

Greeks Bearing Gifts

By Peter B. Wylie

The injunction “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts” refers to the gift of the Trojan horse and the calamity it brought. I have to admit I didn’t know the origin of the phrase until I recently looked it up—another reminder of how the great works were wasted on me as a teenager and an early “twenty something.” But I’d like to draw your attention to a different kind of Greeks bearing altogether different gifts.

Hardly a business day goes by that I don’t exhort some advancement professional to pay attention to how the vast amount of information they store on alums can point to people who are likely to give frequently and give a lot. If I’ve talked to you or if you’ve read some of the stuff I’ve written, you may be saying or thinking, “Pete, ah ... I think we got that. Thank you ... thank you very much.”

But if you haven’t been worn out by my refrain, let me offer yet another piece of evidence that certain data about your alums may help you identify those among them who are more likely to contribute to your institution. That piece of data, of course, is whether an alum had a Greek affiliation as an undergraduate at your school.

I’d like to show you some charts that I think tell a compelling story about the difference in giving across a fifty year span for Greeks and non-Greeks at six different higher education institutions. After you eyeball these charts, I hope you agree with me that the story is compelling. But there’s something more important I’m hoping for—because you may not have (or have ever had) Greek organizations at your school. And this is back to my refrain ... I’m hoping you agree that foraging through your alumni database to find new predictors of giving is worth the effort. Because not doing that kind of foraging and not taking advantage of those predictors in your appeals and campaigns is leaving the generosity of many of your alums untapped. And that’s not a good thing.

Down to specifics. In the rest of the paper I’ll talk about:

- The data I used
- The analysis I did
- What I uncovered
- Some implications for what I found
- My response to some feedback I got on a draft of this paper

The Data I Used

All the data I used came from six four year higher education institutions spread around the country. Five of them were private universities; one was a large public school. For the smaller schools I used records of all the solicitable alums in their databases. For the larger ones I used a random sample of at least ten thousand records. The specific variables I used for the project included:

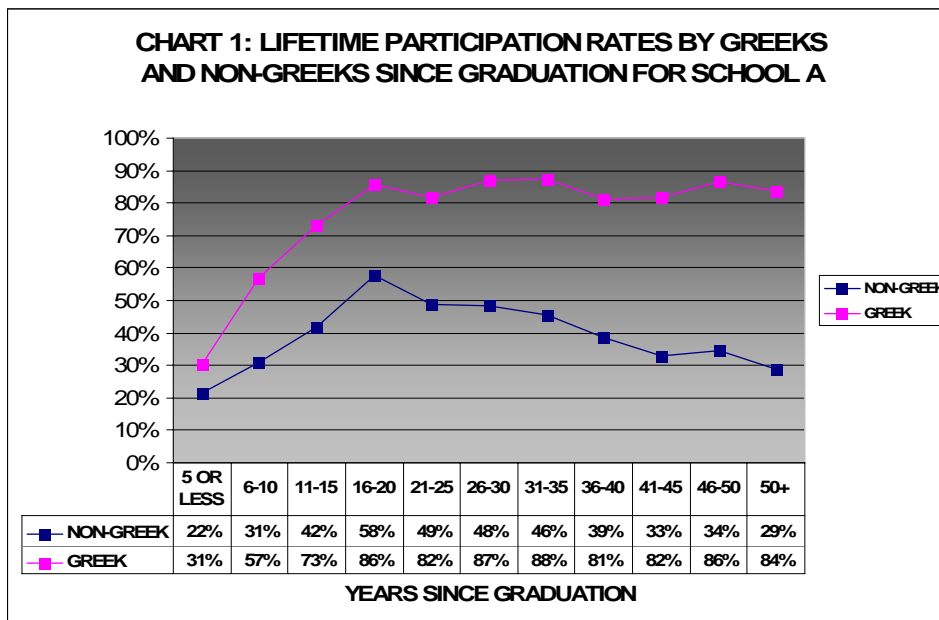
- Whether an alum was listed in the database as having belonged to a Greek organization as an undergraduate
- The preferred year of graduation for each alum
- The total lifetime hard credit giving of each alum at the time I gathered the data

The Analysis I Did

For each of the six schools I studied I wanted to answer these four questions:

1. Was there a difference in the rate of lifetime giving between former Greeks and non-Greeks?
2. How did this rate of giving between Greeks and non-Greeks change as a function of the length of time they'd been out of school?
3. For those Greeks and non-Greeks who had ever given anything to their schools, was there a difference in the median lifetime giving between the two groups?
4. How did this difference in the median lifetime giving between Greeks and non-Greeks change as a function of how long they had been out of school?

To answer the first two questions, I computed the percentage of Greeks and non-Greeks who had ever given anything to their schools at each of eleven five year intervals since year of graduation (e.g., 5 years or less, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, etc. on out to 50 years or more). Let's take a look at Chart 1 to make this clear.



Notice the very large differences in lifetime giving rates between Greeks and non-Greeks regardless of how long the alums have been out of school. In fact, the lifetime giving rates of non-Greeks who've been out more than 20 years seem to drop off a bit while those for Greeks stay about the same.

But that's just one institution—School A. Take a look at the charts for the remaining schools. After you do that, let's compare notes.

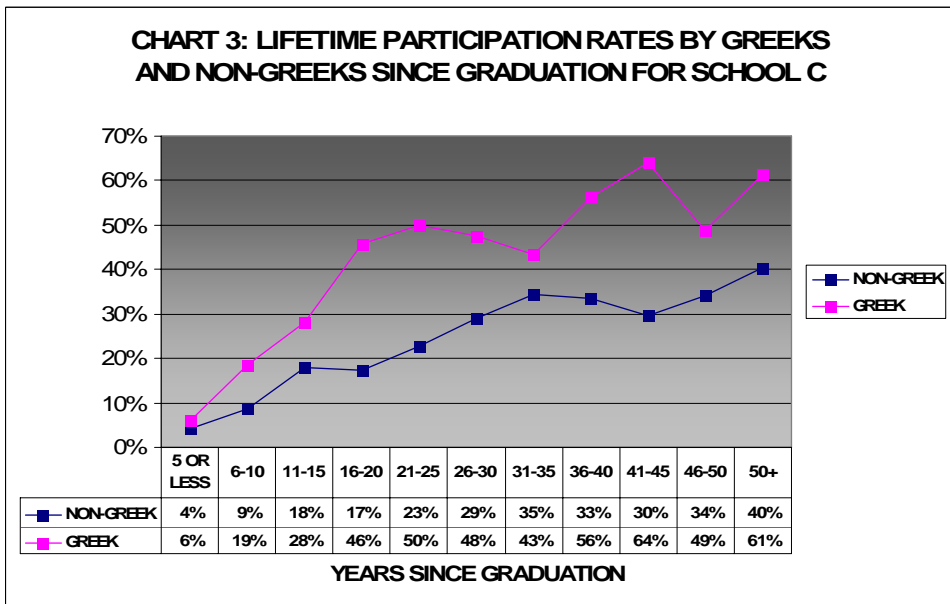
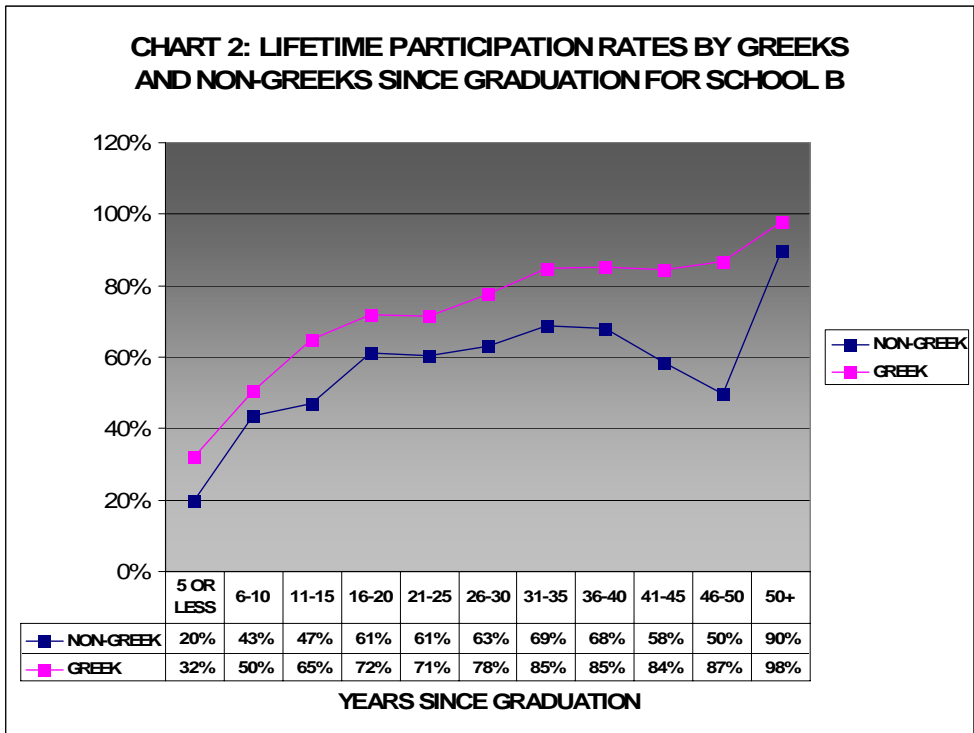


CHART 4: LIFETIME PARTICIPATION RATES BY GREEKS AND NON-GREEKS SINCE GRADUATION FOR SCHOOL D

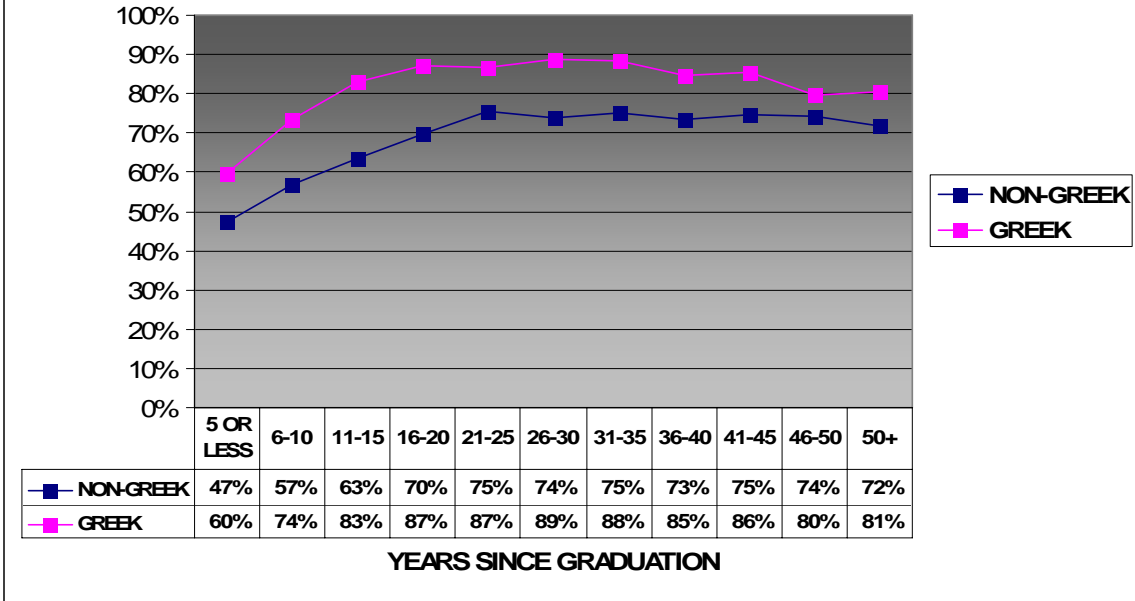
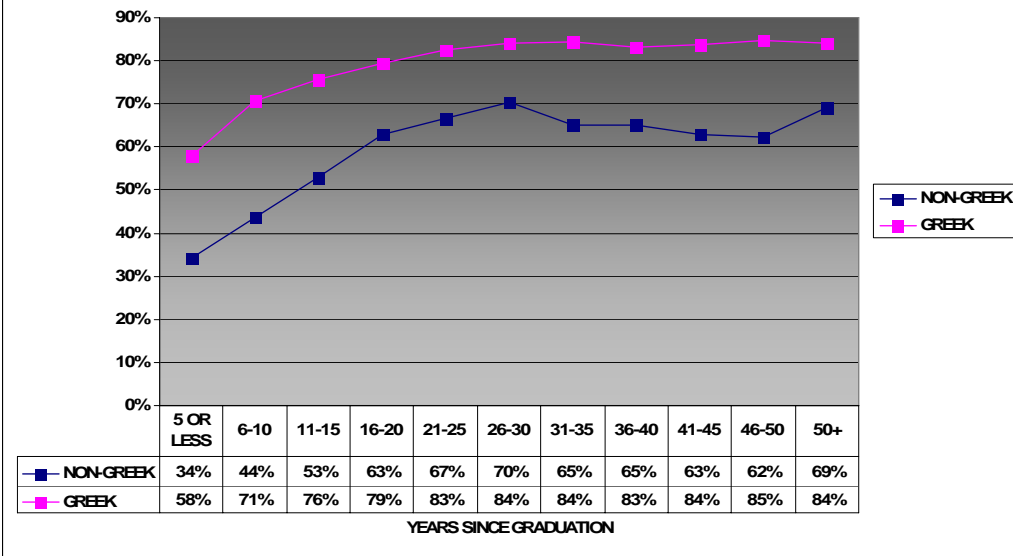
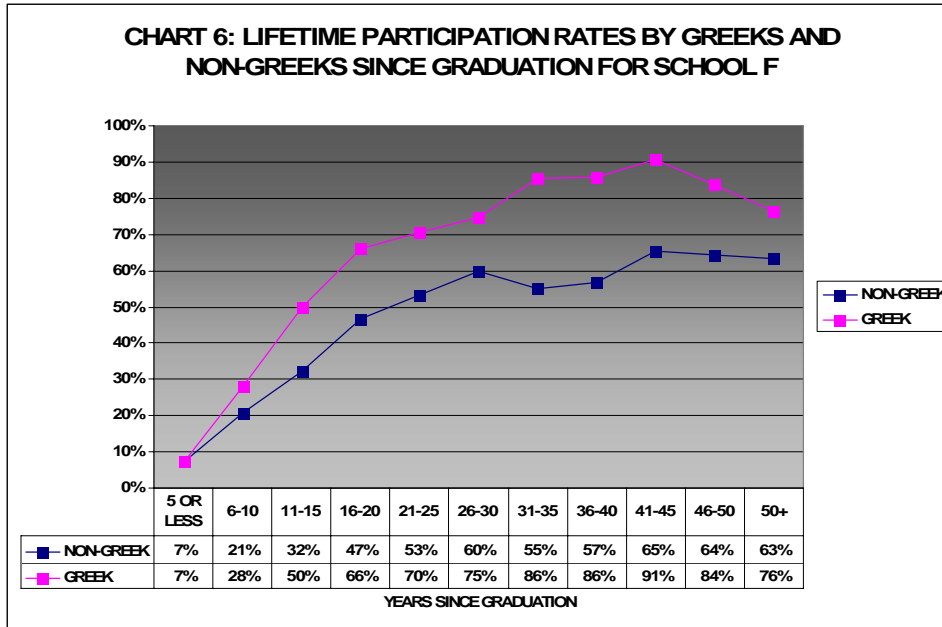


CHART 5: LIFETIME PARTICIPATION RATES BY GREEKS AND NON-GREEKS SINCE GRADUATION FOR SCHOOL E





Now that you've had a chance to look at all six charts, let's go back to the first two questions I was trying to answer:

1. Was there a difference in the rate of lifetime giving between former Greeks and non-Greeks?
2. How did this rate of giving between Greeks and non-Greeks change as a function of the length of time they'd been out of school?

For the first question I think the answer is unequivocal. In *none* of the schools do the lifetime participation rates of non-Greeks *ever* exceed those of the Greeks. In fact, in only one instance (alums in Chart 6 who have been out of school 5 years or less) are the participation rates the same. When I saw this pattern unfold, I knew I had to write this paper.

But how about the second question? Here I think it's harder to give a general response. About the best I can do is say that the difference in lifetime participation between Greeks and non-Greeks seems to widen as the time since graduation increases, but not always. Sometimes the gap between the two groups narrows ... but the Greeks are always ahead.

So you don't have to page back or scroll up, here are questions three and four:

3. For those Greeks and Non-Greeks who had ever given anything to their schools, was there a difference in the median lifetime giving between the two groups?
4. How did this difference in the median lifetime giving between Greeks and non-Greeks change as a function of how long they had been out of school?

To answer these questions, you'll remember that I looked at the median lifetime giving by age group for Greeks and non-Greeks for *only* those alums who had ever made a gift. That seemed like a reasonable thing to do. I knew that the Greeks were consistently better participants, but what about the actual amount of the gifts the two groups were making?

Take a look at the next six charts and then let's discuss what they reveal.

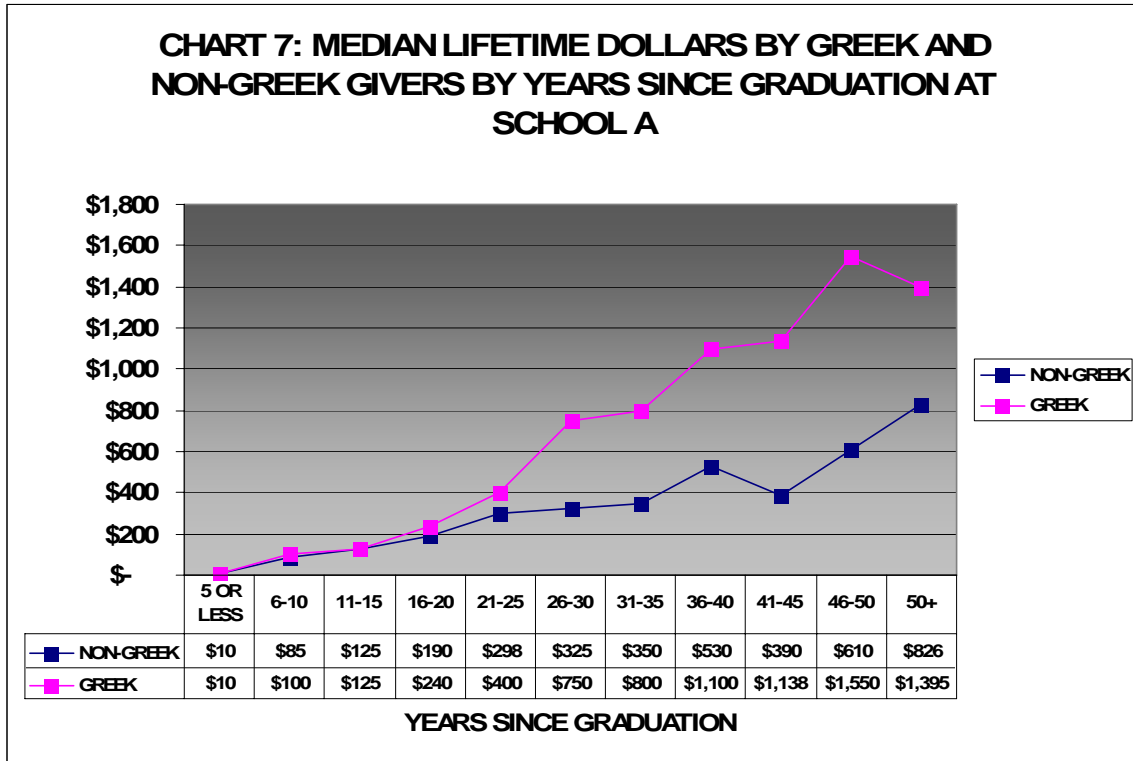


CHART 8: MEDIAN LIFETIME DOLLARS BY GREEK AND NON-GREEK GIVERS BY YEARS SINCE GRADUATION AT SCHOOL B

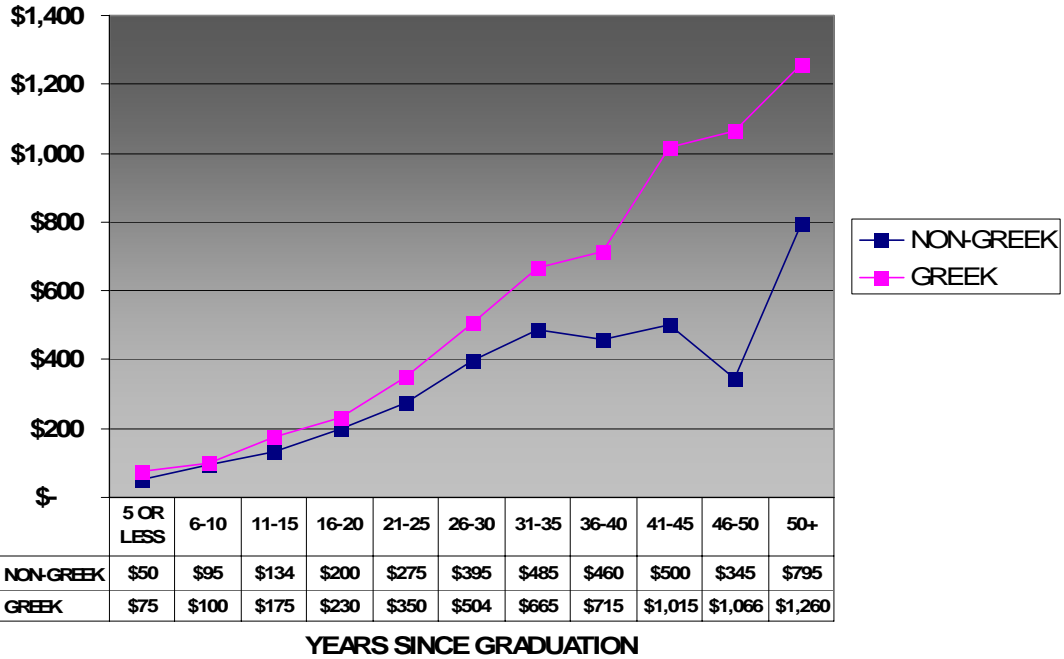


CHART 9: MEDIAN LIFETIME DOLLARS BY GREEK AND NON-GREEK GIVERS BY YEARS SINCE GRADUATION AT SCHOOL C

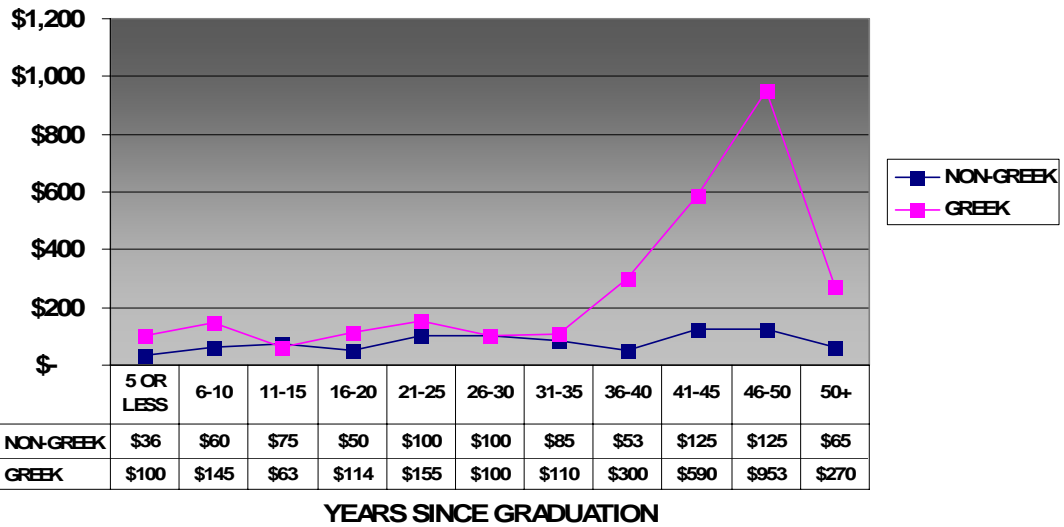


CHART 10: MEDIAN LIFETIME DOLLARS BY GREEK AND NON-GREEK GIVERS BY YEARS SINCE GRADUATION AT SCHOOL D

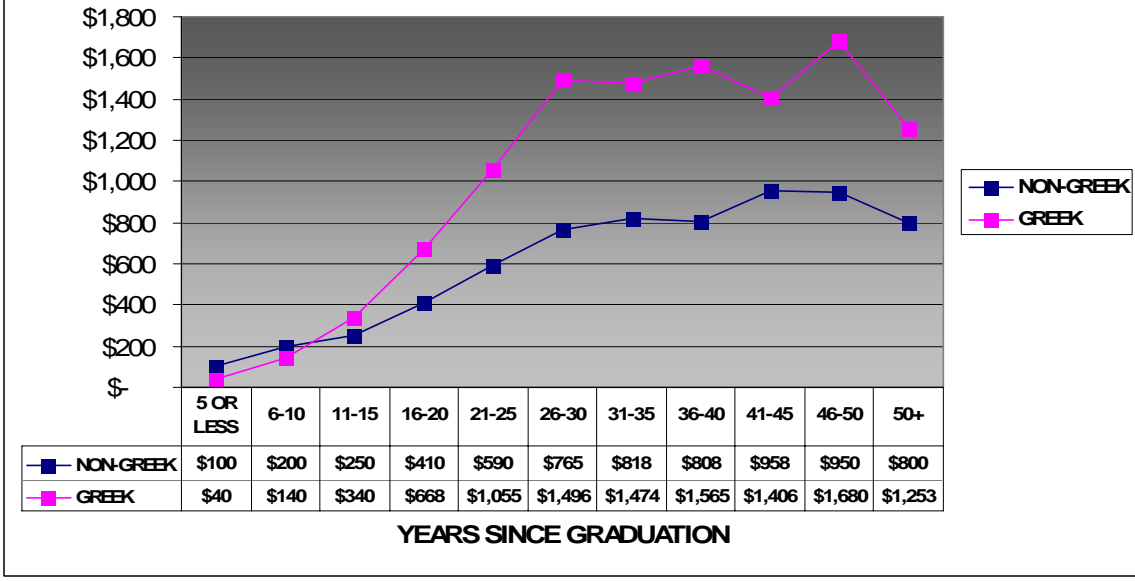
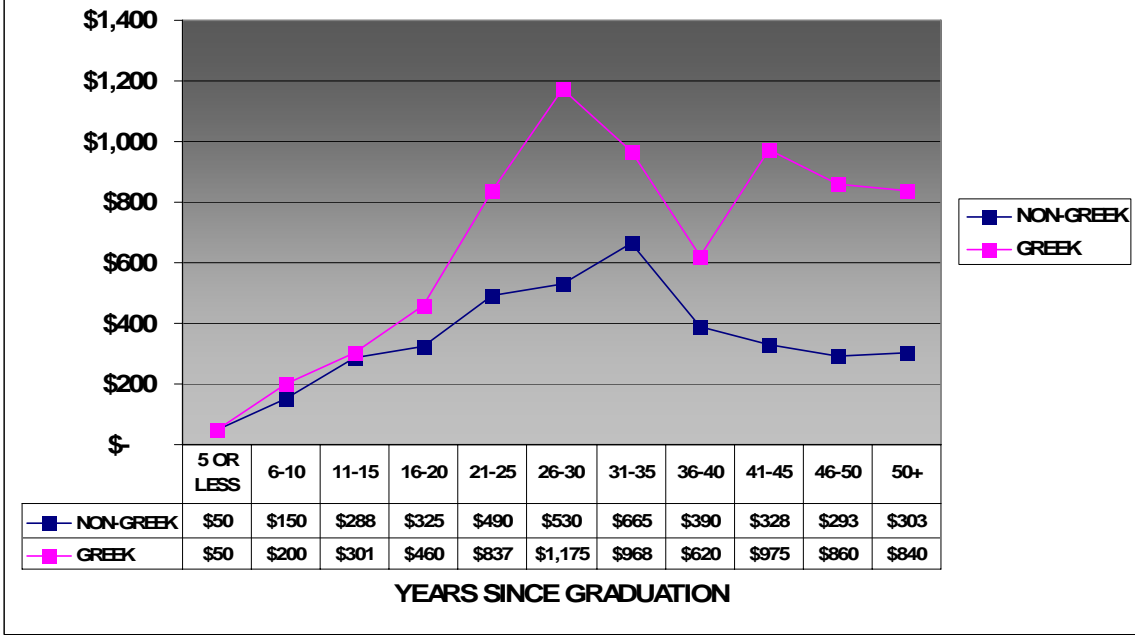
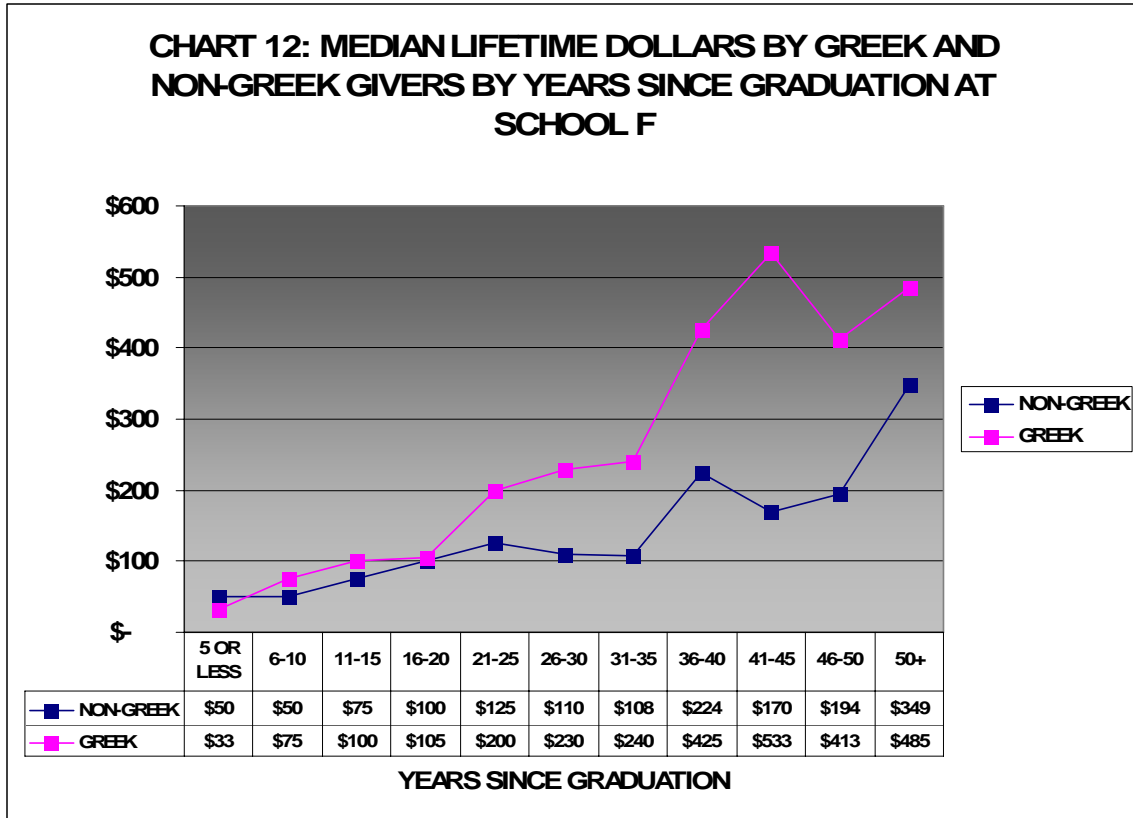


CHART 11: MEDIAN LIFETIME DOLLARS BY GREEK AND NON-GREEK GIVERS BY YEARS SINCE GRADUATION AT SCHOOL E





So what do you think? Well, data's kind of ... what ... whimsical? It just doesn't always give us the definitive answers we'd like. But here's what I see. In general, the Greeks give more than the non-Greeks and that difference tends to widen the longer alums are out of school.

To summarize an answer to all four questions I'd say the Greeks are definitely better participators than the non-Greeks; their gifts tend to be larger than the non-Greeks; and the older Greeks generally give more than the older non-Greeks.

Implications

As a good friend of mine so often asks me, "So ... what are the 'takeaways' of all this?" I think there are several:

- First of all, if you've read this far, you're already thinking about the possible usefulness to your own institution of what I've reported. You're coming up with ideas I've never considered. That's good.
- If you have (or have had) alums in your database who are listed as belonging to a Greek organization while undergrads, take a look at what your data reveal. (Don't worry too much about how the data got in there. On a record by record basis, your IT people won't know.) Look at whether the students in your call center have

more luck getting pledges from Greeks versus non-Greeks? How about with snail mail appeals? How about major campaigns?

- Most, importantly start pushing to uncover other kinds of data you have that can help predict who's going to give and give a lot. For example, do you keep track of reunion attendance? If you do, look at the difference between Greeks who've attended at least two reunions and all other alums. I think you'll be amazed at what good givers these folks can be.

If you do what I suggest, will you get occasional pushback from skeptical colleagues and bosses who think you have more important uses for your time? Maybe. Probably. That's okay. See if you can convert some of 'em. I do it all the time, and I *love* the challenge.

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Wylie is the author of [KeyDonor: Multimedia Course in Data Mining for Fundraising Professionals](#) (Data Description Inc., 2006) and [Data Mining for Fund Raisers: How to Use Simple Statistics to Find Gold in Your Donor Database—Even if You Hate Statistics](#) (CASE, 2004). Order them online at www.case.org/books or by phone toll-free at 1-800-554-8536.

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