

# The Nicknames of American Greek-Letter Organizations

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## Abstract

Most sororities and fraternities in the United States have at least one nickname, the formation of which always follows the regular processes of English neology for shortened forms, and, additionally, always adheres to the basic parameters of non-duplication (of other similar organizations' nicknames), brevity, and uniqueness. Besides serving as a ready means of identification, these nicknames serve important psycho-social functions: fraternity and sorority members use them as one way of achieving social solidarity and a group identity, both within and across organizational boundaries; non-members use them as a convenient means of subcultural derision.

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Greek-letter organizations – more commonly known as sororities (for females) and fraternities (for males) – have been present in the United States for generations. Indeed, the first fraternity (Phi Beta Kappa, now a national honor society) was founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the first sorority (Alpha Delta Pi) in 1851 at Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia (Robson 5, 7). Such organizations have become recognized collectively as something of an institution in most American colleges and universities, and so are an undeniable part of American culture. Yet to my knowledge, fraternities and/or sororities have never come under the scrutiny of names scholars.

This lack of onomastic inquiry is puzzling, not least because of the many questions concerning the specific Greek letters used in the names. Why, for example, do the names consistently contain only two or three letters rather than one, four, or more? Is it true that those two or three letters abbreviate a “secret” motto that is putatively known only to the members of each individual organization (Robson 8), and if so, what are these mottoes? How and why are specific letters assigned as the name of a new sorority or fraternity? How did three fraternities – *Acacia*, *Farmhouse*, and *Triangle* – apparently sidestep the Greek-letter naming pattern, and why? And on and on: the questions are many, the answers few.

Perhaps other scholars can address the questions raised above; in the present essay, however, I would like to focus exclusively on the nicknames

of Greek-letter organizations.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, after briefly detailing my methods and outlining a taxonomic system of classification for the nicknames, I will address questions concerning how and why they are formed and the various psycho-social functions they serve.

### Methods of the Study

I initially became interested in the nicknames of fraternities and sororities while researching the sociolinguistic correlates of membership in such organizations at Kansas State University (about which I will say more later). As I interviewed both members and non-members (henceforth "Greeks" and "non-Greeks," respectively), I became aware that the full form of the Greek-letter name was used only very rarely. Much more frequently, an abbreviated form of the name was used, as, for example, *A E Pi* for *Alpha Epsilon Pi*, *Sammy* for *Sigma Alpha Mu*, *Pi Phi* for *Pi Beta Phi*, *Theta* for *Kappa Alpha Theta*, *Sig Pi* for *Sigma Pi*, and *Tri-sig* for *Sigma Sigma Sigma*. But there seemed to be no regular pattern for shortening the full name to the nickname. Moreover, the Greeks and non-Greeks did not use the nicknames in equal proportion: Greeks appeared to prefer the shortened versions, and non-Greeks the longer. Clearly, there was a great deal to be sorted out here.

My first task was to acquire a working corpus of fraternities and sororities, but I soon learned that no such definitive corpus exists. In fact, the number of fraternities and sororities in the United States varies greatly according to the kinds of Greek-letter organizations considered—active, inactive, honorary, professional, recognition, social, service, and so forth—and these categories are not mutually exclusive. A fraternity may be active, honorary, and affiliated with the engineering profession, for example; or a sorority that was once a recognition society may now be a service organization, or may even be inactive. Even more confusing is that some fraternities and sororities have changed their names—at times to correspond with a change in purpose or function, at times for other reasons.

To quickly acquire a corpus that was accurate, current, and workable, I ultimately decided to focus my attention on only those general women's sororities that are active members of the National Panhellenic Conference ( $n = 26$ ), those general men's fraternities that are active members of the National Interfraternity Conference ( $n = 57$ ), and those historically black fraternities and sororities that are active members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council ( $n = 8$ ). These are the social organizations that exist on most college and university campuses in the United States, not to mention the organizations that Americans tend to associate most readily with the

words *sorority* and *fraternity*. I therefore began my research with a master list of 91 Greek-letter names (see Appendix 2).

Determining whether those organizations had nicknames, and, if so, what those nicknames were, proved considerably more problematic than I had anticipated. For the fraternities and sororities with local chapters at Kansas State University, of course, I merely had to interview students who were members, all of whom were extremely cooperative; but for the remaining 54 Greek-letter groups, I had to rely on information provided by the various national headquarters, and their cooperation was usually difficult (or even impossible) to obtain. Most answered my questions with questions, several simply refused to discuss the matter, and a few, I later learned, lied (by claiming their organization had no nickname when in fact it did).<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, however, I located agreeable informants who were both able and willing to supply the information I requested.<sup>3</sup>

I will conclude this section by mentioning that eight of the Greek-letter organizations included in this study (five sororities and three fraternities) each have two nationally-known nicknames, and one sorority has three nationally-known nicknames, rather than just one. Alpha Delta Phi is known both as *Alpha Delt* and *AD*; Alpha Chi Omega as both *Alpha Chi* and *A Chi O*; Alpha Gamma Delta as both *Alpha Gam* and *A G D*; Alpha Gamma Sigma as *Alpha Sig* and *Ag Sig*; Alpha Sigma Alpha as *Alpha Sig* and *Alpha*; Kappa Delta Rho as *Kappa Delt* and *K D R*; Sigma Kappa as *Sigma K* and *Sig Kap*; Zeta Tau Alpha as *Zeta* and *Z T A*; and Alpha Xi Delta as *Alpha Xi*, *A Z D*, and *Fuzzy*—so while the number of full names in my corpus is 91, the number of nicknames is 101.<sup>4</sup>

## A Taxonomy of Classification

As Paul L. Leslie and James K. Skipper, Jr., have rightly noted, “the first step in any systematic study of a set of names is to develop a scheme of classification” (31); thus in this section I explain the taxonomy used for classifying the various nicknames of the Greek-letter organizations in my corpus. (For a summary of that taxonomy, see Appendix 3.) Since all those nicknames represent shortenings of one kind or another, just three questions sufficed to define them into four basic categories:

1. Has the original name been reduced to an alphabetism?
2. If not, has the original name been reduced to an orthoepic acronym?
3. If not, has the original name been clipped in any way?<sup>5</sup>

Negative answers to all these questions meant that the original name had no nickname, and was therefore excluded from further categorization; the other three rubrics, however — each of which defines a basic method of word-formation in English — were further subdivided in various ways.

Nearly one-third of the nicknames in my corpus — thirty-two percent — are alphabetisms, and just over half of those are “complete”; that is, all the elements of the original name have been reduced to their initials, as in *A G R* for *Alpha Gamma Rho*, *D U* for *Delta Upsilon*, *K D* for *Kappa Delta*, *S T G* for *Sigma Tau Gamma*, and *Z T G* for *Zeta Tau Alpha*. By contrast, just two percent of the alphabetisms involve only the first element of the name, with the final element left intact (*D Chi* for *Delta Chi* and *A Phi* for *Alpha Phi*); just three percent involve only the final element, with the initial element left intact (*Psi U* for *Psi Upsilon*, *Chi O* for *Chi Omega*, and *Sigma K* for *Sigma Kappa*); and just one percent involve the medial element only, with the initial element left intact and the final element clipped (*Pi L* for *Pi Lambda Phi*).

All the remaining alphabetisms involve various combinations of elements. In five percent, for example, the initial and medial elements have been alphabetized, with the final element usually retained (*A D Pi* for *Alpha Delta Pi*, *A E Phi* for *Alpha Epsilon Phi*, *A E Pi* for *Alpha Epsilon Pi*, and *A O Pi* for *Alpha Omicron Pi*), but in one instance clipped (*A D* for *Alpha Delta Phi*). And in three percent, the initial and final elements have been alphabetized, with the medial element retained (*A Chi O* for *Alpha Chi Omega*, *A Xi D* for *Alpha Xi Delta*, and *D Phi E* for *Delta Phi Epsilon*).

More intriguing than the alphabetisms, perhaps, are those six nicknames that constitute various kinds of orthoepic acronyms, in which the combined elements are spelled and pronounced as a new word and not as individual letters. In one instance, the final element of the original name is kept, but hindclipped, yielding *Ag Sig* for *Alpha Gamma Sigma*. In another, the initial element is orthographically and phonetically reinterpreted, the second element is represented alphabetically, and the final element is deleted: *Fiji* /fiji/ for *Phi Gamma Delta*. The third orthoepic acronym retains the original name’s initial element and substitutes a new grapheme for the final element to conform to English orthography: *Pike* for *Pi Kappa Alpha*. Yet another entails an orthographic reduplication of the final element, to which is added a new phoneme: *Sammy* for *Sigma Alpha Mu*. Another consists of a foreclipped, orthographically reinterpreted first element, a retained but transliterated medial element, a deleted final element, and a reassignment of primary stress on the whole: *Fuzzy* for *Alpha Xi Delta*. And the last involves the orthographic representation of the initial element’s first letter, again to conform to English orthography: *Teke* for *Tau Kappa Epsilon*.

More than half the nicknames in my corpus (52 percent) require that the original name be clipped in some way. In five cases, that clipping is of the entire medial element: *Kappa Order* for *Kappa Alpha Order*, *Phi Psi* for *Phi Kappa Psi*, *Phi Tau* for *Phi Kappa Tau*, *Phi Chi* for *Phi Lambda Chi*, and *Pi Phi* for *Pi Beta Phi*. And in eleven others the entire final element is clipped, as in *Alph Chi* for *Alpha Chi Omega*, *Delta Kappa* for *Delta Kappa Epsilon*, *Gamma Phi* for *Gamma Phi Beta*, and *Lambda Chi* for *Lambda Chi Alpha*. Again, it is interesting to note that the entire initial element of a name is never clipped, though in three instances — all involving *Sigma* in a fraternity's name — it is hindclipped (*Sig Chi* for *Sigma Chi*, *Sig Nu* for *Sigma Nu*, and *Sig Pi* for *Sigma Pi*).

These kinds of hindclipping, especially in combination with one or more of the other elements of the original names, can be at once intriguing and tedious. Only once, for example, is just the hind part of the final element clipped, when *Kappa Sigma* becomes *Kappa Sig*, and only once are just the hind parts of all elements clipped, when *Sigma Kappa* yields *Sig Kap*. But the entire final element and the hind part of the medial element are clipped eleven times, as when *Alpha Delta Phi* becomes *Alpha Delt*, *Beta Sigma Psi* becomes *Beta Sig*, *Phi Sigma Sigma* becomes *Phi Sig*, *Pi Kappa Phi* becomes *Pi Kap*, and *Tau Epsilon* becomes *Tau Ep*;<sup>6</sup> and the entire medial element and the hind part of the final element are clipped four times (*Alpha Sig* for *Alpha Gamma Sigma*, *Phi Sig* for *Phi Kappa Sigma*, *Phi Delt* for *Phi Mu Delta*, and *Phi Kap* for *Phi Sigma Kappa*).

There are three other subcategories in which hindclipping in combination with the clipping of other elements of the original name occurs. In the first, which contains only one nickname, the medial element and the hind parts of both the initial and final elements are deleted (thus *Sigma Phi Epsilon* becomes *Sig Ep*). In the second and third, which contain just one and two nicknames, respectively, the medial and final elements and the hind part of the initial element are all deleted. The difference between the two is that in one case the clipping alone defines the nickname (*Delta Tau Delta* yields *Delt*), but in the other a derivational morpheme is added in the form of a prefix (producing *Tri-delt* from *Delta Delta Delta* and *Tri-sig* from *Sigma Sigma Sigma*).

Finally, combinations of entire elements alone are clipped in two subcategories. The initial and medial elements of the original names are clipped twice: *Sigma* for *Phi Beta Sigma*, and *Theta* for *Kappa Alpha Theta*. And the medial and final elements are clipped in ten cases: *Alpha* for *Alpha Phi Alpha*, *Beta* for *Beta Theta Pi*, *Delta* for *Delta Sigma Theta*, *Kappa* for *Kappa Alpha Psi*, and *Sigma* for *Sigma Gamma Rho*.

Some of the Greek-letter names in my corpus – eleven, to be exact – have no nickname at all. I have already mentioned three of these as not containing Greek letters: *Acacia*, *Farmhouse*, and *Triangle*. All the others are extremely short two-letter names: *Chi Phi*, *Chi Psi*, *Delta Phi*, *Delta Psi*, *Phi Mu*, *Theta Chi*, *Theta Xi*, and *Zeta Psi*. Why do these names have no shortened form? The most obvious answer may also be the best. They are all just one or two words long already (often one-syllable words<sup>7</sup>), and any further shortening may be perceived as unnecessary or even impractical. (In neology as in economics, the law of diminishing returns often plays a significant role). I will consider other possible answers to this question below.

### The Origins and Psycho-Social Functions of the Nicknames

In this section I will address the difficult questions that must lie at the heart of any study of nicknames: How and by whom are those nicknames formed? Who uses them? What psycho-social functions do they serve, either in the subculture of which they are a part or in the larger, dominant culture? Why are these nicknames used rather than any others? What kind of “psychological reality” does the structural taxonomy used above have for the users of the nicknames (cf. Holland 266–67)? In what kinds of contexts can the nicknames can be used, and what are the rules governing that use (Cf. Leslie and Skipper 274–76)? And finally, what non-onomastic correlates, if any, exist to help confirm the various patterns of onomastic usage?

Let us begin with the obvious. All the nicknames of Greek-letter organizations, because they are shortened versions of the full names, serve the important purpose of verbal economy (cf. Barrett 106). Many of the Greeks whom I interviewed, in fact, repeatedly insisted that this was the *only* reason the nicknames existed—because full communication with fewer syllables was the ultimate goal, in the same spirit, we may imagine, of *phone* for *telephone*, *TV* for *television*, and *lab* for *laboratory*. As will become clear, Greek-letter nicknames have a much more complicated existence than these informants realized (or wanted to divulge), but their point is not lost: *AKL* represents a savings of three syllables over *Alpha Kappa Lambda*, *Tri-delt* is four syllables shorter than *Delta Delta Delta*, and *Teke* saves its speakers five syllables over *Tau Kappa Epsilon*. And as I mentioned earlier, those fraternities and sororities that have no nickname already have names that are quite short, seven containing three syllables and four containing just two.

Precisely because all the Greek-letter nicknames represent shorter versions of the full names, they are perceived as a kind of slang by the people who use them. In fact, more than a few Greeks explicitly referred to the nicknames as “slang forms,” and said that their use of them depended somewhat on the context in which they found themselves speaking. If they wanted to help define the boundaries of the group (that is, identify Greeks from non-Greeks), or exert their independence from figures of authority, or even strengthen the socio-cultural ties between themselves and other Greeks, the nicknames were used—and it is axiomatic that slang is used in just these ways. Moreover, since adolescents are widely acknowledged as among the most frequent users of slang, Greek-letter nicknames would fit especially well into the prevailing patterns of college-age discourse.

Thus do we see that these nicknames reflect a certain kind of psychological reality for the young people that use them. (See, for example, Leslie and Skipper; Skipper; and Wilson and Skipper). It is not the individual names that are so important, except, that is, as onomastic symbols that distinguish the various societies from one another, or even, strictly speaking, the specific categories into which the taxonomy above places them, except as reflections of the general processes of English word-formation. But since all the nicknames are shortened versions of the longer names, they are perceived as slang, and hence as a natural and integral part of their users’ language system. We may suspect that this perception is part of the reason why the Greek-letter nicknames have endured for so many generations and are used so frequently in conversations (about which more later).

I will explore further the functions served by the nicknames of fraternities and sororities shortly, but first I would like to address the question of morphological formation: Put simply, how did the various nicknames come to be as they are? The specific answer to this question regarding each organization, regrettably, has been lost to history, since the nicknames are nearly as old as the various fraternities and sororities themselves. That is, for example, we cannot say why *Alpha Phi Delta* has been shortened to *Alpha Phi* rather than *A P D*, or why *Sigma Kappa* has been shortened to *Sigma K* and *Sig Kap*, but not to *Sig K*. But a close scrutiny of the nicknames in the taxonomy above, combined with the testimony of numerous Greek informants, has led me to conclude that three basic rules applied in the formation of each of those nicknames (besides the usual rules of English word-formation, of course):

**Rule 1: Do not duplicate the nickname of another sorority or fraternity if referential confusion is likely to result.** Notice from the taxonomy and the appendices that the only nicknames with dual referents are *Kappa*, *Zeta*, and *Sigma*, and that in each instance differences of gender and/or race distinguish the various memberships from one another. (Racial segregation among Greeks is nearly as much the rule in the 1990s as it was between 1870 and 1922, when the societies in question, and no doubt also their nicknames, were formed.) And notice, too, that no onomastic overlapping at all occurs among the general fraternities or sororities, even though it is certainly possible, and perhaps even predictable, given the especially large number of names containing the letters Alpha, Delta, Phi, and Sigma. Finally, it is interesting to note that violation of this rule would, on some level, also seem to violate rule 3.

**Rule 2: Create a nickname that is as short as reasonably possible.** I have already discussed the brevity of Greek-letter nicknames as a function of general verbal economy and adolescent slang in particular; now I wish to make the point that such brevity is an important criterion of the nickname-formation process itself. Speakers who use nicknames rather than their full counterparts “save” an average of nearly 2.4 syllables each time they refer to one of the Greek-letter societies in question—an overall reduction of more than 50 percent. As to why this rule does not operate any more often than it does—why, for example, all the organizations do not reduce their names to just one or two syllables—the answer must surely be that such further reductions, if they did not violate rule 1, would violate rule 3.

**Rule 3: Create a nickname that reflects the uniqueness of the organization in question.** Operation of this rule can be seen most clearly in the six orthoepic acronyms—*Pike*, *Teke*, *Fuzzy*, *Sammy*, *Figi*, and *Ag Sig*—though it is evident in many other nicknames as well (note, for example, the assonance of *Phi Psi*, *Phi Chi*, and *Pi Phi*; the morphological uniqueness of *Tri-delt* and *Tri-sig*; the boldness of single-letter names such as *Alpha*, *Delta*, *Theta*, *Zeta*, *Kappa*, *Sigma*, *Omega*, and *Beta*; and so forth). Indeed, the rule may even help explain why *Triangle*, *Acacia*, and *Farmhouse*, the three fraternities not having Greek-letter names (a unique feat in itself) also have no nicknames.<sup>8</sup>

These rules seem to be important to Greeks in the sequence that I have given them here: fraternities and sororities will avoid duplicating one another's nicknames at all costs, will only secondarily strive for brevity,



and will stalwartly maintain that whatever nicknames remain are the most creative and unique possible.

The question of exactly who uses these nicknames is perhaps more interesting than how the nicknames are formed. The easiest and most obvious answer, of course, is merely “Greeks use them,” but that would beg the question and, in any case, tells only part of the story. In a separate study (1992) in which I examined the phonological correlates to being a Greek or non-Greek at Kansas State University, I recorded numerous hours of conversation both between myself and students and among just students. A tally of how many times any Greek-letter organization’s nickname was used per hour (excluding my own usage), as well as by whom and for what general purpose, appears in Table 1.<sup>9</sup> There we can see not only that the frequency of nickname usage varies significantly according to the Greek or non-Greek status of the speaker ( $p < 0.05$ ),<sup>10</sup> but that non-Greeks typically use those nicknames derogatorily or negatively ( $p < 0.01$ ) – an important point to which I will return shortly.

Table 1. Greek nickname usage among Greeks and Non-Greeks.

Speaker	General Purpose of Usage	Usages per Hour
Greek	complimentary/positive/neutral	17.2
	derogatory/negative	0
Non-Greek	complimentary/positive/neutral	0
	derogatory/negative	6.8

If it is true that Greeks use their organizations’ nicknames significantly more often than non-Greeks, then why should it not also be true that former Greeks – Greek alumni – continue in that same tradition? In fact, although I have no quantifiable data to support my observation, my general perception is that adults who were once Greeks *do* continue to use their former organization’s nicknames. This makes it all the more mysterious why so many of the leaders at the various fraternities’ and sororities’ national headquarters were reluctant to share with me information on their groups’ nicknames. Perhaps, as I have already mentioned, those leaders were merely attempting to protect their societies’ honor, integrity, and general interest from the curiosity of an unknown investigator (see note 2). But perhaps, too, other motives are at work here.

Numerous student-Greeks have told me of the ongoing struggle between the various national organizations and their individual chapters—struggles over matters of governance, the maintenance of minimal standards, and the like. I believe that these workers at the national level deliberately refrain from using their societies' nicknames to further distance themselves psychologically from the student-Greeks they oversee, thereby to gain some further measure of control or authority over them; and that their denial of the existence of such nicknames with me was, in part, a simple reflex of that curtailed usage. What is interesting in any case, however, is the net effect this lack of nickname usage by national workers has on the student Greeks, who respond, perhaps predictably, by using the nicknames all that much more frequently (as a symbol of rebellion, independence, or whatever).

This "rebellion effect" was first called to my attention by a student-Greek at Kansas State, whose testimony I quote here at some length:

Yeah, they're always getting on our back at nationals. And to some degree they have that right and responsibility. But sometimes it's like, we can't do anything right. I mean, if we're not enforcing standards and restrictions that are in the national charter, that's one thing. But our nickname? Give me a break! Sometimes when we answer the phone we say "Tri-delt" instead of "Delta Delta Delta," and one time when nationals called us, that's what the girl who answered the phone said ["Tri-delt"]. Well, you'd have thought it was the end of the world or something. I mean, suddenly we're getting letters from nationals telling us the "proper" way to answer the phone, and threats of reprimands—you wouldn't believe it. So then they started calling us, like, once or twice a day, just to see how we'd answer the phone, you know? They never told us that; they'd always have some big reason for calling, but that often you know something's up. And once we figured out what was going on, we figured, there's no written rule against using the nickname, it's just them [nationals] trying to tell us what to do again, so this time we're going to do what we want. So we start using the nickname even more when we answer the phone, and they got all pissed off at us. But we figure we've got to have some freedom, you know? So we used it even more, and did they ever get pissed! But we didn't care. When it comes to something like our nickname, we're going to do what we're going to do.

I elicited similar testimony from the members of several Greek-letter organizations on the Kansas State campus, and can only conclude both that such tensions exist nationwide and that they result in a bonding of the student-Greeks, which bonding often manifests itself in an increased use of their groups' nicknames.

This observation raises another interesting question: Do the members of sororities and fraternities use their nicknames to express what has been called "social solidarity" (Holland 258) or "group identity" (Dorian) in other ways as well (see, e.g., Price and Price; McGeachy; Yassin; Brandes; Cohen; Foster; Pitt-Rivers; Iszaevich; Morgan et al; and McDowell)? The

answer is resoundingly affirmative. Not only do Greeks use their various organizational nicknames as symbols of “internal” intimacy and strength within their individual groups (that is, vis à vis other similar groups of Greeks), but as a means of achieving “external” unity within the Greek subculture as a whole (or, in other words, achieving greater separation from the dominant non-Greek student culture, or from the adult-Greek national subculture mentioned above).

Let us first consider the “internal” functions served by these nicknames. When a student joins a fraternity or sorority, he or she begins a process of socialization that is measurable at least linguistically (Murray), and perhaps nonlinguistically as well. Part of that socialization is into “Greekness” — what it means to be a Greek, the privileges and responsibilities that accompany that identity, and so forth. But the larger part of that socialization is into the specific Greek-letter society the student joined — what it means, in other words, to be a “Pi Phi,” or the ceremonies and rituals that go along with being a “Delt,” or the history of the “Pikes,” or the basic beliefs and philosophy behind the “Sig Eps,” and on and on. And, of course, nothing more precisely defines a fraternity or sorority — perhaps, indeed, any organization — than its name, and by implication, its nickname.

Some evidence for the link between Greek socialization and the use of the organizational nicknames can be seen in Table 2, where we can see that the longer a person is a member of a fraternity or sorority, the more frequently he or she refers to that group by its nickname rather than its full name. These differences in onomastic usage are not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), but they are very suggestive: the longer a student is a Greek, the more he or she is socialized into his or her organization, the more he or she “feels” like a member of that group (cf. Milroy), and consequently the more he or she uses the society’s nickname. In short, the nicknames of Greek-letter societies seem to serve as one means of allowing their users to symbolize the social solidarity they feel with one another (cf. Bernard; Holland 258).

The “external” psycho-social functions the various nicknames serve are even more dynamic. Earlier we saw not only that Greeks use their societies’ nicknames much more frequently than do non-Greeks, but that the non-Greeks’ usage is frequently disparaging (see Table 1); and I have written elsewhere of the general enmity that seems to exist between Greeks and non-Greeks. Now, it is axiomatic among sociologists that if two groups of people have a conflictive relationship, then that relationship helps to develop what is known as “group consciousness” — that is, an awareness on the part of individuals that they belong to a group and that the group has an identity. Put another way, “in the course of battling ‘them,’ people

Table 2. Greek nickname usage as a function of membership longevity in Greek-letter organizations.

Length of membership in Greek-letter organization	Full-name usages per hour	Nickname usages per hour
less than 1 year	3.2	0.8
between 1 and 2 years	2.6	1.7
between 2 and 3 Years	1.4	4.3
between 3 and 4 years	0.3	6.3

Note: The same database was used here as was described earlier in the introduction to Table 1. The second and third columns refer only to the number of names or nicknames used in reference to the speaker's own fraternity or sorority.

develop a stronger sense of who 'we' are" (Popenoe 345). And as I mentioned above, the largest part of the Greek "we" is surely the various names, and the nicknames, that identify them. Hence the nicknames, even as they serve as a target for the non-Greeks, also serve as a point of focus for the Greeks.

The precise role that the nicknames play in this regard is difficult to quantify, though not, perhaps, impossible. Table 3 contains the results of a survey that I conducted among 250 Greek and 250 Non-Greek juniors enrolled at Kansas State during the fall 1991 semester. Because I collected all the data orally, I had a captive audience and therefore received a 100 percent response. We can note that among the many characteristics the respondents listed, "student" occurs most often for both groups, followed by the individual courses of study the students are pursuing. But then the two groups diverge sharply: among non-Greeks, a variety of answers ranging from hobbies to sports to religious affiliations, among others, appear; among Greeks, however, the vast majority mentioned their status as Greeks (and those respondents frequently mentioned the specific name—and usually the specific nickname—of the Greek-letter organization of which they are a member).

### Final Remarks

My final remarks can be brief. Holland (265, 268) has noted that while scholarly interest in nicknames and nicknaming practices has grown sub-

Table 3. Self-reported characteristics of Greek and Non-Greek identity.

	Greek Responses	Non-Greek Responses
Student	226	220
Major field of study	187	155
Status as a Greek	151	—
Doer of some hobby	73	132
Player of some sport	32	86
Follower of some religion	11	52
All other responses	70	157

Note: The instructions prompting the responses listed here were as follows: "Think carefully about 'who you are.' Excluding all physical features, features of your personality, and specific references to ethnicity or geographic origin (such as Italian, American, or Kansan), list three terms that best describe you or help to give you your identity or make you who you are, at this particular point in your life." The number following each response indicates how frequently it was offered by the various respondents.

stantially since the 1960s, it is still very much in its infancy, with a great deal of work remaining to be done. In the present essay, I have attempted a modest amount of that work, focusing on the nicknames of American Greek-letter organizations. We have seen that while these nicknames—which follow the regular processes of English neology for shortened forms (within the basic parameters of non-duplication, brevity, and uniqueness)—serve as viable means of identification, they serve other roles as well (cf. Holland 258). The ease with which they can be used and the fact that they can be incorporated especially easily into college slang undoubtedly play some part in their continuing popularity, but they also serve important psycho-social functions as well. Specifically, Greek-letter nicknames serve as symbols of unity for both members and non-members of sororities and fraternities: members use the nicknames as one means of achieving social solidarity and a group identity, both within and across organizational boundaries; non-members use the nicknames as a convenient means of subcultural derision.

I have intended this study to be exploratory, not definitive; certainly Greek-letter nicknames in the United States may define other roles, serve other functions, and, indeed, contain numerous other aspects than those discussed here. During the course of my research, for example, I discovered that the shortened nicknames often serve as starting points for other derived forms that are much more sexually suggestive or explicit (such as when *Tri-delt* yields *Try Me*, or *D G* produces *Dick Grabber*).

These kinds of nicknames are uniformly used only by members of other Greek-letter societies—in fact, the nicknames seem to be unknown outside the Greek system—but do they serve any purpose or reflect any social meaning beyond the usual adolescent preoccupation with sex? This question and others like it will have to serve as the focus of the next study of Greek-letter nicknames in the United States.

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## Notes

1. I must make two important points here. First, as will soon become obvious, I am using *nickname* in a way that not all scholars of names will endorse. Because the word derives from Old English *ekename*, literally “also name,” many contemporary onomasticians prefer to reserve it for names that occur only “in addition to” the given name, and explicitly exclude abbreviations, diminutives, or other shortened forms of the original (see, e.g., Lawson, Morgan et al., and Skipper). A distinct minority of names scholars, however, have allowed that shortened forms of given names do legitimately occur within the “nickname” rubric (see, e.g., Allen, Holland, and Mook), and it is this precedent that I follow here. There are, I believe, sound theoretical reasons for adopting such a stance, but such arguments deserve more than to be relegated to a footnote, and would, in any case, take me too far afield. Merely suffice it to say that pragmatically, *nickname* is easier and less cumbersome to use repeatedly than *diminutive* (or *shortened*) *form of the original*. The second point is that the nicknames I will be dealing with are based on the Latin alphabet spellings of the various Greek letters in question, and only twelve of those Greek letters are more or less identical with their Latin alphabet counterparts (thirteen if you count *upsilon/v*; see Appendix 1, The Greek Alphabet). This results in some odd, even non-Greek-looking nicknames (for example, when *Alpha Kappa Lambda* is alphabetized to *A K L*, and *L* resembles no Greek letter), as well as some nicknames that appear misleading (as when *Alpha Tau Omega* is alphabetized to *A T O*, and the *O* could just as easily, and more appropriately, perhaps, abbreviate *Omicron*). But such problems are merely functions of the transliterative process; they do not seem to bother the coiners and users of the nicknames, and should not concern us further.

2. In their defense, I should perhaps explain that the various national representatives with whom I spoke were merely attempting to protect the integrity of their organizations. Sororities and fraternities and their members have taken a great deal of abuse over the past generation or two—much at the hands of journalists and other writers with questionable motives—some of which has been deserved, but much of which has not. The popular conception of the party-loving, beer-guzzling Greek who has no sense of propriety or responsibility seems to grow stronger every year, when in fact most of the available research suggests that such a characterization is no more applicable to Greeks than to non-Greeks. (Ms. Barb Robel, the Advisor for Greek Affairs at Kansas State University, has my thanks for explaining this to me.) And lest I give the impression that *no* representative from the various national headquarters was helpful *without* also being suspicious or disagreeable, let me state plainly that such was not the case: a (small) number of these people, in fact, answered my questions with no qualms or ill will whatsoever.

3. I need to make two more important points here. First, I am very aware of the epistemological problems with the direct-question approach to gathering information—informants can and do misrepresent facts, omit information crucial to the purpose of the

researcher, and, as I have already said, occasionally lie; but in this study I had little choice but to rely on personal interviews for my data. To minimize the inherent problems associated with the method, I interviewed as many people affiliated with each sorority or fraternity as possible, always at least three and sometimes as many as fifteen. The second is that my list of nicknames may not include some that readers remember from their college years. One of the members of the Editorial Board, for example, recalls that the members of Delta Kappa Epsilon called themselves *Dekes* rather than *Delta Kappas* or *Kappas*, and that non-Greeks often referred to themselves as *G D I* (abbreviating *God Damn Independents*). The fact is that despite my best efforts, some Greek nicknames may have eluded me, and, of course, others may have changed over the years. And as for *G D I* (which does still exist, though it is restricted in usage to mainly Greeks), I did not include it simply because my focus in this essay is on the nicknames of Greek-letter organizations, not their non-Greek counterparts.

4. There seems to be no regional, social, ethnic, or other kind of pattern to the use of the multiple names. In every instance, they merely co-occur and enjoy more or less equal popularity among the people who use them.

5. These are not the only questions I could have asked, of course, nor are the four categories that resulted the only ones I could have used; hence no special significance should be attached to either the questions or the categories. In fact, although the categories worked well enough for my purposes, they are not, strictly speaking, mutually exclusive: two subcategories under the heading "alphabetisms" — each containing only one nickname — have a clipped form as one of their elements, and so could just as easily have occurred under the rubric "clippings" (and would have occurred under "clippings" had I asked question 3 before question 1.) In any case, however, I claim no statistical significance (or even special importance) for any of the numbers or percentages in the following discussion; I provide them merely as an interesting insight to how the nicknames in my corpus can be divided.

6. The question of which *Sigma* in *Phi Sigma Sigma* has been clipped entirely and which has been only hindclipped is not an easy one to answer. In fact, any time the original name has two identical elements, only one of which — or part of one of which — remains in the nickname, a legitimate question can be raised as to which of the identical elements has been clipped and which remains, as when, in addition to the example already given, *Alpha Phi Alpha* and *Alpha Sigma Alpha* both reduce to *Alpha*, *Kappa Kappa Gamma* reduces to *Kappa*, *Delta Tau Delta* reduces to *Delt*, and *Phi Sigma Sigma* reduces to *Phi Sig*). Though such a question can never be answered with absolute confidence, two facts determined my decision in each case: first, I polled the members of each organization, or, if that was not possible, the various national headquarters; and second, I determined which of the possibilities was more likely based on the relative frequency of nicknames in the taxonomic subcategories in question. To take one example, the subcategory in which the medial and final elements of the original names have been clipped contains many more nicknames than the subcategory in which the initial and medial elements have been clipped, so I chose the former rather than the latter subcategory for *Alpha Phi Alpha*, *Alpha Sigma Alpha*, and *Kappa Kappa Gamma*. At no time did the facts gathered from the polls and the frequency analyses contradict each other.

7. Here and elsewhere, I count syllables rather than morphemes for two reasons. First, syllables are more psychologically real for most speakers, especially when word-length or phrase-length is a consideration. *Kangaroo* for example, which has three syllables but one morpheme, seems longer than *cats*, which has one syllable but two morphemes; and the six-syllable *Alpha Kappa Lambda* seems much longer than the three-syllable *A K L*, even though both have three morphemes. Second, a morpheme cannot, by definition, be subdivided and still be meaningful, but that is precisely what has happened with forms such as *Delt*, *Ep*, *Kap*, *Sig*, and the like.

8. There is a folkloristic story among Tri-delts which, though perhaps apocryphal, nevertheless illustrates the importance of a nickname's uniqueness to the organization it names. Delta Delta Delta, founded in 1888, quickly took the nickname *Tri-delt*, and was mortified a decade later when Sigma Sigma Sigma adopted *Tri-sig*, thus reducing the novelty of the prefix *tri-*. In the nearly 100 years since, that mortification has evolved into a more or less friendly, but still pronounced, competitiveness between these two sororities.

9. It is not always easy to deduce whether someone's language is intended as complimentary, neutral, or derogatory, of course, but close attention to such suprasegmental cues as pitch, intonation, juncture, and tone, not to mention the facial expression of the speaker, can usually reveal a great deal. I omitted from Table 1 any instances in which the speaker's underlying attitude seemed questionable.

10. Here and elsewhere, all p-levels of significance are according to the standard chi-square test. The minimum level of significance usually accepted in the social sciences is  $p < 0.05$ , which means the results could have occurred by chance fewer than five times in 100. Higher levels of significance, such as  $p < 0.01$ , which means the results could have occurred by chance fewer than one time in 100, indicate correspondingly higher levels of reliability.

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**Appendix 1**  
**The Greek Alphabet Used in**  
**Fraternity and Sorority Names**

Greek Letter	Latin Alphabet Name	Roman Equivalent(s)	Greek Letter	Latin Alphabet Name	Roman Equivalent(s)
Α	Alpha	A	Ν	Nu	N
Β	Beta	B	Ξ	Xi	none
Γ	Gamma	C, G	Ο	Omicron	O
Δ	Delta	D	Π	Pi	P
Ε	Epsilon	E	Ρ	Rho	R
Ζ	Zeta	Z	Σ	Sigma	S
Η	Eta	H	Τ	Tau	T
Θ	Theta	none	Υ	Upsilon	U, V, W, Y
Ι	Iota	I, J	Φ	Phi	none
Κ	Kappa	K	Χ	Chi	X
Λ	Lambda	L	Ψ	Psi	none
Μ	Mu	M	Ω	Omega	none

Note: Two former letters of the Greek alphabet do not appear here: Ϝ (Digamma, from which derived the Roman *F*) and ϝ (Koppa, from which derived *Q*).

**Appendix 2**  
**Names of Greek-letter Organizations**  
**Fraternities in National Interfraternity Conference (n = 57)**

Acacia	Alpha Chi Rho	Alpha Delta Gamma
Alpha Delta Phi	Alpha Epsilon Pi	Alpha Gamma Rho
Alpha Gamma Sigma	Alpha Kappa Lambda	Alpha Phi Delta
Alpha Sigma Phi	Alpha Tau Omega	Beta Sigma Psi
Beta Theta Pi	Chi Phi	Chi Psi
Delta Chi	Delta Kappa Epsilon	Delta Phi
Delta Psi	Delta Sigma Phi	Delta Tau Delta
Delta Upsilon	Farmhouse	Kappa Alpha Order
Kappa Alpha Society	Kappa Delta Rho	Kappa Sigma
Lambda Chi Alpha	Phi Delta Theta	Phi Gamma Delta
Phi Kappa Psi	Phi Kappa Sigma	Phi Kappa Tau
Phi Kappa Theta	Phi Lambda Chi	Phi Mu Delta
Phi Sigma Kappa	Pi Kappa Alpha	Pi Kappa Phi
Pi Lambda Phi	Psi Upsilon	Sigma Alpha Epsilon
Sigma Alpha Mu	Sigma Chi	Sigma Nu
Sigma Phi Epsilon	Sigma Phi Society	Sigma Pi
Sigma Tau Gamma	Tau Epsilon Phi	Kappa Epsilon
Theta Chi	Theta Delta Chi	Theta Xi
Triangle	Zeta Beta Tau	Zeta Psi

**Sororities in National Panhellenic Conference (n = 26)**

Alpha Chi Omega	Alpha Delta Pi	Alpha Epsilon Phi
Alpha Gamma Delta	Alpha Omicron	Pi Alpha Phi
Alpha Sigma Alpha	Alpha Sigma Tau	Alpha Xi Delta
Chi Omega	Delta Delta Delta	Delta Gamma
Delta Phi Epsilon	Delta Zeta	Gamma Phi Beta
Kappa Alpha Theta	Kappa Delta Kappa	Kappa Gamma
Phi Mu	Phi Sigma Sigma	Pi Beta Phi
Sigma Delta Tau	Sigma Kappa	Sigma Lambda Gamma
Sigma Sigma Sigma	Theta Phi Alpha	Zeta Tau Alpha

**Fraternities and Sororities in National Pan-Hellenic Council (n = 8)**

Alpha Kappa Alpha	Alpha Phi Alpha	Delta Sigma Theta
Kappa Alpha Psi	Omega Psi Phi	Phi Beta Sigma
Sigma Gamma Rho	Zeta Phi Beta	

Note: Only those Greek-letter organizations that are members of the National Interfraternity Conference (general men's fraternities), National Panhellenic Conference (general women's sororities), or National Pan-Hellenic Council (historically African American fraternities and sororities) are listed; honorary or discipline-specific Greek-letter organizations do not appear.

**Appendix 3**

**Nicknames of American Greek-letter Organizations,  
by Taxonomic Category**

**I. Alphabetisms (32)**

**A. Of all elements (17)**

Alpha Delta Gamma: A D G	Alpha Gamma Delta: A G D
Alpha Gamma Rho: A G R	Alpha Kappa Alpha: A K A
Alpha Kappa Lambda: A K L	Alpha Sigma Tau: A S T
Alpha Tau Omega: A T O	Delta Gamma: D G
Delta Upsilon: D U	Delta Zeta: D Z
Kappa Delta Rho: K D R	Kappa Delta: K D
Sigma Alpha Epsilon: S A E	Sigma Delta Tau: S D T
Sigma Tau Gamma: S T G	Zeta Tau Alpha: Z T A
Zeta Beta Tau: Z B T	

**B. Of initial element (2)**

Delta Chi: D Chi	Alpha Phi: A Phi
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**C. Of initial and medial elements (5)**

**1. With final element retained (4)**

Alpha Epsilon Pi: A EPi	Alpha Delta Pi: A D Pi
	Alpha Epsilon Phi: A E Phi
	Alpha Omicron Pi: A O Pi

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2. With final element clipped (1)  
Alpha Delta Phi: A D

- D. Of initial and final elements (4)  
Alpha Chi Rho: A Chi R

Alpha Chi Omega: A Chi O  
Alpha Xi Delta: A Xi D  
Delta Phi Epsilon: D Phi E

- E. Of medial element, with final element clipped (1)  
Pi Lambda Phi: Pi L

- F. Of final element (3)  
Psi Upsilon: Psi U

Chi Omega: Chi O  
Sigma Kappa: Sigma K

### II. Orthoepic Acronyms (6)

- A. With retention of hindclipped final element (1)  
Alpha Gamma Sigma: Ag Sig

- B. With orthographic and phonetic reinterpretation of initial element, initialistic representation of medial element, and deleted final element (1)  
Phi Gamma Delta: Figi (/fiji/)

- C. With retention of initial element and substitution of new grapheme for final element (1)  
Pi Kappa Alpha: Pike

- D. With orthographic reduplication of final element and addition of new phoneme finally (1)  
Sigma Alpha Mu: Sammy

- E. With orthographic representation of initial element's first grapheme (1)  
Tau Kappa Epsilon: Teke

- F. With retention of foreclipped but orthographically reinterpreted initial element, transliterated medial element, deleted final element, and reassignment of primary stress on the whole (1)  
Alpha Xi Delta: Fuzzy

### III. Clippings (52)

- A. Of medial element (5)  
Kappa Alpha Order: Kappa Order  
Phi Kappa Psi: Phi Psi  
Phi Kappa Tau: Phi Tau  
Phi Lambda Chi: Phi Chi

Pi Beta Phi: Pi Phi

**B. Of final element (11)**

Alpha Phi Delta: Alpha Phi  
Alpha Sigma Phi: Alpha Sigma  
Delta Kappa Epsilon: Delta Kappa  
Kappa Alpha Society: Kappa Alpha  
Lambda Chi Alpha: Lambda Chi  
Sigma Phi Society: Sigma Phi  
Theta Delta Chi: Theta Delta

Alpha Chi Omega: Alpha Chi  
Alpha Xi Delta: Alpha Xi  
Gamma Phi Beta: Gamma Phi  
Theta Phi Alpha: Theta Phi

**C. Of initial and medial elements (2)**

Phi Beta Sigma: Sigma

Kappa Alpha Theta: Theta

**D. Of medial and final elements (10)**

Alpha Phi Alpha: Alpha  
Beta Theta Pi: Beta  
Omega Psi Phi: Omega  
Kappa Alpha Psi: Kappa

Alpha Sigma Alpha: Alpha  
Delta Sigma Theta: Delta  
Kappa Kappa Gamma: Kappa  
Sigma Gamma Rho: Sigma  
Zeta Tau Alpha: Zeta  
Zeta Phi Beta

**E. Of hind part of initial element (3)**

Sigma Chi: Sig Chi  
Sigma Nu: Sig Nu  
Sigma Pi: Sig Pi

**F. Of medial element and hind part of final element (4)**

Alpha Gamma Sigma: Alpha Sig  
Phi Kappa Sigma: Phi Sig  
Phi Mu Delta: Phi Delt  
Phi Sigma Kappa: Phi Kap

**G. Of medial element and hind parts of initial and final elements (1)**

Sigma Phi Epsilon: Sig Ep

**H. Of medial and final elements and hind part of initial element (1)**

Delta Tau Delta: Delt

**I. Of medial and final elements and hind part of initial element, with addition of prefix (2)**

Delta Delta Delta: Tri-delt  
Sigma Sigma Sigma: Tri-sig

**J. Of final element and hind part of medial element (11)**

Alpha Delta Phi: Alpha Delt  
Beta Sigma Psi: Beta Sig  
Delta Sigma Phi: Delta Sig  
Kappa Delta Rho: Kappa Delt  
Phi Delta Theta: Phi Delt  
Phi Kappa Theta: Phi Kap  
Pi Kappa Phi: Pi Kap

Alpha Gamma Delta: Alpha Gam  
Alpha Sigma Tau: Alpha Sig  
Phi Sigma Sigma: Phi Sig

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- Tau Epsilon Phi: Tau Ep
- K. Of hind part of final element (1)
  - Kappa Sigma: Kappa Sig
- L. Of hind parts of all elements (1)
  - Sigma Kappa: Sig Kap

### IV. No Nickname (11)

Acacia

Chi Phi

Chi Psi

Delta Phi

Delta Psi

Farmhouse

Theta Chi

Theta Xi

Triangle

Zeta Psi

Phi Mu

Note: All names and nicknames are given in the format "name: nickname"; sororities appear in the right column, fraternities in the left. Parenthetical numbers following each taxonomic category refer to the number (and percentage: total n = 101) of Greek-letter organizations in that category (a few organizations have multiple nicknames, and so appear in this appendix more than once.)