OUT OF THE NIGHT THAT COVERS ME:

HOW MEMBERSHIP IN A BLACK GREEK LETTER ORGANIZATION

SHAPES THE BLACK STUDENT EXPERIENCE

by

KELBY J. LAMAR

KARRI HOLLEY, COMMITTEE CHAIR
CLAIRE MAJOR
NATHANIEL BRAY
STEVE D. MOBLEY JR.
LITSA RIVERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how membership in a historically Black Greek letter organization (BGLO) shapes the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution. Students who identify as Black Americans with a membership in a BGLO for at least one year and were full-time undergraduate students at such institutions were the participants for this study. The study included 13 participants who were chosen using snowball sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and a digital recording device. Data were analyzed using three-cycle coding and NVivo software to identify specific codes and themes in the data. Data collected showed that participants experienced a sense of belonging and connection to campus through membership in their BGLO. This study highlighted the need for more scholarship to differentiate between the BGLO experience and the traditionally White GLO experience at predominantly White institutions.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my parents, Herman and Veronica Lamar. They have always believed in me and encouraged and supported my dreams since I was a child. I have always wanted to complete a dissertation study, and the idea never seemed far-fetched or an impossibility because of them. I have seen and traveled to so many places in the world so far, and I have that ability to expand my horizons and seek more because they never limited my belief in what was possible. All of the sacrifices they have made for me to have the opportunity to complete this degree is a testament to their belief in me and my desire to continue to be the best that I can be in all that I do. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for everything. I love you both.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs) constitute an undeniable part of the Black

existence in the United States of America (U.S.) These organizations are recognizable for their

impact on the community, their performances on stage, and the unique legacies they have created

for college students at various universities across the country (Ross, 2001). As valuable and

impactful as these organizations have been for students of color at predominantly White

institutions (PWIs) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), they have also

been plagued with issues of elitism, extreme physical hazing, and the struggle to remain viable

vehicles of development when so many other student organizations exist on college campuses

today. This study explores membership in a BGLO through the experiences of students at a

predominantly White commuter institution. The members were able to share elements of their

BGLO experiences, both good and bad, so that readers have an in depth reference to what

membership in these organizations entails.

Undoubtedly, BGLO members' experiences on campuses today will be different from

those of the earlier members. The founding dates go as far back as 1906 with the founding of

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., and life in the U.S. is different for Black Americans than it was

at that time (Ross, 2001). Yet, despite some progress, students of color still face difficulties on

campuses of all types (Hughey, 2007). Consequently, some of the experiences that the students

in this study shared mirrored those of the past, while others detailed more progressive experiences on their respective campuses. In both cases, BGLOs have shaped experiences in a way that is worth detailing and sharing with the academic community. With such few studies on BGLOs available in the literature, especially with respect to areas outside of hazing and the academic performance of students of color, this study sought to provide a different perspective. The researcher provided narratives from the students' points of view to hopefully help campus faculty members, administrators, and the academic community understand the nuances of being a member of a BGLO at a predominantly White commuter institution.

BGLOs were founded at both HBCUs and PWIs. The founders of these organizations endured similar experiences because of the times they were in. With respect to organizations founded at PWIs, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. at Cornell University in 1906, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. at Indiana University in 1911, and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. at Butler University in 1922, students faced increased ostracism, racism, and difficulties when trying to develop and create organizations that were specifically designed for and catered to Black students (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). Black students did not make up a large part of the population at these institutions at the time, nor do they today (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). Black students could go weeks without seeing another person of color on campus in the founding years of these organizations. Apart from these experiences being isolating and difficult, they sometimes became hostile as well. The culmination of these experiences led to the creation of BGLOs, which could serve as sanctuaries and places of refuge for Black students during a tumultuous time in the country for Black people. Eight of the nine BGLOs that exist today were founded in the 16 years between 1906 and 1922 (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008).

Along with the BGLOs came the creation of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), an organization formed at Howard University, the mecca of BGLOs (Clark, 2016). Established in 1930, the NPHC was intended to be a coordinating body for the existing BGLOS across the campus (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). However, it would take a considerable amount of time for the NPHC to gain effectiveness at a macro level across the country. Kimbrough (2003) and Ross (2001) noted that there is a lack of documentation explaining the growth of the NPHC between 1940 and 1970. Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., the final organization that eventually joined the Divine Nine or the collection of BGLOs, was founded in 1963 at Morgan State University. Thus, for most of its initial existence, the NPHC was not well received on many campuses because of its loose structure and lack of comparable power that the College Panhellenic Council and Interfraternity Council held over traditionally White sororities and fraternities, respectively. Yet, despite this lack of power and authority, the period between 1906 and 1930 represented an unprecedented time for Black students on college campuses. These new fraternal organizations provided a sense of connection and comradery among Black students at the time which was missing prior to their inception (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008).

Historically White fraternities and sororities excluded students of color from their membership, and, as a consequence, the founders of BGLOs sought to create organizations for themselves that would provide community, a familial atmosphere, and a way to foster a collective identity in an often-hostile environment (Parks & Hughey, 2020). Though the founders of the organizations that began at HBCUs may not have experienced the same kind of racism and discrimination on their campuses as their counterparts at PWIs, the vileness of racism did impact them outside of their collegiate spaces as well.

As the organizations began to charter on campuses throughout the country, the number of Black students enrolling in college and subsequently graduating also began to increase. Even so, in the Southern region of the country, segregation and the institution of racism held firm the ways and ideals of the past. Though many BGLOs established chapters at Southern universities in the early 1900s, almost all of these were chartered at HBCUs. The ground-breaking 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision changed the future of education for Black students and their potential to enroll at PWIs while also providing them an opportunity to charter these new BGLOs on campuses across the country in the decades to come (Hughey, 2007).

Purpose of the Research

With this historical context in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine how membership in a BGLO shapes the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution. To assess how students within these organizations connected to campus at a predominantly White commuter institution, the researcher formulated the three research questions, that follow:

1. How does membership in a BGLO shape the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution?

2. How does membership in a BGLO affect Black students' involvement and sense of belonging at a university?

3. What skills do BGLOs equip Black students with to succeed at a PWI?

Through the answers to these questions, the researcher hoped to gain a better understanding of the experiences that such students have had at the institution(s) and how their BGLO membership may have contributed to that experience.

Several studies have examined the effect that membership in Greek letter organizations (GLOs) has on academic performance, post collegiate outcomes, career prospects, and leadership development. For instance, Walter Kimbrough (1995), a preeminent scholar on BGLOs, examined the history of Black fraternities and sororities and how memberships in them correlate with student success. Kimbrough reported that the membership is positively correlated with Black student success. He surveyed 61 students, including both members and non-members of the organizations. Of the non-members, almost 55% indicated that membership in one of the historically Black fraternities or sororities improved their leadership skills (Kimbrough, 1995). Almost 82% of the non-members had also considered membership in one of the organizations at

some point during their undergraduate years. These statistics relate to one of the later themes presented in the present study, regarding the treatment of members by aspirants after they joined their respective BGLOs.

Hazing and dangerous pledge processes were also legitimate concerns for all the organizations in the NPHC. Several pledges died due to dangerous pledge processes, and, as a result, the council agreed in 1990 to eliminate above-ground pledging in all nine organizations (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008; Jones, 2015). To this end, the organizations developed a process that was designed to remove pledging as a component of gaining membership. While adopted in good faith, the results of this change in policy were mixed. Student injuries continued to mount, with some even resulting in several deaths since the 1990 policy shift. In some cases, Black Greek members' continued desire to be recognized for having endured a particular pledge process in homage or honor to the tradition of their chapter of initiation or to the organization itself led members to participate in unofficial practices that are against the fraternity and sorority policies (Jones, 2004). This desire of aspiring members to be perceived in a certain way often overrides their better judgement concerning their health and well-being given the power dynamics at play (Jones, 2015). This creates a social conundrum whereby aspirants who do not subject themselves to this practice may be viewed in a negative social context, known as "paper," and those who do violate the guidelines to participate in an unsanctioned process are viewed in a positive social context, known as "made" (Jones, 2004, Kimbrough, 2003, Parks & Brown, 2005).

Previous Findings about GLO Effects

There are specific historical circumstances that distinguish BGLOs from traditionally White GLOs. Though there are similarities between the two groups, many studies have excluded the nuances of BGLOs that make them distinct from traditionally White GLOs. There are also findings that are contrary to both claims. For example, Grubb (2006) noted that students who were members of Greek letter fraternities and sororities posted lower grade point averages (GPAs) than their non-member counterparts. This finding is contrary to the literature, which suggests that membership in GLOs results in above-average academic performance. Most Greek organizations tout that their members hold higher GPAs than the overall non-Greek undergraduate average and use this as a recruiting tool in their marketing (Nelson et al., 2006).

Despite these similarities among GLOs, the number of studies that exclude BGLOs or simply lump them in as a generalization with traditionally White GLOs is evident. These studies along with those which cite excessive violence, social, and racial separation as well as drug and alcohol abuse paint a portrait of organizations that have not kept pace with time. There are numerous research articles and books on these topics in relation to GLOs in general. However, no two experiences within fraternity and sorority life will be the same, which is part of their allure in general. Yet, this unique aspect among their membership also makes them difficult to study because the experiences cannot be readily replicated. Despite these difficulties, fraternities and sororities have been and continue to be researched within the academy.

However, few studies have specifically examined commuter institutions, and far fewer have approached the topic of Black students who are members of GLOs at such institutions. Considering the duration that higher education has existed in the U.S. for, BGLOs are still a relatively new phenomenon. The dichotomy between BGLOs and traditionally White fraternities

and sororities is striking. Kimbrough (1997) reported that BGLOS often have fewer members, no campus housing, and lengthened recruitment methods, which often incorporate performance and dance with a culminating neophyte presentation. These processes cannot be mirrored with those of traditionally White fraternities and sororities because they contain elements from African rituals and customs that are not present in those organizations. If a college or university does not have a professional staff member in place who understands the nuances of and differences between these organizations, their structure and progress may suffer.

Another major difference between BGLOs and some traditionally White fraternities and sororities is that the latter have existed for centuries in some cases. White men have maintained access to college and higher education longer than any other group of people, and, as such, early organizations reflected their interests and viewpoints. Oberlin College, founded in 1833, became the first college to openly admit Black students in large numbers (Brazzell, 1996; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Rudolph, 1990; Harper et al., 2009). No other college had begun the process of allowing Black students to attend higher education institutions at a consistent rate. In comparison, many traditionally White fraternities and sororities had already been in existence for several years before Black students even gained the opportunity to attend college. Consequently, comparisons between the two groups must include this historical context so that they are viewed from a holistic perspective.

Though the Black student population at many institutions in the latter part of the 1800s and early 1900s would not be considered large, the students who were on campus at the time were aware of their potential and how their dreams could be realized. Many BGLO founders served as butlers and servants in the fraternity houses of some traditionally White groups (Parks & Hughey, 2020). This is where the idea of creating their own organizations for the upliftment

and support of other Black students originated. The first BGLOs did not arrive until the early

20th century; by that point, Phi Beta Kappa, the earliest fraternity founded at the College of

William and Mary, had been in existence for 130 years (Whipple & Sullivan, 1998).

It is not hard to imagine why BGLOs have struggled to achieve equity and distinct

standing among their traditionally White counterparts given this deep difference in support on

college campuses. As BGLOs began to be founded at PWIs across the country, such as Cornell,

Indiana, and Butler universities, and as other organizations began to charter chapters at PWIs, the

administration remained largely indifferent. They did not actively prevent the activities of the

students, but they did not provide virtually any modicum of support either (Crump, 1991).

Therefore, the early chapters of these organizations were left to fend for themselves.

Unlike their counterparts founded at HBCUs, the organizations founded at PWIs were created for

three primary expressed purposes: to combat social isolation, provide academic support for

Black students, and financially support one another (Bradley, 2008). Prior to organizing these

groups, students could go weeks at a time without seeing another student of color on campus.

This type of isolation would have almost certainly influenced academic performance, given

scholars' observations about the importance of community and involvement on academic

performance today (Astin, 1977; 1999).

Statement of the Problem

Culturally based organizations, including BGLOs, serve a crucial role in the involvement and sense of belonging for Black students (Hurtado, et. al, 1999). Yet, university administrators have not historically provided equitable resources to this population in comparison to their traditionally White counterparts. These students sometimes feel a sense of isolation at PWIs and may end up transferring to other colleges or universities where they may feel more connected to the campus. The level of involvement that a student has on campus (Astin, 1999) as well as their ability to integrate successfully on the campus through membership in culturally based groups (Guiffrida, 2003) that reflect their intersectionality (Greyerbiehl, & Mitchell Jr., 2014; Crenshaw, 2017) and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018) has a tremendous effect on the general student's ability to succeed and the Black student's likelihood to remain at the institution. Many BGLOs still maintain much smaller numbers in their memberships vs. their traditionally White counterparts at PWIs. This has a disproportionate effect on how such organizations are viewed internally within the university community and externally by the general public. For example, if a traditionally White sorority has over 100 members within their chapter but a historically Black fraternity has under 10 members, the two groups cannot be fairly compared or presented because they are operating in two very different ways. This study examined how membership in a BGLO shapes the Black student experience at two predominantly White commuter institutions through the lens of BGLO membership. The two theoretical frameworks that were used to examine these experiences were level of student involvement (Astin, 1999) and student sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). The participants in this study were able to speak at an in-depth level about how they felt a lack of belonging on campus in many cases prior to their membership in a

BGLO. Despite this, even after joining and developing a sense of internal community among themselves, they still do not collectively feel that university administrators or leaders take the interests of students of color into account for large-scale campus wide programming or initiatives.

The literature on underrepresented students who attend predominantly White commuter institutions in urban environments or at smaller regional universities in rural environments is limited. These students are often lumped into larger pools of literature that includes White residential students, or they are eliminated from the discussion altogether. Prior research illustrates that commuter students struggle to persist and be retained as compared to their traditionally aged and enrolled counterparts (Kuh et al., 2008).

Astin's (1993) research on students and their connection to college is incredibly useful in understanding what has happened in the realm of fraternity and sorority life. He noted that "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development in the undergraduate years" (Astin, 1993, p. 398). There are few organizations that define a peer group more than just a Greek letter fraternity or sorority. These organizations, by their very definition, create an atmosphere of influence among peers due to their ritualistic practice. While the public may consider them to be purely social vehicles, students do gain a large percentage of their learning from their fraternal experiences (Astin, 1993). Since peers are often more influential with one another than an a person in leadership or administration, what they learn through their membership in these organizations may be lost or remain unexamined.

Further, due to the secretive nature of many GLOs, students may be apprehensive or unwilling to discuss how membership may have affected them beyond the surface level. For example, Kuh (1996) explained that if universities do not consider the learning that occurs

among students themselves, rather than simply from instructor to student, they are bound to fail. Some universities have a larger fraternity and sorority life presence than others; the importance and integration of GLOs in institutions with a large fraternity and sorority life presence will be different from that at an institution with a limited presence. Students create meaning and culture irrespective of whether it is studied or examined from an academic lens. Therefore, Kuh (1996) suggested that universities take account of the ways in which learning occurs so that they can respond accordingly. This advice is still relevant for administrators today. Because prior research on culturally based fraternal organizations (CBFOs) in this realm was limited or missing altogether, this study added to the previous research on level of involvement and sense of belonging for students, while specifically examining how their membership in a BGLO at a predominantly White commuter institution shaped their experience.

Traditionally White GLO Juxtaposed with CBFOs

Since there are often fewer BGLO members on campus, it can cause BGLOs to be perceived in a particular way if their academics or activities are juxtaposed against traditionally White fraternities and sororities with many more members. Fraternities and sororities were originally designed to meet specific needs that ranged from cultural to academic, and these organizations were able to fulfill both simultaneously (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). While both traditionally White fraternities and sororities and BGLOs emphasize service, philanthropy, and academic achievement, the groups often diverge on being an avenue for acceptance and belonging on a campus where skin color could provoke others in a negative way (Ross, 2016).

Over time, such needs have become much more nuanced; organizations with a specific religious affiliation such as Jewish fraternities or sororities (Kohn, 2008), those with a unique cultural background such as CBFOs, or those specifically for military personnel have developed. As these organizations have endured so much change within the university structure for centuries, it is hard to imagine university life without them. However, with continued student deaths occurring due to hazing within the fraternity and sorority community across the country, many believe that such organizations are no longer responsible and viable vehicles for students to thrive in college.

Interestingly, critics of fraternities and sororities have just as much to say about them as their supporters. The organizations are exclusionary, and, in addition, researchers have found that the number of hazing allegations that have been taken to court is far higher than many organizations would have you believe (Parks et al., 2014). Each of these cases is contradictory to the goals and objectives of these organizations. The founding of BGLOs was a result of Black students being forbidden from membership in traditionally White GLOs (Ross, 2001). Yet,

many of the members of BGLOs have inflicted irreparable physical, mental, and emotional scarring in the form of hazing on some of their members. As the number of hazing deaths and racist acts on campus continue to rise, critics gain more ammunition to advocate for the removal of fraternities and sororities from colleges altogether. In many instances of hazing during the initiation process, alcohol and other drugs are factors contributing to the same (Allan & Madden, 2008).

Considering the abovementioned association, more research is needed to delineate the type of organization (i.e., BGLOs vs. traditionally White GLOs) and the hazing incidents involving drugs and alcohol within the organization. Some scholars already show that students who are members of a fraternity or sorority have an increased likelihood to participate in underage drinking or illegal drug use (De Simone, 2009). However, most of these studies do not account for the nuanced differences between BGLOs and traditionally White GLOs. The studies tend to focus on traditionally White Greek letter fraternities and sororities almost exclusively. This leaves the coverage of BGLOS and their problems in the literature largely being relegated to incidents involving extreme physical hazing or academic performance (Harper, 2009). There has been limited emphasis on the meaning that Black students form based on their memberships in these organizations at PWIs. A significant gap exists in the literature on this topic as well as the experiences that Black students who attend predominantly White commuter institutions face. Therefore, the researcher hopes that this study will add context and support that will assist scholars, practitioners, and administrators to focus more on this specific population moving forward.

Aside from the ways that the researcher's study may add to the gaps in the literature surrounding Black students at commuter institutions and their experiences as members of

BGLOs, the present study may also raise additional questions. For instance, research shows that membership in a BGLO has had different effects on the Black student experience at PWIs vs. HBCUs (Kimbrough, 1995). At some PWIs, Black students consider these organizations to provide a gateway to commonality and a sense of belonging on a campus where their differences are often more highlighted than their similarities (Mc Clure, 2006). White students who are part of GLOs do not experience this difference and may often navigate their own campuses or travel to other universities without a consideration of race or other cultural differences between campuse. However, a Black student who joins a BGLO at a PWI and then travels to an HBCU may have an entirely different experience.

Overall, no matter what campus one visits, traditionally White GLOs continue to be primarily homogenous in nature and often host activities that would be considered insensitive at best and outwardly racist at worst (King, 1996). When White students do not speak up against or discourage this kind of behavior, it sheds a negative light on GLOs as a collective, with BGLOs becoming collateral damage. More recently, fraternities and sororities that continue to host large social gatherings at varying universities across the country amid the COVID-19 pandemic have dampened the perception of many such organizations. The average person with no foundational or historic knowledge about BGLOs and their traditionally White counterparts may not be able to distinguish between them. This creates a bigger divide between the organizations and, like the membership differences described earlier, creates an unintentional message that BGLOs are participating in the same types of activities as their peers.

The present study was conducted at two separate predominantly White commuter institutions. This provided additional insight to further inform how BGLO memberships affect the Black student experience across campuses. The researcher hopes this study helps to dispel

the notion that all GLOs are the same and provides students of color at predominantly White

commuter institutions with the opportunity to share their experiences in a way that adds

additional perspectives to this topic within the academic literature.

Black Student Experiences on the College Campus

Despite the myriad of differences between traditionally White fraternities and sororities and BGLOs across the country, one common element plays a role in the way that students interpret their collegiate experience—the region of the country (Anderson, 2002). The historical impact of the history of the U.S. affects some students' achievement of success at PWIs located in the Southern region of the country. Faculty and staff of color at these institutions have not kept pace with their peer institutions in other regions of the country, and, consequently, some students may not feel understood or represented at the institution (Turner et al., 2008). Just over a decade ago, i.e., in 2006, Black college students maintained a 43% graduation rate while their White counterparts maintained 63% , according to the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2007). This is a staggering statistic that illustrates the extent of the divide between Black and White students' graduation at institutions of higher education. When Black students do not have allies within or outside the classroom, they can feel as though they are constantly under assault at a PWI. The literature shows that this is especially true for Black males. Robertson (1995) and Kim and Hargrove (2013) noted that Black males with close relationships with White faculty are more likely to enjoy or have a positive collegiate experience than those without. While this may not be surprising, it underscores the point that there are many White faculty and few faculty members of color that Black students can potentially identify with at PWIs. Consequently, Black students—males in particular—may often be forced to develop kinship with a White faculty member to achieve a positive experience. If a student comes from a background wherein, they did not interact with White people on a regular basis, having to do so at a PWI can seem like an insurmountable challenge to them.

Continuing with this trend, the curriculum at many Southern colleges and universities may not be analogous to that of other institutions in the U.S. either. Classes on the history of the South or particular states are commonplace at many Southern institutions. This kind of curriculum may not reflect the interests or sentiments of students of color (Anderson, 2002). In turn, it results in some of those students transferring from PWIs to attend HBCUs, where the curriculum may reflect their interests in a more direct way. Robertson (1995) expressed that White faculty who have integrated the interests of Black students into the course curriculum had Black students with higher academic performance in those classes. The students were able to identify with the subject material and were inspired to perform better on assignments. Studies in the literature have also examined the preconceptions and biases of teachers at the K-12 level for students of color and White students (Gershenson et al., 2016). These studies largely indicate that, in many instances, teachers may form biases that affect how they engage with or set expectations for students of color. This can have lasting effects and contribute to the students' perception of their PWI instructors.

Interestingly, Black female students have not had the same struggles as their male counterparts. They maintained the largest growth in graduation rates between 1990 and 2006, according to the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2007), rising from 34% to 47%. However, the successes of Black women are often not examined in their own right but are juxtaposed with their male counterparts (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). While it is true that Black women are continuing to enroll in colleges and graduate at a record rapid pace, it does not mean that they have not and do not face challenges in the collegiate realm (Robinson & Franklin, 2011). This places the success of Black female and male students at a crossroads for many faculty and staff. The differences in their levels of success and engagement suggest that

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something more nuanced must be happening within the populations. The stark contrast between Black males being placed among the highest collegiate attrition rates and Black females among the highest graduation rates in a student population illustrates the potential influence of outside sources on their successes and struggles (Robinson & Franklin, 2011).

The present study intended to add clarity on how Black male and female students within BGLOs experience collegiate life at a predominantly White commuter institution in the Southeast region of the U.S. Traditionally, the retention rate at commuter institutions has been much lower than that at a traditional, residential institution (Jacoby, 1989). When this is combined with the data illustrating that Black students make up almost 30% of the population at one of the host institutions, and Black males maintain some of the highest attrition rates, the importance of other influences on their experiences at the institution becomes paramount (OIE, 2017).

Another way that the geographic region has a tremendous effect on BGLO memberships is the expansion of the organizations within the Divine Nine. For example, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. were the two final organizations to be founded and added to the NPHC (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). Though founded in 1922 and 1963 at Butler University and Morgan State University, respectively, these organizations do not have the presence at many Southern PWIs that the other organizations have (Parks, 2008). Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., the most recent founding, has the fewest members nationally and internationally as compared to any other BGLO (Parks, 2008). This poses a challenge for many high school students or those growing up in a certain state or region who may be interested in these organizations. Though no student would be advised to select their college or university based on the existence of a fraternity or sorority on the campus alone, if a student has a choice between

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two competing universities and one has an organization while the other does not, it could serve as a deciding factor.

Elitism in BGLOS

  As different as the two host institutions may be—in terms of location, age, population

demographics, and the presence of eight of the nine Divine Nine organizations—there are also

similarities among them. Unfortunately, within some chapters, BGLOs have become shells of

themselves. Some researchers even call BGLOs obsolete failures in the 21st century (Chambers,

2017). The very founding of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. in 1914 at Howard University is

said to be in response to some of the early problematic sentiments of some BGLOs (Hughey,

2007). Organizations founded prior to 1914 allegedly selected members based on elitist qualities

such as skin tone, hair texture, and financial status (Hughey, 2007). Some BGLOs are rumored

to still have elitist elements in their membership selection processes today. Though brown paper

bag tests may no longer be used as a form of selection criteria, aspirants from lower socio-

economic backgrounds, with lower intellectual capabilities, or lacking sophistication have been

discriminated against in some instances (Hughey, 2007). Additionally, discrimination based on

sexual orientation has also plagued many Divine Nine organizations. Due to their close kinship

to the church and Christianity, many such organizations, particularly fraternities, have

historically frowned upon acceptance of openly gay members (Parks, 2008). These members

often closeted themselves or lied about their sexual orientation to gain membership into these

organizations at some chapters.

  Aside from these issues, some have noted that BGLOs create a separate, privileged

society within the greater Black community, only spurring further division among their members

rather than uplift and enlightenment (Chambers, 2017). This is particularly noteworthy at

Southern PWIs, where Greek organizations serve as a temporary respite from the challenges and

microaggressions that students of color may face in other parts of the university. Greek

organizations, as a collective, have had problematic histories surrounding discrimination, which is also the reason for the founding of BGLOs---because Black students were excluded from membership in traditionally White organizations. Yet, as negative as the history of some of these organizations may be and as troubled as some individual chapters continue to be, there are also a host of positive activities that would not have been accomplished without the tireless efforts of Greek fraternities and sororities: On many campuses, these organizations are lauded for the community service and philanthropic work that they carry out on a regular basis. They provide avenues for entertainment, service, philanthropy, and leadership to members and aspiring members.

However, they do not constitute a panacea. Some chapters have created division among the Black student population. The argument that they are elitist organizations that have strayed away from their intended purpose is alive and well. It has already been illustrated that Black students who participate in culturally based organizations are more likely to have higher GPAs at PWIs (Davis, 1991). In contrast, it is also known that students who overcommit to such institutions are likely to experience a drop in their academic performance (Guiffrida, 2003), indicating that a level of balance and involvement in multiple kinds of organizations is needed for Black students to thrive at PWIs. The researcher's study examined the fine line between the level of involvement that participants have, in conjunction with the sense of belonging that membership provides to the student at the institution. Too much of any one type of activity has the potential to stifle the student's growth. Membership in a minority or culturally based organization is no different. However, when it comes to BGLOs, as this study illustrated, most members are already well-rounded students. Since they often have memberships of older students in comparison to their traditionally White counterparts, these students had an

opportunity to join other types of organizations before they became eligible for BGLO

memberships in many cases. In this way, the requirements of BGLO membership may indirectly

promote what Guiffrida referred to in the literature.

For example, a Black student may have membership in the institution's Black Student

Union while also being a member of the student government association. While the influence of

their membership in both organizations may affect the student differently, the combination of

these experiences may ultimately help them navigate the realities of the PWI experience

(Guiffrida, 2003). Through an examination of undergraduate students who are members of

BGLOs and likely other organizations, the researcher intended to illustrate how the Black–Greek

student experience may compare and differ from the collegiate experiences of others who are not

part of those organizations. The participants in the study had the opportunity to reflect on their

current experiences as members of a BGLO as well as what their collegiate experience was like

prior to joining a BGLO. This targeted focus on those aspects of their college experience

directly informs the influence of these organizations at the host institutions.

Common Experiences Black Students Face at PWIs

While most participants had a similar experience at their institution, scholars note that Black students who have a negative experience at a PWI are much less likely to persist (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado, 1992; Nettles & Perna, 1997, Locks et al., 2008). This is regardless of the region and applies to various types of PWIs in the U.S. Many students have a difficult time transitioning to college, but students of color at PWIs often experience more difficulty because of the history of the institutions. The names of buildings and statues that may exist in the center of the campus or traditions that the university continues to participate in may all serve as reminders to students of color that they were once not welcome at the institution. If these activities still occur today, it can contribute to a lack of sense of belonging for these students as well. While history cannot be erased, it is important to note what the celebration of that history may mean to students of color.

These experiences cannot be ignored, but there are other aspects of the Black student experience that can be highlighted as well. Instead of focusing on the reasons that Black students may not persist or be retained at a commuter institution, the researcher sought to examine students' experiences through GLO memberships and inform how these memberships affected their overall experiences at the institution(s). Since there is a plethora of research examining and defining the Black student experience from a deficit mindset (Harper 2009), the researcher wanted to examine an area of a significant gap in the literature—BGLO memberships at predominantly White commuter institutions in an urban and rural environment.

As lauded as GLOs have been on many campuses, their struggle for relevancy is still a concern in the 21st century. Some students arrive on campuses with no intention or desire to join a fraternity or sorority, despite many of the organizations' history and legacy. This has also not

been discussed at great length in the literature (Fouts, 2010). Students have their reasons for joining a fraternity or sorority and those who never consider joining also have reasons for doing so. As national news stories continue to leave negative impressions of these organizations on the minds of parents, some students do not see the positive impact that membership in a GLO may have on their lives. The literature shows that campus leaders have historically been interpreted to be student government officers, fraternity and sorority presidents, and residence hall advisors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Schuh & Laverty, 1983; Hutcheson & Kimbrough, 1998).

These students were in prominent positions on campus and had the cachet to influence how the rest of the student population interacted in some instances. However, preconceived notions about the organizations as well as early interactions with members during orientation or initial days on campus can have a profound impact on students' likelihood to join or even be interested in fraternities and sororities (Fouts, 2010). Despite their history of leadership development, some students see these organizations as nothing more than exclusionary clubs. BGLOs are especially unique in this scenario because of the importance of discretion when expressing interest to be a member of the organization (Ross, 2001; Parks & Hughey, 2020).

Unlike formal rush activities with traditionally White fraternities and sororities, which usually occur at the beginning of the fall semester (or spring in some instances), BGLOs and their activities are much more secretive (Kimbrough, 2003). This element also contributes to the lack of academic research on BGLOs. Aside from Black students not having equal access to study and research topics pertaining to Black history in the history of higher education, the secretive element of BGLOs contributes to the lack of research on such organizations (Ross, 2001; Parks & Hughey, 2020). Members hold information close and often do not feel

comfortable discussing their membership with someone from another culture or background (Ross, 2001; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks, 2008).

Additionally, because of the way that members are revealed at the end of membership intake activities in BGLOs through new member presentations, or what were historically known as probate shows, it is vital that the expression of interest and disclosure of activities associated with joining remain as discreet as possible throughout the process (Parks & Hughey, 2020). Unlike bid days in traditionally White fraternities and sororities, which are formal announcements of an intention to join an organization, the public does not find out about a student's intention to join a BGLO until after their initiation. This nuance is especially noteworthy at commuter institutions, where students may be coming and going from the campus at a much higher rate than a traditional residential campus. In many instances, transfer or nontraditional students with part-time or full-time jobs or who may only be taking a course for a limited number of hours may have difficulty in meeting the demands of a BGLO (Yearwood, 2011).

Activities such as attending community service events and social outings are commonplace, but interested students also get to know potential members within the classroom and on campus through common membership in other organizations. However, a commuter student may not be on campus as often, may take evening classes, or may not have the time to join other groups because of their increased responsibilities away from campus. Thus, those who become members usually do so under stringent guidelines and expectations. These unwritten rules can be detrimental to the likelihood of a student's success while attempting to join a BGLO if he or she is unaware of them or does not have context about their practices (Kimbrough, 2003).

Other nuances within the culture of BGLOs can also affect an aspirant's likelihood to gain membership. In many instances, for students who do not have a familial history of attending college or joining GLOs, they may lack the context and perspective to know the appropriate behavior when engaging with these organizations. The fees associated with joining BGLOs often places them at a premium, and leaves students from lower socioeconomic statuses (SES)with little opportunity to join (Parks & Hughey, 2020). Some critics may argue that this is further evidence of the divide and stratification between Black students who are members of BGLOs and those who are not. Even outside of membership in a BGLO, SES plays a tremendous factor in the sense of belonging and level of involvement for students, particularly students of color (Nguyen & Herron, 2020; Kilgo et. al, 2015). While desire and intent may be present for the student, if the financial resources are absent or limited, it may add to the ostracism the student may be internally or externally facing.

In terms of BGLOs specifically, a student may arrive on campus without the necessary information to engage in a socially acceptable manner, and some less understanding members of BGLOs may hold it against an aspirant who attempts to gain membership. Students being told to do their research is a common occurrence when they request more information about how to engage with a BGLO (Kimbrough, 2003; Jones, 2015). While it is acceptable for members to expect interested students to research and know about the organization they are attempting to join, it is no longer acceptable for them to assume that all interested students have the same level of depth and awareness about BGLOs or fraternities and sororities in general given the diversity of the student population today.

Further, many students who elect to join GLOs have a familial tie or connection to the organization and generally a higher degree of self-efficacy than their counterparts. Self-efficacy

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is defined as the perception of one's ability to achieve a desired outcome (Thompson et al., 2011). As defined, this makes students who are a part of GLOs highly motivated achievers, who believe they will accomplish what they intend to. This type of belief is instilled much earlier than in college in most cases, and when students arrive with this kind of mentality in place, their acclimation into student organizations becomes much more seamless (Thompson et al., 2011).

On the contrary, some students who do not have this familial connection to BGLOs or GLOs may want to join but lack the high degree of self-efficacy as other aspirants. They may attempt to gain additional acceptance on campus or at least the perception of it through such a membership (Thompson et al., 2011). The irony in this scenario is that, within many BGLO chapters, this lack of knowledge or connection may be used against them in the process. This cyclical behavior is the reason that many critics consider BGLOs as elitist. When familial ties to the organization are present, students have an increased knowledge regarding the unwritten rules of engagement with the organizations. However, in the absence of this tie, as some of the participants of the present study shared, the student is left to fend for themselves amid everything else that is new and challenging on a college campus (Kimbrough, 1995). For many Black students, including the participants of this study, seeing organizations like BGLOs and wanting to join a group that has a shared purpose and mutual interest is attractive. There is a high potential for creating a lasting bond within college and thereafter, thus improving the sense of belonging and level of involvement at the institution at the institution both while enrolled and post-graduation (Kimbrough, 1995).

The Role of College Admissions on Student Diversity

Another area that is not as readily discussed when examining GLOs is the importance of

university admissions. In many cases, students may be admitted to universities without the

proper skills or resources provided to them to maximize their level of success (Harwood, 1997;

Marcus, 2000; Trombley, 1998). Students who are admitted despite needing to take introductory

developmental courses are examples of this phenomenon. While it is commendable for the

diversity of the student population to take precedence in university admissions, the qualifications

of the students cannot be discounted or the entire university, including the alumni, may suffer.

Admitting a student who adds to the strength of diversity within an institution but is also not

intentionally connected to the departments or individuals on campus who may assist in

overcoming the student's areas of weakness, is negligent on the part of the university. On the

contrary, not admitting students who illustrate promise but may need additional assistance is also

problematic. Universities that want to protect their rankings may engage in such practices and

limit the possibility that students who fall into this category may ever earn a bachelor's degree

(Lavin & Weininger, 1998).

Past research shows that most of the students who take developmental courses do so at

community colleges and that a majority of the community college students are also commuter

students (Attewell et al, 2006). This is noteworthy because much of the literature on commuter

students centers around their struggles. Community colleges often serve as the beginning of

college life for many students, so the correlation between developmental courses and commuter

institutions makes sense in this context. However, Bettinger and Long (2004) found that of the

students who completed developmental courses, not all had the same results. Some went on to

complete a bachelor's degree, while others transferred to a community college, to another

four-year institution or dropped out of college altogether. This illustrates that each case is different; taking developmental courses does not mean that a student is lesser than or cannot achieve. However, if a university does not admit a student because of the need for developmental courses or if the university admits the student without providing them the resources to complete developmental courses, it is problematic (Bettinger and Long, 2004).

Additionally, studies illustrate the effect that early decision processes have had on the diversity of incoming freshmen classes. Antecol and Smith (2012) found that early decision processes at elite private and liberal arts colleges positively affected White students while negatively affecting students of color, particularly Asian and Hispanic students. This is a phenomenon that can shape how colleges change their admissions processes going forward so that their student populations mirror the desires of the constituents.

The minority student populations at the two host institutions are considered fairly large given the enrollment levels at the institutions; Humble University has a 42.9% minority student population out of 22,563 students and Spirit University has a 40% minority student population out of 3,150 students (OIE, 2020). However, the improvement in access has not eliminated the challenges in equity at the institutions. The participants in this study shared how their BGLO membership is just one area where problems are still present in comparison to their peers who maintain membership in traditionally White fraternities and sororities.

Significance of the Study

Student organization membership plays a larger role in the level of involvement, sense of belonging, and campus integration for students of color than for White students (Bourke, 2010; Guiffrida, 2003; Patton, 2006; Strayhorn, 2018). Campus involvement includes membership in GLOs (Guiffrida, 2003). Additionally, much of the existing literature on commuter institutions and commuter students is monolithic. It largely does not examine within-group differences or dynamics which may shape the student experiences at these institutions (Jacoby, 1989; Jacoby & Garland, 2004). This study examined how membership in a BGLO shapes the Black student experience, thereby addressing the level of involvement in a specific kind of organization, while also exploring how membership in the organization contributes to the sense of belonging for the students at commuter institutions, thereby creating an affective tie beyond class attendance. This study adds to the literature in both realms by utilizing two theoretical frameworks which seek to ultimately increase student retention and persistence through increased involvement and sense of belonging.

The extant literature on GLOs and their impact on student persistence and retention largely revolves around traditionally White GLOs. This is a problem because of the increasing and changing diversity of the student population at campuses across the country. When this is combined with the issues that BGLOs face on PWI campuses in terms of the equity of resources received from university administrators and the lack of recognition in many instances beyond performative actions such as step shows or stroll offs, the impact of this study could create many opportunities for future research, as well as prompt administrators to consider addressing some of the issues that participants outlined in their responses. In general, the research on BGLOs specifically is relatively new in academia (Brown, Parks, & Phillips, 2005). Hughey and

Martinez (2012) noted that these organizations possess a high level of secrecy and discretion, which contributes to why they have not been studied to a large degree. However, the limited literature that does exist on BGLOs is reduced to five main areas, according to Hughey and Martinez (2012):

(1) "*Hazing and pledging (*Kimbrough 2003; Jones 2004; Dickinson 2005; Parks and Brown 2005) (2) *Civil rights and civic participation (*Harris 2005; Washington and Nunez 2005; Skocpol, Liazos and Ganz 2006; Gasman, Louison and Barnes, 2008; Harris and Mitchell 2008,) (3) *Racial/gender identity and inequality* (Giddens 1994; Black, Belknap and Ginsburg 2005; Phillips 2005; Stombler and Padavic 2005; Hernandez 2008; Hughey 2008b; Neumann 2008; Berkowitz and Padavic, 1999) (4) *Cultural aesthetics* (Fine 2004; Branch 2005; McCoy 2005; Posey 2005) and (5) *Media representations* (Whaley 2005; Hughey 2008c, 2011)."

These five themes are varied, but none of them specifically address how BGLOs shape the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution. These institutions often have higher populations of commuter students than traditional residential college campuses. While both research sites have made strides to become more residential in nature, the commuter population still outnumbers the residential population at both institutions. Commuter students are defined as students who do not live on campus but attend the university from local and surrounding areas (Schibrowsky & Peltier, 1993; Forbus et al., 2011). To address the needs of the commuter student population, universities must be sensitive to their specific qualities and how they differ from traditional residential college students. For the purposes of this study, each participant lived off campus, but the distances from the institution varied. No student lived more than 25 minutes away from their respective campus, so while they commuted to campus, the

degree to which they could be involved in campus activities would likely be much different than a student commuting from over one hour away.

Forbus et al. (2011) noted that the primary differences between commuting and non-commuting students can be differentiated based on three basic areas: (1) socioeconomic and demographic differences; (2) academic differences; and (3) non-school obligations and activities. Since both research sites have historically been considered as commuter institutions, respectively located in an urban environment and rural environment, the present study examined how membership in a BGLO shaped student experiences at a predominantly White commuter institution in a specific region of the country. Using Astin's (1999) updated theory of student involvement as well as Strayhorn's updated (2018) concept of sense of belonging the researcher explored how Black students who are members of a BGLO and attend a commuter institution have experienced collegiate life through the lens of membership in that organization.

The college student population has become increasingly different than in years past. Less than one quarter of students today fit the traditional description of a college student, which includes ages 18–24 (Attewell et al., 2007). With these changes, the impact of student organizations has shifted on many college campuses. In light of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, this will become increasingly more important on college campuses in the coming months and years ahead. The number of commuter students may rise if families are not comfortable with their student living on campus amid a pandemic. When students do not live on campus, their desire to join or participate in organizations that will require them to remain on campus after their classes have ended may be lowered. For example, as many schools begin to adopt mandatory recreation center and technology fees to compete with one another for the best

facilities and attract the best students, commuter students are often left with a bill for things they never intend to use.

While a large percentage of students commute to campus, there is little literature on the engagement and learning of these students (Horn et al., 2006). Consequently, this also means that there is limited information about the effects that commuting to campus may have on Black students. Part of the problem that many commuter students face is due to the lack of empirical research. Much of the information about commuter students is based on observations or limited research. In fact, Jacoby (1989) asserted that much of the literature on commuter students was so teemed with negative characterizations that colleges and universities never implemented policies to change their narrative. Since this 1989 finding, little has changed. Commuter students continue to be viewed in a monolithic and negative light, despite making up the majority of the college student population (Yearwood, 2011).

For a specific population like commuter students, this can be disastrous because there may be limited professional staff on campus to advocate on their behalf, and some of the students may not be connected or engaged with the university enough to know what they may be missing. However, Black students at PWIs, particularly in the South, have only recently been able to gain admission to these institutions and advocate for items specific to their population. The initial round of students that attended PWIs were pioneers whose primary goal was to attain a degree and survive the hostility faced on campus (Harper, 2008; Harper et al., 2009). GLOs were not a priority when there may have been only a dozen students of color on the campus in total. However, as time passed and Black students started attending these institutions in larger numbers, they wanted the opportunity to charter and establish organizations that would foster a

sense of community and sense of belonging which many of them had heard about or seen at HBCUs across the country or PWIs in the north or mid-west.

The 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision changed life for Black students at PWIs, particularly those in the South, to have an opportunity to attend what had been historically White institutions and create a place for themselves (Ross, 2016). For many students, the sense of community and acceptance at these institutions was established over time through BGLOs. This is this very reason that many of the BGLOs on campuses in the Southern part of the U.S. were chartered well after their organizational founding date. Though many of the organizations had existed for decades, they did not expand to the South until much later because of the region's resistance to integration and the treatment of minorities in comparison with Whites (Harper, 2007, 2008). For example, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., the first two historically Black fraternities, were founded in 1906 and 1911, respectively, but they did not receive charters at one of the research sites until 1974 and 1980, respectively. However, another chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. was chartered at Morehouse College, an HBCU located in Atlanta, GA in 1929—only 18 years after its founding in Indiana (Crump, 1972). This exemplifies what happens with such organizations at PWIs in the South. Since Black students were not legally allowed to attend these institutions, there was no way for these organizations to exist on those campuses. However, after the institutions were integrated and the number of Black students began to rise, the organizations began to charter at PWI campuses all along the South (Parks & Hughey, 2020).

With this rise in enrollment, the opportunity for scholarship and research on these organizations and their members in the South is new. The potential research sites are both described as predominantly White commuter institutions. Harper et al. (2018) noted that far too

many studies conducted on commuter students or at commuter institutions have been deracialized; and have not incorporated race or its impact on the commuter students or institutions. HBCUs often have smaller campuses and enrollments and have not historically been considered to be commuter institutions.

However, PWIs in various locations have been considered commuter institutions, and this experience is often unique compared to PWIs without this description or characterization. Black students have been included alongside other students in these types of studies, but the meaning of race in this specific institutional context had not been examined to a large degree prior to Harper (2018). Previous studies on students at commuter institutions examined familial commitments, employment, and academic coursework (Harper, 2018; Jacoby, 2000, 2015; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001; Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009). Though impactful, these elements do not speak to the experience of being a Black student at a predominantly White commuter institution in an urban or rural setting. Harper (2012) noted that studies rarely critically examine a specific campus context to offer more nuanced insights into how racist institutional structures, policies, and practices undermine Black student achievement.

Thus, the experiences of Black students cannot be generalized across institution type. PWIs and HBCUs, public or private, and the geographic location of the institution all have the potential to affect the interpretation and meaning of a student's collegiate experience. Black students have been recorded as having a much more difficult time transitioning to PWIs vs. HBCUs (Watkins et al., 2007). The PWI environment is often more stifling culturally and students may feel alienated and detached from the university (Loo & Rolison, 1986; Steward et al., 1990; Suen, 1983). Recent research suggests that Black men at PWIs in the Southeastern U.S. experience many more difficulties than they do at HBCUs. Parker et al. (2016) found three

primary themes in their study examining Black men at PWIs in the Southeast: divergent feelings

of safety and belonging, institutional climate issues, and personal accountability. These

experiences are considered more of a norm for students of color at PWIs rather than an anomaly.

The participants in the present study corroborated many of these previous findings. Black

students may be more likely to suffer academically and refrain from participating in

extracurricular activities at PWIs as well. Even so, as Harper (2018) noted, fewer studies have

examined whether this is the case at predominantly White commuter institutions.

Hurtado et al. (1999) suggested that cultural activities and memberships play an

important role in the engagement and outcomes for students of color at PWIs. BGLOs often fall

under the realm of cultural safe spaces on these campuses. Aside from support, these

organizations often provide a space to students to network, build connections, and share a unified

experience with others who may have similar backgrounds (Harper & Quaye, 2015; Guiffrida,

2003; Museus, 2008c, 2011; Museus et al., 2012). Tinto (1993) explained persistence through

the concepts of social and academic integration. He believed that students who participate in

extracurricular activities are far more likely to persist and ultimately graduate than students who

do not. However, Tinto's (1993) study did not factor in underrepresented student populations

and their experiences, and it has largely been refuted through further academic literature.

Consequently, the researcher explored how Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement

was applicable to Black students at predominantly White commuter institutions while also using

Strayhorn's updated (2018) concept of sense of belonging to contextualize the experiences of the

participants in this study. The results of this research have the potential to benefit a wide

population. BGLOs and the nuances they carry are often incorporated into the larger community

of Greek organizations. However, this diminishes their value and the reason for their founding.

Whipple et al. (1991) and Berkowitz and Padavic (1999) argued and defined the fundamental differences between BGLOs and White GLOs. A finding from their 1991 study is that students who join BGLOs "generally come from a lower socioeconomic background, are more academically motivated, more liberal, more socially conscious, and more independent than White Greeks" (Whipple et al., 1991, p. 146). However, as illustrated, the majority of the participants in this study were not affected by the price of membership in a BGLO. As such, this indicates that their individual SES levels may be higher than the typical Black collegiate student.

The stories that the present study's participants shared make a dramatic difference in the understanding and interpretation of how these organizations exist within the fabric of a PWI. While BGLOs do have and welcome members that do not identify as Black, most of their members are Black men and women. Barol et al. (1985) found that students of color on PWIs are not likely to join campus organizations or interact in social settings with non-minority students. Further, Museus (2008) conducted interviews with Black and Asian American students, revealing that these groups view ethnic student organizations as essential for them to meet, network, and befriend others in a hostile campus environment. This reinforces the role that minority serving organizations may have on a PWI campus as well as the initial reasons for this study. As universities continue to diversify their campuses by accepting larger incoming first-year classes with students from various backgrounds and interests, the stories of students who affiliate with a BGLO may have an impact on a new or transfer student of color who is in danger of leaving a PWI or higher education altogether.

Students of color may experience episodes of isolation and marginalization from their counterparts outside of what has already been examined. An insult or microaggression may be common experiences that they silently endure throughout their time in college (Bourke, 2010;

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Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Ross, 2016). This study examined how Black student experiences are shaped through the lens of their BGLO membership, and how that membership contributes to their sense of belonging on campus. The researcher is hopeful that the results of this study inspire future research and impacts other predominantly White commuter institutions, institutions within an urban and rural environment, or institutions with chapters of BGLOs more generally.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Orientation of Black Students at a PWI

Black students are often met with stereotypes and preconceived notions when they step

foot onto a PWI (Ross, 2016). The students may immediately be made to feel isolated and

marginalized simply because of their skin color and the existence that travels with it. Fries-Britt

and Turner (2001) refer to the "proving process" as a situation that brings attention to the

struggles of students of color in a PWI classroom. The student(s) may feel increased pressure to

participate in class discussions on race or the responsibility to respond in a specific way. The

pressure often derives from stereotypes that White students may have about students of color and

the student's desire to counteract those stereotypes. This pressure may cause students to

disengage entirely in the classroom, which may result in lowered performance and/or increased

anxiety.

In addition to the increased pressure to perform within the classroom, many Black

students may also be forced to interact with White students or those outside of their race on a

regular basis for the first time in their lives (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Cross racial interaction

measures how often a student interacts with a person from a different race or ethnicity despite the

reason (Bowman & Park, 2014).

At a PWI, students of color are forced to interact with students outside of their race on a

regular basis, even if it is unintentional. For example, students visiting the campus dining hall

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, library, or even the game room may interact with a student outside of their race. The interactions can be broken down into two categories that Bowman and Park (2014) describe as positive and negative. Positive interactions are associated with activities such as studying together or sharing in-depth personal feelings, whereas negative ones are characterized by microaggressions or other tense events that evoke negative emotions. Previous research has correlated positive, negative, and neutral interactions, implying that the opportunity for cross-racial interaction can bring either conflict or meaningful interaction. The resulting interaction that occurs often depends on the experiences of both the student of color and the White student.

For many Black students, arriving on a college campus brings general feelings of anxiety and worry. They may worry about the possibility of experiencing extreme hostility due to being in an unfamiliar environment and surrounded by individuals who do not look like them. These types of anxieties only intensify when a Black student may have previously experienced race-based struggles or tensions. In contrast, White students have the privilege to appear "normal" on and off campus. They can blend into the majority, and the concept of their race having any type of effect on the outcome of their mood or experience does not exist.

Even so, for many Black students, their minority status is used against them outside and at times even within the classroom (Ross, 2016). These students may feel a pressure to perform or behave in a certain way to avoid confrontation or hostility. The concept of this increased pressure is referred to as stereotype threat, which causes students to feel constantly aware of what others think about them (Robertson & Chaney, 2015). This self-consciousness is a driving force behind these students' need to affiliate with other students of color on campus. This increases the importance of culturally based organizations that provide a safe space for students of color. Such members are more likely to have had shared experience regarding discrimination

or a form of microaggression at some point in their lives, which bonds the group together through shared narratives.

Aside from seeking the kinship of one another in culturally based groups because of the increased pressure of stereotype threat, some Black students are also affected within the classroom (Steele, 2003). Being aware of this perception is one of the primary driving factors for low academic performance among Black students. When their White counterparts excel or do well on an assignment, they are able to exist or respond on an individual basis. However, when Black students underperform on an assignment, they may feel as though they are representing the Black student population in a poor manner. Thus, the importance of a positive social and academic mindset cannot be understated. The same students who have a positive image of themselves are much more likely to perform well inside the classroom and engage in activities outside when they know that there are others experiencing the same things (Fries, Britt, & Turner, 2001).

Fife et al. (2011) noted that when academic self-efficacy is higher, the student's self-image or self-perception improves as well. As the student performs well inside the classroom and achieves accolades outside, the morale of the student improves, providing greater opportunity for the cross-racial interactions mentioned previously. On the contrary, when some Black students perform poorly, they may be less likely to engage in cross-racial interactions because of the stereotype threat that may envelope their minds.

There are four primary factors that contribute to the likelihood of Black students to engage in cross-racial interactions. These include availability, propinquity, homophily, and balance and sociality (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). Each of these factors play a role in the way that students can interact on a college campus. The first one refers to the availability of peers. To

have meaningful relationships, specifically the cross-racial kind, there must be a meaningful difference in the kinds of students available on the campus (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010).

As PWIs increasingly attempt to become more diverse through their admission statistics, the appearance of having students from diverse backgrounds is not as much of a problem for campuses as in times past. Second, propinquity refers to the proximity of various racial groups to one another in terms of time and space. As mentioned, multiple racial groups can exist on a college campus, but, as Wimmer and Lewis (2010) noted, if the students are divided in terms of their residence halls, organizations, or curriculum, the opportunities for meaningful interactions decrease. In other words, if students are socially divided in all these areas, the likelihood of meaningful interaction is lowered. The third factor, homophily, may be one of the more difficult factors to overcome. It refers to the preference that individuals maintain friendship groups of individuals that are like oneself (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). It is a psychological phenomenon to want to surround oneself with those who are similar. At a PWI, if White students engage in this expressed behavior within their GLOs, it is virtually impossible for Black students to have cross-racial interactions with those students. Unlike BGLO events that are primarily open to public, many traditionally White GLO events are only open to members and their guests, which are often other White GLO members (Ross, 2016). This eliminates the likelihood that the two groups have the opportunity or desire to interact.

Finally, balance and sociality are connected to the previous factor of homophily (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). An individual who is friends with two different people who are not friends with each other is likely to encourage or cause them to become friends through association. Similarly, the more social that an individual is, the more likely it is that the person has more interactions on campus (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). The problem that Black students

may encounter with each of these factors is that it presupposes that they will be able to overcome

the factors. To have positive cross-racial interactions, White students must be willing to engage

with students of color on campus. If they do not have a desire to do so because of their

hierarchical social systems, then Black students may not be able to move past the third factor—

homophily (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). Similarly, if the pressure and impact of stereotype threat

is strong enough, Black students may be unwilling to move past the second factor, propinquity,

with White students and may intentionally separate themselves to be comfortable on campus

(Robertson & Chaney, 2015). In either case, what these four factors illustrate about a PWI is that

socializing and interacting are endeavors that are much more intentional between students of

differing races than those of the same race (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010).

Due to the numerous microaggressions that many Black students encounter on a regular

basis at PWIs, it is sometimes harder for these students, particularly for Black males, to maintain

a sense of high self-efficacy and thus a desire to interact with anyone outside of their race. For

example, Harper (2009) explains how critical the impact of the word "nigger" is and how its

existence affects Black students even today. Immediately upon reading, seeing, or hearing the

word, many Black people's defenses go up, attitudes shift, and tempers sometimes flare up as

well. This is especially true if a White or non-Black person uses the word. Their intention often

does not matter in these scenarios because an impression has already been created once the word

is uttered (Harper, 2009).

On today's college campuses, it does not take a racial slur for a Black student to feel the

impact and the residue of pains from times past (Harper, 2009). The name of a collegiate

residence hall or the placement of a historical statue in a prominent place on campus may have

the same impact on a minority student. With organizations such as Black Lives Matter gaining

national recognition for the work that they are doing within communities across the country, the impact on college campuses will continue to be felt as well. College campuses will not be divorced from the realities of the world going on around them. In instances where the use of racial slurs or negative language does take place, the effect it may have on a Black student's collegiate experience and life at large cannot be understated. It virtually removes any chance of meaningful cross-racial interaction for the student on campus (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). At this point, many Black students and other students of color will have already associated the university with racist activities and may have also connected other White students with similar behaviors. The bystander effect is especially critical in situations where a negative interaction such as the one described above may occur on campus. If other White students, faculty, or staff are aware of an incident of this type and do nothing to intervene or call attention to the matter, then the Black student population may see this as silent support for the activity (Harper, 2009). When these types of behaviors are repeated consistently, Black students may lose what little connection they had with the university, encouraging them to transfer to an HBCU for community (Harper, 2008, 2009). This is integrally tied to the sense of belonging that students of color may feel on campus.

When Black faculty and staff are hired to assist with such incidents on a PWI campus, Black students are more likely to remain unbiased and connected to the university (Ross, 2016). The problem that arises is that departments hiring individuals to help advise and support underrepresented groups on campus are often overworked and understaffed. It is unrealistic to expect a small staff to be able to assist hundreds or thousands of students with all the anticipated mental and emotional support that they need. Racial incidents may occur every day on these campuses, and with each student likely having a story of their own, the staff in these roles may

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be overwhelmed (Ross, 2016). In those cases, students find solace in campus-based organizations. These organizations may include local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Black Student Unions, historical BGLOs, Black Theatrical Ensembles, or any other identity-based organization that honors and highlights the cultural heritage of these students (Hurtado et al., 1999).

Additionally, the same is true for inside the classroom. When the classroom environment mirrors what students of color see in their daily lives, they may be more likely to struggle. The material covered in class may have little or no relevance to their culture (Harper, 2007). This creates a disconnect, and based on previous research, Black students are sometimes forced to attempt to develop a rapport with their faculty members to gain a sense of connection. When the material has no remote connection to their past or current life, the divide is intensified and the student gradually begins to feel as though the university does not value his or her presence on campus (Harper, 2007).

On the contrary, when a student of color has a faculty or staff member of color with whom he/she can identify, their likelihood for success increases dramatically. Five main categories where a faculty member of color may enhance a student of color's potential for increased success include the following: ability to serve as a mentor, commitment to a more diverse campus climate, role in creating an inclusive environment, an ability to provide diverse perspectives on teaching, and, finally, a commitment to a pluralistic view on education (Smith, 1989). Having a faculty member of color is a small way that some students receive confirmation or affirmation of their position at a PWI.

Intersectionality and Development

While a student's success at a PWI inside and outside the classroom is determined by several factors, the way all these factors come together to create a particular experience for a student must be assessed. The term "intersectionality" was first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe the way the legal system, in addition to anti-racist and anti-feminist material, disproportionately and categorically denies and erases the experiences of Black women by considering only race or gender in their examinations. Crenshaw (1989) stated that the true and real experiences of these individuals were far too complex and involved to be reduced to two factors only. While Crenshaw (1989) was the first to use the term intersectionality to describe this phenomenon, the work of describing marginalization at the intersection or meeting of multiple identities has existed for some time. For example, King (1995) and Lorde (1984) described ways that categories beyond race and gender, including social class, sexuality, and other factors, may work together simultaneously to influence a person's experiences and ways of life.

The Conceptualization of Gender Identity

One of the ways that intersectionality has begun to have a profound impact in the academic literature is in the area of gender identity studies. Because fraternities and sororities are often described or grouped based on a gender binary, there are many opportunities for exploration in this field when gender identity is explored from an intersectional framework. Much of the prior research on students and students of color in particular has gendered students in a binary complex, and has not focused or operated from a truly intersectional lens. Robins and McGowan (2016) offered a brief description of gender, which includes the following

descriptions: gender, gender description, people of all/no genders, trans*. As the authors noted, many college students may hear some of these terms for the first time upon their entrance to college. Consequently, the way in which they interpret the world, or their own experiences may be from a binary way. An example that the authors posed included the study of cisgender African American men. They were asked to reflect on how their gender identity affected or influenced their way of life on campus. Because of their prior socialization, the participants were largely unable to separate or identify the ways in which their gender identity influenced their lives outside of a connection to their race or sexuality (McGowan, 2013). This is pivotal because it illustrates how intersectionality operates from a systematic level rather than a personal one. Three takeaways that the authors provided about gender identity and its connection to other areas are as follows: gender and other social identities are connected, gender and other social identities are shaped by structural inequalities, and gender is a socially constructed, interactive process, (Robins and McGowan, 2016).

Individuals are unable to turn these identities on and off in a particular space or environment. Rather, the person always moves through the world with these identities and must learn to navigate the process of learning how they influence one another, as well as how the world around them reacts to and ultimately categorizes them based on these identities. In many cases, an individual may not be aware of all their identities. This is particularly true among college students because of their ongoing development and the number of changes occurring within them at one time. Warner and Shields (2013) noted that understanding societal structures and how these identities represent different levels of saliency within those structures is critical to successfully navigating the world.

Racial Identity

For many Black students, this is the crux of the issue. Many of them may come into the collegiate environment from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds, because their level of exposure to immediate and short-term things may be limited in comparison to their more affluent peers. For example, the identity of having a lower social class may be much more salient and impactful on the student's life than their gender identity or racial identification. Consequently, when such a student arrives to campus and is treated differently, it may be difficult for them to assess which of these identities plays a larger role in their experience.

The social identity theory notes that individuals from historically marginalized groups experience the salience of their identities much more readily in an everyday context than their peers who do not possess or maintain these identities (Ashmore et al., 2004). In the context of higher education, this means that students who hold minoritized identities are much more likely to see the collegiate environment and interpret their experiences on campus through these identities than someone who does not hold them. For example, the Black student who lives in the residence hall may immediately seek to notice how many other Black students live on the same floor or within the building. This is not done with malice or to self-segregate but because of the marginalized identity of race being a prominent factor in the way that this individual moves through the world.

Scholars have previously noted how college students who hold multiple social identities may perceive and interpret the actions of others with the same in mind. These individuals recognize and construct similar histories of experiences and occurrences within their lives which create an immediate commonality based on a specific identity (Lineville, 1987; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Some have argued that the in-group and out-group dynamics that result from

shared experiences within these identities may lead to social attitude shifts towards those outside of the sphere of the identity. For example, a gay student who perceives those who are not a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) spectrum as opposition or as the enemy is an example of extreme manifestation of in-group dynamics.

Owing to the complexity involved with intersectional identities, strategies to engage, help, and assist students cannot be viewed from a one-size-fits-all lens. Instead, students must be viewed holistically so that their entire lives are captured rather than the fragment or piece that is most easily observable. How this occurs for Black students at PWIs is critical to their level of success and engagement within the campus. Student organizations, including Greek letter fraternities and sororities, are one of the primary options for students to find commonality in something that they can believe in or identify with which is also theoretically value-based. However, in the case of historically Black fraternities and sororities and their members, the very existence and nature of the organizations themselves is a consistent reminder of the ostracism, discrimination, and disrespect that their founders have experienced, leading to their original founding.

Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014) conducted a study on African–American women who joined a historically Black sorority using intersectionality as a framework. Interestingly, three primary reasons for joining the organization emerged: access to large networks and community, academic pressure, and a culture of high standards. While these categorizations are specific to their research and the participants within the study, these reasons can likely be extrapolated to a larger audience and group as well. The intersectional identity of being Black and a woman presents itself differently for students who may want to join a sorority than for a White female who wants to do the same. The socialization process for Black and White women is different, as

is the process for joining traditionally White and historically Black Sororities. Consequently, the intersectional dynamics at play for Black women on a PWI campus are numerous.

For many Black women, the sorority helps to serve as a vehicle which helps members navigate a PWI through the commonality of experience. However, what is not highlighted as often is the within-group dynamics that differentiate the members of the sorority or on the university campus. Because Black women are not a monolithic group, more research would be needed from an intersectional lens to explore how sororities affect Black women in different regions of the country, at different types of institutions, and how specific sororities influence or affect the experiences of members in these same contexts.

Previous scholars have identified that traditionally aged college students have close ties with their social groups and that the degree of closeness is intimately related to the behaviors and interpretations of the actions of other groups (Gurin et al., 2002). The ways in which these social identities manifest and develop exists long before a student reaches college. Erikson (1968) wrote that many factors, including socialization through family, neighborhood, school, and peers, have an impact on a student's social identity development. As such, because a student may have multiple identities along with multiple factors that contribute to the formation of these identities, it is problematic to attempt to categorize a student based on a single identity.

Further, centrality is a concept within psychological identity development which refers to an individual's self-concept or normalization of their social identity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Sellers et al., 1998; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Variations in a student's centrality are likely to influence the meaning the student assigns to his or her identity, as well as the attitudes and behaviors they exhibit towards others, both within and outside their group. For example, if a student does not identify with being privileged, he or she may view the world in a pessimistic

way. Obstacles may always seem to be present in the way of achieving goals and objectives because of the identities that the student possesses or lacks. While this may begin as a perception issue due to a student's environment, it becomes real when the student begins to experience behaviors and results as a response to their perceived identities.

Notably, most studies have only examined students from a single identity lens. Their experiences based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, or geographic region of origin are all commonly covered areas of scholarship. However, as Cheeks et al. (2019) noted, relatively few scholars have examined how the social attitudes and experiences of students with an awareness of multiple social identities contrasts with those for whom a single identity may be central to their concept of self. This is an area primed for future research as college campuses begin to diversify and reflect the changing dynamics of the world around them.

The present researcher utilized the framework of sense of belonging alongside the theory of involvement to contextualize the study and allow participants to share how their memberships shaped their experience. While each participant maintains membership in one of the nine BGLOs, the intersections at which many of their other identities collide also contribute to the results of this study.

Identifying as a Black American is an area that cannot be understated. Black existence is not a monolithic or streamlined experience. Cross et al. (1991) developed the seminal academic theory concerning Black identity development or Nigrescence, which describes how a Black person moves through stages of development, beginning with low awareness regarding their Black identity and ending with positive thoughts and affirmations concerning their Black identity in relation to other groups. These four stages are as follows: Pre-encounter (Stage 1), which depicts the identity to be changed; encounter (Stage 2), which isolates the point at which the

person feels compelled to change; immersion/emersion (Stage 3), which describes the vortex of identity change; and internalization and internalization–commitment (Stage 4 and Stage 5), describing the habituation and internalization of the new identity (Cross et al., 1991; Ritchey, 2014).

Knowing this, the administration and practitioners at PWIs would be better equipped to design policies and procedures that maintain an awareness concerning the development of minoritized groups. Instead of Black students feeling as though they must subvert or quell their identity to fit into the mainstream, the mainstream could be more inclusive of those within the entire population. In addition, this model also contextualizes the experiences of many Black students at a PWI. Each of them may be within separate stages of their own identity development as Black students, which informs how they interpret their place on campus and within the world at large. A student in Stage One, with low race awareness, will likely respond differently than a student at Stage Four or Five who has internalized race as a constant mainstay of their identity. These differences are critical in understanding Black student responses and experiences within the structure of a PWI.

In addition to this concept of Black identity specifically is the concept of self-worth and the self-concept more generally. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) defined the concept of self as the idea of who one is. This concept of self is intricately connected to their definition of self-worth, which are the beliefs about what needs to be done to have value (Crocker and Wolfe, 2001). These concepts are shaped and in place within the mind of a Black student long before they enter college. Home environment, familial relationships, school, and friendships all play a tremendous role in molding the idea of how students think about themselves internally, which then manifests through actions they may take externally. Because of this, some students may be more in tune

with certain parts of their identity than others. This is especially true in the case of students of color, as students of color who are considered more lower class or upper class may have more connection to their class identity versus their racial/ethnic identity due to being surrounded by people within that same class tier of varying races.

Related to the idea of joining a Greek Letter Organization, Garcia and Crocker (2004) noted that it is virtually impossible for an individual to have a positive view of self or high sense of self-esteem if the domains or groups with whom an individual interacts do not share that same view. Individuals seek commonality through their desire to join a Greek Letter Organization, so the concept of self-esteem and self-worth is related to the desire to affiliate with such organizations.

In addition, because commuter students often have more difficulty than traditional residential students in making the transition to college and acclimating and connecting with campus, these identity-based stressors may affect commuter students in a more profound way than their counterparts. (Burlison, 2015) noted that research utilizing a qualitative method to examine the experiences of commuter students apart from their residential counterparts is largely absent from the literature. Like Black students once were, commuter students have largely been considered a monolithic group, with the in-group dynamics and differences being ignored. This led to the researcher selecting sense of belonging as one of the frameworks for this study.

Sense of Belonging

One of the more important elements in promoting the retention and persistence of students on college campuses is the students' perceived sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012; 2018) authored the most definitive definition of this concept.

> Sense of belonging in college refers to the students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (Strayhorn, 2018, p.29)

This sense of belonging contributes to the students' connection or lack thereof to campus. It can be the primary reason that a student enjoys their campus, or it can be the main reason that a student leaves the institution. As Strayhorn wrote, sense of belonging often leads to an affective or behavioral response, (Strayhorn, 2018). The researcher selected this concept as one of the theoretical frameworks for the present study. It aligns with the idea of Greek Letter Organizations generally, and BGLOs specifically.

These are campus-based organizations with extensive histories that predate students' arrival to campus. Consequentially, by joining a fraternity or sorority and being active within the organization, a student's connection to campus should improve. Because of what previous research has already illustrated about the concept of identity, by affiliating with a group of individuals who have a similar identity, or at least the perception of an identity that a student longs for, he or she may increase their individual sense of belonging. Strayhorn cites sorority membership as an example of mutual belongingness for the individual and the group, which added further defense of the researcher's use of this concept as a framework for the present study:

Consider the student who is a member of a collegiate sorority—she likely feels important as a member and the group serves an important role in her life, partly because it satisfies one of her fundamental needs and that is to belong. By the same token, the sorority means nothing without members who constitute its very existence. The group satisfies the belongingness needs of the individual—in exchange for membership, members will be cared for and supported. The group needs its members, however, to exist and the members yearn to be part of the group as it also gives meaning and purpose to their existence (Strayhorn, 2018 p.4).

Strayhorn developed his concept of sense of belonging based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1962). Maslow created this hierarchy based on the idea that humans needed certain elements to be present in their lives before they could satisfactorily or progressively move upward towards other elements. Maslow's hierarchy was created based on foundational necessities beginning with physiological needs, safety and security, love and belongingness, esteem, and ending with self-actualization.

Strayhorn used this concept and applied it to the collegiate environment to argue that sense of belonging is a basic human need, thereby making it a need for college students. With this rationale in mind, Strayhorn argued that a sense of belonging must be present before a student can reach elements of knowledge and self-actualization, which are some of the primary goals and objectives for a collegiate education (Strayhorn, 2005). Because a Greek Letter Organization is an on-campus group that is centered in the collegiate experience, they both contribute to and benefit from the needs that Strayhorn has articulated. Building off the original foundation of Maslow's Hierarchy, he developed a list of seven descriptions for a collegiate setting that must be present before students can reach a true sense of belonging: (1.) *Sense of*

belonging is a basic human need, (2). *Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior*, (3). *Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain places, and at certain times*, (4). *Sense of belonging is related to and a consequence of mattering*, (5). *Social identities intersect and affect college students.* (6). *Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes* (7). *Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change.*

As a consequence, sense of belonging is a key aspect in the potential success or challenges that students may face when acclimating to a college campus. Faculty, staff, and their peers all play a critical role in the progression of a sense of belonging for students. If a student does not believe that he or she will be missed from the university campus or environment, it is likely that the sense of belonging or connection to campus that the student feels is low. However, the more involved the student is on campus, the more opportunities are created for the student to create or facilitate a sense of belonging across multiple avenues.

Student organizations are only one involvement avenue, but they play a critical role in helping students to find commonality with their peers in a low risk and high reward environment. The third element of Strayhorn's description, heightened importance in certain contexts, is especially critical. As the concept of intersectionality notes, and as Strayhorn also includes within his concept of sense of belonging, humans have multiple intersecting identities that are often at odds with one another in competing environments and contexts. With this in mind, sense of belonging becomes ever more critical in the development of a student's connection to a university because of the constant decisions that a student must make regarding their comfort disclosing or fully living within their multiple identities in certain spaces. By affiliating with an organization, such as a fraternity or sorority, students gain the acceptance and bond that they

may have been seeking before and have a support system within the university environment that may be absent outside of that context.

What is also noteworthy regarding the concept of sense of belonging is that it exists along a spectrum. While sense of belonging may be a basic human need, it does not move linearly or in only one direction. It is precisely because of this that sense of belonging is such a powerful concept. The student who desires to belong to the campus community and elects to join a student organization is theoretically no different than the individual seeking a bond through membership in a gang, illegal drug use, or overindulgence in alcohol (Strayhorn, 2018). Because the desire to affiliate and belong is so strong, when the optimal outcome is not reached, individuals may have heightened feelings of self-doubt. Strayhorn describes this as the *incident becomes reality* phase, whereby an individual associates the failure to achieve a desired outcome of belonging with personal failures about oneself (Strayhorn, 2018). This can lead to an increased likelihood for mental health disorders or feelings of negativity that also may encourage a student to transfer to another institution or leave the collegiate space altogether. Thus, colleges and universities have begun to invest more in certified counselors and mental health experts so that students have a designated space to go and speak with a qualified individual who can listen and support them in a way that others may not be equipped to do. Yet, even with these support systems in place, the level of involvement for students and their sense of belonging are inextricably linked.

Student Involvement

The Black student experience is unlike the experiences of virtually any other student

group at a PWI. These students are more likely to feel isolated and disconnected from the larger

campus because of the historical context of many PWIs (Harper, 2009). This emotional

detachment from the university may make Black students less likely to be involved on campus.

Astin (1984) was integral in defining how students participate and get involved on a college

campus, defining involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the

student devotes to the academic experience," (Astin, 1984, p. 134). In his view, involvement is

not just one aspect but a holistic and collective nature of all these things for a student.

Additionally, perhaps the most important element within Astin's theory is the resource of student

time and attention, which is detailed as a finite resource that multiple people such as professors,

student organizations, family, friends, and others desire at some point throughout the collegiate

process.

The amount of time that a student devotes to one or more of these things vs. another

represents a reduction in educational development (Astin, 1984). Because the student can only

devote so much time and attention to each of these areas, the one's that receive the most time end

up being the most influential on their overall development. Using this theory coupled with

Strayhorn's concept of a sense of belonging as the frameworks for the present study, the

researcher attempted to illustrate how involvement through a BGLO shapes the Black student

experience at a predominantly White commuter institution.

The psychological aspect is especially noteworthy for Black students at a PWI because

they may experience the world differently than their White counterparts. Immediately upon

arrival on campus, Black students have the potential to feel welcomed or unwelcomed simply

because of the color of their skin. These early interactions can affect how such students view involvement at the university going forward. If a few organizations are seen as unwelcoming, for example, the student may assume based on those interactions that their entire experience will mirror those early experiences. This reinforces the importance of having Black faculty and staff present on the campus to reinforce feelings of belonging for students of color (Smith, 1989). In addition, the student's own sense of identity within the Black identity development model also contributes to how they experience and interpret activities and actions on campus.

Astin (1984) theorized that there are five main categories of involvement for students: academic involvement, faculty involvement, involvement with peers, involvement in work, and involvement elsewhere, which includes watching television, commuting, or attending religious services. Of these five main categories, involvement with peers is the primary category under which membership in a fraternity or sorority falls. By definition, these are social organizations, so they are designed to provide an avenue for socializing and peer interaction. More specifically, BGLOs also include the intersection of race as a construct within the overall fraternity and sorority framework. In the original model, Astin focused almost entirely on traditionally aged college students at 4-year residential colleges and universities. The model is referred to as the "input–process–output" model, where the quality and degree of experiences is proportional to a student's learning and development (Astin, 1984). It suggests that without an appropriate level of collegiate involvement outside of the classroom a student cannot have holistic success on the campus. Interactions with other students and faculty are positively related to degree completion as well as a wide range of other outcomes (Astin, 1993). Thus, Astin argued and illustrated that when students are not involved on campus, their likelihood of persisting dramatically decreases. For students of color, this is problematic because each of the five categories for involvement that

he outlines can be negatively impacted because of the student's skin color. Consequently, to further assess whether the model is applicable for non-White and non-residential college students, the researcher incorporated Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging concept as a framework to coincide with Astin's involvement theory to assess how involvement in a BGLO helps to shape the Black student experience at a PWI. The host institutions within this study are predominantly White commuter institutions. These combined factors hopefully contribute meaningful scholarship to the involvement equation that Astin described.

While the above-mentioned model has proven to be true across many variables when recreated, it did not include much diversity among the student population. This leaves many students completely unaccounted for, including community college students, transfer students, and, more specific to the present study, Black students. Therefore, using the updated 1999 model as a theoretical framework at urban and regional institutions that are considered commuter institutions, the researcher hoped to obtain unique information about the Black student experience. As previous research indicates, participation in an ethnically based student organization is unlike membership in a generally based campus organization because the latter may be a safe haven among the other harsh realities of the campus (Hurtado et al., 2009). As noted, one of the primary criticisms for Astin's model is that it did not include students of color within many of the sample population groups. This lead to the experiences of the sample population having to be limited to a certain degree because the elements of race and other intersectional factors that many students carry were not considered in it. Previous studies illustrate that the difficulties many students of color face while adapting to collegiate life are not analogous to those of White students (Allen, 1981; Bennett & Okinake, 1990; Fleming, 1981; Jay & D'Augelli, 1991; Peterson et al., 1978, Zea et al., 1997). Identification with the

environment of an institution is critical in helping a student to see themselves as part of a greater community and develop a sense of belonging. Since Astin did not do this in many previous studies, the researcher utilized some of the previous strategies but with a different population group to assess whether there are major differences or if the experiences for students of color will align with those of the majority.

In terms of experiences, Jacoby (1991) illustrated that students who do not develop an identification with the university are more likely to depart. Astin's theories may have been more demonstrative and inclusive had he accounted for the increased, nuanced difficulties that ethnic minorities face at PWIs. Further, including the experiences of non-traditional and commuter students would have broadened the scope of these studies as well. With such limited space to call their own on these campuses, the opportunities for students of color to develop an identity within the greater campus at any PWI can be a challenge.

However, there have also been studies that have found contrary results for students of color in relation to persistence, retention, and involvement. One such study by Fox (1986) found that academic integration was much more connected to minority student retention than social connections at the institution. While this contradicts some of the findings by Astin, it does confirm that success within the classroom can propel students of color to excel in other ways. This heightened sense of confidence and self-efficacy in the form of high grades may, in some instances, be as valuable as club or organizational memberships. However, there are other studies that confirm Astin's results and found that sense of belonging was more important to the retention of minority students than academic results (Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987).

The mixed results that have been found on this topic across multiple universities at a minimum illustrate that previous studies should have included students of color within the study

demographic. Since these were not included, the information on students of color as it relates to retention and persistence is sparser and is examined from a deficit mindset much more commonly than from a place of achievement and success (Harper, 2009). Minorities other than Black students have also been minimized in this way. Hispanic and Asian-American students have been largely stereotyped and marginalized in a way that presupposes how the entire population of both groups will behave (Harper, 2008).

Additionally, the Covid-19 Pandemic will undoubtedly have ramifications on the level of student involvement for months and years to come. Because geographic location has played a large role in the operations of many colleges and universities, students in different parts of the country have not had the same opportunity to be involved in campus activities since the Spring of 2020. Moving forward, this may have a lingering effect on the way that many colleges and universities elect to design and incorporate their activities on campus. Campus-based organizations such as fraternities and sororities will be a crucial piece in the implementation of plans and decisions for campus operations. As the Covid-19 vaccine becomes more widely available, and side effects are determined to be at a minimum, traditional involvement opportunities may return to campuses for students at varying regions across the country. Yet, if some campuses remain completely virtual or in a hybrid model, involvement will look different on campuses, and the corresponding sense of belonging to campus may be affected because of it.

Changing Dynamics for Student Involvement

In addition to the struggles of developing connections and finding a place within the university, there is also research describing how minority students may often have higher rates of attrition because of the rising costs of college (King & Bannon, 2002). As housing, tuition, and textbook prices rise, students are often forced to decide between necessities such as food and clothing vs. textbooks and tuition. With family members who may not be familiar with the college application process or who may be alumni of underfunded schools with few guidance counselors, such students may be left to navigate the entire collegiate application and matriculation process on their own. When applying for financial aid, if a parent's information cannot be used on the application, the student may have increased difficulty receiving funds. This added strain combined with the inability to find connections on campus may make dropping out of college a more attractive option.

Fischer (2007) also pointed out how Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be first-generation college students, because they are more likely to rely upon financial aid to attend college and ultimately graduate. Wealthier students do not have this consideration and are free to focus more on the social aspects of college such as fraternities or sororities. These organizations are not substitutions for other expenses that a student may have. However, poorer students who may be struggling to simply remain enrolled in classes may not be able to consider the luxuries of joining an organization that will increase their cost of attendance through membership fees, travel expenses, and others. Kilgo et. al (2015) noted that this is one of the primary reasons that students of lower SES may have increased difficulty developing a sense of belonging on campus. This added factor of socio-economic status is another intersection that many students carry with them on and off of the college campus. While not the primary focus of

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this study, participants did share information about their socio-economic status with regard to joining BGLOs; this is detailed later in the study.

Aside from the socio-economic status, Zea et al. (2001) also found that a student's personal attributes also contribute to their success in college. The ability to adapt to new situations was particularly correlated with this feature. The academic environment combined with extra-curricular activities can help increase a student's ability to develop these skills. The present study, too, illustrates that students who arrive on campus with these skills are able to achieve higher rates of success quicker.

An added element that has shifted the dynamic of student engagement and involvement on campus is the increased use of technology. Mobile phones, laptops, and other devices that instructors utilize have revolutionized the way that humans engage—with college students being at the epicenter. Individuals, corporations, businesses, and virtually all other entities can be represented on social media platforms today. Unlike in times past, when a student had to rely on word of mouth or a physical advertisement to hear about an event, today, the simple opening of an app or the snap of a picture can communicate so much in such little time (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). The advent of Facebook and other social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, and YouTube have shaped not only the way students interact with one another but also how colleges and universities engage with students. Requesting that students follow them on social media or add them as a friend is a consistent tactic for many departments on campus to measure engagement and assess student perception. A common example involves students reviewing the number of likes or comments that a facility, organization, or past event has. If a student sees that several friends have liked the campus recreation center, they are more likely to be encouraged to visit the center or exercise on campus with their friends. Through the ability to

view students who have liked their page, colleges and universities can be more intentional with their audiences (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). In turn, students can connect on an individual level with friends and acquaintances and also connect to large groups. This synthesis of information at a student's fingertips gives them a level of choice unlike at any time in the past. If an event is enjoyable, a student can immediately post about it and affect potential revenue for that event going forward.

This way, students can be involved in activities outside the classroom by simply logging on to social media (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). This has the potential to fundamentally shape how Astin's theory of involvement will stand the test of time. As more students begin to communicate and engage more via social media and other digital platforms, their level of interest in clubs, GLOs, and other traditional college vehicles for involvement may decrease. As large gatherings remain prohibited, many student organizations have been forced to become creative on digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Hangouts to conduct meetings and events. If this trend continues even after the pandemic ends, the future of involvement on college campuses may look entirely different than it did in the past. With many of these platforms offering multiple types of communication within their sites, the opportunities for involvement are virtually endless. If a student cannot physically attend a meeting, he or she can connect on a video calling application and attend meetings while being physically located somewhere else (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). The same is true for social events. If a student can "check in" and receive the social benefits of having attended an event but does not have to make time to physically attend it, the way students engage and interact with one another may be altered.

Notably, it remains to be seen whether this technology ultimately shapes the way that students participate in extracurricular activities over the long term, but the potential for change has been intensified in recent months because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, even though Facebook has only existed since 2004, the way students interact today, 16 years later, vs. at the time of the site's creation is completely different. Heiberger and Ruth (2008) argued that Facebook provided an opportunity for students to self-select programs, organizations, and level of involvement which they wanted with a university, unlike any other time in the past. This increased their autonomy and gave them an awareness that they may not have had otherwise. Colleges and universities cannot function or run effectively without students, and with a public platform such as Facebook or other social media site, students can effectively determine the success or failure of a program or even an entire university by sheer word of mouth if enough positive or negative reviews are shared.

However, as polarizing as this may be, other scholars such as Bugeja (2006) have illustrated the specific dangers of social media on college campuses as well. The connection via followers or friends gives the impression of a real and genuine relationship but without the traditional physical in-person connection or interaction. Bugeja argued that individuals who have trouble with boundaries or issues differentiating between elements such as humor and sarcasm may have a more difficult time on these sites. Furthermore, having substantial followings on social media provides the appearance of popularity and acceptance. Utilizing the framework of sense of belonging, if a student is unable to attain similar forms of acceptance within their social sphere, the student may end up feeling ostracized or like an outcast. It is the acceptance from peers and the idea of fitting in that makes social media such a powerful, and yet potentially dangerous tool.

Over time, this same influential power has the potential to create less involvement on a campus, thus affecting the level of interest in things such as GLOs. For example, if a high school senior is connected via social media to a collegiate first year student and the college student exaggerates the requirements to join a GLO, it could have a detrimental effect on the student's decision to join the organization. Through pictures, videos, and other connections, the stories that the college student in this example shares may seem more real. However, it could all also seem artificial and simulated for appearances. With social media, students can gain increased social capital through a virtual environment (Bugeja, 2006). Students did not have this capability in the past, but with the advent of new technologies, the importance of investigation and self-discovery cannot be understated. As more virtual events continue to take place and more social media sites gain popularity, the virtual space on a collegiate campus may become more popular and necessary for students to remain interested in college and university involvement.

Need for Ethnic Student Organizations

While technology may have changed how students interact on college campuses today, it has not removed the stigmas and barriers that students of color still face at PWIs. These organizations help create a comfort zone or safe space within an unfamiliar territory for students of color. Minority students connect and participate in social media conversations like any other student group. One notable difference is that these students seek to distance themselves and negate any negative stereotypes that may exist about them. Steele (1997) noted that one of the reasons many students from Black and Hispanic backgrounds underperform in college is because of their strong desire to refute the stereotype that they are intellectually inferior to their White counterparts. By devoting so much energy to disprove this stereotype, they are less able to focus on things such as extracurricular involvement. In turn, these students may get caught in a metaphorical hamster wheel that sees them silently struggling to keep up appearances while realistically needing the help and assistance that White students feel no shame in seeking because it is not connected to their cultural identity (Steele, 1997).

Aside from feeling alienated because of their skin color, such students may also feel this way based on what they believe others think about them. One common occurrence is for some White students to accuse minority students of only being admitted to the university because of a quota system being in place. This may seem like a benign statement on the surface, but at its core it can be devastating to the self-esteem of a minority student. With doubts already in place about their intellectual ability, hearing this may only further reinforce the perception that they do not belong on the campus. This is related to the idea of stereotype threat presented earlier, as well as the concept of sense of beloning. While students of color may generally want to perform

well academically, they may also feel an additional sense of pressure to perform well in an effort to validate or confirm their place on campus (Robertson & Chaney, 2015).

Finally, a factor that many minority students experience that may exacerbate the above conditions is that of being a first-generation college student. This is a third intersectional identity along with race and socioeconomic status that many Black students carry with them on a college campus. Navigating the admissions process which includes financial aid, application fees, letters of recommendation, and housing selections, can be overwhelming before a student steps onto the campus. When a student is supported and guided by family and friends who have attended college and experienced these things before, their likelihood of persistence and retention at the university increases. On the contrary, when they do not have that support and instead must navigate all of this on his or her own, it is much more likely for them to not persist.

Past studies on professional Black women, for example, illustrate that these students receive most of their support through off-campus means such as family and friends who are can provide encouragement or advice to help them continue their educational journey (Pollard, 1990). It was also found that Black women continue to enroll and graduate from college at accelerating rates (Hernandez & Arnold, 2012). Thus, the fact that they require this type of support to reach such levels of achievement illustrates the types of support that other groups such as Black men and Hispanic students may also need.

Since PWIs are sometimes located in places that may not include a high minority population such as rural or suburban areas, receiving this level of support in the community may be more difficult for some groups than others. In instances such as these, the need for ethnically or culturally based student organizations at a PWI becomes clear. These organizations are not meant to segregate students of color from White students but rather to provide an avenue for the

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former to debrief and let their guards down in a space where others can relate to most of their experiences (Hurtado et al., 1999).

Although many students of color are not resistant to joining or participating in mainstream student organizations at PWIs, such organizations often do not reflect the values and interests of students of color. As such, Black students may not feel welcome or included in those spaces (Davis, 1991; Person & Christensen, 1996; Rooney, 1985). Therefore, understanding the intersectionality of identities and having a campus administration that recognizes and supports those identities is critical for overall student success. The need to feel included and have a sense of cultural identity within the environment is so strong that some researchers have reported that students of color elect to study abroad simply to gain this experience (Comp, 2008; Sutton & Rubin, 2004). By doing so, these students are able to gain a perspective about the history of their culture in a context outside of the U.S. while simultaneously learning about the culture of another group without feeling as though they have no choice in the information they are learning. Having this sense of autonomy about education and the curriculum gives students of color a sense of power which they may not have in other aspects of campus life (Comp, 2008; Sutton & Rubin, 2004).

In addition, past research also suggests that many students of color use cultural centers on their campuses to connect with other students who may have a similar experience or background as their own (Harper & Quaye, 2007). This shared cultural connection allows students to relax without feeling the pressure to assimilate that they may face inside the classroom and in other campus spaces. Notably, Harper and Quaye (2007) found that Black male leaders on PWI campuses choose to join an ethnically based student organization to provide support to other Black students and connect with the surrounding community. Community service remains an

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integral part of many ethnically based student organizations. This is one of the fundamental

purposes of most historical BGLOs (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). At their core, these organizations

provide a safe space that allows students of color to be themselves instead of engage in the

facade of who they are portraying themselves to be for the sake of appearances.

Value Extends Beyond College

Participation in an ethnically or culturally based student organization can have many

effects on students beyond college life. The short-term effects have been examined to a larger

degree because college experience is often limited to 4–6 years (Bowman et al., 2015). Beyond

looking at the collegiate experience, Bowman et al. (2015) examined the outcomes of the

students in civic activities six years post-graduation. Unlike traditionally White fraternities and

sororities whose experience is primarily associated with their time in college, BGLOs stress the

importance of lifetime membership beyond college within their organizations at the time of

initiation (Ross, 2001).

Graduate chapters in the form of alumni for fraternities and alumnae for sororities hold

similar training, developmental, social, and membership intake activities as the undergraduate

chapters among the BGLOs. Due to this difference in scope, the civic outcomes for membership

in these types of organizations directly relate to how they shape the Black student experience

during undergraduate years. The thought among members is that if a student is taught about the

importance of civic engagement while in college, this lesson will be ingrained in the student's

mind to continue after their graduation from college as well. Through surveys where Bowman et

al., (2015) collected responses from over 8600 students, the results indicated that participation or

membership in a racial/ethnic organization, particularly for students of color, was positively

associated with civic outcomes six years after graduation (Bowman et al., 2015).

This is important because it illustrates how membership in these organizations is not viewed as a form of segregation by the members but, rather, as a method of acclimation into the university and the majority culture at large. The results of this study aligned with many previous studies on culturally based organizations. The present study also adds to this literature while providing a new angle in the form of BGLO memberships at a predominantly White commuter institution. In contrast to Black students joining culturally based groups such as BGLOs, White students joining traditionally White fraternities and sororities is not generally viewed as self-segregation (Ross, 2016). However, for Black students who elect to join BGLOs and other culturally based organizations, the question of separating themselves from the greater community because of racial dynamics is often raised. Even so, BGLOs and other culturally based groups often provide a place of refuge and comfort for many students who may feel isolated or out of place (Bowman et al., 2015). For many students, joining these organizations is less about social capital and more about sense of beloning. Due to the lineage and legacy that these organizations have within the community, membership almost immediately gives access to a network of alumni and professionals who can assist them in ways that other campus-based professionals may be unable to (Ross, 2001; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks & Hughey, 2020). The network that students of color can build within these organizations does not leave them upon graduation. Instead, college provides a foundation of opportunities for students to network with like-minded individuals and invest in their futures together.

Aside from encouraging certain civic engagement and participation throughout college and upon graduation, membership in BGLOs also influences the career outcomes of many students (Hernandez, 2008). These organizations are held in high esteem among many middle-class and elite Black individuals. Teachers, politicians, doctors, lawyers, and business leaders

are but a few of the many professions that members of BGLOs hold across the country. As new

collegians join ranks of these organizations, they gain access to a vast network of individuals

who may be able to provide guidance and support as they enter the beginning phases of their

careers. Hernandez and Arnold (2012) specifically examined how membership in a historically

Black sorority serves as the impetus for some students to pursue education as a career path

because of the organization's influence. The authors believed that an important way that many

of the sororities maintain relevance and prestige since their founding is by recruiting and

soliciting teachers for membership. Future research related to the correlation between Black

female teachers and membership within a historically Black sorority should explore this further.

Importantly, a strong correlation or connection between the two variables could be an influential

factor on the importance of these organizations in the future of Black students' education.

Additionally, membership in the organizations illustrates how effective leadership skills,

a quality education, and the ability to work with diverse groups of people are highly sought-after

skills such members are believed to possess (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998). This is in line

with the original founding principles of all the nine historically Black fraternities and sororities.

Each one was founded with a specific purpose in mind while keeping development, training, and

students' futures at the forefront of their purpose (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). Like historically

Black Sororities, historically Black Fraternities also have had a tremendous impact on their

members.

In fact, it has been suggested that Black fraternities may have a more influential role on

the collegiate experience of Black male students than Black sororities have on Black female

students. One specific example is provided by McClure (2006), who conducted a qualitative

research study that sought to examine how historically Black fraternities contribute to the Black

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male collegiate experience at a PWI in the Southeast of the U.S. Using snowball sampling, McClure interviewed 20 Black male fraternity members on a campus. The study used a social constructionist framework, allowing the students to describe their social experiences in their own words. In the present study, the researcher used a similar sampling method for the 13 participants who discussed their experience as Black collegians and members of these organizations. McClure used transcription and constant comparison analysis to note the major themes in her study. Three major takeaways from the interviews with the students are as follows: membership in the fraternity increases the sense of closeness with one another, the campus, and the Black community overall (McClure, 2006). This is what BGLOs seek to provide to students of color on collegiate campuses and in communities across the country (Ross, 2001; Kimbrough 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007). McClure's (2006) study was integral in illustrating how these organizations serve as more than just a place of belonging for Black male students. It also reveals that these organizations gave many of the students a purpose and reassurance that they could succeed despite their obstacles—something the founders of their respective organizations also endured themselves in the creation of the groups (McClure, 2006). McClure (2006) concluded that same-race support groups and voluntary associations serve as a haven for many underrepresented groups at PWIs. In this way, membership in a fraternity or sorority is often different from other kinds of clubs and organizations. Students must elect to participate in a fraternity or sorority, particularly in the realm of BGLOs and are not recruited in many cases. Because of this, students are more likely to see how the organization can be a positive influence on their lives when they consider membership.

Student Experiences at Varying Universities

Aside from the differences in membership intake and the effects of membership on experiences for Black and White students, the difference between Black student acclimation at PWIs and HBCUs is also an important factor to consider. PWIs have a different history of ostracism and segregation in comparison to their HBCU counterparts. Owing to this, the experience for both White and Black students is entirely different at these universities. Patton et al. (2011) examined both PWIs and HBCUs in their study and found membership in BGLOs to be positively related with faculty interaction, peer interaction, and degree persistence. They also noted that there is no database listing the membership of Black students and their affiliations with GLOs. As a result, it is possible that some Black students who were a part of the analysis were members of a traditionally White GLO. This would most likely have been the case at a PWI vs. an HBCU, but that cannot be guaranteed. Also, the research raises valid points about the way that Black students have been historically omitted or lumped into categories with their counterparts in many previous studies (Patton et al., 2011).

Other points to consider about the subject of fraternity and sorority affiliation include the differences between historically White and historically Black fraternities and sororities in general. While the researcher specifically examines the experiences of Black student members of a BGLO at a PWI, previous studies have examined the effects of fraternity and sorority affiliation during a student's first and senior years in college as the researcher details. The difference between these two years on student experience is considerable. However, the more crucial point in this study and other similar ones is that it negates the experience of Black students and BGLOs (Asel et al., 2009). Historically, Black fraternities and sororities rarely admit first-year students because of the membership requirements for all nine organizations

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(Parks & Hughey, 2020). The participants in this study also all identified as juniors or above with at least one year of membership in their organization. Consequently, the membership roster for BGLO members in their first year of college would not be comparable to members of BGLOs in their senior year of college. This nuance highlights one of the subtle ways that BGLOs have largely been excluded from these conversations. Asel et al. (2009) examined the effects of fraternity and sorority affiliation and learning outcomes during a student's first and senior year in college. The site for the study was a large, public research university located in the midwestern section of the U.S. While there were participants from the Interfraternity Council, the College Panhellenic Conference, and the NPHC, most participants were members of historically White fraternities and sororities. A minimal percentage represented students from BGLOs, but because the proportion of Black and White students is not analogous, the results from the study cannot be generalized for the entire Greek population (Asel et al., 2009). This lack of generalizability is an example of the gap in the academic literature that the present researcher sought to cover in this study. While some data trends from historically White fraternities and sororities may overlap with their Black counterparts, it is important to distinguish the fundamental purpose of the organizations as well as how they function and exist at PWIs.

Self-segregation is one of the many perceived reasons that many historically White fraternities and sororities and their Black counterparts do not socialize or hold joint events on a regular basis. The authors found that the traditionally White GLOs and BGLOs did not host many joint events together. Many of the reasons for this may be outlined in the previous literature regarding stereotype threat, social desirability, and perception (Asel et al., 2009). Another reason that these groups may not socialize or hold events together regularly may be due to the campus racial culture. Several scholars have already highlighted how the history of a

campus leaves a residue that is permanently stained on the campus for many years thereafter. Museus et al.'s (2012) definition of campus racial culture is integral in understanding how students of color engage and interact at a PWI:

> Campus racial culture is defined as the collective patterns of tacit values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that evolve from an institution's history and are manifest in its mission, traditions, language, interactions, artifacts, physical structures, and other symbols, which differentially shape the experiences of various racial and ethnic groups and can function to oppress racial minority populations within a particular institution. (p. 32)

With this definition in mind, everything that an institution does essentially influences a student of color in one way or another. The effect can be positive if the institution considers the interests of that population in its decisions, but if a university only focuses on diversifying its population without a plan to effectively promote inclusion, the students will still exist on the fringe of the university (Museus et al., 2012). In this type of institution, students of color are only numbers on a spreadsheet to be included at the end of the year reports for purposes of diversity marketing and propaganda. Therefore, the inner workings and the decisions that a university regularly implements should include all students, not just those of the majority population. This happens often at several PWIs and contributes to the sense of belonging of these student groups on those campuses. One specific example highlighting the inequity at many PWIs includes differences in the way that many students of color are reared vs. their White counterparts. Research shows that a large percentage of students of color are raised in a collectivist culture (Guiffrida, 2006). In such environments, emphasis is placed on the group and their success rather than on individual gains (Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida et al., 2012). On the

contrary, on many collegiate campuses, success is based on an individual basis and not much is devoted towards group or collective achievements. This may create an immediate dichotomy and sense of confusion for some students of color, increasing the level of difficulty they may have in engaging or interacting with peers on the campus and inside the classroom.

Three areas that fundamentally shape how a student engages with his or her campus are cultural incongruence, cultural dissonance, and cultural integration (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2008a, Museus & Quaye, 2009). Some researchers argue that these three concepts are at the heart of what promotes success for students of color at many PWI campuses. The first, cultural incongruence, is the distance between a student's campus culture and the home community to which he or she belongs (Kuh & Love, 2000, Museus & Quaye, 2009). Students from rural areas who attend a PWI in an urban environment or another culturally different area are examples of this as they adjust to many things simultaneously, not the least of which is their campus culture. Due to this contrast in experiences, the student then moves to cultural dissonance, which refers to the tension caused because of the level and degree of difference (Museus, 2008a). It may be a sense of regret for selecting the institution or a sense of shock that the world can be so different from their sense of normalcy. In either case, the student is unhappy, which is directly tied to alienation and isolation on campus because of the differences present in their current reality vs. their home community. Third, cultural integration refers to the actual incorporation or integration of the backgrounds and identities of students of color into various educational spaces to shorten the gap for students of color within these spaces (Museus, 2011b; Museums et al., 2012). Unlike the other two concepts, cultural integration is based on the idea that educators and administrators have the capability to implement it in their daily practice. More course offerings on people of color in the history or political science department could be an example of an

institution attempting to bridge the gap for students outside of the majority. However, if everything the student learns is from a Eurocentric perspective, the likelihood of the student's ability to grasp and connect with the material beyond a surface level is low (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

By adjusting or altering its campus mission, a university could illustrate that it is committed to inclusivity beyond political correctness and words on a page or a website. By offering programs, events, and courses that directly speak to a wide array of audiences, colleges and universities could demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion, rather than simply advertising the former. This intentional activity would have the potential to attract other students of color in future application cycles because of the change in the campus environment and atmosphere. Once this effort has proven to be successful over time, it is almost certain that other universities will emulate the model to achieve a similar level of success.

Commuter Students & Student Experiences at Commuter Institutions

While choosing to adopt new curriculum and other methods of inclusion may help with the recruitment and retention of some groups such as students of color, there is no panacea to achieve and promote success among all students. They have varying needs and, as such, must be addressed in specific ways to achieve their goals. One specific population that has unique needs is that of commuter students. Unlike many other populations, commuter students see the college campus as merely a place to visit (Likins, 1988). There are many definitions that universities use to categorize or define commuter students, including that of nontraditional students (Gianoutsos & Rosser, 2014; Newbold et al., 2011), which for some institutions involves many types of sub-groups, in addition to commuter students (Kahu, 2013). Further, some institutions choose to refer to the commuter student population as off-campus students (Kuh et al., 2001; Griffin, 2016).

However, the most common definition of a commuter student is one who does not live in university-owned or -managed housing (Jacoby, 1989). With this definition in mind, most students at the intended host institutions would be considered commuter students. Many universities do not have the resources or the space to house their entire student population, even if those students wanted to live on campus. Consequently, commuter students are faced with the difficult task of acclimating to their surroundings or being disengaged with the institution. Much of the research surrounding commuter students focuses on aspects that are outside of institutional control, such as their age, geographic origin, or performance in high school or a previous community college. However, as Lima (2014) argues, a more appropriate focus would be their social integration into the institutional context. Research has also explored the reciprocal relationship between the student and the institution and the effect it may have on the persistence

of students (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). While the student must have an interest in being engaged with the university, the institution must do its job to reach the student instead of promoting a one-size-fits-all mantra on its campus towards residential students. Generally, the commonly held idea of a commuter student is a non-traditional one—i.e., one who is not the typical college age of 18–24 years old (Jacoby, 1989). However, many commuter students are traditionally aged college students, but their circumstances or desires prevent them from participating in college life in the same way as their peers. This creates a problematic cycle whereby the research on commuter students focuses only on their engagement within the classroom, while the narrative about them disengaging or being disinterested with involvement activities outside of the classroom is mistakenly understood as a fact. There is a plethora of research that already illustrates the importance of involvement outside of the classroom on student persistence. Tinto (2006) acknowledged the reasons students leave school and added that institutions provide far fewer reasons for them to stay, particularly to nontraditional students. Lima (2014) cited Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs and the impact that the sense of belonging has on human psychology. This impact is still present in commuter students and nontraditional students despite their vast differences.

Maslow's original theory suggests that a basic need must be met before an individual can operate at a higher level or capacity. Since the need to belong is basic, if commuter students do not feel they belong on a university campus, it can result in a potential decrease in retention and a struggle to maintain persistence among this population (Lima, 2014). A Black commuter student on a PWI campus fits the mold of someone who may have a harder time finding a sense of belonging. Since the institution was not designed or set up with individual experiences in mind, the process to acclimate to the environment is that much more difficult (Lima, 2014). The

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identities that a student of color carries with him or her may also contribute to the degree in which the student experiences a true sense of belonging on campus.

In a broader sense, fraternities and sororities exist on PWI residential and commuter campuses and at HBCUs on a basic level because of Maslow's theory regarding a sense of belonging. When Black students were excluded from membership in traditionally White fraternities and sororities, they sought to create organizations that would highlight the ideals of Black life without being exclusive to Blacks to provide a sense of belonging to others and themselves (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). This delineation is important because it serves as the very impetus for the creation of such organizations. Without this sense of belonging, an individual will not gain the additional self-confidence as someone who has been able to acclimate or gain a sense of belonging through various organizational memberships. While many things can be done to satisfy the basic need to belong, two things must be met: (a) frequent and pleasant interactions with others, and (b) interactions taking place in an environment that promotes the welfare of the individuals involved, (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lima, 2014). The need to belong is characterized as basic because its presence or absence can affect psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. All these factors contribute to success or failure in a university setting in one way or another and as such would have an enormous impact on the student population in general, but especially the commuter student population because of the more limited opportunities for connection on these campuses.

This point also suggests that a sense of belonging, and consequently, increased involvement cannot exist without frequent interactions that are meaningful and promote the welfare of students (Lima, 2014). Since commuter students may have a more stringent schedule than residential students, attaining a sense of belonging through increased involvement may be

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more difficult. For example, because some commuter students may work outside of school, having a class schedule that requires attendance each day of the week may not be feasible. Being on campus less certainly lowers the likelihood of an individual to have frequent involvement in on-campus activities. While a student may be engaged inside the classroom with the instructor or classmates, the environment is entirely academic and may not contribute to their sense of belonging but more towards a sense of academic self-efficacy, as described earlier.

In addition to the two factors stated above, fit and involvement are the two aspects of a sense of belonging that Hagerty et al. (1992) also considered necessary for an individual to gain and maintain a sense of belonging. Fit is defined as an individual's perception that his or her own values are congruent with those of others. Valued involvement refers to the perception an individual has that he or she is valued or needed (Hagerty et al., 1992; Lima, 2014). Membership in a classroom at a basic level would be classified as being a part of a group, thus fulfilling that fit part of the definition. But it would likely not constitute the valued involvement part of the definition. One person's presence or absence in class has little to no effect on another person's performance in the class unless they are a part of the same group (Hagerty et al., 1992). This provides one example and helps illustrate why a commuter student may struggle to engage and persist on campus outside of the classroom unless intentional efforts are targeted towards the student by the university or if they possess a strong interest in campus activities. If there is no group in which the student feels a sense of belonging, it is also likely that they may not feel needed or valued in the group(s) they may be a part of; consequently, the student's sense of belonging is not met and the likelihood for retention decreases (Hagerty et al., 1992; Lima, 2014). This also explains why fraternities and sororities work so well at varying universities in different parts of the country. These organizations feed on the need for students to belong to a

group (fit) and maintain the appearance of exclusivity and, in some cases, elitism, (valued involvement) (Hagerty et al., 1992). The mere membership in these organizations provides some students with a self-esteem boost, without which their sense of belonging may disappear (Lima, 2014).

Because commuter students must be more intentional to connect on campus, their experience has the potential to be more isolating, resulting in an ultimate lack of fit and valued involvement in many cases. With these variables in place, in the past few decades, scholars have suggested that research on commuter students should not focus on them as a monolithic group (Berger, 2000). Commuter students remain the most varied type of student population across varying institutions and should be reflected as such in the literature. Research should examine students of differing ages, races and ethnicities, intended majors, and institutional types to capture and accurately reflect the experiences of the average commuter student (Berger, 2000). The experiences of a commuter student at a community college may not, and likely will not, be like those of a commuter student at a large research university. Much of the literature does not make this delineation, creating a false narrative about this population that the researcher's study sought to contribute towards. While two institutions were included in this study, the experiences of the students at both institutions were not identical. However, the literature supports the narrative that virtually all commuter students or institutions have the same characteristics (Berger, 2000).

Typically, commuter students may generally be older (25 or over) than their residential counterparts (17–22), but this is not always the case (Aud et al., 2012). In addition, the enrollment of commuter students also differs. Nearly 40% of all commuters over the last several decades have been part-time students (Aud et al., 2012). Part-time students are on campus for

less time than full-time students which also helps explain their lowered involvement levels. Part-time students' perceptions of involvement may not be like those of full-time students, and they may be more solely focused on their academics as opposed to an out-of-class experience. In addition, because full-time students may pay more in student activities fees, technology fees, and other institution-specific items, part-time students may not be eligible to participate in many activities that are afforded to their counterparts. From the onset, this creates a barrier between the student groups and the varying types of students simply because of the number of hours they elect to register for, not the kind of fit or valued involvement the individual may have or seek within the campus (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Being enrolled full-time also assists residential students with the completion of their degrees within the 4–6 year span on a much more regular basis. Commuter students may be unable to enroll full-time because of other responsibilities. These students are often employed off campus and are unable to participate in social interaction on campus at the same rate as residential students (Weiss, 2014).

For example, a commuter student who opts to take 6 hours in the fall and spring semesters along with one course in the summer would complete 15 hours over the entire academic year, while a traditional residential student may take 15 hours in a single semester. This provides the residential student with the ability to double and potentially triple the number of credit hours that he/she could complete in comparison to the commuter student in this example. When the number of students is aggregated and compared, these figures paint a negative narrative of commuter students.

However, without the knowledge that commuter students may be working full-time off campus, have other responsibilities, or simply desire to live off campus, the characterization and

comparison of commuter students to their residential peers is not entirely complete (Weiss, 2014). Had the part-time commuter student been given the opportunity to join the same organizations as a full-time student, the level of engagement and persistence for the student may have increased. The number of hours that an individual has on their course schedule contributes to more than how quickly he or she finishes their degree. Those dollars are allocated towards fees that help to fund residence halls, student unions, parking garages, and more on the campus which all students should have access to at a minimum as students at the university.

If a student organization is self-funded, as many fraternities and sororities are, and does not receive expenditures from the university, it could be argued that they should be able to accept whomever they wish into their chapters, despite their part-time enrollment status, if the individual meets a certain GPA. This slight change could create more involvement opportunities for part-time students and commuter students and may also lead to increased persistence of this population. More research is needed in this area to determine whether part-time commuter students would be more likely to participate in student organizations that are reserved for full-time students if they had the opportunity (Weiss, 2014).

Unlike commuter students of the past, current commuter students have a much more challenging road to completion of a degree with part-time enrollment. There are so many more avenues to completion with online education, but there are also increased distractions that were not present in days past. Consequently, commuter students must be much more intentional with their time and decisions than ever before to achieve success. Not only must they decide whether full-time or part-time enrollment is a better choice for their circumstances, but they are also faced with the prioritization of other aspects of their lives such as work, home, school, and a social life. These options and all that they entail make the intentionality of their decision much more

important and specific to their choice of college or university (Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Griffin,

2016). This speaks to the gravity of difference in this population vs. a residential college student

population, who may view the campus as their home or an extension of the same.

Black commuter students are an even rarer population that has been studied or addressed

in academia. Chickering's (1974) *Commuting vs. Resident Students* was the first book to focus

on and address the commuter students' population. It did not specifically include differences for

Black students. This continued lack of inclusion of Black students in seminal historical texts on

commuter students, fraternities and sororities, and the impact of student involvement on a

college campus is the impetus for the researcher's study. Each of these areas historically omit

Black students from the sample population. The present study though illuminates several areas

for future research within the above-mentioned specific areas.

Black Commuter Student Experiences

While the academic research concerning Black students at commuter institutions is

sparse, Yearwood (2011) conducted a study that specifically addressed the level of success of

Black students at a commuter institution. This study is one of the few to directly examine the

impact of factors on the success of Black commuter students. The findings inspired future

research on the very topic that the present researcher was seeking to gain more insight into—

fraternity and sorority memberships and Black student experience. In Yearwood's (2011) study,

Black students who held membership in a fraternity or sorority at the commuter institution

benefited from their membership and held higher rates of student engagement than non-

members. However, the host institution only had 6.5% of the students who identified as being a

member of a fraternity or sorority. Of this percentage, an even smaller number identified as

Black, illustrating a lack of a priority for the population at the institution or lack of interest in Greek life, in general. Therefore, one of the primary recommendations for practice is for the university to highlight or showcase these historically BGLOs through greater institutional support (Yearwood, 2011). Yearwood's (2011) study is indicative of many preceding ones which illustrate the positive results of membership in a fraternity or sorority. Furthermore, Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998), Kimbrough (1995), Pascarella et al. (1996), and Pike (2000) completed important and intentional studies showing that leadership development and higher levels of engagement with the campus were all benefits resulting from membership in a fraternity or sorority. However, because Yearwood's study was conducted at an urban commuter institution, it has a scope to examine whether the same would be true at a commuter institution in another region of the country or at another type of university.

Further, Harper's (2008) research found that GLO memberships among Black students result in higher engagement within the classroom. The importance of understanding the differences between commuter students and their residential counterparts cannot be understated. If universities place more of an emphasis on the commuter student population instead of believing that they will respond in the same way as residential students, their success rates could rise. Commuter students continue to represent the collegiate majority regardless of institutional type, yet they are not given a proportional amount of attention in the literature (Lima, 2014). Most of the research surrounding persistence and engagement tends to fall under a single institution type or residential population. This results in much of the research on commuter students focusing on the negative aspects surrounding this population and their struggles to adapt to the structure of collegiate life.

Notably, few studies look beyond the success or failure of commuter students to address their level of connection or sense of belonging at an institution. They address the academic performance of this group or how their psyches may have been impacted because of the structure of college itself. Lima (2014) focused on commuter students and their sense of belonging or connection to campus. Using Astin's (1984, 1993) I-E-O (inputs, environments, outcomes) model, Lima (2014) found that commuter students had a higher sense of belonging overall when they were more involved on campus. The researcher hoped to build on this finding with the present study. Minority students experienced a lower sense of belonging than their White counterparts or the overall population. This was attributed to a lack of connection with the university or, more interestingly, a deficit in the social capital needed to make intentional connections on campus. In this regard, the present study provides evidence that is supportive of these findings because of the importance of GLOs in establishing a sense of belonging through involvement on campus.

Commuter Students versus Residential Students

An additional factor besides characterization as a commuter student which may impact a student's level of involvement on campus is also whether they are a first-generational college student. In many cases, first-generation college students and minority students share several overlapping characteristics. As such, if a minority student is in an unfamiliar environment and has no contact with anyone who looks familiar or with whom he/she can identify, the ability to find a connection at the university overall is diminished because the student may also not have a familial acquaintance who understands how to navigate collegiate spaces. Despite these challenges, Lima (2014) reported that commuter student engagement has historically been most powerful inside the classroom. Since many such students come to campus for class and then

leave, the potential of a faculty member to intervene and impact the commuter student's experience is considerable. If this relationship is soured or if there is no meaningful connection with the material in the class or the instructor, the student may effectively feel that there is no place for him or her on the campus. This ultimately results in a negative sense of belonging and decrease in retention (Hagerty et al., 1992, Tinto, 2006). The campus climate, faculty interaction, and the ability for clubs and organizations to intentionally seek out specific students is imperative when attempting to impact the commuter student, especially the Black commuter student.

Despite the highlighted differences between commuter and residential students, the two groups continue to be compared. Commuter students have yet to be researched more frequently as a single entity in the literature (Berger, 2000). As illustrated, the education that a student receives at a university becomes more impactful and complete when the student has intentional relationships with peers and faculty (Astin, 1993, 1999). This is true for both commuter and residential populations. However, for commuter students, this can be a source of frustration when opportunities for involvement are not inclusive of non-traditional populations or not intentionally designed to address the intersectional identities that these students possess. There are no studies that examine the impact of BGLO membership on the Black student population at either of the intended host institutions. Since one university is 114 years old and the other is only 51 years old, the present study has implications for other institutions that may soon reach similar age bench marks in institutional history.

Aside from these characteristics, the impact of race on the perceptions of campus environments for different types of students has also been examined in the literature. Laird and Niskode (2010) stated that students' perceptions of a campus environment may differ based on

their race. Similarly, Kuh et al. (2005) stated how enriching educational experiences surrounding race and other self-related attributes helps students learn about themselves and appreciate differences in others. With these two takeaways in mind, minority and White students will almost certainly have different interpretations of one another. Faculty and administrative staff are more likely to mirror White students than minority students, especially at PWIs. Upon arrival to campus, the experiences of the two groups will most likely differ because of representation and perceived stereotype threat (Chaney, 2015). However, at younger universities such as the host institutions, these longstanding traditions have not been in place. It is unclear if the age of the institution has any distinct or tangible effect on the experiences of the student population, but it does raise an important point to consider.

As important as the above-mentioned considerations are, there are other characteristics of commuter students who specifically attend urban campuses who may differ from commuter students at residential campuses. In some instances, commuter students at urban campuses may be older and have family or job responsibilities, which they must prioritize (Bye et al., 2007). Compared to their residential counterparts, these types of students may be more likely to notice the differences in the administration or faculty components based on race and gender as a positive or negative characteristic. While the entire student population at an urban institution will not fall under the category of commuter students, a sizable percentage of the population will. Unless a college or university requires that students live on campus throughout their entire collegiate tenure, chances are high that the institution has a large commuter student population. For example, Jacoby (2000) noted that commuter students may be more likely to schedule their courses during the same timeframe each week. While many students may seek to avoid Friday courses, the reasons for a commuter student to request a more stable schedule would entirely

differ from that of a traditional student. Commuter students may have a job or other significant responsibilities that require as much routine as possible. Having consistent times when they will be on campus may help commuter students with managing other responsibilities (Jacoby, 2000). For campus organizations seeking to reach such students, they must be intentional in their marketing and must consider those routines and how the schedule for a commuter student may differ than traditional students.

Additionally, Jacoby (2000) also noted that commuter students may lack the support system that traditional college students have. For example, resident assistants, counseling services, and other student affairs support staff aid may assist traditional college students with questions and concerns while they are on campus. However, for commuter students, since they are on campus for a limited time, most of their support may come from family and friends instead of university staff (Jacoby, 2000). If these family members or friends have not experienced college themselves, they may be unable to effectively assist the commuter student with questions. This can lead to added frustration for the student and a decreased sense of belonging because no one in their immediate circle of friends or family identifies with their dilemma.

A sense of community is also related to the sense of belonging for commuter and residential students. Johnson (2000) found that a sense of community was just as important for commuter college students as it was for traditional students. However, it was previously believed that commuter students did not want or need a connection to the university and that they were just on campus to attend classes. Since the early research on commuter students, beginning with Chickering's text, many studies have proved otherwise. Because commuter students represent the largest type of student population across all institutional types, understanding the

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nuances of their needs in campus life is critical for university retention and persistence (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Aside from this, other studies illustrate how involvement is critical for student success of all types at the university level. When students are not involved or engaged, not only are their persistence and retention numbers lowered, their development is affected as well (Demetriou & Sciborski, 2011). With this in mind, administrators and staff would do well to attempt to involve all students, rather than assuming commuter students will automatically be disengaged from the university. Recently, research surrounding commuter students has been much more institution specific. Findings are no longer applied to universities as a collective; instead, they characterize the experience at a single institution through innovations on that location (Busby, 2011).

An additional theory explaining the factors surrounding the actions of commuter students is the campus ecology theory, according to which the dominant systems on a university campus are analyzed to understand how they may affect the environment and student experience (Kuk et al., 2012; Griffin, 2016). The literature shows that most institutions structure their activities around the needs and desires of residential students despite the evidence that commuter students continue to represent the majority of the student population at a majority of the institutions around the country (Griffin, 2016). This cognitive dissonance explains, at least in part, how commuter students may struggle to engage on campus more than traditional residential students through the very structure of institutions themselves, such as their schedules not aligning with the commuter student population in many cases. As Griffin (2016) stated, the primary developers of the campus climate are residential college students. The things that these students are interested in are prioritized and supported in various ways. The level of engagement and success of all students is measured against this primary group since they determine the climate

and environment at the institution (Griffin, 2016). The problem is that commuter students cannot engage in the same ways as their residential counterparts. The assessment and level of engagement for the former will always be lower or viewed negatively if it is measured using a false equivalency. Commuter students may need or use some of the same resources as residential students, but that is not always the case. In many instances, these students need an entirely different level and form of support (Jacoby, 2000).

One specific area where commuter students struggle with stigmas and associations is their perceived lack of commitment to education. Since these students may be older and from underrepresented minority groups or a different social background, they may face stereotypes concerning their ability to succeed on campus (Jacoby, 2000a; Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Astin (1999) noted that retention suffers when students have full-time work off campus. These findings almost define the commuter student experience as being detrimental to their ability to succeed academically. However, as noted earlier, the reason why many students enroll as commuter students to begin with is the presence of additional responsibilities for them off campus. Wentz and Yu (2010) examined the impact that work had on a student's academic achievement and GPA. After examining almost 7000 undergraduate students, the study found that students who had jobs studied more and held higher GPAs than those who did not work. While this finding may not be generalizable to all institution types, it illustrates that off-campus work does not always negatively impact grades in every circumstance.

Besides the impact that participating in activities during college may have on collegiate performance, the impact of pre-college characteristics is also examined to determine how they may affect future levels of success. The theory asserts that the level of integration a student has with the university may eventually detrimentally affect his or her institutional commitment and

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the student's attrition may rise as a result (Braxton et al., 2004). Since commuter students spend significant time commuting to campus, it is thought that their level of institutional involvement and the likelihood to persist will be lower. Jacoby and Garland (2004) found that the experience of commuting to the campus has a negative impact on performance, compared to residential students who live on campus or nearby. Commuter students may have additional difficulties when they arrive to the campus because of not only their lower self-efficacy and sense of belonging but also the monetary investment involved in attending college. Organizations such as fraternities and sororities have membership dues and new member fees that may be out of reach for many commuter students. By sheer circumstance, these organizations may not be considerations for students who are struggling to remain enrolled in their academic classes (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). While desire and time may be large predictors as to why some commuter students may not get involved, affordability is another practical reason.

How commuter and residential students perceive their campus environment cannot be understated. In their analysis of commuter and residential students' living scenarios, Gianoutsos and Rosser (2014) found that the former viewed college and home as synonymous, whereas the latter viewed the two as separate entities. In many ways, this characterization explains why commuter students have such stark differences with their counterparts. An organization such as a fraternity or sorority may be more appealing to a student who views campus as an extension of home (Gianoutsos & Rosser, 2014). For a student who views college as a means to an end, getting involved on campus may be seen as a hindrance to achieving their ultimate goal of earning a degree.

An additional factor that has been examined over the past two decades with the advent of more online education opportunities is college student attendance status (Jacoby, 2000). As

more students begin to attend part-time college or take time off in between semesters, this shift will likely influence the way universities respond to student demands. Jacoby (2000) noted that more students have started practicing a phenomenon known as swirling, which refers to students attending more than one institution of higher education within a specific time period. This practice is associated with reduced or lowered likelihood to persist to a degree and graduation. These circumstances put commuter students on the fringes of many college and university plans. Due to their financial difficulties and lowered likelihood to persist, they may not be noticed until they have departed from the university. If students feel like they do not matter on campus, they are likely to depart because of the disengagement. Notably, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) developed an accurate concept of mattering based on the ideas of belonging from Maslow's hierarchy.

Applied to a university context, commuter students often feel the opposite of mattering, which Schlossberg (1989) defined as marginality. By being marginalized, these students are openly and negatively confronted with their differences. The operating hours of certain offices on campus, the location of some meeting spaces in comparison to others, and the amount of university funding that an organization receives can all be related to a group or an individual feeling marginalized. A student's feeling of marginalization may increase their disengagement or result in a lack of involvement on campus. By examining this population in this study, the researcher was able to examine how membership in a BGLO shapes the Black student experience from the frameworks of involvement and sense of belonging.

BGLOs and other culturally based groups serve as a large part of student involvement for Black and other students of color, including commuter students. They provide a space for underrepresented students to know and understand their worth and realize that their presence is

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important on campus (Harper, 2009). Since students who join such organizations are often older

and less likely to live on campus, they represent a unique and disproportionate amalgamation of

race and ethnicity but are in majority, in terms of their commuter status.

Academic Performance and Improvement

  While it has been proposed that students who are more involved and connected to a university may be more likely to persist and graduate, research also shows that these students may be more likely to learn more as well. Astin (1999) posited that student involvement is linked to student learning due to five major reasons: (a) investment of physical and psychological energy, (b) involvement occurs along a continuum, (c) involvement contains quantitative and qualitative features, (d) student learning being related to the quality and quantity of student involvement, and (e) increase in student involvement when the policy is related to the capacity of that policy or practice (Astin, 1999; Lewis et al., 2015).

  Most courses have learning outcomes associated with them. This is the way that instructors assess whether students have learned the intended material or not. Since instructors often receive a list of students who may participate in activities outside of class, including sports, band, or other related activities, it is relatively easy to see longitudinally whether these students have performed better on assignments than their peers who may be less involved in some instances. Interestingly, Kuh (2003) noted that student engagement occurs when students direct their activities towards involvement and learning. While there are different variations and levels of involvement, Kuh concluded that students who are involved are more likely to learn more in college. A previous study by Astin (1975) revealed that being a member of a fraternity or sorority, among other groups, contributed to the likelihood that the student would be more involved and excel academically. Importantly, the author later defined student involvement as also having a behavioral component (Astin, 1999; Lewis et al., 2015). How students behave provides valuable information as it gives an insight into their minds. Astin (1999) found that student involvement should focus on the behaviors and motivations of the students, rather than

the specific subject matters of a class. For example, the motivations behind a student selecting a class can elicit much more qualitative information than how they prepare for the material covered in class. Because of increased involvement, the student may be tying his or her extracurricular experiences to their academic work. For instance, a student participating in the student government association may naturally select history or political science as an intended major because of an interest in pursuing law as their career.

As important as these elements of involvement are for students to perform better in the classroom, it is critical for instructors to incorporate sound cognitive engagement strategies to enhance student learning. Three aspects that promote learning include physical (Astin, 1999), emotional (Lund et al., 2012), and cognitive engagements (Kahn, 1990). Kahn (1990) noted that since learning is a cognitive activity, students must be stimulated consistently to learn efficiently. Moreover, Lewis et al. (2015) found that older students were much more likely to experience cognitive engagement inside and outside of the classroom. This aligns with the belief that non-traditional commuter students are more concerned with their in-class performance rather than out of class engagement opportunities. The students in Lewis et al.'s (2015) study were familiar with the campus environment and were much more connected with and aware of the course materials, allowing them to engage on a deeper level. In the same sample, younger undergraduate students were found to have experienced more emotional engagement. They chose courses and instructors because of affective reasons and were less active and engaged outside the classroom (Lewis et al., 2015). This vividly exemplifies the potential of Black students who elect to join BGLOs. As students who join BGLOs are often upperclassmen rather than first-year students, they are likely to have already chosen a major and be involved with more rigorous academic activities by the time they become members of their organizations.

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Aside from the leadership skills that some authors have found BGLOs to provide to new members, improvement in academics is also a byproduct. Harper (2007) examined student activity in the classroom based on membership in a BGLO. For many students of color, being the minority in a large classroom at a PWI was intimidating at best and stifling at worst. In many cases, a student of color may be the only person of his or her race/ethnicity in the entire class. This experience may result in increased pressure to perform or serve as a representative for their race in this context (Harper, 2007). This would be true for many Black students, but for those with membership in a BGLO, the experience was different.

Harper (2007) found that membership in a fraternity or sorority had a significant effect on how students performed in the classroom setting based on interviews with 131 members, which indicated that faculty teaching style and fraternity and sorority membership were both positively and negatively correlated respectively with student engagement. As a result, membership in the organizations along with the teaching style of the instructor affected students' academic performance. Harper (2007) thus concluded that this topic should be reviewed further. Since Black students are often examined from a deficit mindset that merely seeks to explain why and how they fail, Harper proposed a different framework in his study which the present researcher also attempted to employ in the present study. By seeking to provide explanations for the multitude of ways that Black students achieve success inside of the classroom and in organizational memberships, researchers can gain a better grasp of how universities should be developing policies and procedures for campus activities which are inclusive of all student experiences. Because membership in BGLOs often require a certain GPA, students are incentivized to get good grades to be eligible for membership, which often requires 2.75–3.0 as a minimum (Ross, 200; Parks, 2008).

While the aims and purposes of traditionally White GLOs and BGLOs may differ, they share some similar traits related to academic performance. Walker et al. (2015) examined Greek collegiate outcomes at a private university and found that most fraternity and sorority members at the university were White and that the members placed a greater emphasis on an active social life than non-member students. This finding supports the idea that traditionally White GLOs serve as a social connection for each other, while BGLOs provide a hub for virtually all Black students, regardless of whether they are members or not.

Walker et al. (2015) also determined that while members had more exposure to drugs and alcohol, most likely due to their increased social activities, they also had an increased likelihood of persistence. Thus, the members were involved in many aspects of campus life rather than an isolated part of the campus. Therefore, the congruence between traditionally White GLOs and their BGLO counterparts is their emphasis on high academic achievement. However, Walker et al.'s (2015) study did not include any students of color which is a tremendous drawback in the generalization of the findings to other universities or populations. Students of color are a part of the fabric of university campuses today and the study would have had more impact had it used a more diverse sample. Previous research already illustrates how these organizations are differentiated based on who they attract, what their purpose is on campus, and how they are perceived by the greater campus community. The lack of participants of color in a number of studies on Greek life in general; but more specifically surrounding the experiences of Black students at commuter institutions is the unifying thread for the researcher's study.

To fully grasp how the idea of Black academic achievement at a PWI differs from that of White academic achievement, Hotchkins and Dancy (2015) examined Black male success and academic values to determine how they self-defined their success at a PWI. The authors argued

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that because of past racial discrimination and increased isolation, the study participants had to be excellent in more ways than their White counterparts to achieve success. The history of the university and Black students' mere presence on campus was a variable in their definition. White students have had the opportunity and the option to attend colleges of all types for years. Notably, Black students did not readily gain the right to do so until the *Brown vs. Board of Education* court decision in 1954 which integrated schools.

Further, using a qualitative case study approach, Hotchins and Dancy (2015) examined three primary themes to determine Black male excellence, including the following: 1) major focus as the "major focus"; 2) Black + male + nerd = academic anomaly; and 3) intergenerational fulfillment. The study concludes that Black male students thought about being excellent internally and, therefore, participated in activities that allowed them to exhibit characteristics of being excellent externally both on and off campus. Interestingly, the final factor of intergenerational fulfillment is often related to many Black students' reasons for wanting to join a BGLO. This connection illustrates that a student's internal definition of excellence is often manifested through the choices he or she makes, as well as the organizations that he or she chooses to affiliate with or become a part of. Since Black students see members of BGLOs as academically excelling, participating in community service endeavors, and developing a kinship and sense of connection with each other within the often-hostile confines of a PWI, others want to affiliate and gain access to this powerful network.

History of BGLOs

The academic and social endeavors of Black students on and off campus help define their experience. BGLOs have remained a consistent fixture in Black student life at HBCUs and PWIs since their inception. However, the decision about which BGLO to join is one of the most important choices that many students of color may make. Membership in these organizations is stressed as a lifetime commitment and does not end upon graduation from college (Ross, 2001; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks & Hughey, 2020). Consequently, students must be aware of the history of the organizations, stereotypes that may exist about them, as well as how it aligns with their values. Additionally, all organizations have community service, leadership, and activism incorporated into their purposes in one way or another. Through membership, students have historically been able to not only develop a closer relationship with their college or university but also within the surrounding community. In fact, student peer groups have a large level of influence on the behavior and growth of undergraduate students during their first few years on campus (Astin, 1993; & Patton et al., 2011).

Since BGLOs play a great role in students' lives on college campuses, it is impossible to fully examine them without explaining their history and origin. Lawrence Ross Jr. (2001) authored the definitive guide on BGLOs called *The Divine Nine: A History of Black Greek Letter Organizations,* providing detailed accounts of the history of all nine organizations and situating them within the current landscape of college campuses. The nine organizations that make up the NPHC of historically Black fraternities and sororities is included in the table below:

Table 1

Listing of Black Greek Letter Organizations

ORGANIZATION NAME	FOUNDING DATE	FOUNDING INSTITUTION	INSTITUTION TYPE
ALPHA PHI ALPHA FRATERNITY, INC.	December 4, 1906	Cornell University	PWI
ALPHA KAPPA ALPHA SORORITY, INC.	January 15, 1908	Howard University	HBCU
KAPPA ALPHA PSI FRATERNITY, INC.	January 5, 1911	Indiana University	PWI
OMEGA PSI PHI FRATERNITY, INC.	November 17, 1911	Howard University	HBCU
DELTA SIGMA THETA SORORITY, INC.	January 13, 1913	Howard University	HBCU
PHI BETA SIGMA FRATERNITY, INC.	January 14, 1914	Howard University	HBCU
ZETA PHI BETA SORORITY, INC.	January 20, 1920	Howard University	HBCU
SIGMA GAMMA RHO SORORITY, INC.	November 12, 1922	Butler University	PWI
IOTA PHI THETA FRATERNITY, INC.	September 19, 1963	Morgan State University	HBCU

Aside from their history and founding locations, Ross provided a comprehensive history of how each organization came to be. The founders of these organizations had endured countless acts of racism and ostracism from White students. In fact, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. changed its original name from Kappa Alpha Nu because of a racial incident involving a member of the fraternity at an athletic event (Ross, 2001). To avoid such incidents in the future, the founders had decided to adopt the Greek letter Psi. This change in name fundamentally altered the future of the organization and holds significance among members today as well (Ross, 2001). In addition to Ross, other scholars have also contributed meaningful literature on the history of BGLOs, including Parks (2008), Hughey and Gregory Parks (2020), Kimbrough (2003), and Jones (2005).

In the past, to gain access to membership in a BGLO, aspirants had to endure a process known as pledging, which is an initiation ritual or routine and was used to determine whether a candidate should gain admittance to the organization based on a series of trials and learning of information over a specified period of time (Laybourn & Goss, 2018). The pledge process for BGLOs has a background in activities conducted at European educational institutions that later arrived in the U.S. (Kimbrough 2003). Through the pledging process, candidates were observed to determine whether they were able to place their individual concerns aside and remain selfless for the good of the group. By overcoming adversity in the process, the pledgees' self-esteem and self-confidence were bolstered and improved, which contributed to their sense of belonging and connection to the organization and institution (Laybourn & Goss, 2018).

BGLOs have also conducted performances and practices that distinguished them from other Greek organizations. Through cultural practices such as stepping (choreographed dances), branding (marking skin with a metal iron), and calls (loud vocals), members are readily able to

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identify one another on their own campuses or at other institutions across the country and the world (Laybourn & Goss, 2018). Specific symbols and imagery that members of each organization are familiar with create a group identity dynamic within the organizations, specific chapters, and in the overall Divine Nine. Despite these cultural norms, BGLOs and traditionally White GLOs have often received unequal treatment at PWIs.

A specific example involves the availability of organizational houses on campus (Ray & Rosow, 2010). Since Black students do not have the comparable alumni support in terms of numbers or the legacy of White GLOs in terms of institutional awareness, the latter are more likely to have on-campus houses at PWIs. In addition, because of the performances that many BGLOs display, universities often ask them to participate in activities that showcase their talents, without providing equitable institutional support on campus (Ross, 2016). This causes many BGLO members to feel like they are asked to perform for a cause where they have no decision-making power. However, despite these continued challenges, the fundamental principles upon which each BGLO was founded contributes to the ability of their members to persevere through adversity. While all the organizations have principles and objectives that are unique to them, at their core, community service, leadership, and engagement are tenets that all nine of them strive to live up to through membership (Ross, 2001; Parks, 2008). Ross, Parks, and Kimbrough were all members of one such organization, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Their accounts and documentation on the history of the Divine Nine have credibility and an added personal touch that brings each organization's descriptions to life.

Previously held interviews with famous members of these organizations also illustrate how BGLOs have played a pivotal role in the lives of so many leaders. For example, many civil rights leaders of the past century who made it possible for Black students to enjoy an education

at any institution of their choice included members of BGLOs (Ross, 2001). Martin Luther King

Jr., Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, Andrew

Young, and a myriad of others are all part of the legacy of these organizations. Thus, one could

conclude that the positive reinforcement these organizations provide may have played a role in

their leadership, courage, and conviction to strive for civil rights within the country for people of

color.

As great as these ideals and sentiments may seem, Parks et al. (2014) took a more critical

look at Black fraternities and what they claim to provide to potential members vs. what actually

takes place more commonly. Ross' narrative was more of a historical lesson, while Parks et al.

(2014) examined whether these organizations are truly continuing to live up to their legacies or

merely serve as hyper-masculine bodies that only divide the Black male community on collegiate

campuses. The study details the nuances of the fraternities and how their founding at both PWIs

and HBCUs may influence the way they are perceived today. However, the article did not

include whether Alpha Phi Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi may serve as a greater catalyst for

students of color at PWIs vs. HBCUs. Since these two organizations were founded at two

different universities and Phi Beta Sigma and Omega Psi Phi were founded at the same

university (Howard University) only years apart, further research is needed to determine whether

there is a connection between the university type and BGLO fraternity and sorority choice.

Notably, an area covered in the study which has not been examined thoroughly in the

literature relates to how interwoven BGLOs were within the Black church. Church remains an

integral part of many Black students' lives while they are in college (Parks et al., 2014). These

organization's affiliation with Christian ideals and beliefs through church is added evidence that

speaks to the ways these organizations could be perceived to have an impact on Black student

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persistence and retention. In days past, membership in these organizations was often seen as complementary to membership in the church (Parks et al., 2014). Christian values and ideals were central to the founding of each of these fraternities and sororities, and as such, members were often involved in both GLO and church activities. However, since their founding, some BGLO chapters have unfortunately begun to stray from their original intended purpose.

Parks et al. (2014) examined acts of extreme physical hazing within BGLOs which is the greatest preponderance of literature on the subject in academia. In 1990, the nine organizations collectively ended the pledging process and adopted a process known as membership intake (Parks, 2014). This process was intended to eliminate acts of hazing by having an agreed upon schedule, method of initiation, and established relationship with the university where chapters were held. However, this created a culture of underground pledging or pledging that takes place before and/or after the official university and organizational membership intake process begins. This led to scenarios where students began to be severely injured and, in some cases, died of injuries (Parks et al., 2014). In their efforts to seek belonging, increased self-efficacy, and high levels of social capital, students began to literally place their lives on the line for membership (Jones, 2010; Parks et al., 2014).

The takeaways from the history of these organizations are great service and philanthropy, but their past is also littered with too many hazing activities. Students want to feel connected to something and putting their bodies at risk to become a part of an organization provides many with the self-esteem boost that they need to remain enrolled in a hostile environment at a PWI (Jones, 2010). In many cases, students who experience these violent acts of hazing do not voluntarily tell the police, university officials, or international headquarters (Jones, 2010). Instead, parents, concerned friends, or other members of the fraternity who may be

uncomfortable with those actions may inform authorities to end the behavior. Because of hazing injuries and deaths, many commonly associate BGLOs with violence and/or pledging before service.

Universities may argue that they are reticent to invest in the organizations at a deeper level because of the risk of hazing (Jones, 2010). However, few studies have examined whether BGLO's acts of hazing have historically exceeded or mirrored those of traditionally White GLOs. The implications of this research would be invaluable in helping to both recognize and eradicate hazing in all fraternities and sororities. The present study provided participants with the opportunity to detail how their membership in a BGLO shaped their experience, illustrating how the connection between university experience may inform how valuable a student views membership in a culturally based organization such as a BGLO.

Gap in the Literature

While there have been issues involving inexcusable acts of hazing detailed in the literature, it is not the only component of these organizations that should be examined. Through a review of past and more current examples in the literature, the present researcher uncovered a considerable gap in the literature which this study sought to cover. The shaping of the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution through the lens of a BGLO has not been readily examined. Utilizing the frameworks of level of involvement and sense of belonging builds upon past literature while adding a more novel angle to support or refute previous findings in these areas.

While past research has examined hazing, organizational development, voluntary affiliation, social integration, and retention, Black students' college experience shaped through membership in a BGLO at an urban and regional historically commuter institution has yet to be studied at length. Through a review of several studies that were both qualitative and quantitative in nature, no specific studies mirroring the researcher's study evolved. While the research on BGLOs is continuing to grow, it is entirely focused on GLOs more generally, traditionally White GLOs, or the origin of fraternities and sororities. BGLOs are often omitted or lumped in with other organizations that focus solely on the history or impact of these organizations as a collective. This illustrates a lack of understanding on how these organizations differ from their counterparts (McClure, 2006). The within group differences of GLOs are largely ignored or not considered to the same degree as other delineations in the literature. As a consequence, BGLOs have not been examined to the degree that they could have been in the academic literature.

Black students at PWIs remain one of the most minoritized groups in higher education (Harper, 2009). As a collective, this group of students is often met with preconceived notions

before they arrive on campus. They are faced with many circumstances that White students are less likely to face. Many studies attribute the lack of campus involvement by students of color on PWI campuses to negative environments (Fleming, 1984; Griffin et al., 2008; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Loo & Rollison, 1986; Museus, 2008b; Person & Christensen, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Turner, 1994).

However, as varied as the campus environment may be for students of color, engaging and participating in activities that many campus organizations display or participate in may not reflect their views (Davis, 1991; Person & Christensen, 1996; Rooney, 1985). For instance, many colleges and universities may commonly have a Greek week sponsored through their Department of Fraternity and Sorority Life. This week is traditionally meant to hold activities for all fraternities and sororities on the campus and highlight the successes of the entire fraternity and sorority life community. However, on many PWI campuses, the Greek week may not be inclusive (Hughey, 2010). Activities may center and focus on certain councils or chapters instead of being inclusive of the culture surrounding all the organizations. When this practice is repeated over time, Black students can feel like they have limited place or that they may be marginalized. Patton (2006) noted the importance of safe and validating spaces for students of color on PWI campuses. A Black cultural center, for example, provides an avenue for students to gather, socialize, and feel a sense of belonging that may have been non-existent or diminished within the larger university campus (Patton, 2006). These spaces help to define the specific campus culture and climate for many students of color.

Shenkle et al. (1998) defined campus climate as the "current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution and its members" (Bauer, 1998, p. 2). In contrast, campus culture refers to the persistent patters of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that

shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university, (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

The campus climate and campus culture of an institution are linked to the experiences of all

students at the institution, including students of color.

Since there is an abundance of literature illustrating how students of color experience

hostility and other negative emotions at PWIs in the past and currently, the present study sought

to explore whether Black students who have joined a BGLO at a predominantly White commuter

institution experience similar things or whether their experiences contrast with previous findings.

These organizations have been shown to be a source of support for many students of color

because of similar background, interests, and other commonalities that members share

(Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008c, 2011; Museus et al., 2012). What has not been shown is

whether these elements are present across varying universities and student categorizations.

Since the host institutions are located in an urban environment and a rural environment

respectively, the takeaways from this study can be viewed generally and can be isolated to the

specific institution that a participant attended. Thus, while the generalizability to other campuses

may be limited, the study provides insight into how students at two separate universities felt a

sense of belonging within their campus culture through their BGLO membership.

As previously shown, traditionally White fraternities and sororities have historically been

designed as providing more of a social and party culture on the collegiate campus (Armstrong &

Hamilton, 2013). These students view their membership as compulsory in many cases to

participate in the social aspects of campus, whereas Black students view their memberships as

necessary for basic acceptance and support in many instances (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999;

Strayhorn & McCall, 2011). Though no organization is a panacea, the present researcher wanted

to provide another context from which BGLOs can be examined. Whether students join BGLOs

for familial reasons, historical reasons, or as a way to develop a sense of belonging on campus, this study intended to provide participants with the opportunity to tell their stories through a specific perspective to inform the academic community about the Black student experience at two institutions in the Southeast region of the U.S.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Methodology

Qualitative inquiry is a multidisciplinary form of conducting research for a specific

project or purpose. It is not inherently better or worse than quantitative research, but different in

its aim, intended outcome, or purpose (Creswell, 2013). Similarly, data collection and analysis

within qualitative research also varies. The purpose of this study was to examine how

membership in a BGLO shapes the Black student experience at a predominantly White

commuter institution. The study included 13 participants, all of whom identified as Black

Americans and members of a BGLO. The participants completed a combination of in-person,

telephonic, and virtual semi-structured interviews via Zoom, which lasted in variation between

45 minutes and over one hour. Because of availability of the participants during various parts of

the day or evening, the researcher alternated between the use of Zoom and telephone interviews

with participants. In some cases, participants had to be subsequently contacted because of

additional responsibilities in their home environment that they had to attend to. These dynamics

would not have been present in the intended interview location on campus prior to Covid-19

restrictions.

The researcher intended to conduct a combination of in person interviews to coincide

with in person focus groups among participants. The researcher wanted to observe whether

participant responses shifted or whether responses changed among participants from their solo

interviews to their group participation in the focus group. However, in the process of planning these meetings at both campuses, the Covid-19 pandemic affected the researcher's ability to move freely from one state to another for data collection. Additionally, participants were sent home from their universities to begin taking classes via a virtual format. This prevented the researcher from being able to conduct an in-person focus group that would have provided additional context for participant responses. The researcher was able to conduct two in-person interviews for the study at Humble University prior to the Covid-19 restrictions being in place at both sites. These interviews lasted for a total of approximately two hours, with each interview lasting for one hour each. The two-in person interviews were conducted with participants Darius, of Phi Beta Sigma, and Molly, of Zeta Phi Beta. Because these participants also were in a relationship, they traveled to the interview site together. The researcher was able to speak with them on the same date, one after the other, at the same location. This assisted with the interview process, and the participants provided additional context that others simply could not because we did not meet in person.

Nonverbal cues, expressions, and other elements that these two participants shared were instrumental in the researcher's processing of their responses. This suggests that had the Covid-19 restrictions not been in place, the researcher may have had more variables for this study beyond the inclusion of focus groups, such as observational notes. All participants were asked a series of questions to assess their experiences as members of a BGLO, as Black students at a PWI in general, how their status as a commuter student affected their collegiate experience, and whether their BGLO membership provided them with skills useful for them outside of the collegiate space.

In the analysis phase, the researcher conducted three-cycle NVivo coding to determine if themes could be evolved from the data. As Saldana (2016) noted, coding is only one way of analyzing qualitative data, but it is not necessarily the only way. In other words, themes and codes are not synonymous but are rather one possible outcome as a result of coding. However, the process of coding is distinctly different from that of thematic analysis. The researcher thus determined that coding in combination with resulting themes would be the most effective way to capture the experiences of the participants in a holistic and accurate way.

A code is defined as a word or short phrase that assigns meaning to a piece of specific language or data (Saldana, 2016). It is intended to provide context and meaning to a set of data so that an audience can interpret the data in a clearer way. Coding is an interpretative act that allows the synthesizing of data in a way that is most accurate and authentic. However, coding in and of itself is not the end goal of data analysis. Once data is coded, it is then categorized to reveal relationships between the data sets. However, data is rarely coded only one time because language and data sets often reveal different meanings upon multiple viewings or readings (Saldana, 2016). More commonly, data is coded at least two times, before it is then categorized and synthesized to determine themes. While there is no set and specific number of codes that a study should have, Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) noted that a researcher should keep copies of the theoretical framework, central research questions, and goals of the study during the coding process to remain focused.

The 13 individuals included in this study had been members of a BGLO for at least one year at a predominantly White commuter institution. Seven of the nine historically Black fraternities and sororities were represented in this study. Through data analyses, eight themes emerged from the participant responses.

Participant Demographics

For this study, the researcher included current students at Humble and Spirit Universities who identified as Black American, or the descendants of African Slaves who reside in the United States (Hanchard, 1990). This is in contrast to the term African-American, which can be confusing because the combination of the two terms does not specify whether one intends to one mean "American identity based on residence in North or South America, citizenship in the United States, or a mode of existence across two continents that is characteristically 'American'," (Hanchard, 1990, p. 31). Consequently, the researcher elected to use the term "Black" throughout this study to characterize both the organizations and the participants in the study who identify as such based on that definition. In addition to maintaining a specific racial identity for participation in the study, all potential participants had to maintain active membership in a BGLO for at least one year with full-time enrollment at their institution.

At Humble University, all participants originated from one state in the Southeast, while at Spirit University, all participants were from a neighboring state in the Southeast. Eight participants attended Spirit University and five students attended Humble University. No out-of-state students from these institutions participated in this study. In addition, only one participant in the study self-identified as a transfer student. While he was had transferred to his institution, he did not join his BGLO until arriving at one of the host institutions. Thus, his reflections about his experience in the fraternity were not unintentionally influenced or affected by another institution.

Despite that participant's lone transfer status, at Humble, prior community college students represented a large percentage of the total student population (49.6%), in comparison to four-year institutions generally (47.4%) (OIE, 2017). While not drastically larger than the

general four-year institution percentage, this is noteworthy because community colleges do not have BGLOs on their campuses. Many students may arrive at a four-year institution with no knowledge or perception that these organizations exist or what the requirements for membership may be. As noted earlier, a lack of context for these organizations can ultimately impact an aspirant's chances of gaining membership. The Black student experience at an institution like Humble or Spirit could be affected because of differences between the two institutions in relation to other colleges or universities that the student may have previously attended. Because of the relatively high proportion of Black students who also attend both institutions, in comparison to their overall university enrollment, this may be correlated with the students' on-campus experiences.

Of the 13 participants in the study, all identified as commuter students and lived off campus. At the time of this study, the Covid-19 regulations for both institutions had been implemented, so most students had already moved off campus. Consequently, the researcher wants to note that even if some of the participants had lived on campus, their status would have been categorized as off campus based on the timing of this study. While all 13 participants identified as commuter students based on its definition, the length of commutes to campus for the participants varied widely from 5 minutes to 30 minutes. Because the two research sites were in vastly different areas, one being an urban environment and the other being a smaller, rural environment, the literal effect of commuting to and from campus for the students at Humble University was different for the students at Spirit. None of the participants indicated that their commutes posed a significant challenge to their ability to succeed academically.

Yet despite the commutes not posing a significant challenge, the history of the Southern U.S. is filled with prejudice and a staunch resistance to integration and the desegregation of

schools (Harper, 2008). As one of the host institutions had recently turned 50 years old and the other was 114 years old at the time of this study, each institution had not had Black student enrollment for a substantially long time. Thus, participants were able to reflect on instances of discrimination and ostracism which they felt at their institution and how BGLO memberships assisted in developing a sense of belonging on campus and overcoming those experiences. In addition, because this population has been historically examined from a deficit mindset far too often (Harper, 2018), the researcher was interested in juxtaposing the history of an institution located in an urban environment with an institution located in a small, rural town to determine if similar experiences would develop across university type.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Institution	Classification	Organization	Years in Organization
Ernie	Spirit	Senior	Kappa Alpha Psi	3
Ken	Spirit	Junior	Kappa Alpha Psi	1
Jason	Humble	Junior	Kappa Alpha Psi	2
Michael	Humble	Senior	Omega Psi Phi	2
Darius	Humble	Senior	Phi Beta Sigma	2
Sandra	Spirit	Senior	Alpha Kappa Alpha	1
Linda	Spirit	Senior	Alpha Kappa Alpha	2
Kiana	Spirit	Junior	Alpha Kappa Alpha	2
Molly	Humble	Senior	Zeta Phi Beta	2
Carey	Spirit	Senior	Zeta Phi Beta	2
Jackson	Spirit	Senior	Alpha Phi Alpha	1.5
Naomi	Humble	Senior	Delta Sigma Theta	1.5
Danielle	Spirit	Junior	Zeta Phi Beta	1

The participants represented a vast array of demographic characteristics. While every student identified as Black American and had at least one year of membership in their BGLO, the SES of the participants was also noteworthy. While the researcher did not specifically ask about the participants' upbringing or their SES status, their responses indicated that they had likely arrived at college from a middle-class background. Of the 13 participants, 11 had family members within their immediate or extended family who were also members of a BGLO. This illustrates that many of the participants were not first-generation college students. In addition, because of this familial connection and their SES backgrounds, the participants did not ever consider the possibly of not attending college.

It was a foregone conclusion in their minds because of their performance in high school, and the expectations that they had for themselves, as well as the expectations that family members may have had for them as well. In addition, the range of membership experiences elicited different responses for the participants as well. Those who had been members within their organizations for a longer period, such as 3 years, were able to reflect on a much more diverse array of experiences than someone who had only 1.5 years of membership because of the opportunities that come with time in the organization.

However, the range of membership experiences provided findings about the role that such memberships play on an undergraduate student experience no matter the length of time involved. Some experiences in the organization were more immediate, while others took more time to develop. The participants' connection to their respective campus prior to joining a BGLO was also varied. For example, one of the participants, Ken, was originally from the town where the university is located. He initially attended another institution, an HBCU, and transferred to the current institution after two years of enrollment. Ken grew up spending time

on the campus in his hometown and taking duel enrollment courses there while in high school. Because of this previous exposure, Ken's approach to acclimating to campus was different than many other participants, who were new to their campus and the respective town or city where the university was located.

Research Design/Framework

The researcher conducted a basic, qualitative interpretive study at two research sites. Using two theoretical frameworks, Astin's (1999) theory of level of involvement and Strayhorn's updated (2018) concept of student sense of belonging, the researcher was able to contextualize the experiences of participants in this study. Black students are not monolithic and experience the world in a multitude of ways. The within group differences that these students share are important to recognize and report on so that their holistic experience can be captured.

Astin's (1999) theory was heavily criticized for not using students of color in the study and for using students only from a traditional residential college setting. By combining the two above-mentioned theories as the framework for this study, the researcher hoped to capture how BGLO membership shaped the student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution. The researcher's aim was to utilize these theories to build upon the knowledge that has already been curated regarding involvement level and sense of belonging while also adding to the limited literature on Black students attending commuter institutions. The element of student time and attention being a finite resource along with the basic need for a sense of belonging to reach the levels of knowledge and self-actualization that colleges aspire for students to reach inspired the foundation for this specific study.

To conduct an effective qualitative study, the researcher accessed a population that could provide useful information for the intended research questions. The researcher emailed the entire population of students who were members of a BGLO at both institutions, which totaled approximately 75 students. While all 75 students would not meet the criteria for the study, the researcher wanted all BGLO members to gain awareness about the study to help garner participation. Purposeful sampling is defined as intentionally selecting individuals and sites to

learn or understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In addition, Patton (1990) also

noted that individuals are often chosen based on whether they are "information rich" (Patton,

19990, p. 169). Through this type of sampling, a researcher can select individuals to participate

in his or her study who may have experienced or have access to useful information. The

researcher thus used homogenous sampling to select the participants. This type of sampling uses

certain sites or people because of their similar traits or characteristics (Creswell, 2013).

Snowball sampling is a form of purposeful sampling that occurs when researchers ask

participants for recommendations on other individuals for their study (Creswell, 2013). After a

successful experience during the process, one participant would often share their experience of

the interview process during the study with a friend or chapter member who also met the

participation criteria. These elements ensured that the researcher had willing participants who

were genuinely interested in sharing their experiences as well as had an interest in the overall

outcome of the study itself. By having a larger pool of individuals from each research site rather

than a single institution study, the strength and potential impact of the study increases because of

the similar characteristics that the participants may share with one another across institutions.

Participants for the study were emailed with a description of the study, the approximate

time needed, and were informed about the $10 gift card incentive that would be provided for

participation. The initial communication with participations included specified meeting

locations for their respective campus where the interviews would occur. The researcher's

university email address and phone number were provided so that anyone interested could

immediately contact the researcher through at least two mediums to sign up for a specific date

and time. 22 students originally signed up to participate in this study out of the 75 students

contacted. This represented over 30% of the entire BGLO population at both institutions. Of

these 22 students, one organization was much more represented than many of the other BGLO

organizations in the study because of the size of the chapter at one of the research sites. This had

the potential to skew the interpretation of responses towards one organization in particular rather

than the BGLO community as a collective. However, the researcher planned to deliver interview

questions in a way that would attempt to draw out the experience of being a member of a BGLO

generally rather than a specific organizational response for the purposes of this study.

After the first two initial two interviews were conducted on Humble's campus,

participants were informed that due to Covid-19 restrictions, all interviews would be conducted

virtually moving forward for both their safety as well as that of the researcher. The change to a

virtual format caused nine participants to withdraw from the study because of their change in

availability. Of the nine participants who withdrew from the study, eight were graduating

seniors, and had a major in nursing. The two host institutions have two of the most selective

nursing programs in the entire Southeast Region. Because of the effects of the pandemic and

their final internship hours being increased due to their graduating status, these students simply

did not have the time to devote to this study despite a sincere desire to participate. The ninth and

final student withdrew from the study because he planned to transfer to another institution out of

the state.

With the upheaval of the semester, and their intended plans greatly affected, the

researcher moved forward with 13 confirmed participants for the study. These 13 students

represented both institutions equitably, and the organizational representation within the

participants was much more evenly distributed than the original 22. The researcher is confident

that saturation among the population was reached because of the organizational representation

within the population, the equitable distribution across both research sites, and the availability of

participants who would have been eligible for the study. While 75 total students were contacted, the researcher estimates that of the 75 students contacted, approximately 30 students were eligible for the study based on their membership criteria. Consequently, 13 total participants represent an almost 50% participation rate among eligible BGLO members within the population at both research sites.

Participants were assured of their anonymity over the course of the study both via email and during the interview itself. The researcher would determine a specific time for the interview with a participant. The researcher contacted the student at that specified time. After a brief explanation of the research project, the researcher informed the participant that he would be turning on the recording device for the interview. Once a student interview was concluded, the researcher assigned the participant a pseudonym, and the file was transferred from the recording device to the researcher's computer. From there, the researcher copied the file and secured it on the University of Alabama Box Server network behind a unique log in and password to protect the data. Files were destroyed and removed from the server at the conclusion of the study. In addition to securing the interviews from the participants on the server, participants were assured that because they were assigned a pseudonym, their responses would not be verifiable or connected to their organizations.

The participants were also able to illustrate trends or patterns based on their responses, revealing valuable information about their experiences at their institution. These experiences can serve to inform future programming and instruction to the institutions or may highlight specific areas for improvement. Hurtado et al. (1999) suggested that culturally based groups serve as more than resume fillers for students of color. These organizations provide social activities, support, and a safe space to gather and share similar experiences with one another. Through an

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examination of the current experiences of Black students who are a part of BGLOs, participants were also able to describe how other culturally based groups they are a part of led them to join their BGLO or how that membership was similar to their fraternity or sorority membership (Hurtado et al., 1999).

This research will hopefully prove to be impactful for the staff and administrators at both institutions as well as others to make the necessary changes and incorporate the needs of this group in a more intentional way. Too often, research has incorporated the needs and concerns of many students of color into the majority group on campus. However, many students of color do not feel connected culturally to the activities or initiatives designed with this group in mind (Strayhorn, 2018). This has led to a campus climate that is often hostile at worst and unwelcoming at best for many students of color (Hurtado et al., 1999). This study sought to provide students of color with an avenue to speak to their experiences in their own words to help provide context as to why they do not always feel connected to the majority university culture.

Table 3

Methods Summary

METHOD	POPULATION	DATA COLLECTION (FEB-MAY 2020)	DATA ANALYSIS (JULY-SEPTEMBER 2020)
Basic Qualitative Interpretive	Current undergraduates Identify as Black American Member of BGLO for at least one year	Snowball sampling Semi-structured interviews 13 participants	Three-cycle coding Thematic analysis Nvivo-Coding
Two Institution Site			

Research Setting/Host Institutions

When deciding to select institutions for this study, the researcher had several options available. The researcher wanted to select institutions that would be categorized as both PWIs and as commuter institutions. In addition, the researcher wanted to select potential research sites that differed from one another so that the participant responses could be described across the differences between the sites. The first location, Humble University, is defined as a tier-one mid-sized research university located in a large city in the Southeast U.S. It has existed independently since 1969 and originated as a medical extension of the state's flagship institution. Humble University enrolls approximately 22,000 students and has a sizable undergraduate (13,878) and graduate student (7,513) population within that makeup (NCES, 2020).

Black students make up 21% of the population at Humble University, while part-time students make up 35% of the student population (OIE, 2020). Female students represent 59% of the student population at Humble University, while male students account for 41% of the student population (OIE, 2020). In terms of faculty diversity, Black Faculty represent approximately 24% of the population, while White faculty represent 61% of the population. Part-time students have also historically been a large percentage of the commuter student population. By having a large commuter student population and minority population in comparison to many of its institutional peers, Humble University may continue to have evolving student demographics in the years to come.

In recent years, Humble University has attempted to create a more robust on campus experience for students. Building new residence halls, revamping the student center in the middle of campus, and hiring more staff in the division of student affairs to plan and orchestrate afternoon and evening events has been a part of the plan for Humble to transition away from

being described as a commuter institution. Because the institution has only existed for 51 years, it was a prime location for this study. It is in a historical city in the South, and the researcher could not locate a study that examined the BGLO perspective at the institution. While this is not reason enough for the site to be selected on its own, in conjunction with many other characteristics, it became an ideal site. The first chartered Greek Letter organization on its campus, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, is a member of the Divine Nine. Because of this, BGLOs were originally in a unique position at Humble University as opposed to many other traditional PWIs. Many traditionally White GLOs arrived on campus after several BGLOs had already been chartered. This placed Humble in a rare position for the purposes of this study because of its location and description.

On the contrary, Spirit University is defined as a small regional public university, located in a rural town in the Southeast U.S. (NCES, 2020) and has existed since 1906, maintaining a 94% in-state residency status for enrolled students (NCES, 2016). Black students represent approximately 27% of the undergraduate student population at Spirit University, with White students representing the majority at 63% (NCES, 2020). The male to female student ratio is much starker, with female students accounting for 62% of the student population at Spirit University, while male students account for 38% of the population. Interestingly, Spirit University's faculty make up is also less than ideal in terms of diversity, with Black faculty representing 12% of the university population, and White faculty representing 80% of the university population (NCES, 2020). This indicates that Black students on Spirit's campus may have a more difficult time finding a sense of belonging in the realm of racial identity based on sheer numbers. Thus, virtually any research study conducted at Humble or Spirit regarding Greek life has the potential to be compelling because of the age of the institutions, their

respective locations, and shared histories as commuter institutions. Harper et al. (2018) noted that far too many studies on commuter students have been deracialized and do not incorporate race or its impact on the commuter student or institutions that have been categorized as commuter institutions.

Table 4

Description of Research Sites

Institution	Enrollment Size	Racial Demographics	Gender Demographics	Faculty Diversity	On Campus Living Capacity
Humble University	22,000	21% Black 58% White	59% Female 41% Male	24% Black Faculty 61% White Faculty	2982
Spirit University	2950	27% Black 63% White	62% Female 38% Male	12% Black Faculty 80% White Faculty	950

The present study could prove to be analogous to other studies that examined mid-sized urban institutions or small-regional universities. According to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at Humble University, full-time students make up 65.7% of the student population, while part-time students make up for 34.3% (OIE, 2017). This equates to a ratio of three out of 10 students attending the university part time. Of this total, Black students make up for 21.2% of the population, with 13.8% attending full time and 7.4% attending part time (OIE, 2017).

In contrast, Sprit had 66% of their undergraduate students attend classes at the full-time level in the Fall 2019 semester. Of those students, 79% identified as being traditionally college aged or 24 years or younger. Additionally, Black students at the institution maintain a 30% six-year graduation rate (NCES, 2020). The combination of these factors provides some overlap between the host institutions, but many distinct differences as well.

As mentioned earlier, students who join BGLOs often do so later in their academic career because of the requirements for these organizations. Owing to this, most BGLO members are not first-year students but rather sophomores, juniors, or seniors. The participants within this study all identified as juniors or above at both research sites. In addition, the full-time enrollment at both institutions was significantly larger than part-time enrollment. These factors are in line with Astin's (1999) study which suggests that students who attend full time are much more likely to persist to graduation.

In the period between 2012–2017, Black students represented 26% of the university undergraduate enrollment at Humble (OIE, 2017). In comparison, during the same time, Black graduate students represented 15% of the total graduate student population (OIE, 2017). Moreover, Black students represented between 25% and 30% of the university population at Spirit between 2016 and 2019, while graduate students represent between 10% and 15% over the same time frame (Spirit Factbook, 2019). Thus, despite having a drastic difference in the number of overall students at each institution in the Fall 2019 semester, 22,080 at Humble vs. 2,950 at Spirit, the proportion of Black students at each institution was quite similar, which added to the efficacy of the study (NCES, 2019).

Humble and Spirit have historically been considered as commuter schools. Both have also undergone recent leadership changes within the Division of Student Affairs, having chief

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Student Affairs Officers who have been present in that role for five years or less. The rationale

for selecting Humble and Spirit as research sites relates to the age of the institutions, their

location in the Southeast region, historical perception and operation as commuter colleges, and

the similar proportion of Black student population. These combined factors filled many

variables that add to the gaps in the literature concerning Black student enrollment, persistence

and experience, as well as literature regarding urban mid-sized universities and small rural,

regional universities. At each institution, eight BGLOs have chapters on the campus, with only

Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. missing from the group (Humble FSL, 2019; Spirit Greek Life &

Leadership, 2019).

Examining the burgeoning Greek life experience at Humble and Spirit University and its

impact on the student body at a relatively young, tier-one research university, and an older

regional university fulfills a large gap in the literature on the topic. So far, research largely

examines the experiences of traditionally White fraternities and sororities while negating the

experiences of students of color to a large degree (Ross, 2016). Previous research also notes how

membership in these organizations is positively related with degree persistence and faculty and

peer interaction, with a far more pronounced effect at PWIs vs. HBCUs (Patton et al., 2011).

Having fraternity and sorority houses, which aids in the acclimation and involvement of a

student on campus, plays a role in this increase in peer interaction and degree of persistence.

However, Humble does not have designated fraternity or sorority houses. At Spirit, three

traditionally White fraternities maintain houses off campus but no BGLO has housing on or off

campus at either institution.

Interestingly, a noteworthy description about the collection of data at Humble was that it

was founded during the heart of the Civil Rights Movement (McWilliams, 2007). Of the three

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BGLOs historically founded at a PWI, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., none of them were founded in the Southern region of the U.S. (Ross, 2001). Since many Southern schools did not begin to admit Black students until after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the effect that these organizations may or may not have on the Black student population in this region is relatively recent.

These additional details may also need to be examined in future research regarding the experiences of the students and how their membership in a fraternity or sorority is affected because of the founding location of their BGLO, a lack of housing and designated space for BGLOs at many PWIs, and the geographic region of the PWI itself. To be eligible to join a fraternity or sorority on both Humble and Spirit's campuses, students must be attending full time. Thus, the variable of fraternity or sorority membership may be related to increased persistence, integration, and engagement because of the students' enrollment in more academic hours.

Data Collection

Qualitative research is any type of research method that involves clustered language data (Polkinghorne, 1995). Creswell (1998) noted that the kind of data that is collected depends upon the method. For this study, the researcher conducted a basic, interpretive qualitive study with semi-structured interviews. Merriam (2002) defines a basic, interpretive qualitive study as follows:

> In conducting a basic qualitative study, you seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these. Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. These data are inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or themes that cut across the data. A rich, descriptive account of the findings is presented and discussed, using references… that framed the study in the first place, (Merriam, 2002, p. 7)

Participant interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. Collectively, interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour via a combination of in person, phone and Zoom methods. The two in person interviews lasted the longest, with each lasting almost one hour each. Two participants were contacted subsequently to follow up on information that they shared which needed further clarification. The digital recording device used for data collection enabled the researcher to record the interviews, upload the recorded file to a computer, and transfer the digital file to the University of Alabama Box Server. The file remained in a folder labeled "Dissertation Interviews" until each file was ready to be uploaded to a transcription site for the purposes of data analysis. Each file was affixed with the assigned pseudonym given to the participant to protect their anonymity. A key distinction between qualitative and quantitative

research is the role of the researcher. In quantitative research, the researcher is detached from the study and merely examines what he/she finds. On the contrary, in qualitative research, the role of the researcher is participatory (Creswell, 1998). Before beginning the study, the researcher obtained consent from the participants, after which an overview of the study was shared with them along with the procedures taken to protect participant anonymity and secure the collected data. Upon completion of this overview, the researcher asked each participant a series of interview questions, which were developed to help illuminate the three primary research questions:

1. How does membership in a BGLO shape the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution?

2. How has membership in a BGLO affected Black students' sense of belonging at the university?

3. What skills do BGLOs equip Black students with to succeed at a predominantly White commuter institution?

Qualitative researchers serve as the instrument for data collection in many instances because of interviews, focus groups, and/or observations. These forms of data collection directly involve the researcher using his or her knowledge and expertise to gather data that will be most useful for the study. Farrelly (2012) noted that qualitative research is also especially useful to obtain culturally specific information.

Prior research on BGLOs shows that members may have a separate and unique fraternal experience than their White counterparts (Laybourn & Goss, 2018). Therefore, a qualitative method was deemed appropriate to gain in-depth information about the experience and how it

relates to a student's connection and sense of belonging at the university. Additionally, qualitative methods have also been shown to be useful in studying specific populations.

Typically, interviews can either be unstructured, where the researcher simply has a conversation with the participant and the attitudes and feelings that emerge are a part of the data or they can be semi-structured, where the researcher goes into the interview with a topic or key area that he or she wants to explore with intended questions (Creswell, 2013). Thus, for the purposes of this study, semi-structured interviews were more appropriate because of the increased level of specificity to the topic. The researcher wanted participants to focus on elements of their lives that contributed towards how they viewed the experiences of BGLO membership at their respective institution while also allowing for the possibility of other elements of their identities to present themselves in their responses.

While the researcher was familiar with prior research concerning the impact of BGLOs on the Black student experience at PWIs, there were no specific intended participant responses that were sought. Instead, the researcher wanted participants to respond to the questions in a transparent way, fully detailing their experiences at the institution. The researcher read each question aloud, verifying that each participant both heard and understood the question. In addition, once a participant had completed their answer, the researcher would ask each participant "Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding this question?" With this mindset, the researcher was able to structure interview questions in a way that focused on the topic and minimized their potential to speak about other unrelated aspects. Additionally, by asking this question at the end of each participant response, the researcher was certain that participants were able to share all that they wanted or intended to share on a specific question. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher informed participants that they could choose to

withdraw from the study at any point by contacting the researcher at the specified phone number and email listed. The researcher informed the participants that their $10 incentive would be provided immediately at the conclusion of the interview. By using semi-structured interviews as opposed to unstructured interviews, the researcher provided more consistency across interviews in keeping the participants focused and on track with the original topic of the interview (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Once all data was gathered using semi-structured interviews, the researcher uploaded

each participant recorded file to a transcription website, Rev.com. The site produced 13 entire

transcripts from the participants for the researcher to read and analyze. Using NVivo coding

software version 12, the researcher uploaded all 13 files into the program. The researcher read

through each transcript and began to create Nodes on general topics that were repetitious or that

manifested across interviews.

The researcher used Astin's involvement theory as a background for the creation of some

of the codes, and Strayhorn's Sense of belonging theory as the background for others. Keeping

the theoretical frameworks in mind for the interpretation of the data was helpful in creating the

codes and recognizing the themes that emerged from the data. For example, the following codes

were created with Astin's involvement theory in mind: *level of community service increased,*

networking increased, participation in other organizations is limited, level of engagement with

chapter, harder to get members to participate in business activities versus social activities, time

devoted to the organization is like a part time job. Similarly, the following codes were created

with Strayhorn's sense of belonging in mind: *isolating experience being Black at a PWI,*

membership allows you to connect with others who are in BGLOs, BGLOs are left out of things

on campus, organization served as focus and funnel, preparing to transition to graduate chapter,

desire to be a part of something larger.

The researcher created a total of 50 nodes across all of the interviews. Once the nodes

were created, the researcher began to drag and drop specific chunks of text from each interview

that related or corresponded to a specific node. This began the coding process. Saldana (2015)

has authored one of the more definitive texts on qualitative data analysis according to which the

purpose of coding is to capture any main ideas or trends that evolved from the data collected (Saldana, 2015). A code as defined in qualitative inquiry is a word, phrase, or sentence that represents aspects of data or captures the essence or features of data (Saldana, 2015; Clarke & Veale, 2018). It is a way to identify themes among the participants and draw a larger conclusion. Though coding is not the only way to interpret data in qualitative analysis, it was appropriate for this study because of the similarity of characteristics for the participants in the study. They were all full-time currently enrolled undergraduate students who are members of BGLOs for at least one year who identified as Black American.

Once the researcher began coding the pieces of text from each interview, the codes were color coded to distinguish among each other. The researcher used the "Coding Stripes" tool in the NVivo software to assist with distinguishing among the various codes. After concluding the coding process, the researcher began to count the number of references that appeared in each node. The researcher indicated this number and repeated the above process two more times to complete the three-cycle coding process.

Aside from coding, a thematic analysis also involves observing and recording data, according to Clark and Veale (2018). In contrast to the coding of transcripts and notes, a thematic analysis involves observational similarities or differences noted during focus groups or interviews. Thematic analysis is one of the added benefits of using a qualitative method over a quantitative one (Clarke & Veale, 2018). This observational tactic allows the researcher to observe how participants react physically and emotionally to the questions and how those reactions may relate to the findings (Saldana, 2015). While the researcher intended to utilize a thematic analysis after interviews, because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it was unable to occur in person outside of the first two interviews. Despite this challenge, the researcher was

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able to gain tremendous insight through telephonic conversations and virtual meetings on platforms such as Zoom. It was the researcher's intention to frame responses and create a narrative for the students using their own words to craft meaning. By generating codes from the exact words that the participants used in interviews, and having the actual transcripts available, the researcher maintained objectivity and avoided unintentional projecting or a misinterpretation of what a student may or may not have meant in their response (Creswell, 2013).

Once codes emerged in the data, the researcher began the process of sorting. Through sorting, specific trends that emerge from the data can be highlighted and patterns can be developed. These patterns then become the major takeaways and are further categorized as themes, if applicable (Saldana, 2015). At each point throughout this process, the researcher kept level of involvement and sense of belonging in mind as the frameworks for the data and analysis. Once themes are confirmed, the research gains increased confidence because multiple participants have a shared experience around a central idea. Saldana (2015) presents six major categories that patterns can be described under as follows: similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation.

These patterns can be interrelated or entirely different in the data analysis phase. Because the researcher is an instrument in the process, this thorough analysis procedure helps minimize the effect that bias, opinion, and personal experiences may have on the way that the researcher interprets the data. It allows the data to speak for itself through a categorization procedure illustrating the appearance of themes that validate and support a researcher's hypothesis or serves to refute expectations (Saldana, 2015). The researcher was able to look at the codes that were filed under different nodes, the number of references of a specific word or phrase in each node, as well as the number of specific files that the researcher had color coded

and placed in a particular category. This process led to the emergence of eight themes from the

data analysis and the frameworks of level of involvement and sense of belonging:

Table 5

Emergent Themes

Black students join culturally based fraternal organizations (CBFOs) out of a sense of isolation at a PWI

Greater visibility through membership

Improved academic performance & gender differences

Increased networking opportunities

Increase in transferable skills

Letters affected others' behavior

Membership fee had little impact on the decision to join & SES influence

BGLOs are needed to showcase alternatives to students

Positionality

Aside from the objective part of a research study, it is equally important for a researcher to acknowledge and reveal any potential biases or experiences that he/she may have had which could impact the results (Crewswell, 2013). As the researcher identifies as a Black man who attended a PWI in the Southeast U.S., it is relevant for the reader to understand the researcher's perspective and additional reasons for interest in this study. Personal experiences inform interests, and the researcher's own experiences at a PWI led to the desire to conduct a study at an institution in the same region.

As an undergraduate, the researcher was a member of culturally based organizations that helped him manage university life. By participating in these organizations, the researcher was able to connect with friends and have a commonality in an otherwise large and unfamiliar space. The researcher's personal experiences were in alignment with previous research, illustrating how culturally based organizations assist minority students with engagement and a sense of belonging (Bourke, 2010; Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008c, Patton, 2006). In addition, the researcher also lived on campus during his entire undergraduate career. As such, the researcher was not a commuter student during his time in college and was interested to see how being a commuter student at a predominantly White commuter institution affected the Black student experience. The researcher was able to have increased opportunities to gain an on-campus job as well, and through this experience, met other students with similar campus insights. The researcher is also a member of a BGLO and works in Student Affairs, which often houses fraternity and sorority affairs. Thus, the researcher's profession and membership in a BGLO, specifically, led to the interest to conduct a study on this subject. Through fraternity membership, the researcher gained leadership skills and development as well as a strong network of friends and associates.

Uniquely, the researcher also joined a BGLO at the alumni level after receiving his bachelor's degree. Unlike many traditionally White fraternities and sororities, this is a common practice among BGLOs (Kimbrough, 2003). If a chapter is suspended on the undergraduate campus or if an aspirant is unable to gain membership at the undergraduate level through an affirmative vote, he or she can still attempt to join at the graduate or alumni level. Once the aspirant has achieved a bachelor's degree, they are eligible to join a graduate chapter of a BGLO along with the specific requirements each organization sets (Parks & Hughey, 2020).

These requirements often include letter(s) of sponsorship, proof of voter registration, documented community service, and rationale for not joining at the undergraduate level (Ross, 2001; Kimbrough, 2003). After finishing an undergraduate degree, the researcher was able to join an alumni chapter two years later while completing graduate school at the same institution. Consequently, the researcher had no affiliation with an undergraduate chapter and possesses an entirely separate membership experience than the study participants. Notably, these differences helped mitigate some of the bias from personal membership in a BGLO because the researcher cannot identify with being a member at the undergraduate level. Previous research indicates that undergraduate members of BGLOs are often involved in multiple organizations by the time they become members of a BGLO (Hurtado, 1999). Some participants shared that their other culturally based memberships likely contributed to their decision to join a BGLO. These organizations often had overlapping memberships, which allowed participants to connect at a deeper level.

The research sites were 50 years and 114 years old, respectively. Each institution has been described as a predominantly White commuter institution, in terms of its population, investment in on campus activities, and the number of commuter students. Both the institutions

in this study have recently taken steps to cater more towards the on-campus undergraduate population which include the hiring of additional campus life staff, creation of additional on-campus housing, and adoption of new on-campus living requirements. In combination, these factors are intended to focus on attracting and retaining a larger percentage of residential undergraduate students.

With a basic qualitative interpretive study, the researcher was able to assess the experience at two different institutions using a similar population. Through their own narration, the researcher hoped to illustrate how BGLO members at a 50- and 114-year-old university experienced college through the lens of a BGLO. The data supports the literature on the topic that membership assists Black students at PWIs with sense of belonging, leadership development, and increased academic performance. Despite this, more in-depth research is needed to focus on the intersections of race, gender identity, cultural organizational membership, geographic region, and university type. Furthermore, the examination of these factors at commuter institutions is especially needed because of the lack of research concerning organizational memberships and their specific effect on the Black student experience at commuter institutions (Harper, 2015).

CHAPTER 4

DATA

Themes

This study sought to examine how membership in a BGLO affected the Black Student

Experience at two predominantly White commuter institutions. Through semi-structured

interviews involving 13 participants eight themes emerged. 75 students in total were contacted

for participation in this study, with approximately 30 of those students being eligible for

participation based on their membership criteria. 22 students originally signed up for

participation in the study prior to new Covid-19 regulations being installed at both research sites.

Nine students dropped out of participation in the study, with eight being graduating seniors with

majors in nursing and having limited availability for virtual interview times. The ninth student

transferred to a different institution. After in depth data collection and analysis, the researcher

developed a list of codes utilizing NVivo version 12 coding software. Of those codes, eight

themes emerged from the data.

Those themes were then connected to the original research questions which derived from the frameworks of the study, Astin's (1999) level of involvement and Strayhorn's (2018) concept of sense of belonging. The original research questions were as follows:

1. How does membership in a BGLO shape the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution?

2. How has membership in a BGLO affected Black students' sense of belonging at the university?

3. What skills do BGLOs equip Black students with to succeed at a predominantly White commuter institution?

The themes that emerged from the data overlapped in some areas. However, there were several themes that stood independently of the others as well. Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory alongside Astin's involvement theory were the primary interpretive measures used for the emergence and categorization of the themes. Consistently, participants overwhelmingly recognized the need to join culturally based groups to feel connected to their campus. Students of color often experience the campus environment differently than their White counterparts. For the participants in the study, this difference manifested itself in their need to socialize with one another and have a place to feel safe among the majority culture. This was in direct alignment with Strayhorn's description of a sense of belonging. While the students identified as commuter students, their desire for a connection to campus was no less than traditional residential students. In addition, participants noted that membership in BGLOs provided them with a greater platform to share grievances, problems, and issues that were ongoing within the Black student population as a whole because of their GLOs' collective influence within the campus structure.

Black Students Join Culturally Based Fraternal Organizations Out of Isolation at a Predominantly White Institution

The most consistent theme that participants shared regarding their membership in a BGLO was their sense of isolation at a PWI. Membership provided them with a unique connections that few other organizations could. By joining a fraternity or sorority, along with other culturally based organizations, students felt a sense of commonality and safety, which are consistent with what the literature states. One of the participants, Molly, a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., noted that although she had several academic scholarships to attend Humble University, she still felt a sense of isolation upon arrival. While she was able to perform well in class and engage with peers outside the classroom, she did not originally feel welcomed at the university overall. This experience led her to intentionally seek out other Black students, contributing to her building a connection with the university as well as a desire to affiliate with a sorority.

> When I first got to campus, I was a biomedical science major. And so like, it wasn't a whole lot of black people in my classes. And so, I, I literally drifted towards the Black people because, you know, I just felt like that other people didn't think that we deserved to be there. (Molly, Zeta Phi Beta, Sorority, Inc.)

Other participants also shared this sentiment that their primary sense and feeling of community was among others who looked like them. Sticking together through adversity and shared experience was a common sense that many of them had. The cultural integration of the university space often did not account for the desires and experiences of Black students. This incongruence led to what many participants described as "tokenization". The participants noted that the university did not make them feel as welcome as they were within their own culturally based spaces. Feelings of comfort, safety, and support were stressed upon by most participants,

suggesting that their universities may only be diversifying their student populations without doing the additional necessary work to ensure that those diverse populations feel a true sense of inclusion with access to equitable resources at the institution.

Some participants shared that when they first arrived at the campus, they did not see an active promotion of BGLOs on campus.

> We need to see representation… Not just the White ones, but Black students getting their education, doing things in the community, and giving back. Like you need to see representation, so that you know you can do the same thing. But I don't think it's important to the administration, I think it's important to the student population. (Kiana, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Sorority, Inc.)

However, traditionally White sororities and fraternities had space on campus and were present in large numbers at many events. The reasons for this could vary and may differ across universities. The participants shared that had they not done their own research about the organization they wanted to join, then they may have missed out on the opportunity by solely relying on the university to highlight such organizations. This increased responsibility is a weight they felt once they joined their BGLO as well. Since their membership numbers were much smaller than their traditionally White counterparts, participants stressed that they had to be creative in their endeavors to attract and ultimately recruit other students. When asked about their experiences in contrast to students who may have attended an HBCU, the participants were unequivocal about describing the differences between a PWI and HBCU experience.

They noted that at an HBCU, there is a foundational knowledge base already present about BGLOs and what they represent. As a consequence, they are more revered in that environment. In addition, BGLOs at HBCUs do not have to do much advertising for their events

in comparison to BGLOs at PWIs. Because the student population is aware of BGLOs and the cultural events that occur within that space, word of mouth advertising about the events goes a long way. In comparison, at PWIs, flyers, social media, word of mouth advertising, and announcements about the events still may not draw a similarly sized crowd as HBCUs because of the lowered knowledge base and pool of interested students. Thus, even within the membership itself, participants shared that being Black at a PWI was an often draining and difficult experience because of the factors that came along with being Black in a culturally different environment.

Jason, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., noted that when Black students are a part of an organization in which everyone looks alike, an understanding and acceptance is automatically present. He shared that whether it was his fraternity or membership in the campus-based NAACP chapter, not having to explain himself or his experience to those around him was a relief considering the micro-aggressions that Black students regularly experience at PWIs. Similarly, Danielle, a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. who recently completed her first year of membership, shared that she struggled to connect with her campus, Spirit University, during her first year at the institution. Organizations were not proactive in recruiting or reaching out to her, so she was unable to develop a sense of connection to the university outside of her academic coursework. Once she found her safe space in another culturally based organization devoted to the social and economic uplift of Black women, it allowed her to feel a connection to the campus and she developed a true sense of belonging that led to her interest in joining a BGLO.

Many participants shared that their membership overlapped with other culturally affiliated groups on campus. Because of this, some participants held memberships in some of

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the same groups and met each other often. This created a kinship among the students which, they believed, helped them tackle some of the discomfort they felt in the classroom and other spaces on campus. However, not all participants shared a sense of isolation at the university. Some of them said they were able to connect with their campus in a positive way prior to joining their BGLO.

Linda, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., was already well known on campus before joining her sorority. As a nursing major, she had great academics and was already involved in community service both on and off campus. However, once she joined her sorority, she noticed that her exposure and popularity increased because of the reputation and status of the organization. Her response highlighted the issue of many students having low or wavering self-esteem related to their connection or lack thereof to the campus. While Linda did not have this specific issue, other participants did struggle to connect with the campus and membership in their BGLO improved their relative social standing and sense of belonging on campus. This increased cachet improved their self-esteem and affinity for what their BGLO membership did for their perception among peers. As a result, their academic performance and involvement in other activities improved because their social standing and basic needs of acceptance had been met.

Greater Visibility Through Membership

In addition to improved self-esteem and a greater sense of belonging to the campus, participants also said that they achieved greater on-campus visibility through their membership. This was the second consistent theme among participants. In fact, participants shared that not only did other Black students notice them in a different way, but the people in the general Greek community also had expectations of them merely because of their memberships. BGLOs have a long history of community service, academic excellence, philanthropy, and social justice advocation. By joining one of these organizations, the participations knew they had an increased sense of responsibility for themselves and the organization.

One of the more interesting aspects of joining a BGLO is the practice of discretion. Aspiring members are discouraged from openly sharing their desire to join or affiliate with a BGLO. Instead, those aspiring to join a BGLO are encouraged to attend chapter events and activities to express their interest. By getting to know members through their attendance at various events, the aspiring member then gains a closer connection to the chapter members, culminating with their formal invitation to a chapter informational, interest meeting, or rush event. Because this process can vary in its length, those who seek membership in a BGLO must walk a metaphorical tight rope in attempting to express their interest, without overstepping unwritten boundaries or rules. As Darius reflected on his experiences after joining his fraternity, his sentiments captured the essence of how individuals are perceived before and after joining the organization:

> Since joining, it's been fairly positive, honestly. Just a lot more people I can connect
> with. It's weird. Like I don't feel like it shouldn't be like that, but it's just people see

letters and like, they can change their entire conversation, their tone changes. But when I

first got here, I didn't really know anybody. (Darius, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.)

The entire tone of a conversation may change because of the apprehension that a potential

member may have in approaching someone in a BGLO. As stated, BGLOs serve as a haven on

campuses, particularly at PWIs. In addition to being treated differently by peers, participants

also noted that their voice and ability to advocate for change on campus immediately improved.

Jackson, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., stated that before joining his

fraternity, he experienced a "lack of voice" at his campus. Although he was a member of several

culturally based organizations prior to his membership in a fraternity, it was not until he joined

the fraternity that he felt his voice was respected and heard outside of the echo chamber of his

peers. In his response, along with several others, Jackson characterized membership in a BGLO

as part of a hierarchical system on campus. GLOs in general, and their individual chapters more

specifically, have a long and storied history at many universities. Because these organizations

are often some of the older student organizations on campus, participants believed that the

activities they engage in or the positions that they advocate for carried more leverage and weight

with university administration and other stakeholders than other campus-based groups.

Membership in the fraternity or sorority granted an immediate privilege to the student who may

have otherwise gone unheard. Both the collected data and literature support this anecdote as

well. Universities often cite and share the accolades and experiences of their Greek letter

fraternities and sororities to recruit future students and parents to the university. This is rarely

done with general student organizations to the same capacity and, as such, also warrants further

study.

Another term that participants used to describe their increased visibility both on and off campus was "prestige". Not only do the organizations carry prestige, but the members within the organizations also assume a level of prestige upon joining. In addition, certain stereotypes, whether true or false, are also immediately thrust upon new members. Participants shared that they were aware of the potential of this happening; in fact, some welcomed the additional attention that membership and stereotypes brought towards them. Ernie, a third-year member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., shared that the experiences and increased visibility were some of the best parts of his membership. He noted that it immediately improved his network and ability to connect with others. Once people realized that he was a part of this organization, they gained a new respect and appreciation for him because of the perception they already had about members of that organization.

Consequently, based on participant anecdotes, it may have been possible and likely for them to assume laurels and privileges from membership in the organization while doing nothing more. The motivations for membership in a BGLO then become a key element in the vetting process for aspiring members. This is often why so much attention is focused on the process in which an individual joined their organization (pledging) vs. the work and contributions that an individual may be able to add to the organization after initiation. Despite the continued focus on the membership intake process, the enhanced visibility of membership, regardless of the process, was a constant that virtually all participants expressed in interviews. With a new audience and focus came a sense of responsibility to uphold not only the social and service elements of their organizations but also scholastic endeavors.

Improved Academic Performance & Gender Differences

The third theme that evolved from the interviews was improved academic performance and gender differences within that area. Most BGLOs have a minimum threshold of maintaining at least a 2.5 GPA to be eligible for membership. Some organizations have a higher minimum standard of 2.75. In either case, these organizations seek candidates who prioritize their academics. Throughout conversations with the participants, they too had expectations of themselves. As important as their membership was in the fraternity or sorority, it was not the central make up of who they were as a person. This indicates that their identities were layered, as the concepts of intersectionality and sense of belonging suggest, and that one identity often was compromised by another depending on the context of a situation. Most participants indicated that the primary reason they elected to attend college was so that it would provide them with the skills and credentials to enter graduate school or a career prepared to succeed. Sandra, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., expressed this point when the researcher asked her about the impact her sorority membership had on her progress towards graduation:

> I've always been hardworking and wanting to get to my goals. My sorority definitely
> believes that this should not get in front of your academic studies or anything. So, it
> (membership) really just increased what I was doing, my study habits, because I always
> knew that my future was to stay on top of my work with studying. (Sandra, Alpha Kappa
> Alpha, Sorority, Inc.)

In addition to their personal standards of excellence to maintain high academic standards, the organization also has measures in place to ensure that new and current members do not fall below their GPA guidelines. Academic probation is one measure that many organizations and

universities implement to keep chapters above the threshold. If individual members begin to struggle academically or hurt the chapter in a negative way, the onus is on the members of the chapter to hold that person accountable and restrict social privileges until grades improve. This behavior allows chapter members to develop important conflict resolution and leadership development skills that are critical in the workplace. In addition, since Black students within BGLOs at PWIs are often considered as some of the premiere leaders of campus, they hold an additional responsibility to represent not only themselves well, but also their organizations in the context of Greek life generally.

Many participants shared that they grew frustrated seeing their chapter or the NPHC near the bottom of the tier in university grade reports. While they may have done well individually, some within their chapter may have performed poorly, which brought the collective chapter, and thus, NPHC average down. Participants reflected and noted that this gave the impression that they do not value academics as much as the members of traditionally White GLOs. Participants described the feeling as a constant weight they carry to hold the organization in high esteem in relation to their peers. Prior research illustrates that Black men are especially viewed from a deficit mindset. They are perceived to have poorer academic skills, leading to poorer GPAs and lower retention rates. The Black men who participated in this study were aware of this perception and actively made decisions to counter this narrative. They would place members on probation or suspension who did not meet or exceed the acceptable GPA levels for active membership in the organization.

On the contrary, the Black women participants were also aware that they continue to be some of the statistically highest achievers within higher education as a collective. The importance of a collective bond and the desire to strive for greatness beyond oneself was a

central take away in the responses of participants. They knew that performing poorly academically influenced the direction of the entire chapter, not just on their individual transcript. Grade reports are shared each semester, and chapter awards and activities are often directly correlated with academic performance; so, it is incumbent on each member to do his or her best to keep chapters in good standing. If an individual member had issues, that person was encouraged to seek help with instructor office hours, university tutoring sessions, etc. because so much is related to the academic success or failure of each member. The following table describes the experiences of the participants based on their gender identity and affiliation in a fraternity versus a sorority.

Table 6

Description of Fraternity vs. Sorority Responses

Institution	Gender Demographics	Academic Improvement	Level of Leadership/Involvement in Chapter	SES Description	Familial Connection to BGLO
Humble University	Male:3 Female:2	2/3 had academic improvement 2/2 had academic improvement	3/3 held officer positions in chapter 2/2 held officer positions in chapter	3/3 had no problem with membership fee 2/2 had no problem with membership fee	3/3 had an immediate family member in a BGLO 2/2 had an immediate family member in a BGLO
Spirit University	Male:3 Female:5	2/3 had academic improvement 5/5 had academic improvement	1/3 held officer positions in chapter 4/5 held officer positions in chapter	2/3 had no problem with membership fee 4/5 had no problem with membership fee	1/3 had an immediate family member in a BGLO 5/5 had an immediate family member in a BGLO

While community service is a tenet in each of the nine BGLOs, each member stressed that academics remained a priority over everything else within the organization, including service. Although more female participants had improvements in their academics post membership in a BGLO in comparison to male participants, the difference was not drastic. This confirms the literature which suggests that Black women continue to excel and advance past their Black male counterparts. However, this also refutes the narrative that Black men are failing. They are improving at a slower rate and pace than Black women, even after joining a fraternity.

Kiana, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, stated that her organization understands that academics come before anything else and that if grades suffer, so does the organization itself. She emphasized the fact that chapter study halls were equally as important as chapter step practice for an upcoming show. She characterized an example about social accolades vs. academic accolades saying that winning social awards means nothing if the chapter is academically ineligible or barely above the minimum threshold to compete. Since lifetime membership is stressed as a part of joining a BGLO, members understood that their responsibilities do not end at graduation. They are expected to join a local alumni/alumnae chapter in their area and continue to work for the organization.

This often involves assisting other undergraduate chapters by serving as a graduate advisor or supporter of an undergraduate chapter. Linda shared how her graduate advisor is receptive and supportive of her chapter's responsibilities: "my graduate advisor, she gives us time, like before meetings or she'll reschedule meetings if we have papers or projects or anything to do. She's understanding of our schoolwork before Greek Letters" (Linda, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Sorority, Inc.). While multiple female participants shared the importance of academic study halls as a chapter, no male participants shared any similar plans. The takeaway is that the female participants and their chapters were much more collective in nature in terms of their support among one another, while the male participants were more individualistic. Similarly, the female participants were much more proactive and preventative in their planning, whereas the male participants were more reactionary to things that occurred in the moment.

It is this collective attitude of support and encouragement that distinguishes many BGLOs collectively from other culturally based groups on campus. While many Black students can be members of the campus Black Student Union, membership in a fraternity or sorority

includes rituals and practices that only members know and share with each other. This unique

circumstance creates a fondness and sense of accountability both within the chapter and the

organization. Many participants shared that their membership helped them bond and identify

with not only members of their own organization but also with individuals in other BGLOs. The

common connection of membership and the shared respect of what that membership means in

the greater context of existing at a PWI was a tremendous realization for the participants that

they appreciated more and more as their time in the organization grew. Alongside that

appreciation also came the opportunity to network and connect with audiences who may have

been unknown prior to their membership in a BGLO.

Increased Networking Opportunities

One of the primary reasons that participants stressed they wanted to join a fraternity or

sorority is because of the expansive network that these organizations possess. Unlike clubs or

other civic organizations, fraternities and sororities share a ritualistic bond that only members

understand and appreciate to the full extent. Membership is for a lifetime because the potential

to grow and expand a personal network only increases after graduation. The most consistent

response among participants about networking was their ability to meet new people and

collaborate with other organizations. The participants noted that their attainment of Greek letters

brought new attention to them which they were then able to turn into an ongoing relationship.

Naomi, a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., emphasized that her sorority

membership helped facilitate her ability to meet other like-minded people. Individuals with

similar goals, ambitions, and aspirations seemed to be present more in her life after she joined

the organization. However, Naomi stressed that she was already an outgoing and sociable person

prior to joining the organization. In her case, Naomi had developed a sense of belonging to the

university prior to her membership in her sorority because of her outgoing and sociable personality. Consequently, the sorority only increased her already large profile and ability to connect with individuals both on and off campus. However, contrarily, Jackson, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha had an entirely different experience. Because he was more introverted, he was not as sociable and as outgoing. His membership in the fraternity placed him in positions to meet people and develop a greater sense of confidence and self-esteem. This in turn contributed to his sense of belonging at his institution.

Interestingly, most participants also noted that their network expanded with individuals that they believe they never would have encountered had it not been for their membership. Because of the required attendance at regional and national conferences, members were often thrust into scenarios with other individuals whom they may have never met. In this situation, the only commonality that individuals shared was their membership in the same fraternity or sorority. Consequently, they possessed an immediate bond that allowed them to build a relationship and work towards the upliftment of their organization. However, Linda mentioned how her membership helped her professionally as well. As a nursing major, she had limited time to devote to activities outside of her studies and her sorority. When she met an older member of her sorority who also happened to be a nurse practitioner, she was able to connect and receive advice and counsel, ultimately gaining a job recommendation. She attributed this primarily to her personal dedication to her academics but also to her membership in the sorority. Without it she would have been just another student with a stellar GPA. But in conjunction with the membership in her sorority, Linda believed that she was able to distinguish herself from others who may have been in a similar situation. The letters she possessed not only made a tangible difference in her social life but also in her professional network and associations. These

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differences eventually led to the accumulation of skills that members were able to apply and transfer to other areas of their lives both on and off campus.

Increase in Transferable Skills

By definition**,** membership in a BGLO is exclusive. Aspirants must undergo a series of trials in order to be afforded the opportunity to join a BGLO, including an interest meeting, interview, among other activities specific to each organization. Similarly, the participants were resolute in stating that membership in their organizations helped them to not only navigate different scenarios with their fellow fraternity brothers and sorority sisters but also provided them with a connection to campus like few other organizations.

In their responses, the participants shared one primary skill that they all improved through their membership—improved communication. Since fraternities and sororities often have a hierarchical structure, members had to learn to communicate not only with their peers who had entered the organization alongside them but also with older members who may have joined the organization years ago. The ability to demonstrate appropriate deference towards older members was as important as articulating one's point clearly and effectively. This skill is transferable to the work force because students will likely have to interact with individuals in their place of employment who are in higher positions of authority. Due to the prior experience with their BGLOs, they may have a much easier time acclimating to this unwritten social norm than someone unfamiliar with the concept.

Beyond basic communication, participants shared that public speaking was a critical and specific aspect of their improved communication skills:

I feel communication like public speaking was improved. Even I could take that to the classroom 'cause even in class I did not like getting up and giving presentations. Now I

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have to get up at regional state conferences and NPHC council meetings. (Darius, Phi

Beta Sigma, Fraternity, Inc.)

In addition, other participants shared that their public speaking skills not only improved

through their membership experience, but that they were expected to demonstrate those skills

much more regularly. Kiana, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., noted that because

she was the president of her chapter, she was the official spokesperson for the organization: "I

had experience with that (public speaking) before I became Greek, but now that I am the

president, it's just like more, especially being the spokesperson for my chapter" (Kiana, Alpha

Kappa Alpha, Sorority, Inc.).

A second prevalent skill that participants shared that they gained through their BGLO

membership was leadership. Being involved on campus, as Astin highlighted, includes directing

meaningful attention towards something. Leading on campus or being perceived as a leader was

important for the participants of this study. They were often involved in multiple organizations

and activities and, as such, were able to apply the lessons learned through their BGLO

membership in other spaces. Involvement in many organizations was especially important for

the female participants in this study. Of the seven female participants, all seven had

memberships in other campus-based organizations either before or after their membership in a

sorority. Their involvement was highly correlated with their sense of belonging and perception

of themselves in the university space. However, of the six male participants, only three had

involvement in other campus-based organizations besides their fraternity. This suggests that

female students may be more involved in more organizations, and consequently, have more

leadership roles than their male counterparts. In addition to leadership development, participants

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also stressed the importance of the ability to direct and delegate tasks. Many times, members were initiated and thrust into leadership positions within their chapter.

At PWIs, chapters are often smaller than at their HBCU counterparts because of the proportion of Black to White students enrolled at the institution. Because of the smaller chapter size, many students may hold two or more leadership positions within their chapter for it to function effectively. With the increased exposure on campus due to membership in the BGLO, alongside the added responsibility of an officer position such as president, vice president, or secretary of their organization, some members expressed that the pressure of leadership was something that they experienced early in their organizational process, but it continued throughout their time in the organization.

Michael, a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., shared that taking initiative was one of the most important elements of leadership that he learned. Instead of waiting to do something, if a problem arose or had to be solved, his experience gave him the confidence and wherewithal to take the initiative to solve the issue and alleviate stress from the collective. He noted during this encapsulation of his membership experience that he has been able to utilize that same spirit of initiative as he transitions out of college and into the work force: "You've got to be ready to adjust to a lot of different situations, so in that sense, you know, it kind of just prepares you to be ready for anything" (Michael, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.).

The third transferable skill that participants shared that they gained through BGLO membership was effective time management. Members were often asked to complete tasks and activities under duress with little lead or preparation time. These tasks were not designed to humiliate or hurt members, but instead were intended to teach them the ability to multitask, time manage, and work cooperatively. A membership intake class for a BGLO can range from one

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individual to dozens depending on the interest in that specific organization at a campus as well as the organization's ability to accept all qualified candidates. The importance of culturally based groups at PWIs is critical to the retention and persistence of Black students. Owing to the varying nature of selection size per organization at each campus, students of BGLOs may have overall similarities in their membership experience, but the nuance of joining the organization as well as the chapter dynamics upon joining the organization may differ greatly.

Participants shared that their ability to structure their time and not overcommit themselves, i.e. an increase in time management abilities was a critical lesson of their membership. BGLOs are popular on PWI and HBCU campuses alike among students of color, creating many opportunities for involvement among current and aspiring members. However, many members are often a part of other campus-based groups, have work obligations, or other responsibilities outside of campus. By learning effective time management strategies, participants shared that their lives became much less complicated as a whole.

Joining the fraternity or sorority created a hierarchical structure for the participants that forced them to outline or structure their lives in a way that they may not have done previously: "Yeah. 'cause I kinda struggled doing basketball and school with time management, but once I joined a sorority, it was like, okay, now you have even more on your plate, so you have to balance it"(Carey, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.). Consequently, membership in the BGLO had unintended positive consequences for many of the participants in other areas of their lives.

Carey was the only participant to also play a sport for the university. She noted that some of the leadership skills that she gained in her sorority were directly attributable to her improved performance on the basketball court. She became more assertive, team oriented, and vocally held people accountable in ways that she had not done prior to joining her organization. This

direct correlation between BGLO membership having a positive correlation with performance in another campus-based group highlighted the effects of level of involvement and a sense of belonging to student success on campus.

Letters Affecting Others' Behavior

Along with gaining skills or improving upon and highlighting the existing ones through their membership in a BGLO, participants also shared how others on campus began to react to them after they had joined a fraternity or sorority. As much work that fraternities and sororities do within the community and on campus, they also have some troubling aspects. Issues with hazing, alcohol, drugs, and sexual assault are only a few of the long-held stereotypes that surround Greek letter fraternities and sororities. However, BGLOs often do not share the same stereotypes as their traditionally White counterparts. Instead, many BGLO members are perceived as arrogant, elitist, and separatist to some within the Black campus culture. When combined with the intentional focus on discretion and ways to express interest in an organization to members, some may be turned off by the traditions and culture of BGLOs.

The participants were cognizant of the ways that they were treated prior to joining their organization as well as the ways that they were treated post initiation. Although most of the experiences were good, some were not positive. The prevailing takeaway that all participants shared is the loss of individuality upon joining their organization. While they were able to still be themselves within the organization and among members, to non-members and the general public, they became synonymous with whatever stereotypes or views that an individual had about fraternities and sororities in general or their organization specifically.

> Some of them, they either, want to talk to me more because I am Greek. Whether they want to be interested in Greek Life or something like that, but some of them may not like me at all, just because I'm involved with a certain organization. (Kiana, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Sorority, Inc.)

The idea that someone may like you more because of your organizational affiliation or that someone may dislike you because of the same was an adjustment that participants had to make. They could never truly gauge whether someone was judging them as an individual or as a member of an organization. This proved especially perilous when something may have occurred within their organization at another chapter or at the national level. Whether it be a positive or negative activity, participants reflected that those outside of the organization usually developed an opinion about the members within that organization that they had to carry with them throughout their collegiate experience.

Because they attended a PWI, members of the same organization at an HBCU may have treated them differently as well. Michael suspected because the culture is more aware of BGLOs in general at HBCUs, that members and non-members have a different expectation when you may visit their campus. "The vibe is just completely different at an HBCU. I guess it's 'cause there are more people that know about Black Greek Letter Organizations at HBCUs so they already know what's up. You have to be ready to represent for your org, because you have more eyes on you for sure," (Michael, Omega Psi Phi, Fraternity, Inc.)

Thus, when Black students who have certain cultural knowledge attend a PWI, they are often faced with the challenge of finding others who they may identity with in a meaningful way. Black students are not a monolithic group, so just because other Black students may attend the same institution, it does not automatically mean that a student will find acceptance among those students. What Michael articulated is that culturally, there appeared to be more nuances among the Black student population at a PWI in his experience than at an HBCU. This contributed to the greater challenge in finding a sense of belonging or comparable peer group with similar interests beyond the BGLO or other culturally based organizations.

Despite some changes in perception after joining a BGLO, the participants' experiences were primarily positive regarding their treatment based on membership in their organizations. More people knew their names on campus, they were approached far more often about participating in campus activities and were given opportunities to serve in more leadership capacities because of the reach of their organization. This is part of the allure and attraction to join a BGLO. As Black students at a PWI, participants shared that it was easy to feel invisible or marginalized. Without the commonality or bond of a culturally based group, participants stated that they felt like there was no safe place or haven for them within the campus community. They felt isolated both inside and outside of the classroom. Because the institutions were both PWIs and commuter institutions, there was limited space for them to have events on campus as well.

However, while many student groups on campus allow anyone to join who meets the organizational requirements, fraternities and sororities have additional stipulations and qualifications that aspirants must endure, include ongoing membership dues and initiation fees. Previous research indicates that the members of fraternities and sororities typically have parents of a higher socio-economic background than their independent peers. Those students may arrive to college with a different set of expectations and reactions to the membership dues within an organization such as a fraternity or sorority, compared to students from a lower socio-economic background who may not have context or perspective about those costs. Interestingly, participants in this study all shared an overwhelmingly common response about the effect of the membership price on their decision to join their organization.

Membership Fee had Little Impact on the Decision to Join & SES Influence

Lifetime commitment to their organizations differentiates fraternities and sororities from other campus-based student organizations. These groups have alumni/alumnae chapters and

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associations that continue the work of undergraduate chapters even after graduation. Due to expansive membership, these organizations often charge membership dues and fees that are higher than a local student organization. The addition of these costs may make GLO memberships unattainable for some students. However, the participants in this study did not have an issue with the fee of their organizations, except for one, who shared that the price of membership concerned her prior to the joining. The other 12 participants were able to ask their parents for membership fees, pay for it themselves through their job income, or raise the money through fundraising by asking friends, family, and others for donations.

While the researcher did not specifically ask participants about their SES status, their responses indicated that they arrived at college from middle class backgrounds. As Table 6 illustrated earlier, most participants had an immediate or extended family member who held membership in a BGLO. Thus, there were no first-generation college students who participated in this study. Because these participants were not first-generation college students and still experienced a lack of sense of belonging on their campus prior to certain organizational affiliations, this illustrates a dichotomy in the activities and events occurring on their respective campus. These participants had individuals in their life who had attended college that they could go to for advice, help, and assistance. Despite these resources, they still experienced isolation on campus. Because of this lack of sense of belonging, the students desired to become involved in something that would bring them acceptance, commonality, and a unifying bond. The BGLO served that purpose, and because their family members also had memberships in many cases, the price of membership was something they already had knowledge of in many cases.

Many participants shared that because their parent(s) were also members of a BGLO they already knew what to expect from the process, including the price of membership, before the

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interest meeting. This legacy experience not only provided the participants with privileged

information about the organization but also enabled them to have an idea about what to expect

from BGLO membership on a college campus in general. The researcher did not ask participants

whether their parents had attended a PWI or an HBCU, but in some cases, their parents had

mirrored experiences, which contributed to their desire to help their child join the BGLO. Jason

noted that his familial connections were integral in his awareness of BGLOs and desire to join:

> I have two uncles on my dad's side that are members of Kappa Alpha Psi. I have two
>
> cousins that are members, and then growing up, I've had mentors that have, uh, taught me
>
> a lot of things in my life that are actually members of Kappa Alpha Psi. And then also,
>
> um, I was a member of this organization called Jack and Jill of America, which is pretty
>
> much like, I kinda, I hate to say it like this way, but it's pretty much like the boujee class
>
> for African Americans. And so a lot of them were Greeks. A lot of their parents were,
>
> you know, either AKAs, Deltas, Kappas, Ques, and they were pretty influential in my
>
> life. And so seeing them and having a connection with their kids who had also gone
>
> Greek, ratified my decision to go Greek as well (Jason, Kappa Alpha Psi, Fraternity, Inc).

While not every participant in this study had a direct family member who was also a member,

those who did, indicated that this relationship was pivotal in their quest to join. However,

despite the legacy clause in some organizations, every organization does not acknowledge or

have a clause within their membership application concerning familial affiliation. Despite these

nuances, each participant was aware that their parents’ membership in a BGLO, no matter the

organization, was positive for them. The price to join these organizations could range from

several hundred to thousands of dollars, often due in a lumpsum within a short period of time.

Having a parent who was already familiar with this process, such students were able to secure fees with much less stress and hassle than others.

Ernie shared that the price of membership in Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. did not dissuade him from joining even though he did not readily have the funds available. Ernie actually took out a loan at the bank to pay for his membership in the organization because he did not want to rely on his parents to pay for his membership, and his job at the time was not paying him enough to afford the fee. "Once I saw the price, um, because it was something that I knew that I wanted to do, um, it was- though it was a lot, it was more so of... it was more so of, you know, what does it take to get this amount… Because I've worked too hard to put myself in position to join for it to stop because of money," (Ernie, Kappa Alpha Psi, Fraternity, Inc.)

Since so many participants in the study had a similar response to the question about the effect of price, more research is needed about the effect of parental membership in a BGLO on a student's decision to join a BGLO. While not every student ultimately joins the same BGLO as their mother or father, in many cases, they still end up joining one. The strong cultural influence of BGLOs is often shared with students through affiliated middle school and high school auxiliary groups. These organizations may mimic the activities and actions of BGLOs, leading some students to enter college with an understanding of the unwritten rules within the culture of BGLOs.

In contrast, a student from a poorer high school with no such affiliate groups and who may be receiving financial aid through student loans, the Pell Grant, etc., may not be able to secure large sums of money in a short amount of time for an extra-curricular activity. As many positives that can result from fraternity and sorority membership, joining is a luxury that many students are unable to consider. When some students enter college with prior membership in an

auxiliary group, their familial connection is only one slice of the advantages this student may have over another with no such connections or experiences.

BGLOs Needed to Showcase Alternatives to Students

While joining a fraternity or sorority is a privilege that every student will not be able to experience because of several variables associated with the membership, all participants agreed that BGLOs are needed at PWIs across the country. For a student with no familial connection to BGLOs or collegiate life in general, navigating the experience of joining a fraternity or sorority could be overwhelming. This is especially true when BGLOs may not be highlighted to the same degree at PWIs as their traditionally White counterparts. Participants also noted that BGLOs are necessary on these campuses to provide an alternative and illustrate that Black students are succeeding and doing great work even in an uncomfortable environment:

> These organizations are very important, especially for Black culture and what's going on with our community today. I think it's really important for people of color to have something to be proud about and in America especially during trying times like this…to have people who can guide you and give you different perspectives on things. Getting yourself around other individuals being in the same places as you and you having a place to say, 'Hey, you know, I can do it too. I can achieve it too. I can make it too,' it's something that students need to see. (Ken, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.)

Seeing peers succeed despite the challenges that they face on campus is critical for students' success, both inside and outside of the classroom. While everyone will not have the desire to affiliate with a BGLO, their presence on campus informs the entire community that alternatives to the traditional White student organizations do exist. They provide an opportunity for students of color to see alternatives to traditional White Greek life on campus. The

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participants noted that BGLOs highlight the successes, triumphs, and accolades of Black students in a way that is not filtered through the traditional university lens. Each participant emphasized the need for university administration to pay more attention to BGLOs and to provide them with additional resources to do more within the campus structure. While visibility improved for participants within their own social spheres, in comparison to traditionally White fraternities and sororities, many BGLO members still felt like second-class citizens.

Importantly, the prevailing belief among the entire participant group was that there is a disconnect between the aims and desires of the university and the aims of their organizations at times. A consistent example at many PWIs is the student organization's policy of minimum number of members.

At many universities, in order to be considered active and in good standing, many organizations must have a minimum number of members. The challenge arises for members of BGLOs at PWIs when their members graduate, leave school, or transfer to another institution. Since their membership numbers are typically smaller than traditionally White fraternities and sororities at PWIs, this is an issue that culturally based groups experience with more regularity. Participants described it as a penalty that uniquely harms their organizations. For example, at the time of the interviews, Danielle and Carey were the only two members in their sorority, Zeta Phi Beta at Spirit University. Yet, with Carey graduating in December of 2020, and Danielle graduating in May of 2021, the chapter may potentially be in limbo in 2021 if they do not conduct membership intake and bring in at least two members.

At Spirit university, an organization must have at least two members to be considered active and in good standing, whereas at Humble University, the minimum threshold is four members. While this may not seem like an unreasonable request, many BGLOs may go three or

four semesters in between their membership intake classes. Often times, chapters may be affected by a national policy, and be prohibited from conducting membership intake. This especially hurts smaller chapters at PWIs because they have a much more limited pool of candidates to select from initially. If the chapter has fewer members than the university policy allows for active membership, the chapter may be caught in a constant cycle of attempting to become active on campus again, whereby the supervising alumni chapter must oversee their return.

While all of this is occurring, students who may be interested in these organizations have no knowledge of what is happening. Because they are seeking to become involved and fill their lack of belonging on campus in that semester or in that academic year, the student may not have the patience or ability to wait until a particular fraternity or sorority returns to campus. When university administrators are not cognizant or considerate of the effects that policies can have on different groups based on demographics factors such as race, it creates a distrust among members which is difficult to quell. When combined with the seemingly intentional highlighting of the traditionally White fraternity and sorority experience vs. the BGLO experience, members of BGLOs can feel ostracized. Consequently, more research is needed on university administration attitudes towards BGLOs at PWIs. Participants were aware that they needed to continue highlighting the work that their organizations do on a much more regular basis. Social media continues to play a major role in reaching incoming and current students alike to share the benefits of membership in a BGLO. While there is much work still left to be done to provide an equitable space to BGLOs on PWI campuses, the participants within the study realized that they have helped move the needle of progress through their service, achievements, and active membership.

Commuter Student Effects

   Participants shared that their status as commuter students have a limited effect on their experience. Yet, they did believe that the university needed to have more events that catered to their interests on campus. The prevailing sentiment was that the university did not consider or take into account the desires and aims of Black students. Instead, as members of BGLOs, they were only expected to perform at stroll off competitions, step shows, or table at orientation events. They suggested examples which were highly performative in nature but were not inclusive within the overall campus culture. In essence, the participants felt as though they were being used for marketing purposes but were not being truly integrated into the great campus culture. Because they were not living on campus, programs and activities that were in the residence halls each week were not applicable to them.

   Additionally, late night events in the student center or study sessions in the library were not attractive to them either. In analyzing the participant responses at both institutions, the researcher noticed a disappointment and discouragement among participants about their connection to the greater campus community. While membership in a BGLO and other campus-based groups had provided community amongst one another, it did little to connect them with administration for example. When administrators spoke about Greek Life, but highlighted fraternity houses as an example to parents or potential students, participants felt an erasure because only traditionally White fraternities maintained houses. Collectively, participants believed that residential students received preferential treatment and consideration on campus, which ultimately led to increased disconnects from campus. The BGLO and other culturally based groups were the true saving grace for students because it at least bonded them together over that similar experience. For those students of color who may not have had these

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memberships, participants wondered how they may have been connected to the university at all beyond simply going to class.

The researcher considers participant responses about their commuter status to be more of a response to the institutional culture at both sites. While previous literature suggests that commuter students struggle more academically than residential students, these participants refuted that finding. After joining a BGLO, their academic progress improved, particularly for the female participants. Similarly, commuting to and from campus had no tangible effect on the academic efficacy for students on campus because no student traveled more than 30 minutes to campus. However, the university programs, activities, and resources on campus that are in place for students of color are lacking. Participants shared that when the university delivered statements about events in the world that they considered to be empty and without substance or tangible plans, it only seemed to rub salt in their metaphorical wounds of acceptance on campus.

The participants shared that this contributed to their sense of isolation more than anything because their interests were not considered outside of specific events that were performative in nature. Because both institutions have a majority population of students that do not live on campus, it is possible that the institutions are directing the majority of their resources towards the few residential students who live on campus to promote increased retention and persistence for them in the short and long term. In the process of attempting to remove the commuter institution label and cater towards more residential students, the institutions may be alienating the commuter students who have been at the institution for a longer period of time. "They (students and administrators) need to know that there's more than just Kappa Sig, or Kappa Delta. There's other sororities and fraternities and organizations for majority Black students. Also, they need to know our history and why we were created too." (Sandra, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Sorority, Inc.)

While most participants did suffer from a sense of belonging on the whole prior to their membership in a BGLO, particularly the male participants, it was not due to their status as commuter students. Instead, it was the university response or lack thereof to the interests and concerns of Black students as a collective, which contributed more to their desire to be involved in culturally based groups and the impetus for their desire to belong on campus.

Chapter Summary

After an analysis of participant responses through three-cycle NVivo coding, the

researcher was able to identify eight themes. While each theme stood independently, there was

considerable overlap as well. Participants attended two universities from two different states but

still shared similar responses, indicating that both the positive and negative responses may be

part of larger cultural aspects within BGLOs and PWIs in the region. The theoretical

frameworks of Astin's theory of involvement and Strayhorn's sense of belonging served as ideal

lenses to capture and examine the responses of the study participants. Earlier research indicates

that culturally based groups and BGLOs, in particular, provide an opportunity for voluntary

association and a safe space for students of color on a PWI campus. More recent research

continues to support the claim that BGLOs contribute to student development, which extends

beyond the years of their undergraduate life. The responses seemed to support the conclusion

that generally, BGLOs help provide increased visibility, networking, academic proficiency, and

leadership development on campus, which is in line with the mentioned finding.

While membership is not without its struggles, no participants regretted their decision to

join. Each of them had a unique reason to join, but familial connections as well as the

opportunity to become a part of something larger than themselves, along with the desire to

expand their personal network, and gain a sense of belonging on campus were the primary

overlapping reasons they sought to originally join a BGLO. While each participant identified as

a junior or above in their class standing, those who were able to join earlier in their collegiate

careers experienced the most growth throughout their membership. The researcher thus

determined, based on participant responses, that membership dynamics and responsibilities

within the organization increase with time within the organization. Thus, those with more years

in the organization were able to reflect on the changes that they have experienced within themselves more so than individuals who joined only one year ago. However, individuals who had joined only recently, within the past year, could compare how they had been treated differently that same year, compared to their treatment prior to their affiliation.

In both cases, participants recognized that BGLO membership had a tangible effect on their experiences within the PWI structure. As Jason stated about his experience within his fraternity, "I feel like my experience on campus would have been different because I probably wouldn't have had that closer connection with other African Americans on campus… and would probably have gotten more involved with SGA" (Jason, Kappa Alpha Psi, Fraternity, Inc.). This takeaway is emblematic of the entire participant response concerning their membership and the intersections of student identity, sense of belonging, and level of involvement on campus. While many participants held memberships in other campus-based groups, it was their BGLO membership that provided the largest network, security, and support within the university community.

Based on the data analysis, the researcher asserts that BGLO membership is correlated to a positive Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution. More research is needed to determine whether the institutions' status as a commuter institution and a PWI contributed more to the dynamic with students of color, or whether it was solely due to the status as a PWI. The commuter institution element was not indicated in participant responses as having a tangible effect on their experience. Yet, the researcher asserts that the institutions' desire to shed the commuter institution label and cater more towards residential students could be a contributing factor to the programmatic decisions that are made for campus events that they believe a majority of students will enjoy. Although more research is required to assess the

effects of BGLO membership at varying universities, the present participants made it clear that the value of BGLOs will not diminish at PWIs any time soon because of the array of tangible effects they bring to students' professional, academic, and social lives.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how membership in a BGLO shapes the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution. The researcher sought to answer three primary research questions through this study:

1. How does membership in a BGLO shape the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution?

2. How has membership in a BGLO affected Black students' sense of belonging at the university?

3. What skills do BGLOs equip Black students with to succeed at a predominantly White commuter institution?

Utilizing Astin's (1999) theory of level of involvement along with Strayhorn's (2018) concept of sense of belonging, the researcher sought to find out how involvement in a BGLO shaped the Black student experience and contributed to the sense of belonging of those students at a predominantly White commuter institution. Two campuses within the Southeast region of the U.S. served as research sites within this study. Both are commuter institutions with a larger percentage of students living off campus than residential students living on campus. The researcher conducted a basic qualitative interpretive study and gained participants through snowball sampling. Data were collected using a digital recording device using semi-structured interviews. Interviews were transcribed, and data were analyzed through three-cycle coding using NVivo software to develop codes and themes based on the theoretical frameworks of the study.

This chapter summarizes the results and conclusions of the research questions based on the collected data as well as consequential questions that developed from conversations with the participants. These additional questions inform the recommendations for future research as well as implications for further study in this specific area.

BGLOs were found to be positive forces of change within the Black community at both research sites. The study's findings add to the literature that already exists on BGLOs and culturally based groups, while also presenting an additional perspective from the commuter institution perspective.

Summary of Results

Table 7

Themes and Relationship to Research Questions

Themes	Research Questions	Relationship of Theme to Research Question
Black students join CBFOs out of a sense of isolation at a PWI	1. How does membership in a BGLO shape the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution?	Improved academic performance &gender differences BGLOs are needed to showcase alternatives to students Greater visibility on campus
Greater visibility through membership	2. How has membership in a BGLO affected Black Students' sense of belonging at the university?	Black students join CBFOs out of a sense of isolation at a PWI Letters affected others' behavior Increased networking opportunities
Improved academic performance& gender differences Increased networking opportunities Increase in transferable skills Letters affected others' behavior Membership fee had little impact on decision to join and SES Influence BGLOs are needed to showcase alternatives to students	3. What skills do BGLOs equip Black students with to succeed at a PWI?	Increase in transferable skills

Research Question One: Tangible Effect

- How does membership in a BGLO shape the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution?

The data indicates that membership in a BGLO had a tangible effect on the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution. 13 participants, all of whom identified as Black Americans, juniors or above, and had been a member of their organization for at least one year, reflected on their experiences and shared several ways that membership was directly related to their experience at their respective institutions. Three themes were related to this specific research question: 1). Improved academic performance and gender differences; 2). Greater visibility on campus; 3). BGLOs are needed to showcase alternatives to students.

While some participants were already involved in campus-based organizations prior to joining their fraternity or sorority, others were not engaged in the campus culture. Joining the BGLO provided them with a connection to the campus and community that increased their sense of belonging at the institution. Depending on the size of the chapter, the number of hours devoted to chapter membership ranged from three to five hours per week to over 20 hours per week in some cases. Thus, both level of involvement and sense of belonging increased for participants through their BGLO membership.

Prior research indicates that persistence and retention is much higher for students who are involved in activities outside of the classroom at their college or university. Those who were already involved prior to their BGLO membership indicated that membership in a BGLO provided them with a greater platform along with increased networking opportunities and transferable skills, which is applicable to their career and beyond. For those who were not as involved, the membership changed their entire campus experience and provided them with the

sense of community that they had been yearning for. Based on gender identity differences, female participants were more involved on campus than their male counterparts prior to membership and post membership.

Improved academics was also an additional result of the membership for many. Female participants had greater increases in academic performance than male participants as a result of membership in a BGLO. Because BGLOs have minimum academic standards to join as well as to remain active within the organization, participants had an incentive to do well in their courses to reap the benefits of the social status that BGLOs provided. While some were already academically proficient prior to the membership, for others, membership provided a sense of accountability to uphold the values, legacy, and standards of their organization. Female participants stressed that their chapters implemented academic plans and study hall routines to ensure that their academics remained the top priority within the chapter. Male participants did not share such plans but did have some increases in level of involvement and academic success although at lower rates than the female participants.

Lastly, participants also noted that BGLOs provided an alternative for incoming and current students to the status quo of traditionally White GLOs. They are necessary to illustrate that Black and other students of color have designated organizations on campus created out of necessity due to past racism and ostracism within the campus community. Not all incoming students have an awareness or context for fraternities and sororities. Participants were adamant that BGLOs are especially needed at PWIs so that students with limited knowledge can have an opportunity to engage with others who look like them in a safe environment.

As commuter students, participants stated that the university seemed to create and cater more events towards residential students. Consequently, although their membership in a BGLO

increased their sense of belonging and level of involvement at the institution, it was within their

own self -created smaller community. As a collective, participants did not believe that university

administrators considered their interests or desires for campus-wide programmatic efforts.

Research Question Two: Decreased Isolation

- How has membership in a BGLO affected Black students' sense of belonging at the university?

The participants gave various responses on how membership in a BGLO affected their sense of belonging at their university. Both personality differences as well as the level of prior involvement contributed to these differing responses. As a collective, they shared responses related to the following themes: 1). Black students join BGLOs out of a sense of isolation, 2). Letters affected others' behavior, and 3). Increased networking opportunities.

Upon joining a BGLO, participants noticed a change in their status almost immediately. They had an instant connection to an organization with decades of history at the institution. This provided them with a connection to both the campus and surrounding community in a unique way. Their sense of belonging at the institution increased as well because they were a part of larger group that others coveted. This contributed to the change in behavior that they noticed from other students. While some participants were comfortable with this change, others said that it took them time to adjust to the newfound popularity. However, despite this change, they still did not believe that they had equitable resources like their traditionally White counterparts.

Participants were able to venture out into the community and connect with older members as well as members of other organizations because of their shared bond. Additionally, some participants secured professional recommendations as well as job offers from new contacts as a result of membership in the same organization. This increased network was characterized as a positive by all participants.

Aside from the increased visibility and improved network, participants noticed that more students knew their names and things about them simply because of their membership in a

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specific BGLO as well. While it was flattering in one sense, it also made some uneasy. While

wearing Greek letters, they could immediately notice a discernable change in the way others

approached and spoke to them. Since organizations and their members held stereotypes long

before any of the participants had joined and because these views and beliefs are culturally

entrenched, participants noticed that others may have attributed things to them that may or may

not have been true. For example, an organization's members having a stereotype of being elitist

and arrogant contributed to how aspiring students approached them, whether the participant

would be characterized in that way or otherwise. Yet, despite this challenge, their level of

isolation decreased dramatically through membership in the BGLO, thus improving their sense

of belonging.

Research Question Three: Transferable Skills Increased

- What skills do BGLOs equip Black students with to succeed at a predominantly White commuter institution?

The participants stated that they gained many skills through their BGLO membership. This research question was directly correlated with the following theme: (1). increase in transferable skills. Participants noted that skills they gained or improved upon were transferable to other areas of their lives, including their academic as well as their professional lives. Specific improvements occurred in their communication, leadership effectiveness, and time management. While some participants noted that they were stronger in some of these areas than others prior to their membership, the consistent theme among participants was that the BGLOs placed them in situations where they were forced to rely upon these skills consistently. Having to utilize public speaking skills in chapter meetings, leading their organization in campus activities or programs with limited membership numbers, or completing mandatory trainings in hazing prevention through membership intake, participants were consistently expected to build upon these skills.

They described many scenarios wherein these skills helped them in other areas, such as improved speaking in the classroom environment and spending more time on studying and scholastic activities during the week so as to prepare for social engagements during the weekend, resulting in improved time management. Overall, BGLO memberships highlighted the strengths of some participants, while forcing others to improve in areas they may have been challenged in previously. When asked to describe the level of commitment to their organization on an hourly basis per week, participants indicated a time frame ranging from three to five hours to over 20 hours depending on chapter size and level of position within the chapter. Moreover, by describing their membership experience and commitment as a part-time job, they effectively

illustrated their willingness to take on the responsibilities of membership because of not only the duties they had agreed to uphold during their initiation but also the tangible effects they experienced in other areas of their lives throughout their membership. Some participants in the study held part-time jobs off campus. This affected their ability to participate in the chapter and hold advanced positions. As stated, female participants had a higher level of involvement within their chapters than male participants. Yet, two male participants indicated that they worked off campus jobs which affected their ability to engage more with the chapter. Thus, level of campus involvement for some male participants was affected due to off campus commitments, which confirms findings from previous literature.

<center>**Discussion of Results**</center>

PWI Status More Impactful than Commuter Status

Prior research illustrates that residential students are more engaged with the campus environment than commuter students. These students have more time to create a consistent on campus community and be involved in activities. Additionally, they also tend to have less distractions or other commitments, allowing them to perform better academically. Commuter institutions are characterized and defined by the number of students who commute to the campus and live somewhere else vs. the number of on-campus residents, who live in university-sponsored housing. Previous commuter student definitions have been ill-defined. Their educational experience has historically been sub-par to the on-campus resident, ultimately leading to university policies and procedures prioritizing the on-campus residential student more than the commuter student. This study illustrated that participants were largely able to see increases in campus involvement and sense of belonging despite their status as commuter students. While some participants saw their level of involvement affected because of off campus jobs or academic responsibilities, as a collective, participants saw gains in both of these areas. Because no participants had a commute above 30 minutes, they were able to participate in activities at a greater level than some commuter students who have longer or more extended commutes to and from campus.

At PWIs, White students have been historically prioritized over students of color. Many PWIs had not integrated their campuses until well after the monumental decision in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, regarding the integration of public educational institutions. As a result, students who identify as Black, attend a PWI, and also commuted to the campus may face especially difficult circumstances to find a place in the community.

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This study examined how Black Students found a sense of belonging on campus through their involvement in a BGLO at a predominantly White commuter institution. The data collected in this study adds to the volume of literature which suggested that Black student involvement is positively correlated with overall success. Of the 13 participants in this study, no one shared a regret for joining their organization, or that the organization had a detrimental effect on their academic performance or progress towards graduation. Instead, the organization provided community, connection, and an incentive to do better both inside and outside of the classroom. It also created a community within a community of sorts, as participants believed that the university did not take their desires or considerations in mind when making campus-wide programmatic decisions.

Previously, scholars have noted that Black students may experience increased forms of racism or race-related stress. When coupled with the challenges that many students face on a college campus, unrelated to demographic factors and are simply the virtues of being in a new and unfamiliar environment, Black students face an uphill battle in many instances. As seen in this study, membership in BGLOs provided the participants access to a network and a way to bond with individuals who uplifted, supported, and encouraged them in the face of adversity. While other campus-based organizations exist with similar missions such as the Black Student Union, local NAACP, as well as other civic-minded groups, BGLOs provided a unique space to bond through ritualistic history and tradition. They are thus a counter to traditionally White GLOs that often hold positions of power and authority within the campus environment because of their history, alumni base, and level of financial access.

Through the data collected and analyzed in this study, BGLOs were found to be a way for Black students to find increased acceptance and commonality to the campus culture in a PWI

environment. To be clear, participants did not say that joining a BGLO was the *only* way to make friends or become an invested part of the campus community. However, their responses did add value and credence to previous findings, which suggest that joining a BGLO at a PWI increases Black students' sense of belonging, academic performance, leadership, and overall satisfaction at the university. In no uncertain terms, participants were clear that by joining a BGLO their campus experience had improved. Through the additional skills they gained, opportunities to participate in additional service endeavors, and the benefits of an expanded network, BGLO memberships continue to be an avenue for Black students to intentionally connect with their peers in a positive and meaningful way.

Summary

Since this study was limited to 13 participants at two universities located in the Southeast region of the U.S., the results might not be similar at universities based in different parts of the country. This region has a specific, unique history regarding its treatment of Black people. Universities in the region share the practice of historically implementing policies and procedures that place both aspiring and admitted Black students at a disadvantage, compared to their White peers. This study illustrates the value of BGLO membership to Black students at predominantly White commuter institutions. However, it also raises questions about how Black students in other parts of the country may experience their campus environment through the lens of a BGLO. Future research should thus focus on the effect of BGLO membership at a PWI located in different segments of the country to determine whether region is a silent or active variable in the ways in which Black students experience their college campus. In addition, because neither of the host institutions had a chapter of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. and because current students within the chapter(s) of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. were unavailable at the time of data collection within this study, members of those organizations could not be interviewed.

The researcher wonders if the experiences of members of those organizations would mirror the other seven organizational experiences shared in this study. These two organizations are the most recently founded, in 1922 and 1963, respectively. The researcher would be interested in learning if these organizations have had trouble establishing chapters and maintaining large active memberships in the Southern region of the U.S. in the same way as other organizations owing to the difference in age between them and their NPHC peers.

Finally, since this was a basic interpretive qualitive study, the researcher is interested in knowing if conducting a quantitative study using surveys would have elicited similar results.

While two interviews were conducted in person, due to the restrictions involving COVID-19, most interviews were held digitally or via phone because of campus closures and restrictions involving meeting on campus. The researcher selected a qualitative method because of the unique depth and breadth it offers for participant responses, which can be examined through analysis that qualitative research provides as opposed to quantitative research. While the same questions could be employed for a quantitative approach, it would be interesting to see whether a quantitative replication of this study would garner similar results.

Recommendations

BGLO Members Work to Educate Administrators

The present study illustrates that BGLOs at PWIs provide a variety of benefits to Black students. In addition to strengthening their leadership skills, academic performance, and communication skills, memberships also assist with sense of belonging and level of involvement at the university. The combination of these factors can result in improved persistence and retention numbers for Black students as a collective at PWIs. Therefore, given the positive attributes, more in-depth research must be conducted to determine how BGLOs differ in their effect on Black students' sense of belonging at PWIs vs. HBCUs. In addition, university administrators can invest time into providing resources to advertise BGLOs for both the incoming and current students. As noted, participants shared that they did not feel that BGLOs were highlighted to the same degree as their traditionally White counterparts in marketing materials or in placements at university orientations and admissions events. They felt that they were only included in performative showcases, which limited and affected the ways in which they were perceived by others. This highlights an opportunity for universities to improve the ways in which BGLOs are advertised to both the campus community and the greater surrounding community.

On the contrary, BGLO members must also be willing to be flexible regarding their membership tactics with potential members. By having a tradition of discretion associated with their intake process as well as a less-than-favorable approach in recruiting students, BGLOs must work in concert with the mechanisms that universities have in place to continue keeping their chapters active on campus. By being present and showcasing how their organizations add value to the overall campus culture, they provide an incentive for universities to highlight them in a

multitude of ways because of the related opportunities. In addition, BGLO members must also be willing to educate and provide context for those who are unaware of their history. Since these organizations have not existed for the same amount of time as many historically White GLOs, this difference is often stark when the membership numbers and advantages are compared over time. Despite these challenges, BGLO members must be assertive in ensuring that any student, regardless of their race or ethnicity, is provided relevant information about their organizations. While most students who join traditionally White fraternities or sororities identify as White, in many cases, every student is at least aware of the process or opportunity for membership. BGLOs must ensure a similar awareness to reach a larger audience and ensure that they are at least capturing those who are already interested in their organizations as well as those who may be unaware and are likely to be interested.

Having faculty, staff, and administrators who are invested in the success of these organizations is critical at a PWI. If the on-campus advisor is not aware of the nuances surrounding the effective advisement of a BGLO, students may be left to do many things themselves, thereby diminishing their effectiveness. Whether advisors are selected or assigned, university administrators should continue to examine the approach involving BGLO advisement on their campuses. The participants shared how instrumental their BGLO membership has been in their sense of belonging and experience at the university, so the addition of an effective on-campus advisor will only enhance the impact. Although an ineffective advisor may place the organization in peril because of a lack of understanding regarding the traditions, practices, and customs, a competent advisor will create a two-way commitment that is paramount for BGLOs at PWIs to continue to reach the ultimate heights of success for both current and incoming students alike.

Implications for Further Research

While the aim of this study was to examine how membership in a BGLO shaped the Black student experience at a predominantly White commuter institution, the study also revealed future questions that additional research may address. This study combined the experiences of both BGLO fraternity and sorority members. Although there was an overlap among the members of both groups in many of their responses, future research could address how membership in a BGLO sorority or BGLO fraternity in particular assists with Black student sense of belonging at a predominantly White commuter institution. Based on many variables from this study, female participants experienced larger gains in academic performance and level of involvement than male participants.

Previous research has examined the effects of voluntary association membership for Black men who join BGLO fraternities as well as the effects of BGLO sorority membership on classroom activity and participation. However, only a handful of studies examine how membership in either a BGLO fraternity or sorority effects the Black student experience in comparison with one another. This study highlights some of the differences between female and male participants, so a study utilizing gender identity as a central theme could be beneficial for the academic literature.

In addition, the participants of this study also illustrated that students from middle class backgrounds may have a greater advantage entering college to be eligible to join organizations like BGLOs based on familial connections, high school auxiliary memberships, and a lack of concern about basic resources. Thus, examining a population of students from a lower SES level to see how they find a sense of belonging and become involved on campus would be beneficial as well.

Some BGLOs have a legacy clause within their membership application which provides added incentives or benefits to aspiring members who have immediate family members from the same BGLO. Investigating the impact of the legacy clause on the membership experience and sense of belonging of Black students at a PWI would also add a unique and valuable perspective to the literature in differentiating between the types of BGLO organizational memberships, while also involving the variables of gender identity and SES status.

Lastly, since the inception of BGLOs, additional Greek letter organizations for multicultural groups and other students of color have been founded and created. Often housed under the Multicultural Greek Council label or MGC, these organizations are home to students who identify or have interest in East Asian and Latinx culture (Wells & Dolan, 2009). Many of these organizations pay homage to BGLOs and have adopted similar practices and traditions within their organizations.

The researcher suggests that it would be interesting to find out if Multicultural Greek Council (MGC) organizations play a similar role in the assimilation of Asian American and Latinx students to PWI culture as BGLOs do for Black students. Since these groups were founded much more recently, with some founding dates as recent as the mid-1990s, their impact and effect on the student culture is still relatively new. The percentage of students who identify as Asian or Latinx will differ, depending on the type of institution and the region where the university is located. This is in line with previous commentary about BGLOs on other campuses in different regions of the country. The combination of these two types of groups would provide additional context regarding how CBFOs shape the experiences of students of color in general at PWIs. The researcher believes that MGC organizations and BGLOs could work in concert to

achieve similar goals and may have an increased likelihood of success by pooling resources for the betterment of both groups.

Further, the effects of social justice within the community and across college campuses cannot be ignored. BGLOs have never based eligibility for membership on race. With students who identify as White or any other race besides Black within their membership rosters, future research would do well to examine how non-Black members of BGLOs help to create a sense of belonging for their peers at PWIs. Although many previous studies have focused on non-Black members of BGLOs, there is limited research on the specific experiences of non-Black BGLO members and their use of social justice to impact how their fraternity or sorority brothers and sisters experience a sense of belonging at the university. Considering race-based events that continue to transpire across the country, future research in this area may have a tremendous impact in helping BGLOs specifically and CBFOs more generally achieve similar status and billing as their traditionally White counterparts.

Implications for Practice

Students of color, and thus, most BGLO members, should be more supported by university administration in terms of marketing, inclusion in decision making regarding campus wide-programming, and provided additional financial resources to create equity with traditionally White Greek Letter Organizations. At many PWIs, BGLOs do not have official on-campus housing sponsored or leased by the university. This contrasts with many traditionally White fraternities and sororities who may have large mansions along the entry ways to campus that they partner with the university to maintain. This dichotomy presents BGLOs in a fashion that may not be entirely accurate for incoming students and parents who may be unaware of the historical context of BGLOs at PWI campuses. Through an investment in their housing or alumni associations, BGLOs would have the opportunity to showcase themselves in a way to attract more students of color to the university and their organizations. This would also increase the marketing for BGLOs and provide them with an opportunity to showcase themselves in a way that is not performative in nature.

In addition, university guidelines and procedures regarding the minimum number of members for BGLOs to remain active student organizations on PWI campuses could also be standardized. While the percentage of Black students at PWIs across the country differs across regions, a standardized minimum number of members for active membership would allow BGLOs to be active and supported throughout times when members graduate or leave the university. Currently, chapters seemingly operate independently and one of them may have two members, while another that is less than one hour away has 10 members, despite the chapters existing at similar types of institutions. A standardization of this practice could assist with the recruitment or membership intake process as well.

Creating leadership development and academic success programs specifically catered towards students of color could also be helpful in highlighting the success of BGLOs. This study illustrated that academic success, communication, and leadership skills for participants improved after they gained membership in a BGLO. If universities created a sponsored program for students to showcase and practice the newfound skills and talents that they developed within their BGLO, it could create increased marketing for the BGLO, and an opportunity for students to practice the transferable skills that they gained prior to graduation. This could be in partnership with the university career center to advertise to potential employers for jobs, internships, or graduate school assistantships. This would also create a partnership between the BGLO and the university and could potentially go a long way towards providing the inclusion and belonging aside from the mere diversity that participants stressed is so desperately needed at their institutions.

Limitations

There are several limitations of the present study which limit the generalizability of the results. While 13 participants were included, only seven of the nine organizations represented in the NPHC were covered. Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. did not have a chapter at either of the institutions included in this study. Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., though having active charters at both campuses, had a limited number of members within their chapter(s). Since the study was time-sensitive, the researcher was unable to find a mutually agreeable time to interview members within either of the Sigma Gamma Rho chapters.

The researcher intended to conduct interviews with each participant in person and via focus groups with the participants to illustrate whether responses changed when they were in groups vs answering questions as individuals. However, Covid-19 regulations prevented the researcher from having focus groups, or from having a larger pool of participants for the study. The researcher had hoped to incorporate observational analysis as a part of this study to assess body language, group dynamics within focus groups, and facial expressions to determine whether non-verbal cues indicate how a participant may have felt about a specific question or topic.

The onset of a pandemic during the data collection phase had a tremendous impact on the participants in this study as they were also no longer available to meet with their fraternity brothers and sisters in a traditional format. This new reality heightened their ability to appreciate and reflect on the importance and value of their membership experiences from pre-COVID-19 to the current experiences amid the pandemic.

An additional limitation of this study is geographic location. The results of the study are restricted to the Southeast part of the U.S for two specific institutions. Humble University and

Spirit University, located in neighboring states in the Southeast of the U.S. respectively, are both described as predominantly White commuter institutions. Yet, they are located in vastly different environments, i.e. urban city and rural town. While similar experiences may exist across the entire Southeast region or other parts of the country, the results cannot be generalized and only serve as an indication of the experiences at these institutions within these states. Since this was a narrowly designed study, the author acknowledges the limited generalizability of the study's findings.

Conclusion

Black student sense of belonging and level of involvement is a critical element in the Black student experience at PWIs. BGLOs have played an integral role in the sense of belonging for many students of color for decades. The first such organization was created in 1906 with the advent of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and continued to expand, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement with the founding of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc in 1963. While the participants in this study illustrated the tangible effect that BGLO membership has had on their holistic collegiate experience, many members of these organizations continue to face challenges involving equity and inclusion on campuses across the nation.

As more research will be conducted in this area, the impact of membership in these organizations will gain additional attention from stakeholders across universities. Administrators will be forced to acknowledge the reality that culturally based groups are unique entities that must be harnessed and supported to continue to shield students of color from the racism and discrimination that still permeates many campuses to this day. The violence and destruction that takes place in our society does not end at collegiate gates. As such, the issues that our country and our world face will continue to resonate on college campuses. It is the researcher's hope that future scholarship will address many of the questions raised in this and other such studies. As more research is conducted and other groups such as MGC are examined for the ways that they shape and mold the experiences of students of color at PWIs, the rungs of justice will become more accessible to all students. Intersectional differences must be recognized and celebrated because of the rich diversity they bring to campuses rather than be discouraged because of the spotlight that they shine on oppressive systems of power that have historically subordinated people of color.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Application

IRB EXPEDITED REVIEW APPLICATION

Section 1. Personnel/Funding Information

Title of project OUT OF THE NIGHT THAT COVERS ME:
HOW MEMBERSHIP IN A BLACK GREEK LETTER ORGANIZATION SHAPES THE
BLACK STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT AN URBAN COMMUTER PREDOMINANTLY

Principal investigator Kelby J. Lamar

E-mail address ~~kelby.lamar@gsw.edu~~   Phone 229-942-5182

Mailing address 1448 Grove Park Drive| Apartment 201|Columbus, GA 31904

Investigator signature ████████████████   Date 08/05/19

Other investigators (attach additional paper if necessary) N/A

If the principal investigator is a **student**, please provide the following information:

Deadline for project completion

Is this project part of the requirements for a course grade? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Faculty/staff supervisor Karri Holley

Phone 205-348-7825   E-mail address kaholley@ua.edu

I have reviewed this application and will provide appropriate guidance with the project as needed.

Faculty/staff supervisor signature

If medical supervision is **necessary**, please provide contact information for the physician who will provide this supervision:

Physician name   Phone

If this proposal is part of a grant, please indicate the following:

Name of grant N/A

Principal investigator of grant N/A

Source of funds (State specific name of funding source)

Government agency N/A   Foundation N/A

Corporation N/A   Other N/A

Section 2. Project Description

Please check the category or categories into which the project falls:

☑ 1. Research on individual or group behavior or characteristics, such as (but not limited to) studies or surveys of perception, cognition, attitudes, and actions if the investigator does not manipulate subjects' behavior and the research will not involve stress to the subjects. Research involving sensitive matters such as sexual or political behavior may require Full Review. Expedited Review is not appropriate if the subjects' responses, if known outside the research, could place the subjects at risk of civil or criminal liability or damage their financial standing or employability.

☐ 2. The study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens. This category could include data originally collected under an Exemption.

☑ 3. Voice or video recordings made for research purposes. Research involving sensitive matters such as sexual or political behavior may require Full Review. Expedited Review is not appropriate if the subjects' responses, if known outside the research, could place the subjects at risk of civil or criminal liability or damage their financial standing or employability.

☐ 4. Moderate exercise by healthy volunteers.

☐ 5. Recording of data from subjects at least 18 years of age using noninvasive procedures routinely employed in medical research or practice, such as (but not limited to) electrocardiography, electroencephalography, weighing, and tests of sensory acuity. Expedited Review is not appropriate if the procedure involves an invasion of the subject's privacy or the input of matter or significant amounts of energy into the subject (such as exposure to electromagnetic radiation outside the visible range, e.g., X-rays and microwaves).

☐ 6. Collection of bodily fluids or tissues accomplished through routine practices in subjects at least 18 years of age who are in good health. These bodily fluids or tissues include (but are not limited to) supra- and subgingival dental plaque and calculus, hair and nail clippings if collected in a non-disfiguring manner, sweat, uncannulated saliva, and blood samples not to exceed 450 milliliters in an 8-week period and no more than twice per week.

☐ 7. Research on drugs or devices for which an investigational new drug exemption or an investigational device exemption is not required. Full Review may be required if the reviewers feel that participating subjects will be at greater than minimal risk.

Total number of subjects `15`
Number of subjects in control group(s) (if appropriate) `N/A`
Population(s) from which derived ███████████████

This study includes:

Prisoners ☐ Fetuses ☐ Abortuses ☐ Pregnant women ☐
Minors under 18 ☐ People with mental illness ☐
People with cognitive impairment or intellectual disability ☐

If any of the populations above are involved, attach a statement indicating the reasons for using these groups.

Will any subjects be from hospitals or other institutions (including other universities)? ☐ Yes ☑ No
If yes, please attach evidence of approval from this hospital or other institution. This evidence could be a letter of support from an authorized agent, a copy of an IRB or ethics panel review, or some other documentation indicating awareness and approval of the study's design, methodology, and purpose.

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Location and duration of study:

Location of study	████████████████████
Probable duration of entire study	September 2019-July 2020
Total amount of time each subject will be involved	2 hours

Briefly describe the objectives and methodology of this project in lay language. Attach supplemental documents (e.g., surveys, consent forms) as necessary.

The principal investigator is conducting a qualitative, explanatory case study. The subject of the study is to better understand how membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization shapes the student experience of Black students who attend an urban, commuter predominantly White Institution. The principal investigator will conduct approximately 10-12 interviews and 2-3 focus groups with student members. Data will be analyzed using coding and thematic analysis. The data collection will occur on the ████████

List any possible physical, psychological, and social risks and precautions to be taken to avoid these risks. Examples of risks include but are not limited to loss of time, performance-related embarrassment, invasion of privacy, distress at recalling traumatic events, and self-diagnosis or labeling.

There are no anticipated risks in this study outside of potential loss of time.

Describe the procedures to be used to maintain confidentiality.

The information given in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting names with these codes will be kept behind a password protected file located on the UA Box server. This list will be kept approximately six months after the conclusion of the study and will then be deleted in its entirety. When the study is completed, and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Student names will not be used in any report.

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval

September 12, 2019

Dear Mr. Lamar

Your expedited approval application for the project titled "Out of the Night That Covers Me: How Membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization Shapes the Black Student Experience at an Urban, Commuter, Predominantly-White Institution" has been approved by the ████ ████████████ Institutional Review Board Committee. The approval number is FA19-03XPED, and the approval is valid for a maximum duration of one year, from 9-12-2019 to 9-12-2020.

If this project lasts longer than one year, it will need renewal. The principal investigator must submit required materials for renewal to the IRB. For information about the renewal procedure, please read the "Renewal Instructions" accessible from the "Procedures for Application" link on the IRB website, which is accessible from the ████ Academic Affairs website.

If you choose to modify this project, the IRB committee must be notified of any intended changes in procedure at least one month prior to actual changes in practice.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB Committee, please do not hesitate to contact me at ████████. Good luck with your project!

Sincerely,

Chair, Institutional Review Board
College of Nursing and Health Sciences

IRB Approval
FA19-03XPED
THIS FORM VALID
9-12-2019 - 9-12-2020

College of Nursing and Health Sciences

APPENDIX C

IRB Independent Ethics Committee Authorization Agreement

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)/INDEPENDENT ETHICS COMMITTEE (IEC)
AUTHORIZATION AGREEMENT

Name of Institution Providing IRB Review (Institution A): ████████████████████

IRB Registration #: IRB00005139   Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) #, if any:

Name of Institution Relying on the Designated IRB (Institution B): University of Alabama

IRB Registration #: IRB00000091   Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) #, if any: 00004939

The Officials signing below agree that Institution B may rely on the designated IRB for review and continuing oversight of the human-subjects research described below:

Name of Research Project: Out of the Night That Covers Me: How Membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization Shapes the Black Student Experience at an Urban, Commuter, Predominantly-White Institution

Name of Principal Investigator: Kelby Lamar

Sponsor or Funding Agency:

Award Number, if any:

The review performed by the designated IRB will meet the human subject protection requirements of HHS regulation, specifically Title 45 CFR part 46, and relevant subparts. Any relevant minutes of IRB meetings will be made available to Institution B upon request. Institution B remains responsible for ensuring compliance with the IRB's determinations and with the Terms of its OHRP-approved FWA, if applicable. This document must be kept on file by both parties and provided to OHRP upon request.

Signature of Signatory Official (Institution A):

████████████████████   Date: 9/27/2019

Print Full Name: ████████████

Institutional Title: Chair, ████ IRB

Signature of Signatory Official (Institution B):

████████████████   Date: 10/8/19

Print Full Name: ████████████████

Institutional Title: Senior Associate Vice President for Research and Economic Development

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Material

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to participate in a research study to examine how membership in a historically Black Greek Letter organization (BGLO) shapes the Black student experience at a historically commuter, predominantly White Institution. You will be asked to reflect on the specific experiences in your undergraduate career through your membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization via an interview or focus group. These sessions will be audio recorded, and the tapes will be secured on a password access UA Box server during and after the course of the study. The audio recordings will be destroyed approximately six months after the conclusion of the study.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation in a single session will take approximately *45-60 minutes*. In the event that a follow up session is needed or requested, it will take no more than 60 minutes. Your total participation in this study will not exceed three hours.

Payment: You will receive a gift card in the amount of $10 as payment for your time and participation in this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks associated with this study are minimal. Participant responses will be coded and anonymous.

There are no associated personal benefits to be expected this study. However, secondary benefits may help college administrators see the effect that membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization has on student retention and persistence. This may increase the amount of institutional support provided to these organizations at many colleges and universities. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your grades in school or your standing within your undergraduate chapter.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, or collection of data, please use the contact information below:
Name of Principal Investigator: Kelby J. Lamar
Title: Executive Ed.D Cohort 11 Doctoral Student
Department Name: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Telephone: (229) 942-5182
Email address: klamar@crimson.ua.edu

APPENDIX E

Interview Protocol

How Membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization Shapes the Black Student Experience

        Time of Interview:

        Date:

        Place:

        Interviewer: Kelby J. Lamar

        Interviewee:

        Position of Interviewee: Member of _____Fraternity/Sorority, Incorporated

        This project will consist of the interviewer and primary researcher, Kelby J. Lamar, interviewing undergraduate subjects who have voluntarily selected to participate in this project on Black Greek Letter Organizational Membership. Subjects will answer questions based on their membership experiences to determine how and if their membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization has affected their student experience at the institution.

Questions:

1. Do you live on campus?

2. Have you held membership in your BGLO for at least one year?

3. Do you identify as Black American?

4. What is your classification?

5. When did you join your fraternity or sorority?

6. Are you currently active with the chapter?

7. Do you hold an officer position?

8. What led you to be interested in a fraternity or sorority?

9. How did you connect with the campus before joining your fraternity or sorority?

10. How has your experience on campus changed since joining your fraternity or sorority?

11. What effect has your fraternity or sorority had on your connection with other Black students on campus?

12. What additional skills have you gained since joining your fraternity or sorority?

13. How did the price of membership in your fraternity or sorority affect your decision to join?

14. What other organizations are you a part of on campus?

15. Of all your organizational memberships, which do you devote the most time and attention towards?

16. How has your academic progress towards graduation changed since becoming a part of a fraternity or sorority?

17. How has your membership in a fraternity or sorority affected your level of service to the community?

18. How would your experience on campus be different if you were not a part of your fraternity or sorority?

19. How is membership in a BGLO at a PWI different than at an HBCU?

20. How important do you believe BGLOs are on college campuses in general?

21. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

Thank you for participating in this interview. All of your responses will remain strictly confidential, and no identifying information will be linked to you or your organization. Your information will be kept behind a password protected file on the University of Alabama Box Server. I may follow up with you at _____(Insert phone number/email address) for more information about your responses should it be required. If you have any questions

about this study, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Karri Holley, Professor and

Coordinator of the Higher Education Program at the University of Alabama School of Education

at 205-348-7825.