articles, and conversations with contacts at the institution to determine what activities potential subjects were involved in and what their general reputations were on campus before approaching them about the study.

Beyond information about Third Society members, I searched the Internet and campus publications for information about the Third Society itself. In these documents I

specifically looked for the language the Third Society used to describe itself in order to learn more about how they present themselves and how transparent they are with the greater university community. Further, I reviewed the documents to identify any controversy the society may have generated on campus. This information helped me determine how the society would respond to being approached about serving as a case study for secrecy research. I adopted the sound bytes and tone they used when discussing their society to use in my letters to reach out to them in order to be as well received as possible.

### **University Regulations and Ethics**

I submitted my research proposal to the University of South Carolina Internal Review Board for approval. After minor changes, the proposal was accepted for exemption from a full review under category 2 because the data were to be collected via interviews in a manner that did not allow respondents to be directly or indirectly identified and the respondents were at no risk of being held criminally or civilly liable or endanger their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

### **Sampling and Interview Protocol**

I focused on Third Society members first. I wanted to begin by interviewing the subjects who would be most likely to say positive things about the Third Society and then move into the interviews with respondents who may have negative opinions of the Third Society because as a researcher I did not want to become biased against the Third Society before members were able to speak for themselves. After examining the pool of potential respondents, I selected five members to approach based on what I had gathered. I aimed to gather a sample of nearly equal numbers of males and females, a range of racial and

ethnic backgrounds, and a diversity of areas of campus involvement to better ensure an accurate representation of opinion and realms of thought. This ultimately led to a purposeful sampling strategy.

After selecting the first five potential respondents, I reached out to each with a letter describing my study and inviting them to participate. Because I anticipated suspicion from Society members, the letter was clear about what this study sought to find. It was not interested in the secret proceedings or rituals of the organization, but the impact membership has had on him or her as an individual. I chose not to ask for any society materials, such as standing rules and procedures or meeting minutes, first, because I was certain this would cause members to refuse to participate, and, second, because, while interesting, these materials would not contribute to the answers of my research questions. Additionally, attached to each letter was a list of the questions I hoped to ask with the note that respondents would be permitted not to answer any questions that made the respondent uncomfortable. Finally, the letter outlined the level of anonymity I was willing to provide. I assured potential subjects that their names, the name of their organization, the name of the institution, and the state in which the institution is located would be known only to me and my thesis committee.

From the initial five letters, three immediately agreed to participate, one declined, and the fifth agreed so long as he was approved to participate by the Third Society's public relations chair. After sending my materials to the public relations chair, he was approved. The one potential subject who declined was the only current student; the rest were alumni. This became an important turning point for the direction of this study.

I then invited my four respondents to phone interviews. Two of my subject members expressed they would rather submit their answers in a written format. I agreed and they emailed their responses to my interview questions. I met with the other two subjects over the phone to discuss their membership in the Third Society.

While constructing my interview protocol, I continuously sought feedback from Nick because he best understood the nuances of the Third Society and could help me create questions that would illicit the information I wanted while not offending the members of the group. Even after my protocol was finalized prior to the first interview, it continued to evolve as interviews progressed either because of the path the conversations would take or because I found I was no longer interested in the answers to a particular question. For example, respondents would often answer more than one question without realizing it, allowing me to skip that question in my interview. Also, these interviews helped me narrow my research questions. At the beginning of the process I was interested in how society membership impacted society members' relationships with university professional staff members. As the study progressed, this became tangential to my deeper curiosities. My final protocol is as follows:

1. What do you feel is most important for me to know about a group like yours, both for this project and as a professional moving forward?
2. Tell me how you got involved with your organization.
3. When approached for membership what factors did you consider when deciding whether to accept?
4. How did membership in this group enhance your collegiate experience?

5. Are there any times you felt your membership in the group had a negative effect on your college experience?
6. How do you feel the secret nature of your group contributes to the experience of membership?
7. Your group is very visible on campus. You host events, are caretaker for an important campus tradition, and display your membership through your insignia. Can you tell me what that is like being a part of a group that is easily recognized but often considered a taboo topic of conversation?
8. There have been examples of secret groups throughout American history that started out with great intentions, but ended up diverting from their purpose and actually harming the university and its students, most notably Alabama's Machine. What qualities do you feel your group has that sets it apart from some of these more nefarious groups and will keep it from diverting from your purpose?
9. What do you feel is the greatest benefit you have received as a result of being a part of this group?

During the interviews with Society members I took notes while I was talking to them and then filled in with additional field notes immediately following the interview. After four interviews I decided not to recruit any additional respondents for the society portion of the sample because the data had become saturated. I continued to hear many of the same answers to questions and I did not believe any additional interviews would shed new light on the subject.

The recruitment process for non-society members was similar, except I targeted alumni exclusively. From my conversations with Society alumni, I found that being as

little as one year outside of college gave respondents a more holistic perspective of their college experiences. I felt by contacting alumni non-members they might have a similar perspective and maturity, as well as not being concerned about any consequences from talking about the Third Society in this manner. While I would have liked to recruit an intentionally diverse group of respondents for this second population, because there are so few individuals who meet the necessary criteria, I approached every potential respondent of which I became aware.

My methods for approaching potential non-member respondents were similar to my Society member approach tactics. While the content of my letters was slightly different because it was tailored to non-members, it also described the purpose of the study, the interview protocol, and assurances of anonymity. All potential respondents were presented with an informed consent form further outlining the methodology, potential risks of participation, safety recommendations, and potential benefits of participation.

I approached two potential respondents, first, who had been recommended from university contacts. Both agreed to participate. The second respondent recommended the third respondent. She had been involved with him in a leadership organization. She knew that he had been tapped at the same time she had. She thought he would be an especially interesting person to talk to because, at first, he accepted his tap and began the pledging process. After about a week of affiliating, he decided to break his ties with the Third Society. The second respondent agreed to casually talk to him about the study first. After he expressed interest to her, I approached him with my consent form and letter. He provided me with one final potential respondent. Though, he was not comfortable serving

as an intermediary or with the potential respondent knowing that it was he who recommended him. I found the potential respondent online and sent him my letter. The letter was opened but the potential respondent did not reply. After this last reach out, with no other potential respondents, I concluded the respondent recruitment process.

Interviews with non-society members also took place over the phone, as distance and cost prohibited me from interviewing these individuals in person. The interview protocol for the non-members was very different. Lessons learned from the interviews with Third Society members influenced the way I constructed the second interview protocol. I created a shorter list of questions that were broader to avoid leading the subject. The interview protocol is as follows.

1. Tell me about your involvement at the institution.
2. Tell me about the Third Society.
3. Tell me about your experience with the Third Society.
4. What do you think is the purpose or relevance of secrecy? Is it important?
5. What affect does the Third Society have on the university as a whole?
6. Looking back on your experience now how do you understand or make meaning of the Third Society in relation to your leadership experience?
7. What place do you think secret societies have in higher education?

These interviews were recorded using the TapeACall application for iPhone. Then, the recordings were transcribed using Apple talk to text software to ensure accuracy.

## **Evaluating Data**

After the interviews, the interview transcripts were analyzed to search for answers to the study's research questions. Each of the transcripts was reread and broken into segments related to which research question the section of the interview was discussing. Common themes were identified when possible. This was easier to accomplish for responses from the Third Society, as many of their answers mirrored one another. This may be because of the like-minded nature of the organization. There were commonalities among some answers of the non-Society members. However, the lack of uniformity does not discourage the validity of this study. The purpose was to stitch together the many, unique perspectives of the individuals involved to provide a well-rounded, fair representation of a controversial group.

The first major theme included answers as to the mission of the Third Society. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, there was only one code used when analyzing Third Society interviews. The second theme of interview discussion collected quotations related to why students either decided to accept or turn down their taps. Of all of the research questions, this one had the most variety of answers, particularly from non-members. The third major theme was secrecy, including three subtopics. The first subtopic grouped answers as to the purpose of secrecy. The second subtopic flagged comments related to visibility and invisibility. The third subtopic grouped interview quotes discussing, "Is secret necessarily bad?" Again, there was only one code used when analyzing the answers of Third Society members as to the purpose of secrecy in the Third Society. Likewise, the core of all non-member answers all gathered under a similar umbrella topic. Finally, the third major theme marked data related to the student society

experience. This theme included comments related to impact on college leadership experience, benefits of membership, and challenges of membership.

The themes generated from the initial data analysis of the answers of Society members were compared against hypotheses about secret societies presented in the literature by Simmel (1906), Hazelrigg (1969), and Marx & Muschert (2009) to evaluate the congruence between my findings and previous scholarship. I also compared society and non-society members' answers against information available about the Third Society in campus newspapers and websites. Finally, I compared and contrasted the generalized themes from Society member interviews against those from non-society member interviews to look for patterns of similarity and difference.

There were some data that did not fit into the final product of this study. However, this was not because a particular respondent's answers were irrelevant. All opinions were accurately represented in the Results chapter of this study. It was because the questions respondents were answering ended up being eliminated from the scope of this study. This was most common for Third Society interviews because these took place before the final research questions were concrete.

After drawing conclusions and writing the narrative of this study, I sent the final draft to each respondent to check their contributions for accuracy. Each respondent received the entire document to review to be sure they were fully aware of the conclusions being drawn. The versions each respondent received did not include their real names or the real names of any of the other respondents. All names were replaced with pseudonyms. Therefore, I highlighted the sections related to their interviews

allowing respondents to focus just on their contributions if they wished. No corrections or revisions were made as a result of the member checking process.

### **Implications**

Ultimately the generalizations fashioned from the analysis of the interviews aim to answer the question of why some students are drawn to secret societies while other, similar students are not, how secrecy is perceived and interpreted by students, and what impact belonging or not belonging to a secret society has on a student leader's experience in college. With these data, I hope to aid student affairs administrators in strategizing how to interact with secret societies, their members, and the general campus population to ensure all students have access to experiences and activities to enrich their college experience outside the classroom.

### **Next Chapter**

The following chapter will relay the results of the interviews. There, I will share how Third Society members define their organization's mission and purpose. I will compare and contrast Third Society members' thoughts on the controversy of secrecy and the paradox of being a very visible secret organization with those of the students who were tapped and turned it down. Next, I will share Third Society member's explanations about the purpose and relevance of the Society's secrecy with the theories presented on the subject by the population who was tapped, but did not accept. Finally, I will impart both populations' feelings about how belonging or not belonging to the Society affected their student leadership experiences.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

No amount of historical speculation or sociological hypotheses can provide the clarity or fascination that first hand narrative can. This chapter will reveal the results of the seven interviews conducted with four members of the Third Society and three student leaders who were tapped by the Third Society but declined their invitation to affiliate. It will begin with a description of the interview respondents and then a description of the Third Society as told by the respondents. Finally, it will tell the story of the respondents' experiences and attitudes toward the Third Society. The reporting of the results will be organized by research question.

### **Respondent Profiles**

These brief respondent profiles are meant to provide a glimpse into the many areas of campus to which these individuals were exposed, providing an idea of the experiences affecting them prior to and during their exposure to the Third Society.

All seven respondents, both Society members and non-members, are alumni of the Third Society's institution having graduated between 2007 and 2014. Their involvement on campus during their time as students ranged from student government to alumni relations. I sought as much diversity as possible with regards to demographic characteristics and areas of involvement on campus. This was more achievable for Third Society members. For students who were tapped and turned membership down, I cultivated every lead I found.

All names in this chapter have been changed to protect the identities of the respondents. The four tapped Third Society members interviewed will be referred to as Ashley, Marcus, Catherine, and Lawrence. Ashley, Marcus, and Lawrence were all involved in Student Government as well as Greek Life. Lawrence served as Student Body President and Ashley served as Student Body Vice President, though at different times. Catherine is remembered for her community service initiatives on campus.

Each approached the interview experience in a different way. Some respondents constructed their answers in perfunctory and professional answers exhibiting an attitude of political correctness, while others, like Lawrence, peppered his interview responses with jokes, poking fun at some of the common misconceptions about his society. At different times each member spoke with a level of sincerity, particularly when discussing their sentiments toward the organization and its members. This assortment of responses toward the experience helped me understand the range of reactions toward the Society even from within.

Rory, Amber, and Parker are the individuals who were tapped by the Third Society and elected not to join. Amber and Rory both turned down their taps immediately. Parker initially accepted his tap and, after a week of pledging activities, decided to resign. All three individuals were members of fraternity and sorority life while in college. Rory and Parker both served as president for their respective Greek councils, holding leadership over the thousands of fraternity men and sorority women on their campus. Rory also held positions with the student alumni association and student government. Amber directed the university's largest student-run fundraising campaign for a national charitable organization. After graduation, Amber went on to work as an

administrator in the area of institutional advancement for the university. In this position, she works with homecoming activities, young alumni, and student groups focused on advancing the university. In this role, she regularly works with both current Third Society members and alumni.

### **Third Society Profile**

To construct a definition of the Third Society best reflecting the understanding of the organization on campus, all of the respondents were asked to weigh in on its purpose and mission. The Third Society openly refers to itself as a leadership honor society. To elaborate on this, Third Society members were asked to share the most important thing they felt should be known about their Society. Lawrence, an alumnus of the Third Society, stated, “Our over-arching mission is to advance and promote the university. Basically make our school better, both in reality and perception.” Marcus, another Society alumnus, echoed this sentiment when explaining that he joined the Third Society to support the mission and goals of the university alongside other well-meaning peers. “We, like so many, have a love for the university and want to see it flourish and strive to be one of the best universities in the country. Everything we do is for the betterment of the university.” The Third Society members explained their ultimate goal is to help the university reach a top 25 ranking and be admitted to the Association of American Universities.

They explained that the society was born out of a coalition of students developed in the 1990’s. It began when three powerful student leaders from different areas of campus united to help the university receive a particular distinction it was in the running for at the time. The university did end up receiving the distinction. It is arguable whether

or not the students had any impact on the result. However, the students felt they were instrumental in the school's success. This caused them to consider what other impact could be made on campus when diverse student leaders are convened. At this point, they began recruiting and forming an official organization with their eye on bringing the university into the national spotlight.

The three individuals who were tapped, but elected not to join were also asked for their perceptions. They were asked to describe the Third Society in their own words. The non-members' responses explained that the Third Society is a small, secret group of select student leaders on campus. One of these individuals who turned her tap down, Amber, explained there is both a student and alumni aspect to the Society, which plan different programs throughout the school year. Another such individual, Rory, made a point to say there are many differing views of the group on campus, ranging from like to dislike to apathy, and that a greater number of students likely are unaware of the Society's existence. Similarly, the third non-member, Parker commented that the everyday student likely would not recognize the Society or its members.

When asked to describe the group's mission, there were some differing responses from the non-members. Amber laughed when describing the mission of the Society, stating that even now after continued exposure in her professional role, she still does not understand the purpose of the Society. Her explanation was,

They work alongside several staff members and faculty at the university to either help enhance their own individual student programming for their own student organizations they represent on campus or the overall goal of the Third Society. What that overall goal is I am not sure. I am not exactly sure from the

programming that I have seen that myself or other individuals quite know what the goal of the organization is, but I do know that there are several high-level students and staff members that are affiliated with the organization and plan several events on campus.

Rory echoed this opinion saying,

I don't know the mission of the Third Society. I don't know what their purpose is. I think the problem that I see with them on campus is nobody really knows their purpose. We don't have to have a statement of what the Third Society's mission is to know their purpose. I think it should be seen in the members' actions. And so, for me looking at the Third Society, I don't really see that they do anything besides throw a few events during the school year.

Amber shared details about her interactions with the Society in her work in institutional advancement. During homecoming, the Society hosts a banquet for the Homecoming Court, campus administrators, student organizations, and Society members. Amber's office helps the Society coordinate this event. She described this partnership as having to "play along" with the Third Society. She referenced tensions within her office about allowing the Society to wear their trademark insignia at student and alumni events. Ultimately, it has been the habit of the office to look the other way, rather than make an issue of the subject. She also shared an example of collaborative projects between the Third Society and the alumni affairs office. However, the example did not portray the Society as a contributing partner, but more as gathering alumni information from the office for their own benefit. Ultimately, Amber explained despite her deeper exposure to the group through her job at the university, she still cannot see the mission of aiding the

university being fulfilled through Society actions. She cited the homecoming banquet as an example explaining that her office still does not know what the Third Society does with the money raised from the event.

Parker, on the other hand, perceived their motives to be more conspiratorial. He believes the goal of the Society is to collect students who are in positions of influence on campus to use their power to sway students to vote their candidates into positions in student government. He shared, “When I was asked to join [the Third Society] it was solely done to get position figureheads essentially of organizations... The sole purpose was to make sure that the [political party] member, who was also part of the Third Society, that that person won the [student government] election.” Parker also believes the ambitions of the Society exceed student politics. It is his opinion that the Third Society ultimately aspires to build its influence within the state government system.

Both Parker and Rory spoke about the large impact the Third Society makes on student activities at the university. “They definitely have a strong influence on campus.” Parker said. “That is undeniable.” He believed this aligned with their mission of holding the reigns of student government. While Rory did not name this as a mission of the organization, she did say that the group “definitely control[s] student government” by creating the conditions for their student government president and vice president candidates to win each year. When explaining this phenomenon, she expressed disappointment on behalf of unaffiliated students.

I don't think that the people they picked are bad, but I think that it kind of takes away a little bit from students who are not in the organization and want to achieve

that position...if you're not a member of the Third Society then good luck trying to be the president of the student government.

She also believed that the Third Society works to influence other areas of student involvement as well. Amber explained that each new class of the Third Society members regularly represents many different sectors of campus, including but not limited to student government, fraternity and sorority life, campus philanthropy, and alumni relations. Parker added to this observation saying, "They have the top person in those organizations 95% of the time." Rory hypothesized, "My guess is so they can kind of have a their hand on what's going on in every organization."

Parker gave an example of a time he had seen the Third Society exercise its power to accomplish a goal. The university president had been working to bring attention to the plight of student veterans. In response, the student government association, led by a Third Society president and vice president, sponsored a film festival screening a related to veterans' affairs. At the event, the captain of the university's award winning a cappella group, a Third Society member, sang the national anthem. Parker also observed large attendance from fraternities who had members in the Third Society. Finally, the president of the veteran's association was seen at the event wearing Society insignia. To Parker, the collection of powerful student leaders in the Third Society allowed them to make things happen on campus with relative ease.

### **Choosing to Accept the Tap**

To understand why some student leaders choose to join the Third Society, while others do not, I asked the Third Society members to share how they got involved with the Society and what factors they considered when deciding whether or not to accept their

tap. When asked what ultimately inspired these individuals to join the Third Society, all four said it was because of the members. The students who were already involved were individuals they admired and they welcomed the opportunity to be associated with them. Third Society alumnae, Ashley and Catherine, both explained despite the controversy surrounding the organization, they decided the current members were individuals whose judgment they trusted. If these inspiring student leaders believed belonging to the Third Society was positive, it must be. Similarly, Society member, Lawrence shared,

I knew it was a special opportunity. I had a tremendous amount of confidence in and respect for the people I knew that were already members. I was definitely curious and, in a way, feared missing out on an opportunity like this.

Both Society alumni, Marcus and Lawrence, referenced a desire to make a profound, positive impact on the university. Lawrence explained, “Seeing others around me that I looked up to and held in such high regard uniting to achieve common goals and enhance our university was really inspiring.” This desire to be a change agent, like other members of the Society, was a key factor leading both men to accept their taps.

Catherine followed up her answer to these questions by sharing her sentiments about being selected for the Society. She expressed she was especially appreciative of her inclusion in the Society because it was unexpected. Her leadership involvement did not place her in any campus limelight, as is common with some other Third Society taps.

To understand the experiences of Rory, Amber, and Parker, who were tapped and declined their invitation, I asked them first to describe their interactions with the Third Society and at times probed them about what factors led them to their decisions. All three non-members were approached for membership in a similar way. They remembered

being invited to a ceremony in the middle of the night at a highly recognizable and symbolic campus site. Rory and Parker received calls from blocked phone numbers inviting them to the event, while Amber said she was approached with a bid card. Rory and Amber both respectfully declined at that point. Rory recalls her experience of rejecting the invitation. “I tried to—as best I could—respectfully decline their invitation. I told them that I appreciated the opportunity but that I would like to decline the invitation to join their organization.”

Parker, however, decided to meet the Third Society at the gathering point. He recalled,

When they first asked me to join, I believe it was about a Sunday night or if you want to call it Monday morning, about 1 AM. And I received a phone call from a blocked number and they kept asking me in a deep voice, “Is this Parker?” Parker explained, because of the bizarre approach, he hung up and continued to ignore calls from the blocked number until the Third Society called him from a number he recognized. After answering the call, the Third Society presented Parker with a riddle, revealed it was the Society calling, and invited him to join them at the campus landmark. He remembers, “I drove there, roughly 1:30 in the morning and there’s these members of the Third Society just standing outside asking me to take the oath type thing and they handed me a piece of paper.” This marked his initial acceptance to the Society.

During the following week, his introduction to the Society continued. Parker shared about a scavenger hunt at a local law firm where a Third Society alumnus worked, a dinner where he was presented with Society insignia, and midnight tours around campus meant to bond the new pledges. He explained he was then presented with a

detailed schedule outlining his commitments as a new member. This is when Parker began to doubt if the Third Society was for him. He told me,

I tell you, I'm a student. I already work as the president of the inter-fraternity Council. I don't have time for these things. I have a personal life outside of this. They had stuff for us literally every single day, whether it was campaigning for the [Third Society's political] Party, or late things at night, celebration parties, planning a barbecue for the [Third Society's political] Party, all these little stupid things that I didn't want to do.

After participating in about a week's worth of activities and reflecting, Parker called his friend who was a member of the Third Society and told him he wished to resign. He said his friend understood and was supportive of his choice, though other members, including his predecessor in the fraternity council, were upset about his decision.

Rory, Amber, and Parker all cite unique reasons for deciding not to join the secret society, though there were some similarities. Ultimately, it came down to what the student leaders felt to be an incongruence of values, particularly related to their values regarding leadership. Rory had watched other student leaders go through the process of joining the Society and she perceived the Society as having consumed their lives. She watched friends grow distant from others and the organizations they were currently involved in after accepting. Her opinion was,

I wanted to associate myself with people that I thought were going to help me grow as a person and as a leader. Joining the Third Society, to me, was not something that I saw as beneficial to myself... to me, being a student leader and

already having a large position I felt that it was unfair to my organization to join something that I felt like was going to take away from what I was already doing.

When discussing her decision not to join, Amber spoke a lot about inclusivity and exclusivity. At that time, Amber was working to make her campus fundraising event more accessible to a greater number of students. She said,

At the time the Third Society wasn't something I wanted to align my values with...I saw a lot of exclusivity... At the time, I was very much a pro-everyone-be-a-part-of-something-individual and then to be in this secret organization wasn't really aligning with the image and what I thought was important at the time.

She went on to say that she felt the Third Society was not living up to all that it could be.

I couldn't see what they were doing on campus. I got frustrated because I felt like this group of students from so many different areas of campus with all this quote-unquote power that they could do wonderful things like enhance the...initiative that the president was doing and distribute messages through their organizations or through their areas which they were leaders in. They weren't doing that from what it seemed like as an outsider looking in. So that just kind of continued to still turn me off.

Of the three students who were approached by the Third Society, Parker had the most exposure to the inner workings of the group. Likewise, he cited the most reasons for deciding to relinquish his membership. As previously stated, Parker was deterred by the many time commitments required of members. However, as he later explained, his reasons were deeper than just time constraints. Ultimately, he felt the Third Society had

nothing to offer him. He saw the organization as a largely political, and as the president of the inter-fraternity council, he had reached the peak of his leadership ambitions.

Further, Parker felt the Third Society would actually inhibit his ability to lead his organization in the way he wished. At the time of his tapping, the university was preparing for student government elections. The two main candidates for student body president were both Greek men. One was running with the political party favored by the Third Society. Parker had originally agreed with his executive council that they would remain neutral throughout the election. Of the experience, Parker said,

I felt as if we were just pieces of the chessboard. Where it's like if we get them, we are going to win the election...I felt like it prevented me from doing my best job as president...because I didn't want anyone on my executive board promoting either party because they were both Greek men running on both sides...I didn't want to go against someone in our organization, which is the inter-fraternity council. I don't care about any other influence because I don't want to piss off one fraternity or make another happy. I'm not here to choose favorites. So we stayed neutral and the Third Society wanted me to campaign for [the party] and that would have completely gone against what I said. You know, there was a reason for what I did, why I have that opinion, and I wasn't willing to change that.

When discussing how they made their decision either to join the Third Society or not to join the Society, it appears it came down to perception. All of the Third Society members spoke about admiring the current members and sensing the purpose of the Society to be meaningful and positive. On the opposite hand, the non-members either

could not determine the purpose of the Society or perceived it to be contrary to their leadership values.

### **Centrality of Secrecy**

To understand how student leaders inside and outside of the Third Society made meaning of the secret aspect of the Society, each group was asked their own set of questions. The Third Society members were asked three questions to learn how the secrecy contributes to the inner workings of the Society, as well as how it has impacted them during outside interactions with the community. The three questions were as follows. First, how do you feel the secret nature of the Third Society contributes to the experience of membership? Second, has there ever been a time when you were frustrated by a misconception about your Society? Finally, third, what is it like being a part of a Society that is easily recognizable on campus to non-members, but at the same time is a rather taboo topic?

### **Purpose of Secrecy**

The majority of the interviewed Society members described a deep feeling of connection when asked about the secret aspect of their organization. Ashley, Third Society alumna, expressed the sentiment that secrecy made the organization feel unique. It created a sacredness surrounding all organizational proceedings and interactions. She felt the sacredness contributed to a higher level of responsibility among members toward the organization. She knew no one would look for an excuse to miss a meeting or conversely use the organization as a reason to shirk responsibilities elsewhere. Ultimately, it made the importance of her relationships with other members of the organization very clear. The other alumna, Catherine, mirrored this sentiment describing

the experience as “intimate.” Sharing in the secret aspect bonded members together more closely. Finally, in Society member, Marcus’s, words, “The exclusivity just makes it a little more meaningful... If just anyone could join, then membership in such organizations would have less meaning.”

### **Paradox of Visibility**

The paradox of the organization being secret, yet highly visible on campus, affected the members in different ways. Many members spoke about how it felt wearing the Society’s bold insignia at university events, which is a part of the Society’s tradition, while realizing it generates controversy. Ashley expressed a mixture of feelings. She explained this was a topic of debate among her Society cohort while she was a member. They were concerned others may perceive the Society as showing off. She then described her belief that when the group is presenting itself in this cohesive manner, it is the responsibility of the members to combat such negative impressions by representing the organization in a way that is congruent with its values.

Similarly, Third Society member, Lawrence shared he was told by an older member when he was joining that announcing one’s membership in the Third Society to the greater university by coming out in insignia was “a glorious burden.” Lawrence described feeling honored and humbled by participating in the tradition of displaying insignia alongside his fellow members. “When we are in public together we represent something bigger than ourselves...from the ceremonial perspective, we are an extension of the university and that’s a heavy responsibility.”

Marcus spoke more about how the topic of his membership was approached by non-members, if at all. He explained,

Many of us aren't asked how we became members, but are often asked if we are members and some simply know enough not to ask. I suspect this is mostly because our members were already seen, before membership, as prominent campus leaders. So while we are a very public organization, most individuals understand that you simply don't inquire about it and the vast majority doesn't care.

Marcus described the experience of being at campus events wearing Society insignia as including mixed interactions. He shared,

There will always be those who aspire to become members, so they will be overly friendly. Conversely, there will be those who just don't agree with such an organization existing so they will express a more hostile or abrasive attitude.

Catherine articulated similar experiences. When displaying her affiliation through traditional insignia, she found individuals who would not have approached her in other circumstances, were eager to make her acquaintance. She also found that when people saw her on campus displaying Society emblems, they assumed her affiliation was paramount to her. However, she shared that those who know her best understand that the Third Society is a part, but not all of her. Catherine explained that these types of mixed interactions were something she had to prepare for when she accepted membership.

Catherine voiced the most important thing a student affairs professional should know about collegiate secret societies is that secret is not inherently wicked. Suspicious assumptions created around organizations containing a secret aspect are a challenge for members who belong and are not always warranted. Marcus mirrored this proposition

when discussing his experience as a secret society member. He summed up the controversy by stating,

The third-party perception toward the Third Society is changing in a positive direction, but people often don't like what they don't understand. There will always be those against such organizations no matter what university. It is simply because they have no deep knowledge.

### **Outsider's Perspective**

The respondents who turned down their bids for membership with the Third Society were asked what they believed the purpose of the secret aspect of the Third Society to be. Non-members, Amber and Parker, both shared that they could not find, what they felt, to be a legitimate reason for the Society to be a secret, calling it "weird," "strange," and "comical." Parker joked saying, "This isn't a Skull and Bones type thing. They are not that powerful." In his opinion, if a secret society is not participating in anything "illegal" or "sketchy" there is no reason why the society could not come above ground.

All three respondents expressed that they believed the secret aspect made the Society members feel superior. Each used his or her own words to express this feeling. Rory said she felt the secrecy gave Society members an air of "being elite and prestigious." Amber called it a "sex appeal or affluence." While Parker simply stated, "They think they're cool because it's secret." Another non-member, Rory, concluded saying, "I don't think it's necessarily the secrecy that is wrong... It is the way that you take membership and the entitlement it gives you."

Rory recognized some similarities between the secrecy the Third Society uses with the secrecy she has seen in Greek life. She believed the secret aspect of the Third Society likely bonds members together the way ritual does for sororities and fraternities.

### **Paradox of Visibility Revisited**

Amber and Parker both spoke about the paradox of visibility. Parker expressed, “I find it very interesting there is a secret society yet you know who’s in it. I find that strange that it’s not discreet about who is in it because they reveal themselves at certain events.” However, he did share an interesting aspect of the secrecy of the pledging process. While pledging, new members are not permitted to be seen associating with other new or current members who they had not met before pledging, in order to hide their connection with the Third Society. He explained, “It’s really weird because when you were first joining, when you’re pledging, they specifically tell you, ‘If you weren’t friends before the Third Society, you’re not friends in public.’”

Amber was able to speak about this concept from the alumni side as well. She explained that she has regularly seen alumni of the Society boast about their Society membership both in conversation and on social media. Both respondents found this behavior bizarre given the nature of the Society.

### **Society Membership and Student Leadership**

The final research question guiding this study was how does membership or non-membership in the Third Society impact a student’s leadership experience? I found the respondents’ status of being even a few months out of college was most valuable when exploring this question. Because their college experiences were complete, they had the ability to reflect on it in its entirety. To investigate this question, I asked the Society

members, first, how did membership in the Third Society enhance your college experience? Then, I asked if they could name a time when they were particularly impacted by the Society. Sometimes, I probed respondents with the question, what do you feel is the greatest benefit you have received as a result of the Third Society? Finally, I might probe to learn about how alumni in particular may have impacted the student's Society experience.

### **Benefits of Membership**

While some Third Society members spoke about how their student leadership experiences were affected by achieving higher leadership achievements or collaborating on campus initiatives with other Society members, most conversations ultimately turned to more intangible concepts, such as friendship and deeper emotional connection with the institution.

Ashley described her involvement in the Third Society as the “hands down the best experience,” even in comparison with her sorority. She referred to her time in the organization as the “highlight” of her time in college. All four members expressed similar sentiments. The most common benefit of membership expressed by the four individuals interviewed was the resulting relationships.

From a campus leadership perspective, all four spoke of the network their membership created for them. Lawrence shared he was most affected by the Third Society when he was running for President of Student Government. He stated, “Plain and simple, I wouldn't have won without them.” Without his Society connections, Lawrence felt his student leadership experience would have been vastly different because he would not have achieved this position on campus.

Ashley explained the Society allowed her to collaborate with student leaders whom she admired previously, while also meeting students from other realms of campus life with whom she would not have engaged otherwise. Marcus elaborated on this. He described how he was able to call upon this network of other high achievers when he needed help accomplishing goals in the organizations with which he was involved. Further, Catherine explained how these networks made her feel supported. She enjoyed being connected with other students who were also doing the most they could to benefit the university through their campus leadership. By collaborating with such a diverse group of high-achievers, she experienced personal growth, which she feels is inherent from being a member of an organization like hers.

Marcus, Ashley, and Lawrence also shared how this network has benefitted them after graduation. Ashley thanks the Third Society for the prestigious federal government job she currently holds. Lawrence said, “When I began looking for my first job out of school, several [Society alumni] leveraged their professional networks and helped [me] prep for the interview of my current job.”

Relatedly, several members spoke about the way the network creates a deeper connection to the university for them. Marcus stated,

I learned so much about the university through this organization that I would have not otherwise known or even thought to concern myself with...If the university needs help to accomplish a goal, nine times out of ten, one or more of our members are involved somehow to assist the university.

Lawrence shared similar feelings. Before his engagement with the Third Society, Lawrence’s involvement was strictly within the realm of Greek Life. He shared that the

Third Society “broadens my horizons and makes me a more informed student and citizen...Joining provided a better perspective on my own organizations, but also opened the door for collaborations and idea sharing that brought our entire campus to the next level.” Further, Marcus explained how he loves that by making just a handful of phone calls he can discover what is happening in any area of the university.

Beyond the professional, collaborative relationships inspired by the Third Society, several members described the importance of personal friendships resulting from engagement in the Society. Ashley shared how before she was a member, when she would see Society members at campus events dressed in insignia, she wondered whether the members were truly as close as they appeared, or if it was staged. She described how pleased she was to find the friendships to be genuine when she affiliated. She explained the cohort of members is too small to allow any non-fraternal attitude among members. Lawrence described this more deeply. “I cannot over emphasize what these people mean to me. The way they’ve shaped and influenced my life is a gift whose (sic) value cannot be measured.” He explained his Society companions have grown into best friends whom he believes will remain in his life for years to come.

### **Challenges of Membership**

Despite the benefits listed by members, many also described challenges associated with belonging to the secret society. All were rooted in the way membership affects their relationships with outsiders, including other students, faculty, and student affairs professionals. All four members stated their membership was not always well received, often because they feel others resent what they do not understand. Catherine referenced times when other students would speak negatively about the Third Society in

front of her, unaware she was a member. However, she explained the experiences did not hurt her; she was more amused by the incidents. She also talked about occasions when she felt faculty and staff members were watching her more closely because of her affiliation with the Society. She felt these faculty and staff members wanted to ask her about the Society, but refrained and chose to just stare instead.

Lawrence also described mixed reactions from others. “I encountered a wide range of different impressions people had of our organization. Love, hate, fear, admiration, but rarely is someone comfortable enough to state their true feelings directly. Usually I’d hear about it second hand.” He, also, described some difficult conversations with staff members.

Some staff would take me out to lunch and try to convince me to leave the group or tell me how bad it is. I had already drunk the Kool-Aid by the time they knew I was in. Some would ask me questions about it and I’d usually reply with a super serious face and silence.

Despite these challenges, none of the members interviewed expressed dissatisfaction. They recognized contention comes with the territory of belonging to a closed organization made up of powerful students. Overall, all members of the Third Society interviewed had overwhelmingly positive things to say about their involvement in the organization and the impact it has had on their success in college. Many of the individuals also expressed a desire to remain involved with the organization for years to come, either aiding collegiate members or fundraising for the university on behalf of the Third Society.

### **Non-Society Student Leadership Experience**

From students who were tapped by the Third Society and elected not to join, I wished to learn how they felt this may have impacted their college experiences and ultimately if they felt they made the best decision. Each of the three respondents was asked the following question. Looking back on your experience now how do you understand or make meaning of it? All three respondents stated they felt choosing to remain unaffiliated was the right decision and for the most part could not identify how their student leadership experience would have been enhanced by Society membership. Rory acknowledged while belonging to the Society was sure to have an effect on her life, she was already surrounded by people she considered role models of leadership. She felt, “They only wanted me because of my position and I didn’t want to be friends with people who only liked me because I was the president of an organization.” According to Rory, she already had the mentors and resources she needed to create the student leadership experience for which she had hoped.

Similarly, Amber could not name a way in which her experience would have been enhanced by Society membership. Amber’s greatest goal in college was to raise money for her campus philanthropy and she did not believe the Society would have helped her increase the amount of money raised. Further, she believes paving her own leadership path, without the Society, helped her grow the most. She explained this feeling by describing both her own student leadership experience and the experiences of the Society members she advises in her office.

I think not joining the organization, in my own personal opinion, has helped my own leadership skills and my own identity. I got to make my own choices and

figure out things for myself, whereas the students I work with have told me about how they are told by the organization how they should be doing, what they should be wearing, and how they should be representing themselves inside and outside of the Third Society. And that is a huge turnoff because the age is-- your age in college-- is a time of exploring and finding things out for yourself, making mistakes, fixing them, and realizing what you do and do not want to do in your life. So for me I guess, I don't think it would have affected me in any way. If anything, it gave me more freedom to figure things out for myself.

Parker had similar sentiments. He felt, rather than enhancing his student leadership endeavors, the Third Society would have hindered him from fulfilling his duties as council president with integrity. Like Amber, he said, "I don't need some organization to tell me how to live my life or what to do."

From her experiences working with and observing Third Society alumni through her work in alumni affairs, Amber feels the Society falls short in teaching their members what it means to be a good alumnus of the university. She said, "I do know, not even a lot of these individuals who are in this Society, are not huge donors of the University, they're not huge supporters of the University as a whole." Many of the Third Society alumni with whom she has interacted do little more than attend football games each year.

She also stated that unlike some Society member's statements, she has not seen many instances where the Society has benefited its members after graduation, while members are looking for jobs. Interestingly, this is the only area from which Parker thought he might have benefitted had he completed the membership process. He feels if he had become a member he would have been accepted to the university's law school. He

believes a letter of recommendation from one or more of the Society's distinguished alumni may have been enough for his acceptance. However, he still does not regret his decision. He was accepted to another law school, which was his first choice. He is also not interested in getting involved in politics after graduation, which is where many Society alumni are well connected. Further, he feels that while the network is certainly a benefit of membership, he feels he is capable of networking without the help of the Society.

My opinion on the whole thing is if there is someone you want their help from or you are trying to network with them, I am comfortable enough going up to someone and introducing myself and making a presentation to them, the complete normal way, without having to be in a secret society.

### **Possibilities of Secret Societies**

All three of the student leaders who elected not to join the Third Society had opinions about how the Society could be used as a positive force on campus. Rory and Parker both felt the Society would be more beneficial if it selected members who were younger, such as sophomores. Parker told me, "To be completely honest with you, if they had caught me my sophomore year it...would have been a whole completely different thing." At that time in his collegiate career, he was holding smaller leadership positions and he had not fully developed all of his own principles regarding leadership. Rory explains this in greater detail.

I think that it could be relevant if their mission was to pick out student leaders who are younger and maybe help develop them into the people they want to be and help enhance their experience by helping them grow.

Amber had even more ideas about how the Society could serve as a “wonderful tool.” From a student leadership perspective, she suggests greater collaboration on campus programming. She has observed many organizations, which are represented in the Third Society and espouse similar missions, hosting similar events throughout the year. She suggests pooling resources to host fewer, larger events and avoid over-programming.

From the alumni side, Amber sees the power the Society network could wield. She believes the network could allow the university to reach out to other powerful individuals around the state and educate them about the happenings at the university in order to turn them into donors and advocates within their own professional realms. She feels secret societies have the same potential for aiding the university as public organizations. At the core, however, she feels the advocacy must be done with the best interest of the university at heart, rather than using it as an opportunity for the Society to show off.

What these three suggestions have in common are the concept of greater inclusion and openness. Parker and Rory’s suggestion of inducting younger members would inevitably change the make-up of the organization and share the power it possesses with students outside the leadership elite. Amber’s idea of greater collaboration among Society members’ other student organizations would again spread the wealth of power and include more perspectives. Finally, using Society alumni connections to advocate for the University in different professional circles would create greater openness within the Society.

## **Secret Societies and Student Affairs Professionals**

While it is unrelated to my research questions, I was interested to know what type of relationship Third Society members seek from student affairs professionals to better understand what kind of impact administrators can make with secret societies. Members of the Third Society were asked if there are ways their organization seeks support or involvement from professional staff and what they feel university professionals' role should be in relation to such secret societies. Unsurprisingly, all four members politely explained university involvement is not something they were seeking. Marcus stated, "Because of the nature of our organization, all [of] the expertise we need can be found from within. As mentioned before, we leverage our diversity which includes professional backgrounds." Lawrence expanded on this. "So in theory, an organization like this and student affairs should not get along very [well]. And sometimes we don't...I don't recall ever looking or seeking out that support, but it was certainly offered. And often times willingly accepted." Lawrence and Marcus both expressed hope that relations between university administration and the Third Society would remain positive as they feel both share the same goals for the progress of the university.

Ashley's opinion also explained groups like the Third Society who set themselves apart do not require the assistance or support of higher education professionals. Like Lawrence, she touched on the contention this sometimes generated between Society members and professionals. She described while she had positive relationships with the professionals she interacted with in the student affairs department, she felt these professionals believed there was no need for her Society because there were many other registered student organizations in place within which high achieving students could

network. Related to the controversy surrounding the secret aspect of the Third Society, Catherine expressed she feels it is the responsibility of student affairs professionals to make sure students do not feel ostracized as a result of any affiliation, including that of a secret society.

Overall, all four of the members of the Third Society voiced warm feelings for the student affairs professionals at their university. Even though Society members explained their mission, like university administration, it is to aid the advancement of the institution. They do not seek professional involvement in the proceedings of the group. While this has made for some awkward moments, all expressed desire for positive relationships to continue between Society members and student personnel administrators.

### **Next Chapter**

The final chapter will analyze the findings outlined in this chapter. Propositions put forth in the second chapter about the Third Society categorization in Clark and Trow's (2001) student subcultures and Perry's (2010) theory of moral and ethical development will be revisited. Next, the Third Society will be evaluated on the risk it may pose to the University. Finally, intervention strategies and recommendations for student affairs practitioners will be presented.

## Chapter 5: Analysis

In this final chapter, the data gathered about the Third Society through the interview process will be analyzed through the lenses of student development and secrecy theory. First, evaluations of the discussed societies made in Chapter 2 using Clark and Trow's (2001) theory of student subcultures and Perry's (2010) theory of intellectual and moral development will be reexamined for applicability. Second, these student development theories will be used to evaluate the individual study respondents. These evaluations will be made to discern if there is a difference between the students who elected to join the Third Society and those who did not. This discussion will be expanded to examine the Third Society as a whole through the lenses of the two theories incorporating new information gleaned from the research process.

Then, the possibility of risk presented by the Third Society will be reexamined looking at the concepts of privilege, democracy, safety, and threat to institutional goals. These possible risks will be compared against the benefits attributed to the Third Society from both members and non-members. Finally, criteria for evaluating secret societies will be presented for the use of student affairs practitioners at other institutions, along with recommendations for interacting and intervening with secret societies.

## **Student Development Theory Revisited**

### **Clark and Trow's College Student Subcultures**

The work of Clark and Trow (2001) was presented in the literature review in an attempt to classify society members in the context of established student development theory. Correlations between particular classifications and the societies were analyzed to determine how differences between society member classifications might be related to the either harmful or benign nature of the society. The classifications are being revisited and applied to the study's respondents to determine if there is a pattern of difference between students who accepted their taps and those who did not.

Clark and Trow (2001) present four distinct student subgroups, which are used to classify college students. The subgroups are defined by the student's involvement with intellectual thinking and level of attachment to the institution. Students highly engaged in superior thinking and largely attached to their schools are classified as Academic. Collegiate students are also attached to their schools, but not highly engaged with high-level abstract thinking. Nonconformist students think at a high level, but have no affection for their institutions. Vocational students are neither engaged in high-level thinking, nor are they attached to their schools (Strange & Banning, 2001).

After interviewing members of the Third Society, it is clear these are, in fact, students belonging to the Academic subculture. All four espoused sincere passion for their University, as well as demonstrated a posture toward high-level thinking through the language they used when discussing their Society experiences (Strange & Banning, 2001). Their decisions to join the Third Society were all guided by evaluation of their

personal values and perceived similarities to those of the Third Society, whether it was loyalty to the institution, leadership, or civic engagement. Similarly, the three who elected not to join the Third Society also came to this decision through the type of high-level thinking characteristic of the Academic subculture, identifying incongruences in their personal values and those they perceived of the Third Society, for example, integrity, inclusivity, and independence. The group who turned down their taps for membership also demonstrated zeal for their institution through their heavy engagement in student groups. Therefore, it cannot be said that lack of attachment to the institution is the reason for turning down their taps. All seven members are indeed believed to be members of the Academic subculture. Consequently, student subculture and decision to accept or reject secret society taps have no correlation.

### **Perry's Theory of Intellectual and Moral Development**

Reexamination of the Third Society's classification in Perry's (2010) theory of intellectual and moral development was more challenging. Perry (2010) presents a continuum of moral and ethical development he believes students navigate during college. Students begin at dualism, where they exercise black and white thinking and believe that authorities provide infallible answers. Students transition to relativism when they recognize diversity of opinion, but believe all opinions hold equal weight. Multiplicity is achieved when students recognize the value of context and evidence when evaluating an ethical situation. Commitment is achieved when individuals take stands on ethical issues and argue their points using evidence (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Parker's interview revealed the Third Society's support and promotion of one of the student body's political parties. The Third Society's commitment to the support of this group and unwillingness to allow Parker to remain neutral ultimately led to his withdrawal from the Society. Affiliation with a political or idealistic group does not mean that a student or group practices dualistic thinking. In fact, it could indicate that the student has thoroughly examined all of the options and aligned with the one most in accordance with one's values, signifying commitment (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The aspect of this issue that is questionable is Parker's feeling of being forced to promote the political party, rather than being permitted to quietly remain neutral.

Another factor to consider when evaluating the intellectual and moral development of the Third Society and its members is the premium the group puts on diversity of student background. This implies the group seeks to exchange differing ideas and a search for congruent values from many areas of campus. However, in her testimony, Rory postulated the Third Society looks for diversity of involvement in order to influence the happenings of many areas of campus.

It is impossible to know fully what the internal relationship is between the Third Society and the political party and how it came to be. It is also impossible to know what combination of reasons exists for the Society's value on diversity. Despite the potential conflicts presented, because of my interactions with these Society members, I feel comfortable maintaining my stance that these students are well developed in regards to their intellectual and moral decision-making. This sophistication was evident when members were able to discuss the controversy surrounding the Society without putting

down those who oppose the group. By being able to understand and articulate others' points of view, the students demonstrated their superior decision making skills (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Again, when examining the students who did not join the Third Society, I do not see glaring differences between the group who did affiliate and the group who did not. Conversations with the students who were tapped and turned it down display these students' ability to examine an issue from multiple points of view and make an ethical evaluation using relevant evidence. Despite their own personal qualms with the Society, each member was able to comment on the potential benefits of belonging to the Third Society and how the Society could be improved. This is the hallmark of high-level ethical thinking (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Consequently, differences in intellectual and moral decision-making cannot be cited as the reason some chose to join while others did not.

Reexamining these two student development theories reveals no differences between the development and cultures of students who turn down their taps for Society membership and those that choose to accept. Their reasoning behind their decisions is individual to each student and his or her value systems and goals.

### **Evaluating Collegiate Secret Societies**

Generalizations about whether all secret societies pose a threat to their campuses cannot be drawn based on interviews with one secret society, nor based on the review of literature on only three societies. Secret societies are interesting because each is unique with regards to its purposes, level of secrecy, ritual, and membership criteria. In this section, I will provide criteria with which to evaluate secret societies to assess the

potential threat they may pose to the university. I will use the Third Society and the Machine as examples to show how criteria might be evaluated. The four criteria are the society's demands on the student, values regarding secrecy, organizational purpose, and diversity. The first two criteria are based off of propositions regarding secret societies presented by Hazelrigg (1969). I identified the other two through my conversations with Third Society members and non-members.

In 1969, Hazelrigg published a scholarly response to Simmel's (1906) article on secret societies. In his article, Hazelrigg (1969) presents nine propositions regarding secret societies. These propositions provide if/then-like statements hypothesizing how different factors will affect the development of secret societies. Hazelrigg (1969) notes that these propositions define randomly determined relationships; the results implied by the propositions cannot be forecasted with certainty. Of the nine, Propositions 6, 7, 8, and 9 are most relevant to the evaluation of risk presented by collegiate secret societies.

Propositions 6, 7, and 8 speak about the society after it has formed and discuss characteristics societies may develop that could negatively impact the greater society in which the secret society resides. Proposition 6 explains that the greater tendency toward a model of total inclusion within the society, the more likely the members will develop elitist attitudes and exaggerated self-importance. Proposition 7 proposes the greater the extent that secrecy is exercised by the society, the more likely the society will centralize its power in an authoritarian model. Proposition 8 goes on to explain that greater society reacts negatively and even violently toward secret societies that organize in this way and operate under such deep secrecy. Proposition 9 discusses the topic of visibility versus invisibility, which has been a common topic throughout this study. It proposes that as

secret societies come to adopt values widely accepted in greater society, the secret society will shift away from secrecy and authoritarian models toward greater transparency and looser affiliation (Hazelrigg, 1969).

### **Demands on the Student and Self-Importance**

As introduced by Hazelrigg's 6<sup>th</sup> Proposition, the first characteristic to observe when evaluating a secret society is how it carries itself in public. The Machine's message in "The Society of 1870" makes it clear the organization has a high opinion of itself and considers itself above the rest of the university (Theta Nu Epsilon Interest Group, 1989). In an interview, an independent student senator at the University of Alabama elaborated on this attitude.

There's a saying: Why do dogs lick themselves? Because they can...well there's some things [the Machine] do that are stupid, politically stupid. They have to know before they vote the way they do that it will be unpopular, but they do it anyway. Because they can (Weiss, 1992, p. 3).

The Third Society, while proud of its mission and members, does not demonstrate this same elitist attitude when discussing their society.

However, Hazelrigg's (1969) 6<sup>th</sup> Proposition states that a secret society likely "possess[es] aristocratic self-conceptions" when it puts great demands on its student members. When evaluating secret societies on their own campuses, student affairs professionals should take note of how much a secret society demands of its students' time, talent, and identity. If a secret society places overwhelming demands on its members, this may indicate the society views itself as overly entitled and above the law.

These elitist views can be harmful if the society places its own interests over the interests of the university and the student body.

In his interview, Parker described the detailed schedule the Third Society presented him with at the beginning of his pledge-ship. This great demand on Parker's time and the requirement that he must campaign for their political initiatives, a demand on his identity, communicate that the Third Society views itself and its mission highly and believes it should have priority over members' other commitments. This overwhelming demand contributed to Parker's decision to resign.

Further, all three students who elected not to join commented on the superior attitude with which Society members carry themselves. This potential aristocratic self-conception should be monitored. Hazelrigg (1969) cautions that it is this elitist attitude that has inspired members of secret societies in the past to commit illegal or immoral acts because the society members viewed themselves as above the law.

### **Secrecy and Implied Values**

Proposition Seven specifies how the level of secrecy can impact the consolidation of power within the secret organization. It posits the deeper the level of secrecy, the greater tendency toward centralization of authority. As previously discussed, some societies use secrecy as a mechanism to hide activities it believes will be condemned by greater society, perhaps because they are illegal or immoral (Hazelrigg, 1969). Therefore, examination of the extent of secrecy a society utilizes can inform a student affairs professional on the appropriateness of the activity occurring within the secret society.

As described previously, the Machine does not present itself publicly. However, it engages a vast number of students by cultivating representatives in dozens of Greek

organizations. These representatives hold all of the power for the entire chapter and this power is not to be questioned, thus indicating a strong centralized authority (Koval, 1983). Conversely, the Third Society maintains a public presence and simultaneously places all members on an even level, valuing each member for what he or she brings to the conversation. Based on the criteria provided by Proposition Seven, this indicates the Third Society is not likely engaging in disreputable activity, while the Machine might be.

Proposition Eight also refers to level of secrecy, expanding on the concept of hiding immoral activity presented in Proposition Seven. It suggests the more secret the society, the greater the danger of backlash from the greater population (Hazelrigg, 1969). There are documented examples of this scenario at the University of Alabama. The many student newspaper articles condemning the Machine and accusing it of wrongdoing demonstrate how secret societies can be polarizing on a college campus.

On university campuses, these two principles imply more public organizations present less of a threat to campus wellbeing because they likely hold more democratic values. Therefore, they are less likely to generate polarizing attitudes on campus, negatively impacting campus harmony. Student affairs administrators should be wary of societies who attempt to remain invisible; this indicates the society's values do not align with some of the key values of democratic higher education, transparency and freedom of inquiry.

Again, the Machine's attempts to remain below ground suggest the group's activities are not aligned with democratic values. The Third Society's public presence communicates a confidence that their mission is above reproach. Interviews with non-

members support this notion. Parker, for example, commented that if a society was not dishonest or immoral, there was no need for it to remain secret.

Proposition Nine further supports this notion. It posits, “As the members of a secret society increasingly emphasize universally valued ideas, objects, activities, or sentiments, the secret society tends to change in the direction of nonsecret forms of organization” (Hazelrigg, 1969, p. 329). To summarize, as a secret organization becomes more public, this may be an indication the organization does not feel the need to conceal their presence or purposes because they believe their values will not be perceived as threatening or contrary to those of the university.

### **The Purpose of the Society**

Next, when evaluating a secret society, student affairs professionals must inspect both the espoused and suspected missions of the society. The Machine and the Third Society both operate under the belief that a small team of student leaders is all that is needed to create a powerful impact on college campuses. How this principle is implemented and what issues these organizations direct their attention toward differ in important ways. While both are concerned with campus leadership, the small faction of Machine members coerces their many Greek brothers and sisters to vote a particular way to ensure victory, in a practice known as crushing (Faulk, 2005). Meanwhile, the Third Society demonstrates support for their members seeking leadership positions, but do not bully other students into voting their way. Also, it is important to note, there is no evidence to indicate the Third Society formally selects members to pursue leadership or bars other members from running.

The Machine's methods for impacting campus leadership are worrisome and warrant intervention by campus administrators as they interfere with the democratic values of transparency, equity, accountability, freedom of inquiry, and fair play, at the core of American higher education, particularly when opponents outside the Machine are met with violence and harassment.

The Third Society's engagement in campus leadership falls into a gray area when considering democracy. Rory expressed in her interview that students outside of the Third Society are at a distinct disadvantage when pursuing high-level leadership positions in student government. Students are selected for the Third Society because they have demonstrated leadership skills and commitment to university enhancement, making them potentially ideal candidates for student government. Also, networking and campaigning are by no means a crime, and are in fact hallmarks of the democratic process. However, something about the privilege these students have and their track record for always winning elections implies that other students are being disenfranchised through the process. This potentially elite access to student leadership experiences does not warrant drastic intervention by student affairs administrators, but it should continue to be monitored by appropriate parties. It will particularly important to reexamine the fairness of the election process if Third Society affiliated candidates do not possess the desired qualities of a well-rounded campus leader or affiliated student leaders demonstrate cronyism in distribution of student funding or opportunities.

Beyond concern for student government, the Machine and the Third Society have few common interests. The Third Society's public activities center on topics attempting to benefit the greater campus community, including protecting campus traditions and

honoring faculty. Conversely, the Machine's undertakings are only for the benefit of the Greek community, less than one fifth of the entire campus population (Beadle, 2004). After pushing its ballot for SGA and fraternity and sorority council executive councils, the Machine turns its attention to distributing campus honors among its constituents, including the award of Homecoming Queen. The Machine allegedly schedules which sorority the distinguished lady will come from each year. A student from a Machine backed Greek organization who once ran for a senate seat without Machine permission was threatened that if she did not withdraw from the race, her sorority would be penalized by being banned from having a Homecoming Queen for a certain number of years (Beadle, 2004).

Ray Cole, Alabama state politician and 1987 Machine backed SGA executive council member, admitted, after African-American women defeated sorority Queen candidates two years in a row, his administration introduced legislation per the direction of the Machine, to dismantle the bloc voting strategy utilized by black students to win. The student newspaper named the bill The Negro Queen Exclusion Act. This bill did not pass. However, in the end, the Machine via SGA was able to change the homecoming court voting rules to put the crown firmly back on Greek heads (Weiss, 1992). This behavior is exclusive and disenfranchises the greater campus community. It calls for intervention from the administration to create a more equitable campus.

Catherine shared her opinion of what sets the Third Society apart from its more nefarious cousin, the Machine. She feels the value her organization places on the university in its core mission protects it from diverting from its original purpose. She believes secret organizations can become harmful when the focus shifts to serving the

interests of individual members. Lawrence shared a similar attitude. He explained the Third Society customarily refrains from engaging in matters unrelated to the advancement of the school. “While the Machine is busy keeping black girls out of sororities, we are uniting with the university administration to help our school reach the top 25 and eventually AAU distinction. Those kids in Alabama will eventually succumb to societal pressures or segregate themselves into irrelevancy.”

Catherine and Lawrence speak to the importance of examining a secret organization’s alignment with university missions, as well as identifying the population the organization aims to serve when evaluating a secret society’s potential impact on the campus. There will always be organizations seeking only to benefit their own members. However, organizations that disenfranchise other students by monopolizing leadership and enrichment opportunities by creating barriers to them through the hoarding of influence must be impeded.

### **Diversity**

When scrutinizing secret societies on their campuses, student affairs professionals should take note of the level of diversity represented in the group. Diversity refers to a range of racial, political, religious, and socio-economic background. High levels of diversity may signal the group’s values are in line with the higher educational value of equity. Also, diversity within the group may keep the group from marginalizing any other outlying groups.

Gist (1938) hypothesized the recruitment process of secret societies necessarily homogenizes the organization’s population. The Third Society proves homogeneity does not define all secret societies. Marcus directed “look at any group photo that has been

made public and you will notice [diversity] almost immediately. Our diversity is not just surface level; our backgrounds are very diverse as well.” In fact, all four of the Third Society members interviewed expressed that the strength of the organization is rooted in its diversity. Catherine explained the way in which the diversity of the group transforms its character for the positive. She spoke about times when others outside her group had made a point to comment on the uncommon diversity of the Third Society to her. Likewise, Lawrence described the diversity as contributing to an atmosphere of moral righteousness.

The Third Society is not the only secret society that has embraced diversity. Beginning in the 1990s, Skull and Bones and other prestigious Yale societies began prioritizing diverse backgrounds over scholastic and leadership merit. After twenty years of fiery debate between collegiate members and alumni, Skull and Bones made national headlines for admitting the first women to the secret order in 1991 (Robbins, 2002). The Machine also made the bold shift to include women in a 14-13 vote in 1988 (Weiss, 1992).

However, the Machine does not measure up to other, better-received societies on the scale of diversity. An angry, independent Alabama student declared, “The only reason I see them still here [is] they are the good ol’ boys and good ol’ girls. The only reason I see them still in power is to make sure your white Anglo-Saxon man and his wife stay in power” (Beadle, 2004, p. 4). Lack of diversity not only harms the organization’s public image, it deprives the organization from the benefit of diversity of thought. Ashley believes the diversity of thought in the Third Society is what ultimately protects the group from slipping into corruption. She explained the membership selection process seeks to

maintain a balance of diverse organizational backgrounds. Selecting students purely based on friendship is not tolerated, as it could open the society up to cronyism.

Based on the evaluation of the Third Society in the four categories above, demands on the student, depth of secrecy, mission, and diversity, the Third Society does not demand the aggressive intervention clearly needed with the Machine at Alabama. The Third Society places a significant demand on its members' time and is sometimes interpreted to possess an elitist attitude. However, this potential self-importance has not manifested itself in a way that threatens the safety or goals of the institution. The Third Society's public presence and its mission's alignment with that of the institution are positive attributes of the Society, as is its premium on diversity. However, because the group is secret, its values are contrary to the democratic values of transparency, accountability, and freedom of inquiry. Further, the society's track record for dominance in student government infringes on the ideal of an equitable college environment. Overall, the Third Society's activities are not yet so threatening as to demand drastic intervention.

On the other hand, the Machine measures poorly on each of the criteria presented. Its aristocratic self-conception has led it to make choices harming other students. Its attempt to remain invisible implies that its activities would not stand up to outside criticism. The invisibility also flies in the face of the democratic values of transparency, accountability, and freedom of inquiry. The mission of the Machine, as interpreted by its actions, is to maintain power within a small faction of students. This mission is undemocratic and contrary to the purposes of the university. Finally, the Machine does not have any level of diversity represented among its members. Consequently, the

Machine is evaluated as a society that presents significant risk to its greater community and demands intervention.

### **Student Affairs Interaction and Intervention**

When faced with a secret society on campus, student affairs professionals should observe all they can about the organization. Then, professionals should evaluate the society upon the four characteristics previously discussed: demands on the student, values regarding secrecy, purpose, and diversity. After reflecting on these characteristics to determine the likely impact the group will have, the professionals should chart a course of action for how to engage with the group. Intervention is required in instances like the one present with the Machine at the University of Alabama. It is likely this group has become so out of control because it has been left unchecked for such a long time. Other, more benign groups can and should be engaged through thoughtful interactions between student affairs professionals and society members. This section will discuss recommendations for positively interacting with secret society members and possibilities for intervening with groups that have been perceived as threatening.

#### **Interaction**

While secrecy is inherently suspicious, student affairs professionals can never expect to know all of the proceedings of any fraternal organization. As a result, student affairs professionals must treat the members as individuals and put faith in their honor by treating them with respect. Treating individual society members with respect communicates confidence in the student. Confidence, then, serves as the intermediary between what is and is not known about the secret society. The hope is, by demonstrating this confidence, the student will develop a trusting relationship with the professional.

Therefore, if the student ever needed help, he or she would know there was a professional at the university to call upon. Further, the positive relationship with the administrator would remind the student of his duty to the university and discourage activity that would bring the university harm.

Discussing society membership with the individual group members is not recommended under most circumstances. Student society members have deep emotional ties to their organization. Any judgment or disdain for the organization perceived by the student can damage the relationship built by the professional. Even positive comments about the organization should be exercised with caution. Praising public work of the society can be positive, but overall the student must know the professional views him as a unique, multifaceted individual of which society membership is only one part.

Individual students are on campus only a short time, but societies have lasted on campuses for hundreds of years. Student affairs professionals will not have the opportunity to develop trusting relationships with all members of every secret organization. However, creating even one meaningful relationship with one student can build positive reputational credit for the professional in the society. By the same token, knowing a small number of society members can help professionals understand what they can expect from the society as a whole.

The opinions expressed by Third Society members in Chapter 4 support my assertion that building positive relationships with students who belong to societies is the most effective way to impact the society. The goal of the relationship should not be to influence or control society affairs, but to engage individual students in programming and conversation that inspires holistic intellectual, moral, and leadership development.

## **Intervention**

Before examining policy options for intervening with nefarious societies, it is important to note that it is difficult to intercede with some secret organizations, such as Skull and Bones, because Yale University does not formally regulate them. In 1856, the Order of Skull and Bones was officially incorporated as the Russell Trust Association. Afterward, the society no longer met on university property; they met in their Tomb on High Street, which was paid for by the Trust. Because the society does not utilize university space or funds, Yale cannot formally regulate its proceedings, as opposed to Greek organizations at Alabama whose land is owned by the University of Alabama. Therefore, before considering intervention strategies, student affairs professionals must examine how the secret society is related to the university and how it might fall under their jurisdiction. Student affairs departments should always entreat societies to register as student organizations, so the university can utilize established conduct avenues to hold such groups accountable. Administrators can make this option attractive by highlighting the privileges granted to registered student organizations.

Student affairs administrators must identify where the society is interfering with either university policy or university values, and then design intervention methods to address the interference. Unfortunately, it is difficult to outline catchall strategies for practitioners to employ. Because of the unique nature of secret societies there will never be a productive intervention that will work for all. The key is working to turn the intervention into a teachable moment, educating the society members about higher education's values of democracy, equity, transparency, accountability, and freedom of

inquiry. Student affairs administrators can also use their platforms to instruct all students on the democratic values promised by higher education.

### **Formalized Secrecy on College Campuses**

Ultimately the question of whether collegiate secret societies belong on college campuses must be addressed. After reading about these groups and talking to both members and non-members, it is my feeling that if the mission of a secret organization is to engage in any way with student life, it should be incorporated into the formally regulated student organization structure at the university. Both the Machine and the Third Society exercise power over the proceedings of student life at their respective universities. It is unfair that this power is contained outside of structures and avenues that are accessible to all students.

At the University of Alabama, the students who belong to the Machine are predominately white, wealthy students who were well prepared for college and, consequently, are at a greater advantage to succeed in student leadership realms already. By creating a secret group, unmonitored by the university to protect their power on campus, the society creates barriers to leadership for other students and disenfranchises them. Similarly, the Third Society impacts student politics and leadership at their university. They have not harmed any parties during their tenure the way that the Machine has and the benefits their members have named are admirable. However, I do not think these positive experiences would in any way be diminished if they were registered as an official student organization. Phi Beta Kappa, Mortar Board, and Greek letter fraternities are all registered on the campuses they reside and are still able to maintain their exclusive membership requirements. By remaining underground, collegiate

secret societies insinuate that they have something to hide. By coming aboveboard, these organizations can maintain their secrecy and ritual in a way that is also democratic because they would be engaging in campus proceedings in a transparent fashion.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited by a number of factors. To begin, there is significantly limited scholarship on secret societies on college campuses. There are no primary documents available from the three societies researched. The bulk of the foundational research is from secondary sources and student newspaper articles. Second, the sociological foundations for this study are not written specifically for collegiate secret societies, but more for secret criminal organizations and Free Masons. Therefore, the foundation is not quite as strong as it would be for a study on one of these groups. Further, the theories and propositions presented in this sociological secrecy scholarship is not rigorous and is not rooted in formal research.

Next, the results of this study are representative of one secret society at one institution. Because of the unique characteristics of each collegiate secret society, it cannot be assumed the experiences of other students in other societies at other institutions will have had the same experiences. Further, the sample of Third Society members is small. At the time that data collection was completed the data was thoroughly saturated. However, greater numbers of interviews, particularly from respondents who were student members at different times might provide greater insight. The same cannot be said of the population of respondents who were tapped and declined to join. This sample represents every such individual who I know of that exists for this secret society, except the one individual who elected not to respond to my invitation to participate.

Also, the data was reported from the individuals themselves. This makes it impossible to independently verify their responses. It is possible respondents may have altered their answers to protect their reputation or that of the society to which they belong. Similarly, the respondents are all alumni and are speaking about their experiences as undergraduates. It is possible their responses may have been different while they were still in school, experiencing the day-to-day implications of their membership or non-membership.

Further, secret societies are secret. Inherently, there are obstacles to any research on the topic. In his article, Hazelrigg (1969) states, “Gaining entry in order to study [a secret society] ‘in process’ would be a much more difficult feat than gaining access to a bank, a factory, or a prison” (p. 329). The secrecy of the organization influenced the data collection techniques, limiting sharp probing in an effort to maintain trust with the Third Society members.

Finally, this is the first study of its kind. There was very little past experience from other research to draw upon. This may have contributed to some uneven or unpolished research methods and missed opportunities for exploration.

### **Topics for Future Research**

The dearth of research on the topic of collegiate secret societies leaves the door open to many new investigations and perspectives on the topic. First, case studies of specific secret societies around the country would add to the body of scholarship on the unique societies at various campuses and the impact that they have there. A greater understanding of individual organizations in turn could provide more examples of strategies for productively engaging these groups. Information about how to engage with

secret societies could also be garnered through interviews with administrators on campuses where secret societies are present.

Secondly, to better understand how students make meaning of these groups, interviews with prospective members and non-affiliated students would shed light on the topic. Also, interviewing students who have defected after joining would be meaningful. Another way to understand the secret aspect of organizations would be examining the ritual books and other materials documenting society procedures.

Thirdly, research testing the principles outlined in Simmel's (1906) seminal work and the resulting reexaminations could strengthen the credibility of secrecy scholarship with regards to all forms of secret groups. These studies could be extended beyond collegiate secret societies to Greek organizations, Free Masons, and secret professional groups. Finally, comparisons between different categories of secret groups could provide insight on how collegiate secret societies compare to other categories of secret groups.

### **Conclusion**

“There is something about powerful secret societies that adds an element of the enigmatic to a university atmosphere. They rekindle our interest in the unknown” (Lohr, 2005, p. 2). Institutionalized secrecy has had a place on college campuses for nearly two hundred years and it is likely to continue to hold a place for years to come. While some societies have been harmful to their schools, many have provided students with opportunities to network with like-minded individuals, serve their communities, and grow. The best way to keep societies honest is by building trusting relationships with the organizations and its members from the beginning. While involvement in a secret society may play an important part in students' college experiences, ultimately they are in college

to learn inside and outside the classroom. Student affairs professionals have a responsibility to aid the development of all students regardless of any affiliation. In her interview, Catherine stated that a secret society student is, in the end, a student. Like any other college student, she will make mistakes and achieve successes. It is wrong to assume secret societies are always the reason for students' triumphs and failures.

However, institutions of higher education are also supposed to be places that work to correct society's wrongs. It is crucial that student affairs administrators are equity-minded when approaching their roles. They must be cognizant of the ideals of democracy, equity, fair play, transparency, accountability, and freedom of inquiry, and identify places on campus where they are not present. It is administrators' responsibilities to make efforts to correct these inequities (Witham, Malcom-Piqueux, Dowd, & Bensimon, 2015). One of the responsibilities of higher education is to develop engaged, educated citizens (Kolb, 2011). If underrepresented students feel marginalized in the leadership practices in campus culture, this will color their expectations for the value society places on their voice in society. To nurture students in a manner that prepares them to be active members of our democratic society, we must give them an equitable place in student culture.

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## Appendix A: Third Society Approach Letter

Dear [Potential Respondent],

I'm hoping you are well! Currently, I am a first year graduate student in the Higher Education Student Affairs program at the University of South Carolina. We are studying theory related to students' development in college, current events in student affairs, and the overall culture of college life. We are required to complete a semester long project researching a particular unit of student culture, along with performing several interviews with students who belong to the group.

I have selected secret societies my area of study. Like fraternities and sororities, I have found through my review of the literature that these selective groups of high achieving students can be misunderstood. Groups who have diverted from their original purposes have drawn suspicion and contempt from greater society. However, in their truest form these societies can unite remarkable students who may have never met otherwise, promote positive initiatives on campus, and create a strong base of strong alumni to support the university and its students even after they graduate.

It is clear to me that [Third Society] falls into the latter category of these groups. The students involved hold significant leadership roles on campus where I have seen them engage in positive, meaningful initiatives such as supporting veteran students, recognizing noteworthy faculty, and preserving important campus traditions

In order to gain a better understanding of how such groups impact and enhance the student experience for those involved, I would love to talk to you about your

experience. I recognize that some of the beauty of these experiences is what is shared between its members. To give you an idea of what I would like to learn, I have attached a list of questions I would like to ask. If you choose to talk to me, I will completely understand if there are any you would prefer to leave unanswered. Further, I will honor any level of anonymity and confidentiality that will make you most comfortable, including using pseudonyms and refraining from naming [the Third Society], [University], and the [State]. Also, I would be pleased to send you your section of the paper before I submit it so you have the opportunity to clarify and correct any misunderstandings.

Please know that this is purely academic. Working with high achieving students is my passion. My hope is by learning more through our conversation, I will discover new ways to support students like those represented in [the Third Society] on their collegiate journeys. Please let me know if you would be willing to discuss your experience with me and we can find a time to talk which is most convenient for you.

Best,

Kenzie

Kenzie Crane

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[mcrane@email.sc.edu](mailto:mcrane@email.sc.edu)

## Appendix B: Non-Member Approach Letter

Dear [Potential Respondent],

I'm hoping you are well! Currently, I am a second year graduate student in the Higher Education Student Affairs program at the University of South Carolina. I am studying theory related to students' development in college, current events in student affairs, and the overall culture of college life. To complete my graduation requirement, I am writing a Master's thesis in which I conduct original research and write on my results.

I have selected secret societies my area of study. After exploring the current literature on the topic, I have become intrigued by the range of secret societies present on American college campuses. On one of the spectrum are groups who have diverted from their original purposes have drawn suspicion and contempt from greater society. However, in their truest form these societies can unite remarkable students who may have never met otherwise, promote positive initiatives on campus, and create a strong base of strong alumni to support the university and its students even after they graduate.

I am interested in [the Third Society]. The first half of my research project has included interviewing several members of [the Third Society] about how their membership impacted their college experience. After hearing their stories, I am now interested in how [the Third Society] and its inherent secrecy is interpreted by highly involved student leaders who do not belong. Because of your impressive involvement at [University] and obvious dedication to the University's initiatives, I am interested to talk to you about your experience and opinions.

To give you an idea of what I would like to learn, I have attached a list of questions I would like to ask. If you choose to talk to me, I will completely understand if there are any you would prefer to leave unanswered. Further, I will honor any level of anonymity and confidentiality that will make you most comfortable, including using pseudonyms and refraining from naming [the Third Society], [University], and the [State]. Also, I would be pleased to send you your section of the paper before I submit it so you have the opportunity to clarify and correct any misunderstandings.

Please know that this is purely academic. Working with high achieving students is my passion. My hope is by learning more through our conversation, I will discover new ways to support students like those represented inside and outside of [the Third Society] on their collegiate journeys. Please let me know if you would be willing to discuss your experience with me and we can find a time to talk that is most convenient for you.

Best,

Kenzie

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## **Consent Form**

*The Tap: An Examination of the Controversy of Secret Societies on College Campuses*

Mackenzie Crane, University of South Carolina

### **Introduction and Purpose**

You are invited to participate in research study conducted by Mackenzie Crane. I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership and Policies Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my Master's of Education degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs, and I would like to invite you to participate. The purpose of this study is to examine the controversy surrounding [the Third Society] at [University]. This form explains what you will be asked to do if you decide to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and feel free to ask any questions you like before you make a decision about participating.

### **Description of Study Procedures**

I will gather my data through interviews with student leaders at [University], like yourself. Interviews will be completed over the phone and recorded with Google Voice, then transcribed using Dragon Dictate. Your involvement will consist of one interview lasting thirty minutes to one hour. You will be asked to review sections of the final manuscripts related to your individual interview at the end of the process to ensure I fully understood your meanings.

You have been selected because you are/were a prominent member of the leadership community in the realms of Student Government, Greek Life, service, resident life, and/or athletics.

### **Potential Risks**

I am aware of the reputational risks present should your views on the [the Third Society] become common knowledge on campus.

### **Safety Precautions**

To avoid these reputational risks, identities and identifying factors will be concealed in the dissemination of research results. You will be assigned a pseudonym. Further, the name of the society, the university, and the state in which the society is located will be concealed to further protect you from being identified.

### **Benefits of Participation**

Taking part in this study is not likely to benefit you personally. However, this research may help us understand the potential impact secret societies can have on their campuses generally and students individually. Further, it may be used to develop policy for increasing democracy and access to student enrichment opportunities when secret societies are disruptive to large-scale student development.

### **Costs**

There will be no costs to you for participating in this study.

## **Confidentiality**

Participation will be confidential. A pseudonym will be assigned to you at the beginning of the project. This pseudonym will be used on project records and in any subsequent research dissemination. No one other than the primary investigator will be able to link your information with your name. Study records/data will be stored in protected computer files. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

## **Contact Persons**

For more information concerning this research, or if you believe you may have suffered a research related injury, you should contact Mackenzie Crane at (904) 536-7875 or email [crane.kenzie@gmail.com](mailto:crane.kenzie@gmail.com) or Julie Rotholz at (803) 777-2831 or [jrotholz@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:jrotholz@mailbox.sc.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Thomas Coggins, Director, Office of Research Compliance, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, Phone - (803) 777-7095, Fax - (803) 576-5589, E-Mail - [tcoggins@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:tcoggins@mailbox.sc.edu)

## **Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without negative consequences. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner.

1. Please list your involvement at [University] and what different realms of higher education and student culture you were exposed to and engaged in?
2. In your own words can you describe [the Third Society]?
3. Can you describe your personal interactions and exposure to [the Third Society] and any experiences that you've had with them?
4. What you think is the purpose or the relevance of the secret aspect of [the Third Society] and is that important?
5. What affect does this organization have on the university as a whole?
6. Looking back on your own personal experience, now, how do you understand or make meaning of [the Third Society] in relation to your own leadership experience?
7. What place do you think secret societies have in higher education? And should they be there?