

What if Culturally-Based Fraternal Organizations Did Not Exist?

Syreeta N. Greene, Ed.D., MSW | @SGdiamond22

Culturally-Based Fraternal Organizations (CBFOs) are arguably integral to today's fraternity/sorority community. But, what if CBFOs never existed? What would be the impact on students of color?

The fraternal community has been fraught with incidents of hazing since its early inception, not excluding CBFOs (Jones, 2015; Nuwer, 2001). The result of hazing as a form of membership intake has levied great financial costs on organizations and institutions facing legal responsibility for not ensuring the safety of students. Financial resources certainly would not have been expended in these cases, but more importantly, students would have not been physically, mentally, or emotionally harmed, or would be alive today had they not participated in hazing activities to join a fraternal organization.

If there were no CBFOs, there would be no uninformed assumptions, perceptions, and stereotypes of why these organizations exist (Tran & Chang, 2013). One assumption is the fraternity/sorority community is segregated by race simply because students of color do not want to engage with white students in IFC and NPC organizations (McKee, 1987). Others perceived CBFOs as "educated gangs" due to their specifications of colors, use of hand-signs, and questionable conduct (Hughey, 2008). While others may believe these organizations are only social in nature given the consistent observations of step shows, stroll-offs, and parties above all else they may stand for.

If one considers the negative aspects that would not be present if these organizations did not exist, one must also consider the positives that would not exist either. In general, culturally-based student organizations have created safe environments for students of color to become connected within their campus community, especially at predominately White institutions. From identifying upper classmen mentors, to receiving academic support and advice from other students of color, to having culturally relevant educational and social programming, these organizations have often times filled the gap in transition resources when institutions were reluctant to provide these resources to students of color (Baker, 2008; Harper, 2007; Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen & Milem, 1998; Museus, 2008; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). CBFOs have certainly been a part of the matrix of culturally-based student organizations supporting students of color through present day.

Furthermore, CBFOs have provided leadership, professional, and personal development opportunities for students who may not have been interested or eligible for campus-based programs (Kimbrough, 1995; Torbenson, & Parks, 2009; Sanchez, 2011; Tran & Chang, 2013). When considering the specific histories of Black and Latino fraternal organizations, these organizations were birthed out of the Racial Uplift and Civil Rights Movements, respectively, to address social and civic issues within their respective communities (Malarney, 2014). Thus, these organizations have generated a number of socially-minded members serving their communities in various ways.

Arguably, without CBFOs, the fraternal community in general would be severely void of ethnic diversity given the previous exclusionary policies restricting who could join IFC and NPC organizations (Syrett, 2009). Although in recent years there has been an increase in the number of students of color joining IFC and NPC organizations (Hughey, 2010), it has taken some time for students of color to view the organizations as an option. Fraternity and sorority life would feel and look very different without the CBFOs that can be seen and heard on and around campus today due their vibrant and melodic traditions.

Currently, research and data has focused on hazing, which casts a certain light on these organizations (Molasso, 2005), specifically NPHC organizations, while there is dearth of data and research available on the newer CBFOs, like Asian fraternal organizations. A collaborative effort between the councils, institutions, and organizations like AFA can certainly make great progress in this area that would provide much clarity on the impact of their existence.

Despite the data available and critical areas of improvement, many CBFO members are able to convey their sincere and heartfelt gratitude for their membership experience that speaks volumes to the impact and potential void the absence of these organizations would have caused if they did not exist. At present, CBFOs have the greatest potential to have evidence-based impact for future generation of diverse collegians.

Syreeta N. Greene is a consultant, researcher and speaker who has 13 years of higher education experience serving and working with students of diverse backgrounds, as well as providing training and programming for students and campus-based professionals within the fraternity/sorority community. She recently received her Doctorate of Education from the University of Southern California researching the influences of membership on academic performance for NPHC members. She is a proud member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.

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