

# ***EFFECTS OF GREEK AFFILIATION ON AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT Differences by College Racial Composition***

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This study used a nationally representative sample of African American college students to examine the degree to which their affiliation with a Greek-letter organization contributed to engagement in effective educational practices by analyzing National Survey of Student Engagement data at historically Black colleges and universities and predominantly White institutions. Overall, the findings indicated that Greek affiliation does enhance African American student engagement, particularly as it relates to interactions with faculty members and peers. Data also indicated that Greek affiliated members at historically Black colleges and universities appear to be more engaged than their counterparts at predominantly White institutions.

African American college students who have an interest in becoming involved on campus often join student organizations such as Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs), which have had a presence on campuses dating back to the early 1900s (Kimbrough, 1997, 2003; McClure, 2006; Ross, 2000). As a result of their Greek affiliation, African American students at both historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly White institutions (PWIs) have been exposed

to various leadership roles, opportunities for civic responsibility within and beyond the collegiate environment, and a network of men and women who promote and encourage academic achievement and community service (Harper, 2008; Harper & Harris, 2006; Kimbrough, 1995, 1997; Patton & Bonner, 2001). Despite the documented history regarding the impact of Greek affiliation on African American college students (Kimbrough, 1997), the critical question concerning the relevance of Greek-

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letter organizations on college campuses, broadly speaking (Kuh, Pascarella, & Wechsler, 1996; Maisel, 1990; Nuwer, 1999) has remained a topic of scholarly debate (Kimbrough, 2003). Against this backdrop, Patton and Bonner (2001) stated:

With their longstanding tradition of scholarship, leadership, community service, and social activism, these organizations have served as an aegis of protection for the African American collegiate and noncollegiate community against a number of social and political forays; yet they have not existed without their share of controversy and negative press. (p. 17)

The importance and relevance of Greek affiliation, both across the landscape and within BGLOs have often been questioned over the years (McKenzie, 1990; Ruffins, 1997). In explaining the initial doubts regarding these groups, McKenzie (1990), asserted:

The unfavorable attitudes held toward the groups due to questionable membership selection and initiation practices, along with the disharmony they brought to campus life at Black colleges because of their involvement in student elections, resulted in students, faculty, and the Black population at large frequently challenging the groups to demonstrate positive contributions to student, as well as Negro life. (p. 32)

In light of these and similar viewpoints noted in the higher education and student affairs literature regarding the effects of Greek affiliation on Black student experiences and outcomes (Kimbrough, 1997, 2003; McClure, 2006), the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of Greek affiliation among Black students on measures of student engagement at HBCUs and PWIs using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

We highlight two strands of literature that are pertinent to better understanding this study. First offered is the literature related to Black student experiences at PWIs and

HBCUs. Given that students in this study attended institutions situated in one of these contexts, it is important to share what researchers have found when examining Black student experiences at both institutional types. Second is the literature related to Black student affiliation within BGLOs. We acknowledge that some Black students, although not a critical mass, may belong to predominantly White fraternities and sororities at PWIs. This study focuses specifically on BGLOs, given that their memberships are comprised overwhelmingly of African American students regardless of campus racial composition. Unfortunately, there is no existing database that offers statistics regarding the membership numbers of African American students and their respective affiliations with Greek-letter organizations. Therefore, there is no way to verify if students in this study belong to BGLOs or predominantly White sororities and fraternities. The literature shared later helps to substantiate why we have taken the stance that the large majority of African American students belong to BGLOs.

### ***AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT HBCUS AND PWIS***

Several scholars have suggested that college racial composition plays a major role in the extent to which students are involved and engaged on campus (Allen, 1987; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Flowers, 2002; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999). Recent and historical research has consistently indicated that African American students deal with tremendous challenges while attending PWIs (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Flowers, 2002; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2001; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). They often feel isolated, marginalized, and excluded at PWIs in the midst of adapting to the academic and social culture on these campuses. These feelings are largely due to the perceived

chilly campus racial climates at PWIs (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado, 1992; Rankin & Reason, 2005). The literature on campus racial climates is replete with instances of Black students' exclusion from study groups, lower expectations from faculty members and expectations to represent "the Black experience" during class discussions. Given these negative experiences, Black students often seek support and networks such as the Black student union, Black culture centers, or BGLOs (Kimbrough, 1995; Patton, 2006; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). "Social support is arguably the most important determinant of college success and satisfaction, particularly for Black students attending predominantly White institutions" (Brown, 2000, p. 480).

In terms of HBCUs, the research reveals a different narrative. Scholars who have examined African American students' experiences contend that the HBCU environment is overwhelmingly positive and beneficial, particularly in comparison to PWIs. For example, findings indicate that HBCU attendance fosters overall academic and social success (Fleming, 1984; Flowers 2002), cultural affinity (Allen, 1987), and greater student engagement (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). Black students experience successes at HBCUs because they do not have to address issues of racial discrimination that often serve as roadblocks for involvement at PWIs (Watson & Kuh, 1996). Greater involvement, academic achievement, and an overall level of comfort are fostered at HBCUs (Fleming, 1984). African American students generally fare better at HBCUs largely due to the racial composition at these institutions, as well as opportunities to interact with faculty and administrators in a supportive environment (Allen, 1992; Bonous-Hammarth & Boatmen, 1996; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006). As Outcalt and Skewes-Cox (2002) contend, "The higher education literature is unequivocal: African American students at HBCUs fare better and are more satisfied with their college experience than their peers at PWIs" (p. 336).

### ***AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN BGLOS***

During the 1990s, it was not uncommon to read news headlines such as "The Persistent Madness of Greek Hazing" (Ruffins, 1998) or "Fratricide: Are African American Fraternities Beating Themselves to Death" (Ruffins, 1997). Following this period, Kimbrough (2003) asserted that pledging practices have been a primary topic of concern for BGLOs and college campuses nationwide. Moreover, incidents of chapter removals and member suspensions resulting from hazing have also been discussed in the literature (Jones, 2004; Kimbrough, 2000; Ruffins, 1997). Furthermore, the decline in academic achievement among the collegiate chapters of these organizations (Harper, 2000), inappropriate membership selection practices (Patton & Bonner, 2001), and the need to redefine their emphasis on community service (McKenzie, 1990) have led many university administrators, Greek affairs professionals, the national leadership of these organizations, and students to question the relevance of BGLOs and ponder measures that might be taken to improve some of their operational procedures and practices (Kimbrough, 2000, 2003; Patton & Bonner, 2001).

Despite the past and current challenges facing BGLOs (Kimbrough, 2000, 2003), research has shown that membership in BGLOs provide benefits to affiliated students. For example, Schuh, Triponey, Heim, and Nishimura (1992) found that membership in a BGLO provided bonding networks both locally and nationally, allowed members to act as role models, and stressed the importance of community service involvement. A study by Harris (1998) determined that involvement in Black sororities allowed women to become leaders and enhanced their academic experience. Similarly, Phillips (2005) stated, "The sisterhood network of African American sororities has provided avenues for self-improvement, racial uplift, and leadership development" (p. 347). Phillips maintains that African American sororities retain cultural

traditions of the African American community and serve as an oppositional space of resistance against oppressive societal systems, such as those imposed by race, class, and gender (Phillips).

The research on the benefits of Greek affiliation among Black men indicated that those who participated in Greek organizations developed a greater sense of their racial identity and self-esteem when compared to nonmembers (Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). In addition to these benefits, McClure (2006) noted that Greek affiliation within a Black fraternity was central in helping African American men succeed in college. Their membership in a BGLO facilitated closer bonding with other Black men, a stronger connection to the campus environment, and greater knowledge regarding Black history. McClure's findings are consistent with the work of Harper and Harris (2006) who suggested that in comparison to their same race, non-Greek affiliated peers, African American men in historically Black fraternities hold more campus leadership positions and are more involved in campus activities. While other minority student organizations exist on campus and provide leadership development, affiliation in BGLOs tends to be the most popular vehicle for African American students to become leaders, particularly at PWIs (Kimbrough, 1995; Sutton & Terrell, 1997).

The literature presented thus far suggests that African American students have more positive experiences at HBCUs and that their affiliation in BGLOs results in positive educational and social outcomes for these college students. However, there is a dearth of literature that focuses on the impact of Greek affiliation on Black student engagement. Most of the knowledge that has been gained about BGLOs' impact on student engagement is contained in anecdotal reflections of personal experiences or information that has been published in the written histories of these organizations (Crump, 1991; Giddings, 1988). While these sources of information are helpful and contribute to an ongoing dialogue, they do not

sufficiently contribute to the social science research needed to gain a clearer understanding of how participation in these organizations enhances African American student engagement and how campus racial composition factors into engagement levels.

### ***STUDENT ENGAGEMENT***

In contrast to existing empirical studies about African American student affiliation within sororities and fraternities, the research on student engagement is abundant and fairly consistent (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). College student development scholars have demonstrated through various studies that the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities are the greatest predictors of their cognitive and personal development (Astin, 1993; Pace, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Studies also show that certain institutional practices, such as inclusive and affirming learning environments, where performance expectations are clearly communicated and reasonably set, are associated with high levels of student engagement (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Pascarella, 2001). These two concepts, how much students are engaged in effective educational practices and what policies, practices, programs, and/or cultural elements institutions have in place to prompt students to take part in these activities, coalesce to define student engagement.

Student engagement research that focuses on Black student Greek affiliation is limited in number. However, recent investigations using NSSE data have examined student engagement at HBCUs in comparison to PWIs (Bridges, Kinzie, Nelson Laird, & Kuh, 2008; Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon, Williams, & Salinas Holmes, 2007). These studies suggest that HBCU attendance results in positive effects on many educational outcomes for African American students, especially social and academic

TABLE 1  
Operational Definitions of the Measures of Student Engagement

<i>Student Engagement</i>	<i>Operational Definition</i>	<i>Cronbach Alpha</i>
Academic challenge	Nature and amount of work performed (11-item composite scale)	.70
Active and collaborative learning	Frequency of class participation and collaborative learning (7-item composite scale)	.68
Student-faculty interaction	Frequency of student interactions with faculty (6-item composite scale)	.73
Supportive campus environment	Degree to which the institution is perceived to be supportive (6-item composite scale)	.76

developmental outcomes. To extend the research in this area, for the purposes of this study, we created operational definitions of student engagement outcomes (see Table 1). More specifically, we focused on measures of students' engagement in effective educational practices. Four scales that capture students' participation in effective educational practices (Kuh, 2001, 2003) were among the measures upon which we focused: (a) academic challenge ( $\alpha = .70$ ), (b) active and collaborative learning ( $\alpha = .68$ ), (c) student-faculty interaction ( $\alpha = .73$ ), and (d) supportive campus environment ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

## METHODS

The data for this study were obtained from the NSSE, which collects data from thousands of first-year students and seniors at 4-year colleges and universities across the nation each year. NSSE is designed to measure students' participation in educational experiences that prior research has connected to valued outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2001, 2003). In 2003, the year from which the data for this study were analyzed, approximately 350,000 students were randomly selected from files provided by the 437 participating colleges and universities. The NSSE standard sampling scheme calls for an equal number of first-year and senior students to be selected with the size determined by the num-

ber of undergraduate students enrolled at the institution. The average institutional response rate for NSSE 2003 was 43%, with a range of 14% to 70% across the various institutions, resulting in normed responses from 147,166 students. The number of African American students in the 2003 NSSE sample was 9,539; 2,996 of the students attended HBCUs and 6,543 of the students attended PWIs. At HBCUs, approximately 8% of the sample participated in Greek-letter organizations. At PWIs, approximately 7% of the sample participated in Greek-letter organizations.

The analytical techniques used for this study were based on previous research and scholarship produced on this topic (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Ordinary least squares regression was used to estimate the direct effects of Greek affiliation on African American students' engagement (Table 2). In the first stage of data analysis, we regressed each of the four measures of student engagement on a categorical variable indicating Greek affiliation status (coded: 1 = *Greek student*, 0 = *non-Greek student*) while controlling for a host of potentially confounding precollege variables (e.g., gender, age); institutional characteristics (e.g., institutional control, college selectivity); academic experiences (e.g., grades, college major); and nonacademic experiences (e.g., residence status, work experiences). In the second stage of data analysis, we divided the sample by college racial composition to estimate

TABLE 2  
Regression Summaries for the Effects of Greek Affiliation on Student Engagement

<i>Student Engagement</i>	<i>Metric Regression Coefficient</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>
Part A: All African American Students			
Academic challenge	.309	.055	.062
Active and collaborative learning	.586*	.163	.122
Student-faculty interaction	.711*	.205	.085
Supportive campus climate	.437	.089	.041
Part B: HBCU Students			
Academic challenge	.759	.134	.073
Active and collaborative learning	.693*	.189	.121
Student-faculty interaction	.834*	.230	.104
Supportive campus climate	.411	.082	.037
Part C: PWI Students			
Academic challenge	.053	.009	.065
Active and collaborative learning	.535*	.151	.106
Student-faculty interaction	.581*	.171	.075
Supportive campus climate	.436	.089	.046

Note: \* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

the direct effects of Greek affiliation, separately, for students who attended HBCUs and students who attended PWIs. In the third stage of data analysis, effect sizes were computed by dividing the metric regression coefficient indicating Greek affiliation status by the pooled standard deviation of the outcome measure to examine the practical significance of the differences between Greek students and non-Greek students (Hays, 1994).

### **LIMITATIONS**

The institutions that participated in NSSE in 2003 were representative of all U.S. colleges and universities in terms of institutional characteristics such as Carnegie classification, control, and locale (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2003). However, generalizations from NSSE are limited because some institutions choose to participate whereas others do not. In this particular study, this means that our results and conclusions most appropriately

apply to those institutions that chose to administer NSSE in 2003. Generalizations beyond the HBCUs and PWIs that self-selected to participate in NSSE during the 2003 administration should be made with caution.

In addition, the comparisons between students at the different types of HBCUs and PWIs were made without controlling for pre-college measures of students' engagement or their precollege academic preparation. Consequently, it is remotely possible that differences found between groups of students could be attributable to differences in institutional contexts or differences in the groups of students that existed prior to college. The study also did not specifically identify whether an African American student, who reported to have been a member of a Greek-lettered organization, was a member of a BGLO. Thus, it is possible that some African American students in the sample may have participated in Greek-letter organizations that were not predominantly Black. An additional limitation of this study is that the findings stem from older NSSE data. How-

ever, given the statistical significance of NSSE from year to year, the findings are still very applicable today.

## **RESULTS**

The regression summaries on Table 2 show that the direct effects of Greek affiliation were higher in magnitude for HBCU students for the active and collaborative learning scale and the student-faculty interaction scale. Thus, the results of this study suggest that, similar to previous findings that compared HBCU and PWI student outcomes (e.g., Fleming, 1984; Nelson Laird et al., 2007; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Watson & Kuh, 1996), African American students in fraternities and sororities at HBCUs are slightly more engaged in effective educational practices than African American students in fraternities and sororities at PWIs.

Of particular interest were the results on the active and collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction scales. All Greek-affiliated students were significantly more involved in the activities that comprised those two scales. However, the magnitude of the regression coefficients as well as the resulting effect sizes for HBCU Greeks indicated that fraternity and sorority membership contributed considerably more to these students' collaborative academic activities with peers and their interactions with faculty. In contrast, African American Greek-affiliated students at PWIs, while significantly engaged in these two benchmarks, appeared to be less engaged than all African American Greek-affiliated students who completed the NSSE in 2003. Even after controlling for student characteristics and experiences as well as additional institutional characteristics, there was a difference in students' scores on these two measures of engagement by college racial composition.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this study suggest a moderately strong relationship between sorority and fraternity affiliation and engagement among African

American students. However, the results for African American fraternity and sorority affiliation at HBCUs indicated that their overall engagement exceeded that of their peers at PWIs. Student engagement was particularly noticeable with regard to student-faculty interaction and active and collaborative learning experiences. Perhaps due to a greater understanding and appreciation of the value and meaning of BGLOs at HBCUs, these campus environments may be able to stimulate increased levels of engagement among African American students. At minimum, the results imply that campuses that incorporate Black Greek culture into the larger campus culture may promote higher levels of student engagement.

Despite the challenges facing BGLOs (Jones, 2004, Kimbrough, 2003), the data analysis indicates that membership in these organizations enhances African American student engagement. There is some indication that at PWIs, African American sorority and fraternity members may be dealing with issues that are not as prevalent at HBCUs, thus inhibiting higher levels of engagement. Supporting this proposition, research has indicated that African Americans at PWIs deal with issues of racism and discrimination on college campuses across the United States (Cabrera et al., 1999; Kim, 2002). These types of experiences and issues at PWIs (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) may explain why BGLOs can play a significant role in enhancing the experiences of these students by providing opportunities that may not be readily available for them in other aspects of the campus environment. These opportunities, in turn, may help students in their interactions with faculty and collaborative learning.

The results also indicate that fraternity and sorority involvement promoted increased interactions with faculty members and higher levels of collaboration with peers. This study also found, for each group of African American students, that there were positive effects of Greek affiliation on the active and collaborative learning scale. Astin concluded, "the stu-

dent's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (1993, p. 398). Given this, the powerful impact of the peer group for African American students can be enhanced by Greek affiliation through increased collaboration with peers. This finding also indicates that African American sorority and fraternity members are well positioned to facilitate positive student interactions on campus and promote active and collaborative learning for all African American students.

There is a preponderance of studies that suggests positive cognitive and intellectual outcomes that emerge from students interacting with faculty in meaningful ways (Astin, 1993; Kitchener, Wood, Jensen, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tsui, 1999). Kuh (1995) also found that increased levels of student-faculty interactions contributed to desired learning outcomes. The higher levels of student-faculty interaction for the African American Greek organization members in this study indicates that these students may accrue intellectual benefits above and beyond what one receives from simply attending college. As a result, student affairs professionals may be able to use the study's findings to describe some of the constituent cognitive benefits of Greek affiliation when promoting Greek life on campus.

Additional research on sorority and fraternity affiliation among African American students should focus on gender differences. Such studies might compare levels of engagement between African American males and females who are affiliated with Greek organizations against those not affiliated with these groups. Another future study could examine trends of engagement between Greek-affiliated African American and White students at PWIs. Future research should also examine item-level effects to determine which specific activities within the active and collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction scales contribute most directly to the overall findings of this study to help campuses structure Greek programming around these activities. Finally,

future studies should focus on subsequent analyses of other racially underrepresented student populations and how Greek affiliation fosters development and shapes their experiences.

Given the findings of this study, some key recommendations for student affairs administrators are noted. One recommendation is to work collaboratively with African American Greek affiliated students to create a program that fosters greater interaction with faculty members on campus. A program such as this might entail having faculty members (some of whom may be members of Greek-letter organizations), serve as guest speakers at social programs or facilitators at annual retreats. The results of this study also suggest that creating a learning community that focuses on Black Greek life might also appeal to students and encourage engagement. A learning community focused on the values and customs of Greek life could serve several purposes. African American students who are considering membership in a BGLO could learn about the diversity among the various historically Black groups. This type of programming could be a positive factor in creating strong peer networks across Greek and non-Greek affiliated students. Moreover, professors could serve in a "faculty-in-residence" capacity and facilitate educational activities to promote engagement with African American students regardless of Greek affiliation. The aforementioned recommendations would likely work well at PWIs, but would also be beneficial at HBCUs since the findings suggest that at HBCUs, Greek affiliation is an added value.

Overall, this study is consistent with a significant body of research accumulated during the past 30 years that has documented higher levels of involvement in effective educational practice for African American students at HBCUs in comparison to their African American peers at PWIs. The examination into the impact of Greek affiliation at HBCUs indicates that membership in these organizations more readily facilitates students' interactions with faculty members and collaborative interactions



with other students. By demonstrating that membership in BGLOs at HBCUs promote distinctive educational outcomes, this study adds to the literature base regarding the significance of HBCU environments.

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