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Literature Review: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Fraternity and Sorority Life

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SAHE 637: Introduction to Student Affairs & Higher Education

Dr. Kelsey Bogard

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Literature Review: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Fraternity and Sorority Life

Fraternities and sororities have been a part of social life at institutions in the United States since the 1700s (Mullins Jones, n.d.). The first ever fraternity was created in 1776, the first women's sorority was established in 1870, and the first ever Black fraternity was developed in 1906 (Freeman, 2020; History – Kappa Alpha Psi, 2023; Mullins Jones, n.d.). These organizations have been known to provide college-age students with leadership development, networking opportunities, and as some would argue most important, lifelong bonds and friendships. Despite all of the positives of Greek life, it has its negatives as well. Fraternities and Sororities have a long and complicated history with racism, specifically exclusion and discrimination. Traditionally, fraternities were made up of white, religious, and wealthy men, because those were the people attending institutions at the time (Mullins Jones, n.d.). Because of this fact, the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion did not come into the picture of fraternities and sororities until fairly recently.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion, also known as DEI, has been a hot topic in social justice and education now more than ever. DEI conversations are important to have in order to stay informed on social justice, ethical responsibility, mitigating bias and discrimination, and to have better decision making (Arsel et al., 2021). In a college or university setting, these conversations allow students and student affairs professionals to foster innovation and critical thinking, create an inclusive learning environment, improve campus climate, adapt to changing demographics, and address social barriers (Tyson, 2019). There are a few key topics that are consistently brought up when discussing the DEI issue in fraternities and sororities. First, it is important to understand the historical context of racism in Greek life, next are modern day issue of racism in

Greek life, then there is the role of Black Greek-letter organizations, and finally are the efforts for reform and more theories for DEI in Greek Life

Historical Context of Racism in Greek Life

To understand why there is such an issue with racism in fraternities and sororities, it is necessary to do research over the historical context of racism in Greek life. As previously mentioned, fraternities used to be social groups that were extremely exclusive. These organizations were truly only interested in recruiting upper-class white men (Gasman, 2022). Specific groups were targeted to be excluded, such as African Americans, members of the Jewish community, and any other non-white students (Gasman, 2022). Practices such as these that were discriminatory and exclusionary were justified because members argued that they needed to maintain and uphold tradition, which they believed protected their solidarity (“Why historically-white sororities and fraternities,” 2021). Some groups even created a white clause, which allowed fraternities to only recruit white members (Barone, 2014). Actions and practices such as these only perpetuated a racist culture that promoted segregation when it came to not only fraternities and sororities, but higher education as a whole.

Some scholars argue that maintaining and upholding tradition was not the only reason why fraternities and sororities were being outright racist. According to research done by Brian S. Joyce (2018), members of these traditionally white organizations were protecting access to resources. Fraternities and sororities were, and still are, seen as tools to work one’s way up towards their career goals. These organizations offer leadership and career opportunities such as internships, networking events, and other ways to improve upon one’s growth, development, and leadership skills. Members of these organizations did not want these precious opportunities to be given to anyone else. Institutionally speaking, benefits and opportunities such as these were held

exclusively for white students only (Joyce, 2018). Practices such as this only reinforce the deep roots and notions of racism in fraternities and sororities, as well as colleges and universities themselves. This practice is also an example of white people in power creating systems of oppression for Black communities. In this context specifically, Black college-age students. With these systems in place, there was no room for growth for this community. In fact, there was not much growth in this aspect until the 1960s.

The case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which called for separate but equal facilities, being overturned by *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) led to the desegregation of colleges and universities in the United States (Von Bergen et al., 2020). Von Bergen, Bressler, and Whitlock (2020) describe the positive effects of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) here:

The Brown decision invigorated the civil rights movement and spurred American colleges and universities by the early 1960s to good-faith efforts to achieve racial integration, which has been found to have significant positive effects... Brown signified a critical moment in the fight for racial equality in America and the ending of the Plessy doctrine. Notions of separate spaces, separate entrances, and separate services for Americans was archaic, unworkable, and inherently racist. (p. 2).

While this was a massive step in the direction towards creating inclusive spaces, that did not mean that fraternities and sororities were not still internally racist. From the outside, one could tell that technically, racial bans were removed from institutions. From an inside perspective though, these organizations were still extremely hostile to Black students (Gasman, 2022). One tactic that white members of these organizations used to keep Black students out was legacy admissions, which give recruiting preferences to new members who have a familial relationship

with alumni of that specific organization (“Why historically-white sororities and fraternities,” 2021). This is yet again another way that white people in power have created systems of oppression for Black communities. More specifically, Black college-age students in higher education.

Modern Day Racism in Greek Life

Most research done on racism in fraternities and sororities today shows that racism is still extremely present in these organizations, whether it is overt, or covert. Most scholarly articles describe three main ways that racism manifests in Greek life nowadays: through exclusionary recruitment practices, through insensitive party themes and social events, and microaggressions and racial hostility. First, as mentioned before, research has shown that fraternities and sororities have historically had systemically racist recruitment practices. Apparently, this has not changed. Legacy status is still a practice used by many fraternities and sororities to this day (Miles, 2020). Alyssa Miles, an Alpha Sigma Alpha Sorority alum who wrote for *The Sorority Life*, stated in an article as recent as 2020 that:

Because a legacy has typically grown up with a family member who has shared sorority experiences and values with her, a legacy may receive special consideration during the recruitment process. For this reason, sororities want to identify their legacies before recruitment begins.

Because these organizations are predominantly white, accepting legacies that are also more than likely white, is a way to keep minority communities out of these organizations. Another way that Greek recruitment is exclusionary, is simply the knowledge that students have of the past (Joyce, 2018). Black students may feel uncomfortable going to fraternity or sorority houses to go through recruitment, because they know about the historical past of racism. If fraternity and

sorority members are not willing to see past their biases and meet students where they are, they will never be able to get rid of their racist reputation.

Next, racism is seen in fraternities nowadays through racially insensitive party themes and social events. “Ghetto parties” seem to be happening on campuses all over the United States, according to broadcast by Katie Toth with WSHU Public Radio station at Sacred Heart University. The specific example Toth (2016) gives is from Fairfield University, where their Theta Xi chapter held one of these “Ghetto parties.” She said that “students dress in costumes and act out stereotypes of urban Black youth,” descriptions such as “‘rappers,’ ‘thugs,’ ‘basketball players,’ and ‘bad bitches’” were used to describe who was invited, and phrases such as “‘Hood Ratchet Thursday’ and ‘we goin back to the hood tonight’” were used on the invitation (Toth, 2016). The use of African American Vernacular English by white people in a way that is discriminatory against Black people is incredibly offensive, misrepresentative, and frustrating for Black communities (Mustafa, 2017).

Finally, a key finding in research about modern day racism in Greek life is microaggressions and racial hostility. One quick internet search will be able to pull up hundreds of “racist incidents” from students in fraternities and sororities across the United States. One Los Angeles Times article titled “8 more fraternity scandals that made national headlines” (2015) is one of the first articles to come up when searching “Greek life racial hostility.” This article outlined scandals that include microaggressions and racial hostility such as students in Tau Kappa Epsilon at Arizona State University dressing as racial stereotypes on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Alpha Sigma Epsilon chapter at The Clemson University was suspended after holding a “Cripmas party,” students in Sigma Alpha Epsilon at Oklahoma State University were caught on video chanting a racist song, along with several other incidents (Panzar, 2015). From this article

alone it is clear to see that fraternities and sororities still hold their racist beginnings and traditions as they did when they were founded. This begs the question, “does Greek life even care about becoming more inclusive?” While some schools are taking a stand to make a change and see a difference in their systems, it is obvious that there is way more work to be done. Unfortunately, these big southern schools that see the most incidences of microaggressions and racial hostility are setting the example.

Role of Black Greek-Letter Organizations

To understand the role of Black Greek-letter organizations, or BGLOs, it is important to know some historical context. According to scholars, BGLOs, were formed in response to the exclusionary actions and practices of traditionally and predominantly white fraternities and sororities (Peguero, 2014). The first BGLO, Kappa Alpha Psi, was founded in 1906 at Cornell University (History – Kappa Alpha Psi, 2023). By the mid-20th century, the entirety of the Divine Nine had been founded, which was made up of Kappa Alpha Psi, Alpha Phi Alpha, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Omega Psi Phi, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, Sigma Gamma Rho, and Iota Phi Theta (Vines, 2013). These organizations were founded upon the key values of community service, activism, and the uplifting of the Black community. Because Black students were shut out of career opportunities by white students, as mentioned before, these BGLOs gave Black students opportunities for leadership development and growth that they did not have before.

The role of these organizations was to create networking, mentorship, and support opportunities for Black students (Peguero, 2014). Rituals, missions, and mottos that are sacred to these BGLOs emphasized “service to others, educational advancement, and the pursuit of social justice,” which was a reflection of the struggles the Black community faced, and still faces today. (CITAITON PG #). The impact of BGLOs’ initial values went way beyond campus. Because

BGLOs emphasized activism and social justice, they aided Black communities during periods of history where those communities were not supported. This includes the fight against segregation, voting suppression, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Famous leaders of the Civil Rights Movement who were involved in BGLOs include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, and Coretta Scott King, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha (Vines, 2023). Today, BGLOs are spaces where Black students are able to find a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation (Peguero, 2014). Black Greek-letter organizations are just as important today as they were back when they were founded.

Even though BGLOs are important and have made a positive impact on Black students, research has shown that there are still several challenges faced by these organizations. Especially those chapters at predominantly white institutions, or PWIs. Along with the microaggressions and racial hostility that these groups may face from traditionally white fraternities and sororities mentioned before, these groups also face institutional disparities. Unfortunately, at many schools, BGLOs operate with fewer resources than other Greek-letter organizations (Peguero, 2014). This makes it significantly more difficult to host events and offer scholarships, which are some of the most important parts of many student organizations. This reflects the inequality that Black students face from a different perspective than what has been seen before. The research shows that groups of marginalized students are not only discriminated against by other students, but also by higher education as a whole. It is already difficult for Black students to navigate predominantly white spaces such as the schools they attend, because often times, Black students feel pressure to represent their entire race, which can lead to a lot of emotional labor (Peguero, 2014). Adding on the equity issue from the school itself adds just another layer to the systemic issues that Black communities face every day.

Efforts for Reform

While doing research, it was somewhat difficult to find current efforts for reform to make fraternities and sororities more inclusive spaces, but there were three main initiatives found in a few articles. These efforts are diversity, equity, and inclusion training; revising recruitment practices; and establishing Multicultural Greek Councils (MGCs). Several national councils of fraternities and sororities have implemented DEI training for their members (Wang et al., 2023). These programs include, but are not limited to, “mandated anti-racism workshops, unconscious bias training, and cultural competence programs” (Wang et al., 2023, pg. 166). These workshops have the goal of educating members of fraternities and sororities in order to foster more inclusive environments. By teaching members about implicit biases and encouraging self-reflection, these national councils are hoping their members will be able to get rid of their organization’s racist reputation (Wang et al., 2020). Unfortunately, critics of these trainings argue that DEI workshops are not meeting these goals (Wang et al., 2020). These trainings are apparently known to be superficial because they are not able to address the real deep-rooted issues within the Greek-letter organization systems (Wang et al., 2020). DEI training can be effective, but in this case, it has been seen as performative and symbolic, which at the end of the day, will not get any work done towards creating diversity, equity, and inclusion in these spaces.

The next effort for reform is revising recruitment practices. As mentioned previously, fraternity and sorority recruitment has been proven to promote exclusion. Fortunately, national councils of several fraternities and sororities have gotten rid of legacy admissions, which has been known to favor white students (Miles, 2020). One example of this is the Greek organization known as Zeta Tau Alpha. Here is their statement on getting rid of legacy admissions: “Zeta Tau Alpha is working to build a stronger, more inclusive sisterhood. The removal of the Legacy

Policy is an important step in providing a more equitable recruitment experience for all potential new members” (“ZTA eliminates its legacy policy,” 2021). Getting rid of these historically racist practices makes the recruitment process more transparent and accessible. While this is a step in the right direction, it is only a small one. Fraternities and sororities still recruit subjectively, which means that personal recommendations and social compatibility is still taken into account (Miles, 2020). If these traditionally white organizations are not able to meet Black students where they are, that will still make Black students feel uncomfortable with going through these recruitment processes.

The last effort for reform that was found was the push to establish Multicultural Greek Councils, or MGCs. These councils include all diverse fraternities, including the aforementioned BGLOs as well as Latinx, Asian, and any other underserved groups on campus (Bryant, 2020). The goal of MGCs is not only to create more inclusive spaces on campus, but to promote diversity in Greek-life in general (Bryant, 2020). MGCs do not wish to diminish traditionally white fraternities and sororities, but rather to take down the dominance and power that they have over other organizations at their schools (Bryant, 2020). Just as BGLOs though, in schools where MGCs are implemented, they have not been seen to receive the same level of funding as the traditionally white organizations do (Bryant, 2020). This again reflects a bigger issue of racism in higher education as a whole rather than only in fraternities and sororities themselves.

More Theories for DEI in Greek-Life

Some specific theories that are crucial to the issue of DEI in fraternities and sororities are Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, Helms’ Racial Identity Theory, and Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development. The Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity focuses on a student’s sense of self

which may include identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and or religion. It also explains how environmental factors will shape their experience with their identities (Patton et al., pg. 184). This approach is intersectional and dives deep into how students will experience either privilege or oppression based on their combination of identities. Helms' Racial Identity Theory explains how students of color and white students will develop differently and how that changes their experience in college. For example, students of color go through stages of awareness that lead them to developing a positive racial identity, while white students will go through stages to hopefully one day take responsibility for social justice efforts (Patton et al., pg. 126). Using this theory will allow students to place themselves where they may be in their identity development, in order to know what steps they need to take to move forward. The last theory, Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development, can then be used to show students where they are on an ethics and morality scale. The stage that students will want to get to is the post-conventional stage. At this stage, the students will be able to understand ethical principles, which in this specific situation will include justice and equality. When students get to this stage, they will know that it is okay to challenge norms and advocate for change (Patton et al., pg. 343). There are several other theories that are important to this topic, but these are the ones that student affairs professionals can use in their decision and policy making, or in their student training in order to make the fraternities and sororities on campus more diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces for their students to thrive in.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research has shown that racism is in fact an issue in fraternity and sorority life. It seems as though this racism comes from systemic issues that are already in place in the United States, but the bigger issue is the fact that the actions and practices of fraternities and sororities has only been seen to push those systemic issues further. As more reform efforts are

made, fraternities and sororities should become a safe space for all students one day. This reform has to start at the root of the problem though. Because the research shows that many of these reforms are met with resistance, it may take years before these organizations can even get to the root of the problem (Wang et al., 2020). By understanding the historical context of racism in Greek-life, seeing the modern day racism in these organizations, knowing the important role of Black Greek-Letter Organizations, and researching efforts for reform, hopefully these organizations will one day be able to make the change to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

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