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The Academic Affects of Black Fraternal Membership

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Shedrick W. Daniels, III
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This Capstone Project was approved by:

Advisor: _____
Dr. Richard Mason

Seminar Instructor: _____
Dr. Scott Peters

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Dedication

To the people who make my life complete, Erica, Christian, and Madison. This volume is respectfully dedicated. Thank you for being the reason I live.

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Abstract

African-American fraternity members were examined in order to determine the affects Black fraternal membership has on classroom performance. The findings presented in the study provide further implications regarding the in-class experiences of African-American fraternity and sorority undergraduate members at a predominately White university. Various components of the study are consistent with findings offered in published literature on Black fraternal membership, however, there are some inconsistencies that provide insight to new implications.

Chapter One

Introduction

At a Midwestern, comprehensive university, male members of Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs) were examined in order to determine the academic affects of being a member of a Black Greek letter organization at a predominately White university (PWI). Findings indicate the effects of membership and serve as a resource to students and advisors seeking more in depth information about the Black Greek community.

Why Study Black Male Greeks?

In my role as a Greek advisor at the university where this study was conducted, I have a moral and contractual obligation to provide guidance to all Greek students. However, there were deep seeded personal reasons for why I felt Black males should be considered for such a study. The purpose of this study was threefold. First, to connect Black Greek culture to classroom performance. There has been considerable amount of research done on specific areas of Black Greek culture, such as, the membership intake process and academic disparities between Black Greek members and White Greek members. However, limited research has been conducted on the effects of BGLO membership as it pertains to classroom performance. Although the research that has been conducted has been invaluable to this study, it is my personal goal to publish a more current analysis on how Black Greeks, specifically Black men, maintain the fraternity culture and academics. Culturally relevant material and classroom engagement have been ongoing problems for minority undergraduates at predominately White universities (Harper, 2007). In a review of the African-American achievement gap in higher education, Rovai, Gallien, and H.R. Stiff-Williams described academic settings at predominately White

universities as disengaging. The study claims that these settings allow White professors to zero in on minority students in order to keep current on issues involving that particular race. The study also calls for a reevaluation of teaching practices and engagement tactics that allow minorities to feel more welcomed and included instead of singled out. Although this study has a limited focus on Predominately White Universities (this study was conducted at a PWI), the academic environment where African-American students are the minority should be considered.

A similar study by the National Survey of Student Engagement reported that descriptors like incompatible, disenfranchised, disengaged, and alienated are used to describe the in-class and out-of-class experiences for African-American undergraduates on predominately White campuses (NSSE, 2005). In relation to the African-American male fraternal experience, many have a student first mentality and connect classroom experiences with the overall campus climate. In other words, if a student feels that his/her classroom experiences have a racial undertone, they therefore conclude that the campus in its entirety harbors racist people. This causes them to be disengaged and significantly influences the choices for co-curricular involvement, particularly African-American fraternities and sororities (Harper, 2007).

Second, this project was undertaken because of the perceived lack of understanding and appreciation for BGLO culture from those outside of the council. This can easily be blamed on racial stigma; however, the true reason behind this information deficit can and should be blamed on the Black Greek community. Cultural silence takes place when a group or groups of people are unwilling to teach or explain certain areas of their culture to those outside of their community. Oftentimes cultural silence is a means of protection, members of the culture want to shield that culture from exploitation. Other times cultural silence simply comes from being stubborn. Frankly, some members of the BGLO community refuse to explain the significance of

the culture yet expect everyone around them to appreciate it. Greek life is a sub-culture with its own set of beliefs, values, traditions, and rituals. While many secrets about the organizations are kept amongst members, clarification of the overall culture has been withheld. The problem persists, as the BGLO community is unwilling to teach about the culture and customs of their organizations and expect outsiders to teach themselves by searching the internet or other sources. This study was designed to foster dialogue surrounding the customs of the BGLO community and move forward in an attempt to change the philosophy of cultural silence. In short, Black Greeks cannot possibly complain about the misunderstanding and misuse of our culture if we are unwilling to explain how important our culture is.

Third, as a member of the BGLO community I feel it is my duty to my fellow Greeks to explain our current position at predominately White universities and recommend solutions to current issues. The time for keeping silent about our culture has ended and this study will hopefully serve as a step forward in that process. This is my personal contribution to my community.

Few studies have been conducted on the affects Black Greek membership has on classroom performance. Given this, insights into the relationship between the aforementioned subjects are explored in the present study. Additional justification for the focus is offered in the subsequent sections.

Why Fraternities and Sororities Matter

In my short time as a Greek advisor, I've had countless parents and student ask me about the purpose of Greek life. Many college students are still looking for a strong social connection, especially during their freshmen year when they are most impressionable. Many students search for that deeper level of social acceptance in Greek life. Oftentimes, students join Greek letter organizations that have members with the same attitudes, beliefs, and values that they have. Pascarella, Flowers, and Whitt (2001) found that fraternities and sororities tend to create a peer culture, whose norms enhance the nonacademic and nonintellectual. Although many students have future career and personal goals in mind when they enroll, they are still looking to make friends and connections outside of the classroom. Rosenberg and McCullough defined mattering as "a concept that implies that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego extension which exercises a powerful influence on our actions" (as cited in Kimbrough & Sutton, 2001, p. 31-32). In short, students need to feel like they matter and many see Greek life as a reasonable means.

Why Fraternities Matter in the Black College Community

The concept and feeling of belonging is important to many Black students. Members of BGLOs may have believed at one point that joining a BLGO would give them a sense of community that they never had and would allow them to feel valued in a way that they never experienced prior to joining. This is a concept that can be easily felt at predominately White colleges and universities. Foster, Kimbrough, Parks (2008), and many others who have contributed to the growing body of BGLO literature contend that it is nearly impossible to fully understand or appreciate the powerful impact the BGLO community has on Black student life

(Foster, 2008). For many enrolled at PWI's, the Black Greek community provides a social and professional network that helps shape the values of the overall Black student community (Foster, 2008).

Black students and parents have asked me some of the same questions that I've received from White families as mentioned before. Many believe that they are "elitist social clubs" (Hughey, 2001, p. 2) that were more active and respected during the civil rights movement but have since become social organizations with limited social and political agendas. The perspective on what it means to be a member of a BGLO has changed significantly over time. Students are no longer joining based on a movement or cause but for the chance to be part of a tradition with a rich history and culture. Traditional battles for equality such as marches, sit-ins, and walkouts are now fought from a different angle as students find their purpose in "non-confrontational racial victories" (Hughey, 2001, p. 4) such as step show competitions and conflicting event dates (i.e. two organizations that would like to hold the event on the same day and often in the same location).

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The literature review profiles a comprehensive history and background of Greek letter organizations and issues surrounding the overall Greek community.

Fraternities and Sororities: A History and Background

Greek life has created a subculture at American colleges and universities. The first college social fraternity with a Greek lettered name was Phi Beta Kappa, which was established at the college of William and Mary in 1776 (Sidanius, Van Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004). Over the next 25 years, Phi Beta Kappa became the leading social organization across North America with a strong reputation for academic success, social elitism, and prestigious alumni. In the 1870s, those that called themselves fraternities were joined with women's fraternities, which were called sororities (Sidanius et al., 2004).

Trends amongst these groups began to surface at colleges and universities across North America by the beginning of the 20th century. Fraternities and sororities became notorious for exclusionist terms and discriminatory entrance requirements. During this time many councils had formed such as, the Interfraternity Council (IFC), the Pan-Hellenic Council (also known as Association), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), and the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC). In addition, there was the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO). Each council became an umbrella organization for fraternities and sororities (Baird, 1991).

By 1928, more than half of the national fraternities and sororities had written rules and constitutions explicitly excluding applicants based on religious affiliation and race (Sidanius et

al., 2004). Many fraternities only admitted white Christian members to their organizations and even African-American organizations admitted members based upon superficial conditions such as lightness of skin tone. However, by the end of the 1970s, these requirements disappeared from American Greek letter organizations as many began to recruit, initiate, and retain members outside of the organization's predominate race (Sidanius et al., 2004).

During this time of growth within Greek letter organizations across America, issues of academics, character, and hazing became common among Greek letter organizations of all councils at many colleges and universities.

Issues

Academics

Greek letter organizations tend to create a peer culture, whose norms enhance the nonacademic and nonintellectual (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001). Pascarella et al. (2001) studied 3,331 students to find out the cognitive effects of Greek affiliation in college. Findings indicated that joining a fraternity or sorority in the first year, and many in subsequent years, required so much time and emotional commitment that it had a serious negative impact on academic performance. Many colleges and universities have considered imposing standards to govern the Greek organizations. This has included supervision of membership qualifications, pledging procedures and group activities (Grubb, 2006).

DeBard, Lake, and Binder reviewed over 50 fraternity and sorority mission statements at a Midwestern university and found the enhancement of "scholarship" (2006) present in each one. A case study conducted by an Eastern university concluded that fraternity males had a 2.2

percent lower GPA than non-fraternity males, while sorority women were lower by only one percent (Grubb, 2006).

Grubb (2006) also made the observation that the social pressures, responsibilities, attitudes and perceptions of Greek members are different from those experienced by nonmembers, which also makes a difference in the classroom. This observation gives a clear viewpoint that being Greek has a different impact not just academically but also on personal character.

Retention also plays a part in why Greek life has its place in the college community. DeBard, Lake, and Binder (2006) conducted a study at a small Midwestern university that calculated the retention rates of students in Greek letter organizations during their freshman year. Findings indicated that there were significant differences amongst members and nonmembers. The retention rate amongst male members was 83% compared to nonmembers, which was 71%. The retention rate amongst female members was 84% compared to nonmembers, which was 74%. At the university where this study was conducted, about three percent of the entire undergraduate student body is affiliated with fraternities and sororities. Although there was no reported Greek retention percentage, Greeks maintain a higher cumulative grade point average than the overall student body. Pascarella, Flowers, and Whit (2009) conducted a larger study of 18 four-year colleges in 15 states on the cognitive effects of Greek affiliation. Findings concluded any major negative learning consequences almost disappear when students join a fraternity or sorority after the first year of college. In other words, if students pledge a Greek letter organization at just the right time, it could end up having a positive effect on their academic performance (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whit, 2009).

Character

Greeks have been the subjects of questionable character for decades. Reports of incidents involving hazing, alcohol, sexual assault, discrimination, ethnic/cultural insensitivity, and poor scholarship have overshadowed Greek organizations' positive efforts in campus involvement, community service, and charitable fund-raising (Mathiasen, 2005). Movies such as *Animal House* (1978) and *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) have done little to portray the positive characteristics of fraternity and sorority members. MTV series like *Fraternity Life* (2003) and *Sorority Life* (2003) have also been factors in the negative perception of Greeks.

The debate on the value of fraternities and sororities also focuses on academic dishonesty. Previous studies of the association between cheating and fraternity membership have generally found that cheating is more prevalent among those who belong to fraternities than independent students (McCabe & Bowers, 1996). In a more recent study of college cheating, McCabe and Bowers (2009) reported that 58% of fraternity members admitted to some cheating while in college but only 51% of independents did. After a multi-campus survey, the first in thirty years, McCabe and Bowers conclude that there is a greater prevalence of cheating on tests among fraternity and sorority members than among students not affiliated with Greek letter organizations.

Hazing

Hazing is the most popular and topical of all issues concerning fraternities and sororities. When considering the roots of hazing, tradition and peer pressure come to mind as precursors of the hazing tradition. Hazing new students goes back to European universities where it was common for upperclassmen to haze freshmen (Ruffins & Jamilah, 1998).

The culture of hazing has been examined for so long, some Greek theorists believe that the culture itself is to blame. Kimbrough (2010) stated that joining a fraternity or sorority is more

difficult than it is to get married or get a job. Many students want to join an organization and are willing to do whatever it takes no matter what (Kimbrough, 2010).

African-American fraternities and sororities had to make their own rituals when starting their organizations, many of which emulated the hazing rituals of white fraternities and secret societies such as the Masons (Ruffins and Jamilah, 1998). Dr. Walter Kimbrough (1997) believed that fraternity members are more peer-oriented than other students, which in turn, may make them more subject to the peer pressure associated with hazing. There is, however, a fundamental difference between pledging and hazing. The theory itself has been popularized by BGLO members in an attempt keep the sacred pledging rituals that have become a part of the culture and staying away from the stiff consequences that are associated with hazing. Many BGLO members see pledging as the centerpiece of an organization's existence (Foster, 2008). Foster (2010) studied underground pledging and determined that "as a ritual process, pledging involved a period of time during which an initiate goes through pre-scribed symbolic, affective, and informative activities that lead them toward eventual acceptance as members," (Foster, 2008). The pledge process itself is not illegal. It is, in fact, almost impossible to imagine Greek life, BGLO or otherwise, without it. Foster as well as other BGLO scholars fear that pledging has been coupled with hazing for many years. The results include chapters across the country being suspended from campus, students spending time in the penal system, and in some cases, death. The Black Greek community prides itself on its pledge process but almost refuses to discuss it, mainly for fear that it will be misunderstood and mistaken for hazing. This method of cultural silence has taken on a life of its own in the BLGO community. Rarely do you find a venue of students who are willing to engage in healthy discussion or debate about their pledge process or the issue of hazing.

In 1990 the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), the umbrella organization that governs the BGLO community, officially banned pledging. The members of the governing council at the time believed that pledging and hazing had become inseparable (Foster, 2010) and issued a statement declaring NPHC and its nine-member organizations as non-hazing, non-pledging organizations.

Any action that results in excessive mutual or physical discomfort, embarrassment or harassment; that such activities include, but are not limited to, paddling, creation of excessive fatigue, physical or psychological shock, morally degrading or humiliating activities, late work session that interfere with scholastic activities and any other activities inconsistent with the fraternal law and regulations and policies of the affiliated educational institution and federal state or local law. (www.nphchq.org/docs/hazing103.pdf).

Although hazing has been outlawed by the NPHC, it still has a place in the BGLO community. Many students have argued that it fosters brotherhood, sisterhood, humility and serves as a platform to learn and retain vital information about the fraternity or sorority. In short, pledging has and always will have a significant place in the history of Black Greeks.

History of African-American Greek Letter Societies

Black fraternities and sororities have played a unique and vital role in 20th century African-American history (Ross, 2000). Many famous African-American world figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Shirley Chisholm, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Author Ashe, Michelle Obama, and Kwame Nkrumah are among the elite of African-American Greek members.

The history of these organizations speaks to a culture that is reminiscent of the struggle of the overall race. The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), similar to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, is the umbrella organization to each of the nine traditionally African-American based fraternities and sororities. Founded in 1930 at Howard University in Washington, DC, NPHC serves as a resident organization, during a time when predominately White governing councils did not allow Black Greek letter organizations to become members (Ross, 2000). The members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council are:

- Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Cornell University, 1906
- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Howard University, 1908
- Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Indiana University, 1911
- Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Howard University, 1911
- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Howard University, 1913
- Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. Howard University, 1914
- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Howard University, 1920
- Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. Butler University, 1922
- Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. Morgan State University, 1963

Benefits of Membership

Prior research has been conducted to highlight the benefits of African-American student involvement in historically Black fraternities and sororities. Kimbrough (1995) concludes that African-American students who are involved in Greek letter organizations and other campus activities are more likely to receive a richer college experience. Through co-curricular involvement, specifically fraternities and sororities are more likely to experience higher levels of leadership development and enhanced leadership skills than uninvolved or unaffiliated students. In another study, Kimbrough (2003) found that Black Greek letter organizations serve as a source of social support for African-American students on predominately White campuses. Harper (2007) found that sororities and fraternities are among the most popular involvement opportunities for African-American undergraduate students and many consider it the primary source of involvement.

Benefits of Membership for African-American Male Undergraduates

After a study at six predominately White campuses, Harper (2004) discovered that 40% of the males in the study were fraternity members and had developed productive masculine identities that allowed them to view leadership and engagement positively. African-American male fraternity members have more of a racial identity than that of unaffiliated African-American males, a trait that is also widespread throughout the Black Greek community and among African-American fraternity men in particular (Harper, 2008).

Chapter Three

Methodology

Site of Study

This study was conducted at a mid-sized, public teaching institution in the Midwest. The institution is located in a small “college town,” where 4.6% of the university’s 11,557 students were African-American. Of the entire university’s student body, only 2.3% were black men. About 3% of the undergraduate students are affiliated with fraternities and sororities, with six percent of the entire Greek population being male members of African-American based Greek letter organizations. The university hosts eight of the nine Black Greek Letter Organizations recognized by the National Pan-Hellenic Council. There are four sororities and four fraternities on campus.

Participants

The sample consisted of 26 African-American male undergraduates who were affiliated with the active Black Greek Letter organizations on campus. Each participant held membership in his chapter for at least one full semester. All of the students had taken multiple classes in which other African-American students were marginally represented. Many of the participants were leaders in their chapters (i.e. executive board members, committee chairmen, etc.) but that was not a requirement for the study. Many of the participants were also in their final year of undergraduate studies. Data collection occurred in two phases.

Phase One

An online survey consisting of 10 questions was distributed to all Black male Greeks, each with a focus on the academic effects of membership on a predominately White campus. All active chapter members, regardless of rank or status, were encouraged to take the survey. A total of 15 men completed the survey.

Phase Two

Individual interviews were conducted with one member from each of the active Black Greek Letter fraternities on campus. A semi-structured interview technique consisting of six (6) questions was used in order to follow up with leading questions and probing statements. Questions focused on the factors that affected the participant's grade point average and overall classroom engagement in nearly all-white classes. Questions also focused on the roll their fraternity played in the success or failure of their studies.

Instrumentation

Each survey was made up of questions stemming from the literature review. The interview questions were designed to gather basic information pertaining to the participant's current academic status, classroom environment, amount of classes taken in the last academic year, and current cumulative grade point average. The interviews questions were designed to gather more specific information about chapter academic initiatives, classroom environment, and impacts of membership on participant's studies. All survey and interview questions are included in the appendices one and two at the end of this document.

Data Collection and Analysis

The main question addressed in this case study was: What are the academic effects of belonging to an African-American based fraternity? To determine the answer to this question the data collected from surveys and interviews were broken down to answer each individual element of the research question. Data analysis included reviewing statistical results provided by www.surveymonkey.com. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by noting themes throughout the interviews. For example, if a student discussed on the reason he joined his fraternity, it was noted in two words or less. Direct quotes were also taken from the interviews.

Chapter Four

Results

This chapter is intended to report the results of the study. Each section will examine the results of Tables 1, 2, and 3 as well as examine the results of the individual interviews.

Survey Questions

Table 1.

<i>Student Classification</i>	N	(%)
Sophomore	3	20.00%
Junior	2	13.30%
Senior	10	66.70%

The first survey question examined the academic classification of each participant. Three of the participants (20.0%) were classified as sophomores. Two (13.3%) were classified as juniors and 10 (66.7%) classified themselves as seniors. In Greek life, classification does not always equal experience. Students join the Greek community at various periods of their college careers, oftentimes because of personal reasons. It is common among BGLOs that students do not join until after their freshman year has been completed. As stated in chapter three, students were also required to have at least one academic semester completed in order to participate in the study. The results of this table show a broad range of experiences both in Greek life and the classroom. With the majority of participants classified as seniors, this study errs on the side of men who have been members of their fraternity for at least one academic year.

Table 2.

<i>Classroom Environment</i>		
	N	(%)
1	0	0.00%
2	0	0.00%
3	0	0.00%
4	6	40.00%
5 or more	9	60.00%

Table 2 examined the participant's classroom environment. Question two asked the amount of classes the participants had taken in the last academic year. 40% said they were enrolled in four classes while the remaining 60% said they were enrolled in five or more. At the university where this study was conducted, four classes are considered full time status. As all of the participants were undergraduates, each being enrolled as full time students was expected. Students enrolled in five or more classes tend to have a larger, more rigorous workload. Furthermore, not only were the majority of the participants classified as seniors but they were also registered in five or more classes.

Table 3.

<i>Classroom Environment</i>		
	N	(%)
1	2	13.30%
2	2	13.30%
3	4	26.70%
4	3	20.00%
5 or more	4	26.70%

Table 3 examined the amount of classes taken where participants were the only African-American enrolled. While 13.3% said two or more classes, 26.7% percent stated they were the only African-American in five or more classes. Considering the university where this study was conducted was located in a rural town in the Midwest, this is not uncommon for African-American students.

Table 4.

<i>Classroom Environment by Race and Gender</i>		
	N	(%)
1	1	6.70%
2	2	13.30%
3	3	20.00%
4	7	46.70%
5 or more	2	13.30%

Table 4 examined the number of classes where participants where the only African-American male enrolled in the course. This question was asked to further evaluate the classroom environment of participants. The connection between being the only African-American male enrolled and being a member of an already limited Black fraternal population is made in the results section of this study.

Table 5.

<i>Grade Point Average: Semester</i>		
	N	(%)
4.0-3.5	4	26.70%
3.4-3.0	3	20.00%
2.9-2.5	4	26.70%
2.4-2.0	3	20.00%
1.9-1.5	0	0.00%
1.5 or lower	1	6.70%

Table 6.

<i>Grade Point Average: Cumulative</i>		
	N	(%)
4.0-3.5	1	6.70%
3.4-3.0	4	26.70%
2.9-2.5	6	40.00%
2.4-2.0	4	26.70%
1.9-1.5	0	0.00%
1.5 or lower	0	0.00%

Tables 5 and 6 examined the grade point averages they earned during the previous semester. This purpose was to offer a quantitative analysis to a majority qualitative study. 26.7% of participants earned in between a 3.5 and a 4.0 during the last semester. The same number of participants also earned in between a 2.9 and a 2.5 during the last semester. Only 6.7% of participants earned a 1.5 or lower.

Cumulative grade point averages were a different as 40.0% of all participants earned in between a 2.9 and a 2.5. Only 6.7%, ironically the same number of participants that earned the lowest semester grade point averages, earned a 4.0 to a 3.5 cumulative grade point average. 26.7% of participants had a cumulative GPA between 2.4 and 2.0, while the same number of participants had in between a 3.4 and a 3.0.

Interviews

To confirm accuracy of the relationship between BGLO membership and classroom performance, one person from each active fraternity at the university was invited to participate in an individual interview. The participants provided feedback on their experiences in the classroom, classroom environment, and how their fraternity plays a role in their academic success.

Reasons for joining the Greek community

When participants were asked to describe their reasoning for joining their fraternity, each cited personal factors. A fraternity member stated that he researched the other Black Greek fraternities but made his choice because of the level of comfort he felt when talking to the members during his time of interest. Another member offered a similar reasoning stating that he'd admired many of the student leaders on campus, whom he hadn't known were fraternity members for at first glance. One participant (who will be referred to as Scott) admitted that the social aspect was not of interest to him at the time.

When I first enrolled, they were one of the main organizations putting on events besides parties. When I learned what the major principles were and about the mandated programs the fraternity had to put on, I realized that I was already living my life by those principles.

Grade Point Averages Prior to Membership

When asked about whether or not they met their fraternity's grade point average prior to membership 100% of participants stated that they'd met the standard while 75% exceeded it. One participant (who will be referred to as Thomas), who just met the grade point average a few weeks prior to the membership intake process spoke on academics being a reason he worked harder to join.

In the beginning, I didn't have the most stellar grades but I had the ¹2.6 that was required. We were told to get a higher grade point average than the bare minimum but I always wanted to do better than what was asked.

One participant (who will be referred to as James) admitted that achieving a high grade point average was not about the fraternity for him and that he skipped the opportunity to pledge one semester in order to raise his grade point average above the 3.0 mark.

Prior to membership I actually exceeded the grade point average requirement but I wanted to make sure that if I pledged it would not affect my grades so I skipped one line to raise my grade point average to a 3.4.

When asked what made him want to go beyond the requirement, James stated that his desire to reach a high GPA wasn't about the fraternity.

I wasn't going to let the fraternity lower my standards by settling for a 2.5, for me it was 3.0 or better. To me, getting above a 3.0 average was the key to getting scholarships and internships so getting good grades was something I did for myself. I didn't come to college to join a fraternity; I came to college to graduate.

Grade Point Averages Post Membership Intake Process

When asked about their grade point averages the semester after they became members, 50% of participants stated that their grade point averages were higher while the remaining stated that their grades were lower. One member (who will be referred to as Mike) believes pledging the fraternity allowed him to focus more on his priorities at the time.

When I was pledging it was strictly class, ²basketball practice, and homework. I think pledging helped me focus and it wasn't until after I was initiated into the fraternity that I realized that keeping my grades high was one of the things the fraternity was about, which made me focus on my academics even more.

¹ While most national organizations require a 2.5 cumulative grade point average, The University where this survey was administered requires a 2.6 cumulative grade point average in order to join a fraternity or sorority.

² Only one participant from the sample was a member of the University's basketball team. There were no other student athletes involved at the time the study took place.

Thomas, who's grade point average was lower than that of before the membership intake process, believes that his focus was on being a member and he didn't understand at the time that he was a student first.

I wanted to be a member of my fraternity so badly, that it was either I'm going to be a member of this fraternity or I'm going to get all A's in my classes. I could've done both but my priorities were warped and I got a rude awakening at the end of the semester.

When asked to expound on his prioritizing skills Thomas stated:

When I first came to school it was about excelling as a student and graduating, but I eventually became obsessed with the fraternity I almost forgot that I was a student and I would get so overwhelmed trying to meet the expectations of the fraternity that I forgot that being a student comes first. At one point I replaced student work with fraternity work all together.

Affects of Fraternity Membership on Classroom Performance

When asked what positive and negative impacts their fraternity membership had on their academic performance, responses were mixed. Some stated that their membership has allowed them to become more focused on their academics, some less focused, and others were neutral, citing no major changes in their study habits since becoming members. James believed his membership in the fraternity allowed him to project a better image in the classroom.

It forced me to throw on ties, shirts, and more business like attire. I used to wear sweat pants and t-shirts to class before but being in a fraternity there are dress guidelines that we have to follow. It also made me want to project a better image by sitting in front of the class and paying attention.

Scott believes his fraternal experience has produced mostly positive results on his classroom performance; however, it has had a negative affect on his study habits.

I would say that partying; staying up late, and being tired during class are all negative impacts of being a member of my fraternity.

Affects on Academics While Preparing for a Fraternity Sponsored Event

When asked if academic commitments were affected while preparing for an event sponsored by their fraternity, 75% of participants agreed that academics come second to the planning of the event. James had, perhaps, the most profound response when he stated:

Planning and preparation for Greek events can be very stressful. There are actually a lot of homework assignments that don't get done. The difference between a fraternity event and a classroom project is that there is no grade. So you have guys that don't have the organizational skills to balance event planning and classwork and people like me have to pick up the slack.

James went on to say that the recognition you receive from a good event can feel better than getting ahead academically.

Sometimes the recognition you receive from your alumni feels better than getting an A on a test or a paper.

Fraternity Academic Initiatives

When asked about the academic initiatives put on by their fraternity, the response was the same across the board. 100% of participants said that study nights were the main academic initiative placed by their fraternity on a regular basis.

Thomas: Study nights

Mike: Study Nights

Scott: Study Nights

James: Study Nights

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

The findings presented in the previous section provide insight into the effects of fraternity membership on classroom performance of African-American students and provide further implications regarding the in-class experiences of African-American fraternity and sorority undergraduate members at a predominately White university. Various components of the study are consistent with findings offered in published literature on Black fraternal membership, however, there are some inconsistencies that provide insight to new implications. This chapter will examine the findings and implications of the conducted research as well as offer suggestions to Greek life advisors and future studies.

The classroom environment component was added to the study in order to set the tone for the predominately White university (PWI) aspect. This was important as it also connects to Harper's (2007) forced representation model represented in his study on the effects of sorority and fraternity membership on class participation and African-American student engagement in predominantly White classroom environments. Participants in Harper's study felt the frustration of being the only black student in many of their classes, which led to them feeling as if they had to be the representative for their race in class discussions and overall participation. Although this study did not go into detail about the classroom environment, professors at the university should be cognizant of the 46.7% of males who have 4 or more classes where they are the only African-American enrolled. This implies that predominately White classroom environments have the potential to affect the way African-American students learn and express themselves to their classmates and professors.

An apparent dichotomy existed between student classification and semester GPA. 73% of all participants had a 2.5 or above while 66% of those participants were seniors. Although not measured as a part of this study, the findings suggest that this can be attributed to leadership and accountability. The fraternity members in their final year of school seemed to recognize that their grades had a much greater impact on their chapters now and as leaders they held others responsible for their classroom performance. This coupled with the amount of focus needed to complete their programs and graduate creates a healthy amount of pressure to get better grades, thus helping the chapter GPA a great deal. Knowing this, senior fraternity members could create that same healthy pressure amongst younger members. By the time senior year arrives, many have already had the Greek experience for at least one to two years. The senior experience gives them a certain intrinsic level of focus that can only be created when the end is near. If seniors can help bring out that level of focus amongst younger members, particularly new members, grades as well as productivity within the fraternity could possibly improve.

Perhaps the most interesting of all the findings was the grade point averages prior to membership. This component was one of the more important as it profiles when pledging a fraternity began to play a role in the life of the participants. When considering fraternal membership, all students stated that achieving the required grade point average was important and was considered a “deal breaker” for whether or not they became members that year. Even those who met or exceeded the required average still placed an emphasis on putting their best foot forward in the classroom prior to membership. There is an obvious connection between grade point averages post membership intake process and the amount of time given to planning a fraternity or sorority event. Considering the amount of participants who said their grades were lower the semester after they pledged (50%) and the amount who admitted that academics come

second to planning a major fraternity event (75%), there seems to be a certain level of excitement for fraternity life in the first year of membership. More specifically, during their first year of affiliation with the fraternity, grades seem to take a back seat to the planning and preparation of major events. Furthermore, this seems to still be a problem even into most fraternity member's final years of undergraduate school.

This is not a problem that can be solved by the chapter members alone. A larger potential implication suggests advisors and professors can take more of a hands on approach to making sure students do not overwhelm themselves during the planning stages of an event. Students could submit event calendars to their advisors and professors so that they may keep track of major event periods, thus allowing them to be more specific when tracking their academic performance. Chapter members could also become more responsible for one another by enforcing stricter rules on academics, even during a heavy planning season.

When participants were asked about the positive and negative impacts their fraternity had on their academic performance, many answers suggested that the positive experience was more social than academic. A larger implication suggested that African-American fraternal membership increased the participant's level of pride in their race, which allowed them to conduct themselves better in the classroom (i.e. coming to class on time, sitting in the front of class, being more participative). This connects to Hackman's (2008) observation on community, specifically integration and fulfillment of needs. Hackman (2008) states that integration and fulfillment of needs is the reinforcement of values within the community. This is an implication that African-American fraternity life has helped students to become more conscious of their values and provides a platform for them to make a contribution to their race while enrolled in college.

When participants were asked how their academics were affected while preparing for a fraternity-sponsored event, a near unanimous response indicated that academics come second. This is an obvious connection to Pasacarella, Flowers, and Whitt's, (2001) observation that joining a fraternity or sorority requires so much time and emotional commitment that it has a serious negative impact on academic performance. This is not an implication to be taken lightly. Further research indicates that African-American fraternity chapters partake in at least one event per semester where at least 100 or more people are expected to attend and with a running time of at least two hours. This implies that at least once per semester, 75% of African-American fraternity men willingly work less in their classes in order to plan a fraternity-sponsored event.

Perhaps the most frustrating observation was the fraternity sponsored academic initiatives. When asked what academic enrichment programs each fraternity sponsored, each participant answered the same, almost exactly alike, with a resounding "study nights." The answer was clear, not only from the lack of explanation or listing of further programs, that African-American fraternities at the university where this study was conducted could do so much more in terms of offering healthy academic alternative programming. Grubb's (2006) observation that the social pressures, responsibilities, attitudes, and perceptions of Greek members are different than those of nonmembers connects to the classroom performance of each Greek letter organization. Further research indicated that each fraternity in this study submitted academic goals to the University's Greek advisor, each indicating a higher grade point average than what was required. However, according to Grubb, the responsibilities of being a member of these organizations places a different amount of pressure on each member, resulting in either above or below average grades. Considering the collective grade point average of all African-American fraternity men, it seemed clear that study nights, did not serve the community well. Further

studies need to be explored on the effects of Greek study nights and whether or not they should be used. This will allow the entire Greek community an in depth perspective on what their organization can do more of, in terms of academic programming.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations of this study were few but each significant to the research process. The first and most difficult was the small sample size. Out of 30 total Black Male fraternity members, only 15 participated in the study. This was particularly frustrating considering the already small population. Future studies may entail traveling to larger universities, or a similar size institution with a larger Black Male fraternity population. The second limitation was the lack of information about BGLO experiences at predominately White institutions. Extensive research concluded only one study that captured the depth of this topic; Harper's (2007) study the effects of fraternity membership on class participation and African-American student engagement in predominately White classroom environments. Harper (2007) provided a general analysis on what it means to be Black Greek in a predominately White classroom, and with that, his work provided a foundation for this study. The final limitation of this study was my relationship with the participants. At the time this study was conducted, I was employed as the Greek Advisor for the institution. I've known many of these students prior to joining their fraternities and even some during my years as an undergraduate. I believe all of the participants, particularly those who were interviewed, provided honest answers. However, I have to consider that there may have been a question of authenticity in their approach considering the amount of respect we share from an advisor/student perspective. Frankly, there may have been some participants who told

me what they think I wanted to hear instead of the whole truth. While I don't believe any of the students I work with would do this, it has to be considered.

Recommendations for Advisors

Many recommendations have been made throughout this chapter; however, here are two that could prove helpful to any Greek community. Greeks should consider offering better study initiatives to their chapter members. Many Greek chapters, African-American or otherwise, offer study nights as their main academic program. Study nights, albeit a great public relations tool, have a questionable effectiveness with Greek chapters. Considering the grade point averages of some of the chapters in this study, the question arises, are chapter members really studying together or just conducting an organized social hour? Members of the Greek community should consider enhancing study nights with incentives, sign in binders, or in some cases, experimenting with new study initiatives all together. It is also recommended, that University's with a Greek community should consider adding a Greek community course to their curriculum. This could be a one-credit course designed to teach new members of the Greek community about the history of their University, Greek chapters, Greek councils, and offer specific study initiatives that will help them throughout their college years.

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Appendix A
Survey Questions:

1. Please indicate your academic status
 - a. Sophomore
 - b. Junior
 - c. Senior
2. Please specify the amount of classes you've taken in the last academic year
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5 or more
3. Please specify the amount of classes you've taken in the last academic year where you were the only African-American student enrolled
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5 or more
4. Please specify the amount of classes you've taken in the last academic year where you were the only African-American Male enrolled
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5 or more
5. Please rank your current semester grade point average
 - a. 4.0-3.5
 - b. 3.4-3.0
 - c. 2.9-2.5
 - d. 2.4-2.0

- e. 1.9-1.5
 - f. 1.5or lower
6. Please rank your current cumulative grade point average
- a. 4.0-3.5
 - b. 3.4-3.0
 - c. 2.9-2.5
 - d. 2.4-2.0
 - e. 1.9-1.5
 - f. 1.5or lower

Appendix B

Interview Questions:

1. Please describe your reasoning for joining your fraternity?
2. When being considered for membership, did you meet the fraternity's grade point average requirement? If not, how long did it take you to achieve it?
3. The following semester after you joined, was your grade point average higher or lower than that of before you joined?
4. What examples can you give me that would explain both positive and negative impacts your fraternity membership has had on your academic performance?
5. When preparing for an event sponsored by your fraternity, are your academic commitments affected? Please explain?
6. What academic initiative(s) does the local chapter of your fraternity implement for its members?