

“Don’t Forget About Us!”
Understanding, Advising, & Supporting Black Students Who Cross the Greek Colorline
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During my graduate program, I wrote a thesis entitled *“Fifty Shades of Black”: The Black Racial Identity Development of Black Members of White Greek Letter Organizations in the South*. In my thesis, I interviewed nine Black college seniors or alumni who joined majority, traditionally, and historically white Greek-letter organizations (WGLO) at predominately white institutions (PWI). One of the four major themes discovered during my research was “Experiences with Black and White People.” All of the participants expressed both positive and negative interactions with members of the white community and members of the black community. Some participants experienced racist or discriminatory behavior from white people, while others were able to develop close and cherished relationships with their white fraternity brothers or white sorority sisters. A majority of the participants shared experiences with black students, family, friends, and black members of black Greek-letter organizations that were rude, hostile, and hurtful, while others were still able to still form close bonds. Here are some selected quotes from interviews with thesis participants:

“There was one girl, in particular, that was just racist, I mean, you know, she didn't get why I pledged, she didn't like the fact that the chapter accepted me, and I think she was the only dissenting vote.” - “Dawn” (Kappa Alpha Theta)

“There were some times where I had to check a couple of my brothers when they would use the ‘N-word’ as a term of endearment ... I was unpopular at that time because I was the one who would say ‘Oh no, you don’t need to say that because that’s not cool, and you’re wrong for saying that.’” - “Raphael” (Alpha Tau Omega)

“The reaction for a person of color, particularly a black person, joining a predominantly white organization, they kind of look at you like ‘Why are you doing this? You’re turning your back on us.’” - “Heath” (Delta Sigma Phi)

“I told my [black] friend that I had joined AOII [Alpha Omicron Pi] and she said, ‘Wait what? Nuh uh, you need to get out of that right now, you need to try to be an AKA [Alpha Kappa Alpha].’ And I was like ‘No, I’m having a great experience, don’t try to deny me that.’” - “Rose” (Alpha Omicron Pi)

I created a theoretical framework of Cross's Theory of Nigrescence, which is the process of developing blackness, and Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model, which postulates that pre-collegiate personal characteristics (like race), combined with an education environment (conversely belonging to a white Greek-letter organization at a PWI in the South) leads to a specific output (such as racial identity development). I found that the majority of my participants ended college with a stronger and more confident view of their black identity compared to when they started college. They believed negative interactions with white people and black people forced them to defend their black identity to others and feel more comfortable with who they are.

Recommendations for Advising

While writing this thesis, the movie *Step Sisters* premiered on Netflix. In the movie, Jamilah is President of Theta Chi Phi, a fictitious black sorority. She is tasked with helping Sigma Beta Beta (SBB), a white sorority, learn how to step, which is a type of dance performed by members of culturally-based fraternal organizations. Sandra, who is one of the 'SBBs', as they're called, is black. Throughout the film, she is mocked by Jamilah and other 'Thetas' for being black in a white sorority. After a disagreement between Jamilah and the SBBs, Sandra confronts Jamilah and tells her that she is a Theta legacy and attended a Theta interest meeting as a first-year student but was rejected for being too "whitewashed." Jamilah apologizes, but Sandra says, "It's fine. I dodged a bullet. SBB is not perfect, but at least we judge on actions and not stereotypes" (Stone, 2018, 1:12:20).

I share this excerpt because it is characteristic of the experience of one of my participants but also speaks to the wider experience of black members of WGLOs while interacting with black students and black Greeks. I would recommend student affairs professionals who advise fraternities and sororities do what they can to develop an inclusive fraternity/sorority community. Edwards' (2009) study on the perceptions of racial integration in sororities showed that women who participated in multicultural training were more likely to be open to recruiting and having a diverse membership in their chapter; both black women in black sororities and white women in white sororities.

Intentional conversations about diversity and inclusion in fraternity/sorority life must be had in order to facilitate a better experience for everyone. For example, Lawrence Ross, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and the author of *Blackballed: The Black and White Politics of Race on College Campuses*, tours colleges and universities to speak with students on the issues of race and racism on college campuses. In his presentation, he focuses on how WGLO's have historically oppressed students of color, particularly black students, and how they have

continued to add to a campus climate that is not welcoming to racial minorities. While some members of WGLO's bristle at the idea of being racist, some members listen and reflect internally on how their organization can address racism and discrimination on their campuses, which directly affects their black chapter members.

I do not believe that integration in and of itself will eliminate all issues of prejudice, racism, and discrimination in fraternities and sororities. I also do not believe that chapters should recruit non-white members simply for the sake of having non-white members. I do believe if chapters choose to recruit non-white members, it should not be solely incumbent upon the non-white members to educate the chapter on issues of diversity and inclusion. Rather, the chapter should take action in order to create an inclusive and just environment, which may include self-education so they may feel more empowered to speak up when necessary. Councils or chapters can select experienced speakers to facilitate training or workshops with their members. Moreover, most universities have professionals dedicated to doing this work. Campus-based professionals can invite speakers, like Lawrence Ross, to speak to their campuses and facilitate workshops with their chapters.

Several of my participants expressed an initial desire to join a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organization but did not know how to go about navigating that process, while joining an Interfraternity Council (IFC) or Panhellenic Council (PHC) organization was a much more transparent journey. It is the culture of NPHC organizations to not actively recruit new members, which forces those who are interested to individually learn about the organization they would like to join. For most, it is not culturally acceptable to be interested in more than one organization. NPHC organizations also tend to have individually separate and unadvertised recruitment procedures while IFC and PHC organizations have systematic and public formal recruitment. Professionals who advise NPHC organizations should encourage them to be more visible and transparent with their new member recruitment. The chapters should not essentially "blackball" an interested student who does not know the preferred or traditional way to express interest in an organization, or who does not know enough about the organizations to be able to select one. Conversations should be had in order to help NPHC organizations promote more inclusive and understanding recruitment strategies and practices that still allow them to maintain a level of discretion.

Finally, here are some general tips for advisors to consider when working with multiple councils:

- Select Recruitment Counselors who have a wide array of diverse identities including race, sexual orientation, First-Gen status, etc.

- Have diversity and inclusion be a part of training for Recruitment Counselors and encourage chapters to include diversity and inclusion in their new member education programs.
- Encourage NPHC chapters to inculcate more transparent intake practices.

Conclusion

The title of this study, *Fifty Shades of Black*, was partly inspired by Cross's 1991 book *Shades of Black*. I chose this title as a way to state that there is no one prescribed way of being black or exhibiting blackness. One can be raised upper class, attend a PWI, join an IFC or PHC organization, marry interracially, and have a strong black racial identity; or one can be raised in an urban setting, attend a Historically Black College or University, join a NPHC organization, marry intraracially, and have a weak black racial identity. There is truly no one way to be black.

Before interviewing my participants, I informally hypothesized that these participants would not have a strong black racial identity however, they proved me wrong. These participants know who they are and have a strong identity. For a majority of these participants, their involvement with a WGLO helped shaped them into the black person they are today. Through this process I have learned to not judge black students who join WGLOs but to support them in their decisions.

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