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Winter 2014

# Transitioning from GPA Requirements to Holistic Application Reviews

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# GPA Requirements for BGLO Membership: Hurtful or Helpful?

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## Transitioning from GPA Requirements to Holistic Application Reviews

By Donald Mitchell, Jr.

I struggle with fraternities and sororities denying membership solely or greatly based on grade point average. Minimum GPA requirements mean students who do not meet the standard are rejected without consideration. Do members of fraternities and sororities not want students who fall below the GPA minimum to become engaged, find a sense of belonging on college campuses, develop as leaders, persist toward graduation, increase their GPAs, or develop professionally? While I would argue every fraternity and sorority should consider alternatives to relying on GPA as the measure for membership, I particularly find it troubling for historically black fraternities to exclude potential members solely because they do not meet a minimum GPA. Given the importance of Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) for black students in higher education, I do not understand the value in giving so much credence to GPA. While this argument is transferable to all fraternities and sororities, I emphasize historically black fraternities because of the current state of education for black males in the United States.

My fraternity was founded more than 100 years ago. The men who founded it believed it was important to emphasize brotherhood as a way to help them persist on a predominantly white campus. They went on to serve in the armed services, practice dentistry and medicine, educate our youth, defend the public, and became some of the earliest entrepreneurs and businessmen of color. The fraternity assisted in their success. I contend that when historically black fraternities continue to increase GPA requirements, they negate the founding principles of these organizations because black men who often need the support they offer by failing to meet GPA requirements are denied access without consideration. Some black men need these organizations for social support and integration, leadership development and professional development—particularly at

## Honoring Our Founders, Creating a Standard & Accountability for Black Men

By Cory J. Anderson

Black men attending college need a support system that provides accountability to an established standard. Fraternity membership can provide this support system through adherence to a set of standards including grade point average. As professionals, we need to encourage students to meet and exceed the academic standard, mentor young men (even if they come from different backgrounds), and focus on our collective purpose.

This was important to the founders of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) and remains so today. Let's look through the lens of the Alpha Phi Alpha founders to gain further insight on success, mentorship and purpose.

### Success

"Success in life calls for thorough preparation. Success in American life today is fraught with keen competition. The Negro must compete not only with members of other races, but with those within his own race who have caught the vision of the new age and who are lured along by the attritions of success. The rank and file are dependent upon trained men and women for guidance and extraordinary service." —Eugene Kinckle Jones (Mason, 2010, p. 116)

All BGLOs profess ideals of scholarship, achievement, service and leadership. It is important BGLOs continue to uphold the mission and values of our founders to ensure members are competitive in their respective field upon graduation. As a means to do so, BGLOs have established minimum GPA requirements as a part of their membership criteria. This is a justifiable method to ensure potential new members are held to at least a minimum standard. Jack Thomas, President of Western Illinois University and Alpha Phi Alpha member, confirms. "...I believe that all Black fraternities were founded under the auspices of some level of scholarship. Becoming a member of a fraternity should

predominantly white institutions—as these benefits positively influence academic outcomes (Harper, 2008; Mitchell, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As college enrollment rates for black men decline, institutions of higher education are seeking novel ways to engage and retain black men who do attend. While historically Black fraternities can serve as a supportive option, GPA requirements sometime marginalize those who may want or need to join historically black fraternities.

Perhaps, fraternities and sororities fear lowering GPA standards will attract less serious, more socially-focused members, and that hazing, alcohol abuse and the other negative behaviors will increase. Yet, unfortunately, the negative behaviors associated with fraternities and sororities exist even as GPA requirements continue to increase for some organizations.

Furthermore, in the limited studies conducted on BGLOs and academic outcomes, there are no conclusive empirical findings that indicate negative academic outcomes related to BGLOs. In 2000, Shaun Harper introduced one of his two studies on the impact of BGLOs on academic outcomes in *Perspectives*. He found that 92 percent of BGLO chapters fell below the overall fraternity/sorority GPA average. His findings, however, are not surprising as black GPAs typically fall below the overall GPA average at predominantly white institutions (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Spenner, Buchmann, & Landerman, 2005). Thus, Harper's results are valuable, but inconclusive. The remaining studies on BGLOs and academic outcomes have been positive. BGLOs are noted to increase classroom engagement (Harper, 2008), positively influences persistence (Mitchell, 2012), and increase student engagement (Mitchell, Gipson, Otieno, Putschko, & Lucas, 2014). Given the documented benefits of black fraternities, perhaps the men that need historically black fraternities the most are those who are academically challenged and should be considered for membership without regard for GPA cut-offs.

Gayle Davis, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Grand Valley State University, states inequities

require a higher order of thinking. Acceptance into said organization(s) should be a privilege that is earned, not given without thought or scrutiny," he said (J. Thomas, personal communication, Oct. 14, 2013).

Part of that scrutiny includes GPAs in addition to other factors such as participation in chapter events, organizational involvement, leadership and community service hours. BGLOs should utilize all the information available to them to evaluate potential new members with the understanding there are certain minimum standards that must be met. On some campuses, it may be important to raise standards. For example, a few chapters within the author's organization, Alpha Phi Alpha, decided to raise the overall GPA requirement to a 2.7. Their rationale for the change is to ensure potential new members who join the fraternity continue to maintain their academic standing after affiliating with the fraternity. These chapters are doing well academically and have maintained a strong membership.

### Mentorship

"Let those on the higher rounds reach down and pull, while those on the lower rounds reach up and push as they climb. Let us ever touch hands and grow." —George Biddle Kelly (Mason, 2010, p. 142)

Making the transition to college can be difficult for any student, however, there is a particular set of issues facing Black men. As campus and headquarters professionals, it is important we seek to understand all of our students and their challenges. Some of these challenges are described by President Thomas. "The societal expectation(s) and/or negative stereotype(s) that Black men are not academically gifted or otherwise cognitively engaged in academic settings have manifested into an apathetic attitude for many Black males," he said (J. Thomas, personal communication, Oct. 14, 2013). In addition to dealing with negative perceptions, many Black males interested in BGLOs must grapple with figuring out how to pay for school and the culture shock of being in a predominantly white environment. President Thomas goes on to say, "This lack of resources

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play a role in achievement gaps as measured by GPA. She notes that underrepresented minorities, who often attend “underfunded schools may participate in ineffective educational programs more frequently than well-funded affluent schools” (as cited in Jarvi 2013, para. 4). She goes on to highlight, “When you see somewhat lower GPAs on average, of still very successful students of color...these college readiness factors may well play a part” (as cited in Jarvi, 2013, para. 6). Davis pinpoints one of the many concerns I have with GPA being the determining factors for membership for black men. They and other marginalized populations have been excluded from educational opportunities using standardized measures; historically black fraternities use these same measures to exclude prospective members.

In addition, while seeking to be consistent in nature, a minimum GPA is not. GPAs do not take into account institutional type. Is a 2.5 at an institution known for its rigor equivalent to a 2.5 at an institution with open access? I argue it is not, and students should not be penalized because of different institutional cultures and contexts. While fraternities and sororities cannot—and should not—influence institutional academic policies, the sweeping GPA standards sometimes set by these organizations impact who can benefit from membership. Furthermore, I hypothesize there is no statistically significant difference between a 2.4 and a 2.5 at any institution. Yet we rely on these random incremental shifts.

I have presented a litany of issues, but I also will present solutions that might create avenues of access for students seeking membership. First, academic eligibility could be based on an institution’s “good academic standing” measures. If a student is in good academic standing at an institution—whatever that means for each institution—they should be able to join. Second, fraternities and sororities should use a holistic review process that highlights the complete applicant.

I am not asking for open access. I am asking for consideration for the student seeking membership who puts forth effort to join by attending information sessions;

often lends itself to failure rates while concomitantly causing many Black males to detach themselves from the educational process.”

With so many issues facing Black men in college including those looking to join BGLO fraternities, what can be done? In my experience, it requires a collaborative effort. Stakeholders need to work together to create programs, initiatives, standards and expectations for potential and current members to follow.

One of the most impactful ways to help improve the Black male experience and ultimately draw more members to BGLO fraternities is through mentorship. Current members should establish opportunities to mentor other black males arriving on campus. This is not an interest group, but a touch point for fraternity members to live out their mission by assisting members of their community in adjusting to college life. Fraternity members can help potential new members navigate the campus and guide them away from making the same mistakes current members made. The goal would be to increase the number of potential new members that meet membership requirements. For those who do not want to join, the fraternity would hopefully still have gained an ambassador.

Once qualified members join, fraternities need to create methods to maintain and exceed standards. For example, the Alpha Scholastic Initiative (ASI) was created by a former headquarters intern who saw his chapter’s GPA drop dramatically. ASI is comprised of seven steps that help members create better habits to improve their academic standing. Another example arose when a former collegiate board member created a constitutional amendment to ensure collegiate members and chapters would be held to a particular academic standard.

### **Purpose**

“Our purpose is to raise the intellectual and cultural level, yes—and the moral level also; to aid in the development of special skills: to build men of vision, courage and self-sacrifice who are willing to develop a wise, consistent

networking with current members; supplying excellent recommendations; learning about the organization; and providing a comprehensive package for membership, despite the fact the student has a 2.4 GPA. For example, I would like historically black fraternities to capture the student who is involved in the community, engaged on campus, studying 18th century British literature, and works 10 hours a week to pay the tuition bill. These are the men who need, want, deserve and would benefit from access into historically black fraternities. Not everyone with a 2.5 is accepted. Likewise, maybe not everyone with a 2.4 should be rejected. Ultimately, GPA minimums do not equal automatic acceptance, just as they should not equal automatic denial. The whole student must be considered.

If holistic review processes were adopted, I would expect the quality and quantity of membership to increase. I would also expect positive academic gains—not limited to GPA—according to existing empirical research by Harper (2008), Mitchell (2012), and Mitchell, Gipson, Otieno, Putschko and Lucas (2014).

Not everyone will want to join; neither should everyone receive an invitation to join. I am, however, asking historically black fraternities to consider those who may want to join, those who should be eligible to join based on their institution's "good academic standing" measure, and those who make a concerted effort to join by fulfilling all of the other standards. I question what my founders would say about where historically black fraternities are and where they are going. I advocate for my perspective because of the oath that binds us—advocating for achievement for all men, particularly black men to achieve academic success.

While sharing a potentially controversial viewpoint, I welcome and encourage serious conversations about this issue because this is a time when, not only historically black fraternities, but all fraternities and sororities can make their impact on the nation, and the world, because of the values prescribed within these irreplaceable organizations.



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leadership toward the integration of a truly democratic society.” —Alpha Phi Alpha founder Henry Arthur Callis (Mason, 2010, p. 18)

As a Black male student, I struggled my first few years in college. I came from an urban environment where my education was adequate, but did not prepare me for success in the college classroom. It was not until I became interested in my fraternity that I was challenged to raise my GPA to meet the 2.5 minimum requirement. Over the next year I decided to make some changes. I sought out my academic advisor, attended study groups, and dedicated daily time to my studies and created a personal plan for my academic work. At the end of the fall semester I felt good about the work I had done; I nearly made the Dean's List. By spring, I was an initiated member into Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity.

My low GPA initially prevented me from joining my fraternity. However, it also could have hindered my opportunities for scholarships, job opportunities and admission into graduate school. As advisors, it is important for us to help our students understand that their GPA is a large part of their college career and their future success. The GPA is not the deciding factor, but if the academic standard is not met and maintained when they join a fraternity, it may hinder students from their purpose in attending college, which is to graduate.

Creating a culture of higher standards along with the right support combats some of the issues Black men face when they enter college. It shows them they can be scholarly, achieve goals, provide service and be proud to showcase their leadership skills as it did me almost 15 years ago. Meeting and exceeding the standard is one of the ways we can help Black men find the opportunity to reach their goals and in turn honor the foundation our founders set for us.



**REVIEW  
REFERENCES  
ONLINE**



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