

Student Affairs Research Paper: Greek Life

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Strong social connections and a sense of meaning are key to college students' overall well-being. One common way students develop these connections is through involvement in campus organizations. National studies show that participating in extracurricular groups influences improved well-being. Greek organizations, also known as fraternities and sororities, were founded to build close social relationships among members (Bowman et al., 2020). These organizations often operate as local chapters of larger national bodies. Four major umbrella organizations shape much of fraternity and sorority life including the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC), the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), and the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC) (Banks & Archibald, 2020). According to Parks & Grindell (2022), sororities and fraternities at the university level have multiple entities from the national organization to regional, state and local chapters and even foundations the work with a unified vision and mission. Fraternities and sororities have been part of American college life for over two centuries (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Originally, literary societies were among the first extracurricular outlets for students, but by the late 1700s, fraternities began to emerge. It was not until the 19th century that national councils were created to oversee these groups (Banks & Archibald, 2020).

The Black Greek Organizations: The Divine Nine

Due to racial segregation, Black students were excluded from many mainstream Greek organizations. In response, nine historically Black fraternities and sororities formed what is now known as the "Divine Nine." In 1930, the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was established at Howard University to unify these organizations (Banks & Archibald, 2020). These groups became a source of mentorship, community support, and activism for Black students.

Their foundational values consist of community service, education, and social justice. This necessity emerged directly from the struggles facing the Black community, both then and now. They played a pivotal role during the Civil Rights Movement, with figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King among their members (Easterday, 2024).

For instance, individuals pledging Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) often memorize poems during the initiation process. These poems frequently convey themes such as struggle and resilience (Parks & Grindell, 2022). Symbols within organizations create a framework of behaviors and meanings that help both members and outsiders understand the group's identity (Parks & Grindell, 2022). Organizational symbols reflect the culture of the organization, reinforce internal values and norms, shape conversations around shared experiences, and unify the organization's meaning systems. Specifically for BGLOs, these symbols and imagery express the fraternity's identity by highlighting its cultural ties to African heritage and traditions (Parks & Grindell, 2022).

Today, Black Greek-letter organizations continue to serve as affirming spaces for Black students, but they often operate with fewer resources than their predominantly white counterparts do. This financial disparity limits their ability to host events and offer scholarships. These challenges reflect broader systemic inequities in higher education, where marginalized students often carry the emotional burden of representing their communities in predominantly white institutions (Easterday, 2024).

Importance

Fraternities and sororities are deeply embedded in the fabric of American higher education, with over 750,000 current undergraduate members and more than 9 million alumni nationwide (Pike & Wiese, 2024). Values such as leadership, service, and community often align

with institutional goals. Greek life encourages students to engage in activities beyond the classroom, including community service and leadership roles (Pike & Wiese, 2024). However, studies on their overall impact vary. Some research shows higher student engagement among Greek members, while other findings point to less consistent academic outcomes, especially during students' early college years (Pike & Wiese, 2024). Membership appears to foster involvement in purposeful activities, but it may also lead to students becoming overcommitted, which can negatively affect academic performance (Pike & Wiese, 2024).

Challenges

Fraternities and sororities have come under scrutiny due to issues like hazing, substance abuse, sexual misconduct, and questionable contributions to student learning. These concerns have led many institutions to re-evaluate their Greek systems, with some choosing to suspend or ban chapters in response to high-profile incidents (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Governance councils are expected to play a key role in addressing these ongoing concerns. Fraternities and sororities nationwide face serious legal risks due to these pervasive issues, which have contributed to a surge in lawsuits involving Greek organizations. In response, many of these groups have sought to secure liability insurance as a way to manage and mitigate these potential legal threats (Parks & Grindell, 2022).

Hazing

Hazing has ancient origins and was once seen as a way to teach obedience. Modern hazing often includes harmful practices such as sleep deprivation, binge drinking, humiliation, or physical abuse. Despite growing awareness and legal consequences, hazing still occurs, driven by the belief that shared suffering builds group loyalty (Banks & Archibald, 2020). However, studies question whether hazing truly strengthens bonds. While minor hardships may encourage

group closeness, more extreme hazing often fails to produce meaningful or lasting solidarity (Cimino & Thomas, 2022). Hazing remains a persistent problem, and more clear-cut institutional and legal definitions are needed to prevent and respond to it effectively (Banks & Archibald, 2020). National fraternities and sororities are often structured to limit their liability for the actions of individual chapters and members, frequently avoiding responsibility through legal dismissals or settlements (Parks & Grindell, 2022). While courts have been hesitant to hold these national organizations accountable for fostering hazing-prone cultures, social media has emerged as a powerful tool in hazing cases, exposing previously hidden incidents and providing additional evidence. For example, in *Edwards v. Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.*, the plaintiff argued that the national organization enabled a culture of violence that ultimately led to his hazing (Parks & Grindell, 2022).

Sexual Assault

Sexual violence is a significant issue on college campuses, affecting about one in five students. Greek life, particularly fraternity parties, has been linked to increased risks of alcohol-related sexual assault. Both men and women in Greek organizations report higher levels of drinking and sexual behavior compared to non-members (Porta et al., 2023). Sorority members report heightened concerns about safety at fraternity events, particularly around aggressive behavior and lack of adequate party oversight. While some measures like "sober bros" (members assigned to monitor parties) have been implemented, their effectiveness varies (Porta et al., 2023).

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Despite rules from governing councils like the IFC banning open alcohol sources at parties, many fraternity members find ways around them. Alcohol is often present at events and

subtly distributed, with warnings and disclaimers posted more to shift liability than ensure safety (Porta et al., 2023). Though some students feel safer knowing “sober bros” are monitoring the party, others question the actual enforcement of these safety roles. These inconsistencies reveal the challenges in managing party culture within Greek life (Porta et al., 2023).

Alcohol consumption remains a major public health issue on college campuses. Nearly two-thirds of students report drinking within the past month, and about one-third admit to binge drinking in the past two weeks. These behaviors are especially pronounced among students involved in fraternities and sororities, who tend to drink more frequently, consume larger amounts, and experience more alcohol-related problems compared to their non-Greek peers. Students in Greek life also report feeling more social pressure to drink and place a higher value on alcohol as part of their social experience (Abadi et al., 2020). Given the elevated risks for excessive drinking and its consequences in Greek-letter organizations, it is essential to implement strategies that reduce alcohol-related harm. One promising approach is the use of harm-reduction interventions, which focus on teaching students practical ways to minimize risky drinking behaviors. These protective behavioral strategies (PBSs) may include choosing not to participate in drinking games or planning ahead by designating a sober driver (Abadi et al., 2020).

Racial Discrimination

Greek organizations were not originally created to include students of color. Historically, white fraternities and sororities engaged in exclusionary practices—like using racial slurs during chants, celebrating Confederate symbolism, and denying membership to non-white individuals (Easterday, 2024). Legacy admissions and recruitment practices continue to uphold systems that disadvantage students of color. Racial discrimination in Greek life now appears in more subtle

ways such as biased recruitment, racially insensitive social events, and microaggressions (Easterday, 2024). Racism has been embedded in subtle and overt ways within historically white sorority and fraternity life organizations since their origins. These communities have long been associated with blatant racist behaviors, including hosting racially themed parties, wearing blackface, using discriminatory language and engaging in acts that target Students of Color (Garcia et al., 2023). The founding of these organizations was rooted in exclusion, with discriminatory practices based on race, gender, and religion often codified through explicit exclusionary language in early membership policies (Garcia et al., 2023).

Impact of Greek Life

Membership in Greek organizations can have a lasting impact on students' leadership skills, social responsibility, and intercultural competence. These groups offer students experiences that complement their academic education. Examples include networking, cross-cultural communication, and community engagement (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Students in Greek life are typically more socially engaged, though this involvement does not always translate into better academic performance. In fact, some research suggests Greek membership can hurt grades, possibly due to students taking on too many extracurricular responsibilities (Pike & Wiese, 2024).

Research has consistently shown that students involved in Greek life report feeling more socially connected, more engaged on campus, and less isolated. For students from underrepresented backgrounds, membership can offer even greater benefits by providing supportive communities and helping to build meaningful relationships (Bowman et al., 2020). Being part of a group that shares common values can also deepen a student's sense of purpose. Both Greek and religious organizations typically consist of individuals with similar beliefs,

which can reinforce those beliefs and foster a stronger personal identity. Additionally, rituals and traditions often give members a sense of meaning. While religious groups may have a more direct focus on life's purpose, Greek organizations also contribute to personal development through shared values and structured traditions (Bowman et al., 2020).

Impact on the University & Campus Experience

Many campuses require Greek organizations to be nationally affiliated in order to operate officially. Alumni of fraternities and sororities often provide significant support to both their organizations and the universities they attended, influencing institutional culture and funding (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Greek life is structured around traditional gender roles, with rules and privileges based on binary identities. This system can create unequal experiences and responsibilities, especially regarding risk and accountability. Universities must confront these systemic imbalances to better support student safety and gender equity (Porta et al., 2023). Though only a small percentage of the U.S. population joins Greek life, the influence of its members extends widely. Fraternity alumni make up a large share of U.S. political leaders and top business executives, demonstrating Greek life's powerful network and long-term impact (Banks & Archibald, 2020).

Role of Student Affairs Professionals in Greek Life

Student affairs professionals play a vital role in shaping the future of Greek life. This includes promoting inclusive and equitable practices, particularly during recruitment and initiation, and ensuring anti-hazing education is integrated into all chapters from the start (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Maintaining strong partnerships with national Greek organizations is essential. These relationships allow universities to advocate for change and share responsibility for reform when necessary. A tangible strategy to implement would be alcohol harm reduction

programs to address the cultural norms that exist on college campuses and extend beyond individual organizations (Abadi et al., 2020). Ultimately, changing the perception and practices of Greek life requires intentional effort from student affairs professionals, students, alumni, and national leaders. Ongoing collaboration and open communication are key to making these organizations more inclusive, safe, and aligned with educational goals (Banks & Archibald, 2020).

The Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors developed a core competencies guide for professionals working in sorority and fraternity life, outlining two key areas: foundational knowledge and professional skills. Under foundational knowledge, ensuring student safety is a critical focus, which includes overseeing crisis response procedures (Garcia et al., 2023). In the professional skills domain, practitioners are encouraged to enhance their ability to engage across diverse identities. This involves embracing diversity through cultural learning and interaction, acknowledging personal bias and privilege, and actively promoting inclusive policies, environments, and practices. Despite these guidelines, limited research exists on how SFL professionals actually respond to race-related incidents on their individual campuses (Garcia et al., 2023).

Biblical Worldview

From a biblical worldview, the desire for community, belonging, and purpose among college students reflects God's design for human relationships. Scripture affirms that we are not meant to live in isolation: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18, ESV). Meaningful connection is a core aspect of our humanity, as demonstrated by the early church's model of shared life: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44, ESV). While fraternities and sororities can offer deep bonds and identity through shared

rituals and values, believers are called to evaluate whether these align with Christ-centered living. Paul exhorts, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2, ESV), reminding us that our ultimate identity must be rooted in Christ rather than any worldly organization. Furthermore, the body of Christ is made up of many members with different backgrounds and gifts (1 Corinthians 12:12–13), which challenges any culture of exclusion or discrimination. Christian students engaging in Greek life should seek to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16), promoting justice, humility, and love, especially in spaces where systemic inequities persist.

Future Considerations: The HBCU Context

As a professional in the HBCU environment, there is a critical focus needed for this work. Student affairs practitioners at HBCUs should prioritize culturally responsive risk management education that respects the unique traditions of Black Greek-Letter Organizations (BGLOs) while promoting safety and legal compliance. Leveraging social media as both a tool for accountability and positive storytelling is essential to modern Greek life management. Practitioners must advocate for clearer campus policies addressing hazing and liability and equip students with legal literacy to navigate these complexities. Embracing the rich symbolism of BGLOs can strengthen identity and leadership development, while fostering open dialogue around intragroup challenges like colorism enhances community healing. Finally, improving collaboration between national organizations and local chapters will help align values and support sustained mentorship, ensuring BGLOs continue to thrive as affirming spaces within HBCU campuses.

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