

The Effects of Sorority and Fraternity Membership on Class Participation and African American Student Engagement in Predominantly White Classroom Environments

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The relationship between Black Greek-letter organization membership and African American student engagement in almost exclusively White college classrooms was explored in this study. Data were collected through interviews with 131 members from seven undergraduate chapters at a large, predominantly White university in the Midwest. This study resulted in an explanatory model that shows how underrepresentation, voluntary race representation, and collective responsibility positively affect active participation, while Forced Representation has a negative effect. Findings also reveal that faculty teaching styles both positively and negatively affect engagement among African American sorority and fraternity members in their classes. The implications of these findings are discussed at the end of the article.

The title of Kimbrough's (2005) article, "Should Black Fraternities and Sororities Abolish Undergraduate Chapters?" captures the essence of an ongoing debate among students, various stakeholders on college and university campuses across the country, and leaders of the nine national Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs). Instead of offering a balanced description of risks and educational benefits associated with membership, Kimbrough instead chose to focus almost exclusively on the persistent problem of physical and psychological hazing within undergraduate chapters. Despite being outlawed by the nine national organizations in 1990, hazing continues to occur in BGLOs on many campuses and has resulted in lawsuits, student deaths, and blatant contradictions to espoused purposes and ideals (DeSousa, Gordon, & Kimbrough, 2004; Harper & Harris, 2006; Kimbrough, 1997, 2003). In response to his own question, Kimbrough (2005) suggests that undergraduate

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BGLO chapters should be eliminated unless the national organizations collectively rethink new member intake processes and initiate bold approaches to hold undergraduates fully accountable for adhering to hazing policies.

Despite the known presence of hazing, students on the more than 60 campuses Kimbrough visited offered several justifications for why undergraduate chapters should continue to exist – none of which pertained to the role of BGLOs in advancing the academic missions of the institutions or enhancing academic outcomes among members. Similarly, the academic contributions and limitations accrued through BGLO membership have been understudied and limited academic-related evidence has been furnished in the student affairs literature. Put another way, most explorations of the BGLO experience have focused on matters other than academics. “Although all Black fraternities [and sororities] identify academic excellence as a core value, claims that membership improves academic performance may be overstated” (Harper & Harris, 2006, p. 146). Consequently, those who attempt to justify the continued existence of undergraduate BGLO chapters must rely on anecdotal accounts and literature that focuses primarily on non-academic outcomes and experiences.

As an alternative to the popular and defensible focus on hazing in previous literature, a different behavioral manifestation of BGLO membership was explored in the present study. Specifically, while several researchers have examined hazing as a behavioral by-product of membership (e.g., DeSousa et al., 2004; Kimbrough, 1997, 2003, 2005; Jones, 2004; Sutton, Letzring, Terrell, & Poats, 2000; Williams, 1992), emphasis in the present study is placed on exploring classroom behaviors and academic engagement tendencies among undergraduate BGLO members. Although a considerable amount of research has been conducted on the experiences of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), the outcomes associated with out-of-class engagement, and hazing within BGLO chapters, published studies regarding the in-class behaviors of African American sorority and fraternity members are non-existent. Likewise, existing literature on BGLOs focuses disproportionately on socially-produced outcomes and the non-academic experiences of members, thus furnishing a one-sided rationale for their continued existence. Given this, insights into the relationship between BGLO membership and class participation were explored in the present study. Additional justification for the focus on classroom engagement is offered in the next section.

Literature Review

Class Participation and Engagement

More than 20 years ago, Pollio (1984) found that professors in a typical university classroom spent about 80% of their time lecturing to students who were attentive to what was being said less than 50% of the time. Though the nature of classroom instruction has evolved tremendously during the past several years, Sutherland and Bonwell (1996) contend that college and university instructors still invest a disproportionate amount of energy into traditional teaching methods that suppress active student participation. Likewise, in their most recent comprehensive synthesis of research on college students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note that lecturing remains the most widely-used pedagogical technique among faculty. They conclude: "It is usually the case that lecturing requires students to assume the role of passive learners... lecturing is not a particularly effective approach for exploiting the potential efficacy of the learning that occurs when students are actively engaged..." (p. 101).

After observing 32 different undergraduate classes at a single institution, Fritschner (2000) found that an average of seven students participated verbally in the classrooms she studied, while the rest sat passively and disengaged. An average of 4.4 students made two or more comments. Furthermore, the researcher found the instructors' demeanors often discouraged active engagement and students chose not to verbally participate if they perceived their questions or comments to be undesirable by faculty. Auster and MacRone (1994) found that student participation increases with the number of years in college, with juniors and seniors participating more frequently in their classes than do first-year students and sophomores.

Many scholars have called attention to the need to actively engage students in college classes. For instance, Barr and Tagg (1995) advocate a paradigmatic shift from teaching to learning and argue that the instructional paradigm under which the traditional 50-minute lecture exists is no longer appropriate or effective in contemporary college classrooms. Under the learning paradigm, the greatest attention is devoted to actively engaging students in class discussions, thereby making them co-constructors and co-owners of what they learn.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) suggest that students are more likely to participate in class when they are actively engaged and the professors' roles as all-knowing lecturers are reduced and rethought. They cite interaction, collaboration, task orientation, opportunities for communication, feedback from faculty, and mutual respect as factors that compel student engagement in the classroom and other learning environments. Furthermore, Chickering and Gamson encourage the employment of diverse teaching strategies and a wide array of interactive techniques in the college classroom. According to Astin

(1984), frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to college student satisfaction than anything else. Thus, the degree to which students are afforded opportunities to engage in conversations with faculty, both inside and outside of class, positively affects their academic performance and improves their affective dispositions toward their institutions.

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) argue that students would put forth more effort inside the classroom if their professors taught in ways that elicited engagement and were aligned with well-documented principles of good practice. "Students would write more papers, read more books, meet more frequently with faculty and peers, and use information technology appropriately" (p. 9). As a result, gains in the areas of critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, and responsible citizenship would ensue, the authors submit. Despite this, professors seldom use active participation and engagement as a barometer to measure student learning and outcomes, thus resulting in disengagement and dissatisfaction in the college classroom (Fenwick, 2001).

Classroom Experiences of African American Undergraduates

Quaye and Harper (2007) contend that the onus is typically placed on racial/ethnic minority students to make classroom environments culturally engaging and the material they learn culturally relevant. In their review of published research on African American college students on predominantly White campuses, Rovai, Gallien, and Wighting (2005) characterize classrooms as venues where White professors teach in ways that engender feelings of cultural deprivation and corresponding acts of disengagement and participatory withdrawal among African American undergraduates. Similarly, Sedlacek, Helm, and Prieto (1998) found that a significant number of African American students perceived their instructors to be racist and were disappointed with the treatment they had received in predominantly White classrooms. Regarding their in-class experiences at a PWI, the participants in Fries-Britt and Turner's (2001) study identified and elaborated on the following problems they encountered: (a) Negative comments and stereotypes from professors and their non-African American peers about the African American community; (b) being forced to validate their intellectual competence to White peers and faculty in the classroom; and (c) less-than-appropriate stereotypes about their personal appearance. Without exception, all of the participants felt they had to prove their academic worth more often than did their White peers in the classroom. Consequently, Fries-Britt and Turner found that these stereotypes eroded African American students' confidence in their academic abilities, thus resulting in diminished levels of engagement.

Calling on African American students to provide the “Black” or “minority” perspective on course topics is another common mistake made by instructors at PWIs (Howard-Hamilton, 2000). In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, author and activist bell hooks calls attention to this dilemma: “Often, if there is a lone person of color in the classroom, she or he is objectified by others and forced to assume the role of ‘native informant’... this places an unfair responsibility onto that student” (1994, p. 43). A host of other scholars have consistently called attention to other negative experiences that many African American students have at PWIs (Allen, 1996; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Sedlacek, 1999; Sedlacek et al., 1998). Consequently, descriptors like alienated, disengaged, disenfranchised, underserved, incompatible, and dissatisfied have been used to characterize the in-class and out-of-class experiences of African American undergraduates on predominantly White campuses. These experiences help explain, at least in part, why African American undergraduates, in comparison to other respondents to the National Survey of Student Engagement, reported the lowest level of satisfaction with their college experiences (NSSE, 2005).

Benefits of BGLO Membership

In spite of their “separatist and elitist social practices, coupled with capricious and reckless pledging processes” (Patton & Bonner, 2001, pp. 17-18), prior research has highlighted some of the positive outcomes associated with African American student involvement in historically Black sororities and fraternities. For instance, Kimbrough (1995) submits that African American students who are involved in campus activities in general and Greek-letter organizations specifically, are more likely to experience higher degrees of leadership development and perceive the value of leadership skills more positively than are uninvolved and unaffiliated students. In a study of 189 members, Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) found that Greek-letter organizations provide developmental opportunities to practice leadership-related skills and acquire stronger leadership abilities. Also, Pascarella, Edison, Whitt, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini’s (1996) study revealed that fraternity membership positively affects cognitive development among African American male collegians.

Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) found that sororities and fraternities are among the most popular out-of-class engagement venues for contemporary African American undergraduates at PWIs. Other researchers (e.g., Harper & Harris, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kimbrough, 2003; McClure, 2006; Patton & Bonner, 2001; Schuh, Triponey, Heim, & Nishimura, 1992) have found that Black Greek-letter organizations serve as a much-needed source of social support for African American undergraduate students on predominantly White campuses.

At PWIs, BGLOs tend to be the primary source of involvement for African American undergraduates; they sponsor most of the culturally-appelling social activities that members and nonmembers alike come to enjoy; and they provide a haven of sorts from the racism, isolation, and underrepresentation that African American students often experience (Harper, Byars, & Jelke, 2005, p. 409).

Along with these often much-needed levels of social support for male and female members, some researchers have found specific connections between BGLO membership and various aspects of identity development among African American men. For example, Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) found that African American male undergraduates who were involved in campus organizations, especially Black fraternities, had higher levels of racial identity and a more positive sense of self-esteem than did their uninvolved counterparts. The African American male student leaders in Harper's (2004) study – 40% of whom were fraternity members – had developed productive masculine identities that compelled them to view leadership and engagement positively, despite the competing and less-productive masculine codes of conduct that had been established by the majority of their same-race male peers on the six predominantly White campuses. Furthermore, scholars note that racial identity development and the development of practical competence are among the outcomes enjoyed by BGLO members in general (Harper et al., 2005), and among African American fraternity men in particular (Harper & Harris, 2006).

Nearly all of the published empirical studies, and literature related to Black Greek-letter organizations are cited in the previous sections. Again, inquiry exclusively regarding academic-related outcomes and the in-class behaviors of African American sorority and fraternity members at PWIs is non-existent. Thus, the following questions were explored in the present study: (a) What relationship, if any, exists between BGLO membership and class participation tendencies; and (b) what factors affect (either positively or negatively) engagement among African American sorority and fraternity members in overwhelmingly White college classrooms?

Method

Site

This study was conducted at a large, public research university in the Midwest. The institution is located in a small “college town,” where 90% of the citizens are White. Approximately 3.8% of the university's 31,000 undergraduate students are African American. Sixty-one percent of the African American students are women. About one-fifth of the entire undergraduate student body is affiliated with sororities and fraternities. The university hosts seven of the nine Black Greek-letter organizations recognized by the National Pan-Hellenic

Council – three sororities and four fraternities. The remaining two groups had chapters on the campus that were suspended for hazing at the time of data collection. Each Black sorority had at least twice as many members as the Black fraternity chapters. Exactly 164 African American students were members of the Black Greek-letter organizations on campus when this study was conducted. Of the university's 1,600 full-time faculty members, fewer than 50 were African American. Therefore, it was quite possible for African American students to graduate without having taken a single course from a same-race instructor, which means the majority of the classroom interactions were with White faculty.

Participants

The sample consisted of 131 African American undergraduates who were affiliated with the active Black Greek-letter organizations on campus. Each participant held membership in her or his chapter for at least one full semester. All of the students had taken multiple classes in which other African American students were marginally (if at all) represented. In fact, all but 36 students indicated that they were presently enrolled in at least one course where they were the sole representatives of the African American race at the time of data collection. Additionally, only 20 of the 131 students had taken a course from an African American instructor at the university. Data collection occurred in two phases; therefore, the participants are described separately.

Phase one. Six women and four men represented each Black Greek chapter on the campus in the first phase of data collection. Due to their large memberships, each sorority chapter had two participating members in this phase. All 10 participants were juniors or seniors who were currently taking at least one course in which no other African American student was enrolled during the semester in which the study was conducted. With the exception of one fraternity member, the participants had been affiliated with their respective chapters for at least two academic school years. Only two participants held leadership positions within their organizations; the other eight were general members. Also, only one male and one female participant were pursuing degrees in the same academic major. Only one participant in this phase had taken a course from an African American professor at the university.

Phase two. Of the 121 students participating in this phase, 76 were sorority women (62.8%) and 45 were fraternity men (37.2%). Sophomores, juniors, and seniors representing a wide-range of academic majors were among the participants. Though only 86 students were currently enrolled in classes where they were the only African American students, 113 indicated that they were presently taking at least one course where there were fewer than four other African Americans; the remaining eight were Black Studies majors, thus many of the classes in which they were enrolled had significant numbers of same-race

students. On average, the participants in this phase had been affiliated with their organizations for three full semesters. Chapter presidents and other officers, as well as general members, were represented in the sample during this phase of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews were first conducted with the 10 African American sorority and fraternity members from Phase One. To recruit participants, I attended chapter meetings of the seven BGLOs on the campus and asked for volunteers who were currently enrolled in a class where they were the only African American students. These members were invited to participate in three rounds of one-on-one interviews (approximately five total hours). The first two volunteers from each of the three sororities and the first volunteer from each fraternity chapter were selected. A semi-structured interview technique was used in the face-to-face interview sessions, which simultaneously permitted data collection and authentic participant reflection (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Questions focused on factors that affected the participants' engagement in nearly all-White classes, as well as the role of their respective BGLOs in the classroom. Although specific questions and interview protocol were used, the discussions often became conversational. All cassette tapes were transcribed at the end of each round of interviews and transcripts were sent to each of the 10 participants for accuracy confirmation.

The analysis process began with readings of the verbatim interview transcripts from each focus group. Reflective comments, or what Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to as "marginal remarks," regarding my own suppositions and emerging judgments about the data were written alongside the margins of printed copies of each transcript. Next, the transcripts were uploaded and linearly arranged in the NVivo® Qualitative Research Software program. Here, I engaged in pattern coding (Miles & Huberman), where code words were assigned to passages of text that would eventually enable me to pull together common perspectives and experiences, while discarding cues that were largely unreflective of the participants' shared experiences. This process resulted in the identification of emerging constructs and pursuable leads that aided in the development of protocols for the next set of interviews.

During the second round of individual interviews, I addressed any discrepancies the 10 participants found in the initial interview transcripts and posed specific follow-up questions to probe more deeply into insights they previously offered. After the second set of interviews, I further analyzed the data and developed a list of observable actions and engagement behaviors. Before the third round of interviews, I visited an almost exclusively White class in which each of the 10 participants was enrolled (with permission from the professor); each class was visited twice. No two participants were enrolled in

the same course; thus, I observed 10 different classes for approximately 20 total hours. I sat in the back of the room and observed the participants' levels of engagement. Observation fieldnotes were taken, but are not treated as data for reporting purposes in the Findings section of this article. Instead, my fieldnotes were used during analysis to craft specific follow-up questions for the final round of one-on-one interviews with the 10 individual participants. The students were aware that they were being observed.

Based on responses from the first three rounds of individual interviews, a preliminary set of constructs were developed to explain the factors influencing the class participation rates of the first 10 students. These constructs guided the development of interview protocol for the next phase of data collection – focus groups with African American sorority and fraternity chapters. The focus group method was selected because “the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view or great diversity of views can be quickly assessed” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). Focus groups were also effective because they afforded participants the opportunity to build upon the reflections of others, while dispelling exaggerations and uncommon experiences.

I attended another chapter meeting of each organization to recruit members to participate in 90-minute focus group sessions. Members from each of the seven chapters agreed to contribute. Specifically, 79.9% of the active sorority and fraternity members at the university chose to be a part of this study. Though there were only seven chapters, 11 focus groups were conducted due to the large memberships of the sororities. All of the focus group sessions were conducted immediately after chapter meetings; therefore, members were already assembled. The 10 participants from phase one of data collection did not participate in the focus groups.

Pattern coding was also used to analyze data collected in the focus groups. Code reports were generated from NVivo® and used to construct memos. Regarding this important step in the analytical process, Miles and Huberman (1994) report: “Memoing helps the analyst move easily from empirical data to a conceptual level, refining and expanding codes further, developing key categories and showing their relationships, and building toward a more integrated understanding” (p. 74). The combined data from the individual interviews and focus groups were then organized and reorganized into categories to develop an explanatory model that provides insight into the factors influencing the class participation and engagement behaviors of BGLO members in this study.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

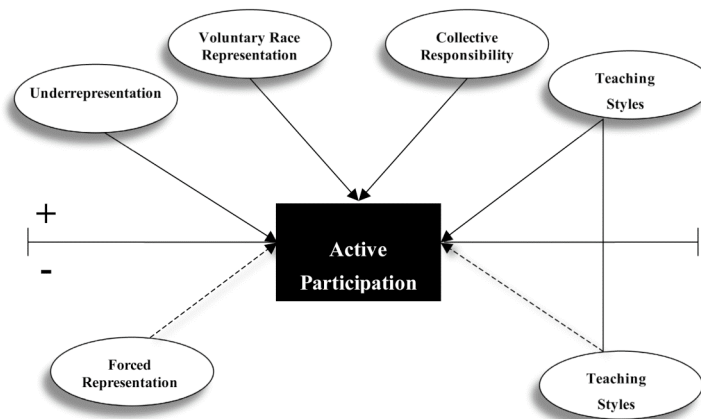
To confirm accuracy of the relationship between BGLO membership and class participation as well as the engagement factors identified vis-à-vis the aforementioned analytical processes, all 131 participants were invited to a

session where the model was presented and explained. The participants provided feedback on the accuracy of the model and posed questions regarding the meanings I made of the nexus between their BGLO affiliation and in-class behavioral tendencies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) call this technique “member checks.” Forty-seven members attended this feedback session (nine individual interviewees and 38 focus group participants). With the exception of one of its constructs, the members confirmed that the model accurately depicted the factors that compelled them to participate actively in their predominantly White classes. Based on feedback offered during the member check process, revisions were made to the one partially inaccurate construct of the model.

Findings

The participants’ perceptions of ways in which sorority and fraternity membership affected their participation in predominantly White classroom environments are presented in this section below. Specifically, five key themes that affected members’ participation in classes where they were the only African American students or in classroom environments where their same-race peers were grossly underrepresented are showcased in an explanatory model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Factors affecting the participation and engagement of BGLO members in predominantly White classroom environments



As shown in the model, the themes of Underrepresentation, Voluntary Race Representation, and Collective Responsibility positively affected members’ active participation in their classes, while Forced Representation had a negative

effect. Teaching Styles, the fifth construct of the model, both positively and negatively affected class participation tendencies among sorority and fraternity members.

Underrepresentation

The first factor that affected class participation rates was the students' realization of the underrepresentation of African Americans in their classes. Respondents noted that African American students were hardly ever represented in almost all of their classes. A fraternity member said it actually "shocked" him to see another African American person in class on the first day. In nearly every interview, the respondents indicated that they were motivated to participate because they were the "lone" African American students. Their recognition of the degrees to which they were underrepresented became particularly important when topics involving racial issues or multicultural concerns arose in their classes.

In the individual interviews and focus groups, most participants said they felt "obligated" to speak on behalf of the African American community. One member asserted, "If I'm the only minority or if I'm one of only a few minority students, I feel obligated to speak up more to debunk myths and clarify misconceptions about minorities in my all-White classes." Similarly, a junior sorority member added:

Sometimes if I'm the only African American student in the class and the discussion has something to do with a racial issue, I will be more vocal because I feel like I have a responsibility as the only African American in that class to speak up on behalf of others who aren't represented there and whose voices are often silenced.

The participants repeatedly indicated feeling self-motivated to provide the missing minority perspective, and responsible for educating their White peers and instructors on issues related to African Americans and other people of color when they were underrepresented in the classroom.

Voluntary Race Representation

Another factor influencing the class participation of African American students in this study was their voluntary commitment to representing themselves, African Americans at-large, and their Greek-letter organizations. Some students wanted to show that they had read or "knew the correct answers," while others felt the need to perform well and participate actively in order to positively represent their sororities and fraternities. In an individual interview, a sorority member said she was usually more apt to participate when she had done all the readings because she could represent herself positively by showing the teacher and her White classmates what she had learned. Several focus group participants made similar claims. Reflecting on the connection between

his personal learning style, commitment to positive self-representation, and class participation, one student offered the following:

I want people to know that I am educated and knowledgeable and that I have valid and intelligent opinions. This breaks down any stereotypes they may have about me or African Americans in general. Besides that, I learn much better when I talk with my peers, instead of listening to the teacher lecture the whole time and taking notes. Just knowing how I learn makes me want to participate more and show people in my classes that I am not an ignorant Black man.

One female student expressed with conviction:

I refuse to look stupid in front of these White folks. They already expect the worst from us, especially these White professors... and especially the White men who teach at this school; they really think the worst about us. I'm not going to give them more ammunition by coming to class unprepared and unwilling to intelligently contribute to class discussions, making African Americans look bad. That would be counterproductive.

One participant reflected on a different aspect of voluntary representation within the classroom:

Being a member of my sorority is sometimes a big challenge. It is tough, and at the same time rewarding for me to be affiliated with so many successful and talented Black women. They have set the bar really high for the rest of us. Everyday I realize that I am representing myself as well as AKA. I try really hard to represent my organization and our members well, especially when I am wearing AKA paraphernalia in class. I'm more inclined to speak out or volunteer in class and I am more conscious of what I say. I don't want to say something stupid and misrepresent the sorority, or myself for all that's worth.

In the focus groups, most participants agreed that they tended to participate more actively when they were "representing" in their Greek letters, usually t-shirts and jackets. "You're an easy target when you're wearing letters. It's like you're wearing a billboard that says 'hey look at me, I'm a Sigma.'" On those occasions, I must be on point in class," one student commented.

Collective Responsibility

The impact of individual grades on the overall success of the chapter, as well as the importance of being a responsible role model for other African American students, was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interviews. A junior fraternity member provided this illustrative example of how his class participation and performance affected his entire fraternity:

Because of the nature of my major, most of my classes are pretty hands on and if I don't participate, I get bad grades. If I get bad grades, the overall chapter GPA goes down, especially since we're a small chapter. If the chapter gets bad grades, we rank low among the other Greeks. If we keep ranking low, our Nationals will shut down our chapter. Hey, I don't want to be the guy who's responsible for bringing the chapter down.

Other members discussed the impact of individual grades on the overall academic vitality of their chapters. Most groups feared being suspended or placed on probation by their national headquarters because of poor academic performance. "I'd rather we get suspended because we hazed someone and nearly beat them to death... it would be crazy, okay stupid, to get suspended because the chapter members couldn't keep their grades up," one fraternity member added. Collectively, the members were aware that what they did in their classes, including participating actively, would affect their place in the all-Greek academic standings report at the end of the semester. In one focus group with an unusually small fraternity chapter, a member added: "We strive hard to be the number one Black Greek chapter on those rankings that come out every semester. We can't be the top chapter if even one of our members doesn't have his stuff together in the classroom."

Another dimension of Collective Responsibility that consistently emerged throughout the interviews was the organizations' assumption of responsibility for positively portraying all of the African American sororities and fraternities on campus. "We as Black Greeks" and "Because we're Greek" preceded many comments pertaining to role modeling and dispelling stereotypes in the classroom. A female participant said, "Black students look up to us and many someday hope to be a part of us. We have a responsibility to them to be good role models in class." A sorority member from another chapter added a similar, but more detailed reflection:

Before I pledged, I looked up to sorority members in my classes, Black and White Greek women alike. I was disappointed if they didn't represent themselves well or if they were slacking off and sleeping in class. I had high expectations. Now that I'm Greek, I know that I have a responsibility to model for other students, especially Black women, the things I was expecting of Black sorority women when I was in their shoes two years ago.

A fraternity member also offered similar remarks:

Achievement is what our fraternity is all about. Black students here really see me and the other Nupes [members of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.] as their leaders. We lead inside the classroom and outside of it. I would hate for me, or my fraternity brothers, or any other Black Greek to let down the Black students who see us as their leaders. I think the Black Greeks do a real good job of assuming responsibility for showing leadership in our classes.

Several students discussed the commonly held stereotypes and negative perceptions regarding sorority and fraternity membership. Because some of their non-Greek peers perceived members to be “party animals” and “hazers,” they worked harder in their classes to show that Greek-letter organizations, particularly the Black sororities and fraternities, were comprised of smart, articulate, and thoughtful members who were serious about academics.

Forced Representation

Feeling forced or pressured to participate was a theme that clearly emerged in the interviews. This factor negatively affected the class participation rates of the study participants, as they expressed extreme disgust with the responsibility placed upon them by their White classmates and teachers. They felt forced to represent the African American or minority community whenever issues regarding race and diversity arose in their classes. One member passionately stated, “I’m sick of it!” He elaborated more deeply on his frustration with forced representation:

One thing that is really fucked up about being Black—excuse me for saying that—is that White students always think I am the spokesperson for all Black people. I mean really... how annoying! There aren’t that many of us [Blacks] at this university, so when I’m in all-White classes, they expect me to speak on behalf of the rest of the Black students on campus. Or whenever I say something, it automatically becomes the voice of all minority students or even the voice of the Black Greeks. That makes me not want to say anything.

A female participant added:

We talked about a lot of diversity and gender issues in that class. I was always eager to participate and state my opinions. A lot of times, I could see my Caucasian classmates in awe that I would answer certain questions or challenge certain things they were saying. I felt comfortable, but on the other hand, there was a lot of uneasiness because I felt like they were making me the voice of Black people as a whole.

In a focus group session, one participant engaged his fraternity brothers in an interactive activity to emphasize his dissatisfaction with being forced to speak on behalf of all African American students in his classes.

Raise your hand if you've had a White teacher step to you wrong. You know, asking you to talk on behalf of all Blacks... [every student raised his hand]. Now, keep your hand up if that gets on your nerves... [all hands remained raised]. Okay, put your hand down if you ever pretended like you didn't know what the teacher was getting at, looked at him like you didn't have a clue where he was coming from, almost like you weren't Black... [every hand went down]. See what I mean, these professors are so insensitive. They think it is cool to expect Black students to teach them and everyone else in the class about Blacks. I don't do it. I look at them like they're speaking a foreign language when they approach me that way.

Teaching Styles

The final most frequently cited factor behind the participants' willingness (or lack thereof) to participate in class had to do with the teaching styles of their instructors. Pedagogical techniques used by the faculty had both positive and negative effects on class participation. If participants perceived their teachers to be engaging and interactive, they participated more. Conversely, if they deemed their teachers boring, they participated less. In the individual interviews, nine of the 10 participants expressed frustration with teachers "who lecture the whole time." A sorority woman admitted to participating less in lecture courses, where participation was often uninvited.

If the teacher is interesting and motivates me to be a part of the class, then I will participate a lot. If I am in a lecture hall with two hundred people, I do not feel obligated to even try to participate. I would say that class size and the style of the teacher are the two main things. I have to feel invited to participate. I have teachers who don't invite students to participate in class, they just lecture.

Members indicated that their professors' enthusiasm about teaching and ability to make the content applicable to their personal interests heavily influenced their inclination to participate in their courses. A male participant reflected upon a course in which he had participated more actively than any other.

A long time ago in one of my English classes, I participated a lot. There really wasn't anything different about the class makeup; it was the professor. It was another class where I was the only African American student, but I had a really interactive instructor who was super excited about teaching. His excitement was so strong that it would have been hard for me to just sit there and not participate. He made me want to participate

and seemed grateful when I did. I learned so much in that class. He was an incredible teacher!

Reportedly, engaging professors who ignited such enthusiasm and frequently invited high levels of class participation were rare and hard to find on the campus at which this study was conducted. “This semester, all of my teachers lecture and only lecture,” one participant added.

Discussion and Implications

The findings presented in the previous section provide insight into the effects of sorority and fraternity membership on the class participation rates of African American students, and pose broader implications regarding the in-class experiences of African American undergraduates at PWIs. Analyses resulted in a model illustrating the factors influencing members’ active participation in predominantly White classroom settings. Various components of the five-theme explanatory model are consistent with findings offered in published literature on active learning, the African American student experience at PWIs, and the outcomes associated with student engagement.

The Forced Representation component of the model is strongly supported by Fries-Britt and Turner’s (2001) research on the in-class experiences of African American students at PWIs, as students here also felt unfair pressure to represent their entire race. Like the participants in Feagin et al.’s (1996) study, the sorority and fraternity members here described their frustrations with being singled out by White professors and peers who often expected them to serve as spokespeople for the entire African American and/or minority communities in class discussions. Reportedly, this alienated the participants and thwarted their participation. Consequently, many members held White instructors in low regard, believing they knew very little about non-White people and diversity issues. Certainly, White faculty should be cognizant of their actions and treatment of racial/ethnic minority students in class discussions. More specifically, they should not turn to students of color whenever discussions warrant a minority perspective. Instead, they should allow students to volunteer their comments as they see fit.

An apparent dichotomy existed between the Forced Representation and Underrepresentation constructs. Though the students expressed extreme dissatisfaction with being called upon by peers and instructors to provide the minority perspective, they repeatedly indicated that seeing few or no other African American students in their classes often motivated them to speak up on behalf of their race. The difference here is that the students provided the minority perspective on their own terms instead of being forced to do so. Given the frequency with which this was mentioned throughout the interviews, it seems clear that an African American perspective will be offered by those who have a heightened awareness of the underrepresentation of their same-

race peers in classes; there is no need for faculty to push. Instantly turning to minority students for the minority voice may actually cause those who would have voluntarily spoken up to suppress their comments.

That consciousness of underrepresentation actually motivated students to participate more actively offers a noteworthy contrast to previous findings. Researchers who have studied the African American student experience at PWIs (e.g., D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin et al., 1996; Fleming, 1984; Rovai et al., 2005; Sedlacek, 1999; Sedlacek et al., 1998) suggest that students in predominantly White classes tend to withdraw from academics and redirect their frustrations to irregular class attendance, passivity, and disengagement. The participants said the inadequate representation of other African Americans had a positive effect on their willingness to participate in class. Instead of being alienated, they were actually motivated. Surely, underrepresentation must affect different African American students in different ways. Because the participants in this study were affiliated with groups primarily comprised of African American students and regularly sponsored programming for the African American student community, perhaps they had stronger Black identities – as suggested by Taylor and Howard-Hamilton's (1995) findings regarding the positive impact of fraternity membership on racial identity development – thereby, inspiring them to offer remarks on behalf of their African American peers who were not there to speak on behalf of the race. This conjecture warrants additional and more direct scholarly investigation.

The Collective Responsibility component of the model speaks directly to leadership and accountability. The sorority and fraternity members reported high levels of accountability to their chapters, recognizing that their classroom performance impacted the overall success of the entire group. The participants were conscious of and inspired by achieving a respectable spot among the Black Greek chapters in the rankings released by the Greek Life Office each semester. This finding suggests that chapter advisors, sorority and fraternity affairs professionals on college campuses, and national headquarters should continue to impose high academic standards on members of undergraduate chapters, as BGLO chapters may be inclined to rise to those expectations and debunk misperceptions about their groups. The students also discussed the importance of representing their chapters well and serving as role models for other African American students in their classes. Given this, the members themselves, with the encouragement of their advisors, must engage in ongoing dialogue regarding the importance of positive self- and group-representation, as well as setting a good example for other students to follow. These values should be part of the socialization of new members to Black Greek-letter organizations.

The findings that contributed to the Teaching Styles component of the model were not surprising. Nearly all of the participants in the current study expressed extreme dissatisfaction with their instructors' heavy reliance on lectures. This finding is consistent with the assertions offered by other researchers who have championed active learning and student engagement inside the classroom (e.g., Pollio, 1984; Sutherland & Bonwell, 1996; Fritschner, 2000). The African American sorority and fraternity members overwhelmingly indicated that they learned more in courses that allowed them to interact actively with their professors and peers. It became clear in all of the interviews that faculty need to do more to better engage students and enliven classroom environments. The findings contributing to the Voluntary Race Representation theme imply that African American sorority and fraternity members (and perhaps other racial/ethnic minority student leaders) would enthusiastically welcome the opportunity to show they had done the readings, could offer intelligent remarks, and clarify misconceptions about people of color. This cannot be achieved if professors lecture exclusively and neglect to solicit student participation.

Conclusion

Aside from the model, the findings presented in this study point to broader and more poignant in-class issues for African American undergraduates at PWIs. It is clear that greater attention needs to be devoted to increasing the representation of African American students on predominantly White campuses. That most participants in this study spoke regularly of being the only African American students in nearly all their courses signifies failed attempts at increasing college access for diverse populations and transforming classrooms into multicultural learning environments. Also, increasing the representation of African American faculty deserves greater effort and action. Only 20 of the 131 participants had taken a course with an African American instructor; thus, most had nearly all of their classes with White faculty, many of whom they held in low regard.

Though specific to sorority and fraternity members, this article merits some discussion regarding the effects of almost exclusively White classroom environments on African American students who are not affiliated with Greek-letter organizations. Many of the factors that the participants identified as having positively contributed to their active participation were related to their membership in sororities and fraternities. Future research should explore what happens to unaffiliated African American students who do not have a fraternity chapter GPA to consider or a sorority to positively represent in their classes. Moreover, studies involving those who never become student leaders and therefore do not feel compelled to serve as role models for other African Americans could be useful as well. Given the often disengaging classroom

environments and faculty insensitivities described by the participants in this study, it appears that extra attention should be extended to those African American students who do not have an external group of peers to whom they are accountable.

Given that educationally purposeful engagement usually leads to the production of measurable and sustainable outcomes among college students (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), it seems reasonable to insist that BGLOs not be abolished at the undergraduate level. Sorority and fraternity members in the present study described how their affiliation led to productive engagement inside the classroom. A full-scale elimination of undergraduate chapters would likely yield fewer African American students who are willing to participate actively in classroom environments where they are underrepresented and professors expect them to provide the “minority perspective.” Notwithstanding the positive benefits noted herein, hazing as a toxic form of out-of-class engagement must be tackled and the membership intake process has to be renegotiated if BGLOs are to survive and continually enhance the academic and social experiences of members.

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