

**Indigenous with Greek Letters:  
Supporting Indigenous College Students throughout their Greek Experience**

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In order to discuss my work with Indigenous students who are associated with Greek letter organizations, I must begin with introducing the lens from which I write this article. My name is Luhui Whitebear, and I am an enrolled member of the Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation. Being an Indigenous, first generation college student at a predominantly white institution (PWI) reflected my experiences of isolation in high school. I had to seek a sense of community on my own. Beyond the Native American Longhouse (NAL) Eena Haws at Oregon State University, I also found a sense of belonging in the sisterhood of Gamma Alpha Omega Sorority, Inc. Thus began my journey with Greek letter organizations to the present day where I offer alumnae guidance to our Kappa Chapter and serve Alpha Pi Omega Sorority, Inc. (APiO) as their advisor. This is lens from which I offer these words.

The story of isolation I tell is not an uncommon story among Indigenous college students at PWI's. Nationally, only 17% of Native American high school graduates go on to college as compared with 60% of the general population (Oliff, 2017). Additionally, only 13% of Native American students complete their college degree compared to 28% of the general population (Oliff, 2017). With Indigenous student populations being low on most college campuses, resources allocated to supporting their continued success in obtaining their degree is minimal, which directly impacts their retention. The importance of creating and maintaining Greek letter organizations that are committed to both the understanding of the unique needs of Indigenous students, as well as to their sense of belonging, can play an important role in shifting these statistics.

Many students at the NAL Eena Haws are affiliated with fraternities and sororities. Those who are members of Panhellenic and Interfraternity Council (IFC) organizations share stories of using what Tara Yosso (2005) refers to as familial capital, the resources and knowledge from precollege experiences, to help educate fellow members on cultural aspects of their lives. This type of resource is also used to help interrupt moments of misunderstandings, cultural appropriation, and microaggression. For instance, students have shared their experiences addressing themed parties which use Native American culture in stereotypical ways and oversexualize Indigenous women. However, it is often shared that value is not placed on their Indigenous perspectives in these moments and their words are disregarded. Rather than create a sense of community and respect of other cultural views and life experiences, this disregard further isolates Indigenous students. They are left to rely on what Yosso (2005) refers to as navigational capital, their ability to move and exist in unsupportive or hostile communities. These are missed opportunities by Greek letter organizations that minimize Indigenous perspectives which could have helped create larger shifts on campuses.

APiO is an example of a multicultural Greek letter organization which exists to both counter negative experiences as well as create communal bonds based on shared cultural aspects. Indigenous students who seek cultural connections often rely on the space that student organizations create. Indigenous fraternal organizations, like APiO, have experiences that often

run parallel with a dominant framework of what is frequently phrased as “the Greek experience” on college campuses. While the communal bond of a Greek letter organization is still present, the focus of organizations like APiO are grounded in strengthening Indigenous communities and creating space to express cultural aspects of students’ lives. These experiences are a form of what Gerald Vizenor (1994) calls survivance, the combination of survival and resistance. The depth of issues and struggles Indigenous students face cannot be contained in this article as they are intertwined with larger contexts that deal with colonization and systematic oppression. However, Indigenous students have found a way to incorporate cultural traditions and teachings into Greek letter organizations in ways that place value on their Indigenous identities and experiences. This is in resistance to the dominant fraternity/sorority community which often asks Indigenous students to choose between their Indigenous identity and their fraternal association. Simultaneously, Indigenous based Greek letter organizations are able to express, share, and learn about each other’s Indigenous identities. This is a distinctive form of cultural survival on a PWI that cannot be found elsewhere.

APiO’s work at OSU is reflective of what has been described. Their organization began as a form of support for Native college women based on cultural teachings. The national APiO website (n.d) describes their beginnings as following the tradition of using the guidance of their elders. Because of their strong connection to Indigenous culture, teachings, and experiences, their sisterhood has drawn other Indigenous students outside of the political label of American Indian, as evidenced by the number of Pacific Islanders members of the Kappa Chapter at OSU. In addition to learning about each other’s unique Indigenous cultures, they also have the opportunity to work on addressing shared social injustices, such as the desecration of sacred sites, environmental protection, the prevalence of sexual assault against Indigenous women, missing and murdered Indigenous women, and others. An example of their efforts include working in collaboration with the NAL Eena Haws on an event called The Red Shawl Project. This is part of a national effort to bring awareness to high rates of sexual assault Indigenous women face. Non-Indigenous attendees also made solidarity arm bands and signs to take to the annual Take Back the Night event on campus. This is one example of how APiO works to support cultural survival while also helping educate the general campus community on issues of significance to Indigenous people.

Through my personal experiences as an Indigenous person who is also a member of a Greek letter organization, I understand the importance of having a space to be authentic to who you are in the broader fraternal community. Creating and maintaining such spaces within this community is critical in not only better supporting Indigenous students, but in helping us better understand how our interactions with each other can transform campuses for better or for worse. It is up to us to decide the direction we want to go.

## References

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