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# An Intersectional Social Capital Analysis of the Influence of Historically Black Sororities on African American Women's College Experiences at a Predominantly White Institution

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# An Intersectional Social Capital Analysis of the Influence of Historically Black Sororities on African American Women's College Experiences at a Predominantly White Institution

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Research exploring the college experiences of African American women at predominantly White institutions (PWI) continues to be a necessity as African American women graduate at lower rates than their racial/ethnic peers. This qualitative study explored the influence historically Black sororities had on the college experiences of African American women at a PWI using an intersectional social capital framework. The study revealed that the women, as Black women, positioned themselves lower than others in terms of social status; they joined historically Black sororities because of family, role models, and mentors; and, building community, academic pressure, and high standards were fostered through involvement in historically Black sororities and shaped their educational experiences at a PWI. Recommendations for practice and future research are included.

*Keywords:* Black women, historically Black sororities, intersectionality, predominantly White institutions

African Americans[1] comprised 15% of the total undergraduate student population within the United States in 2010, as compared to 12% in 2002 (Aud et al., 2012; Mauk & Jones, 2006), indicating an increase in the share of undergraduate students when analyzed by race/ethnicity. African American women[2] tend to enroll in institutions of higher education at far greater rates than their male counterparts, with women accounting for approximately 60% of the total enrollment of African American students (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005). Yet, much of the African American college student literature that has explicitly explored gender has focused on African American men, often comparing them to their racial/ethnic counterparts or documenting their experiences

at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; e.g., Bonner, 2010; Harper, 2008b, 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011). Still, the achievement gaps (e.g., retention and graduation rates) between African American women and their racial/ethnic counterparts nearly mirror the racial/ethnic male achievement gaps, particularly at PWIs (Aud et al., 2012). Subsequently, literature exploring the experiences of African American women and their experiences as college students at PWIs continues to be a necessity.

In this study, we documented the experiences of African American women involved in historically Black sororities at a PWI using an intersectional social capital framework. The following research questions shaped the study: (a) What are the experiences of African American women who joined historically Black sororities at a PWI? (b) How does the intersection of race and gender shape their experiences within historically Black sororities at a PWI?

[1] The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout the article.

[2] Although scholars may have used the terms *female* and *male* in their work, we used *women* and *men* throughout the article to bring focus to gender, which is socially constructed.

One reason for the racial/ethnic achievement gaps at PWIs is the unwelcoming experience that African Americans commonly face at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Harper, 2013; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005). Although access for African Americans to attend PWIs has expanded since *Brown v Board of Education* (1954; Aud et al., 2012), African American students at PWIs have continued to report having inadequate social lives (Harper & Hurtado, 2007); having less than satisfactory relationships with faculty members (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991); feeling left out of the curriculum (Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005); and dealing with racial issues that permeate the campus climate (Chang, Milem, & Antonio, 2011). Although the experiences of African American students at PWIs are well documented, the achievement gaps between African Americans and their racial/ethnic counterparts persist (Aud et al., 2012). Without proper support, the obstacles African American students can face prove to be overwhelming, and these obstacles may continue to cause attrition of African American students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Consequently, PWIs must continue to document and improve upon ways to engage, retain, and graduate African American students.

Researchers have suggested that student involvement and engagement is critical to college persistence and graduation (e.g., Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2006–2007). Notable practices to involve and engage students include positive faculty–staff interactions (Fischer, 2007); involvement in student organizations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2006–2007); and living on campus (Lopez-Turley & Wodtke, 2010). Perhaps one of the most salient practices to engage African American students at PWIs is involvement in African American and cultural organizations (Guiffrida, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001).

Davis (1991) found that participation in minority student organizations had a significant positive correlation on grade point average and campus satisfaction for African Americans at PWIs. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) added that African American students who had more peer-group interactions and peer support reported a greater sense of belonging at PWIs.

Yet, Guiffrida (2003) cautioned that overcommitment in cultural organizations might negatively affect academic achievement.[3] These inconsistencies in the literature highlight the need for future research on outcomes associated with involvement in cultural and African American student organizations. In this study, we bring focus to Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs), particularly historically Black sororities, and their influence on the college experiences of African American women.

Involvement in BGLOs is noted as beneficial at PWIs and has received considerable attention over the past three decades (e.g., Kimbrough, 1995; Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Researchers have documented that BGLOs have positive effects on student-faculty relationships (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011); student involvement and engagement (Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998); leadership development (Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998); social support and integration (Harper, 2008a; McClure, 2006); and academic achievement (Harper, 2008a; Mitchell, 2012). Yet, amid the positive educational outcomes, researchers have also reported BGLOs may negatively influence grade point average (Harper, 2000; Mitchell, 2012) and constantly deal with issues of pledging and hazing (Parks & Brown, 2005).

Although BGLO research continues to emerge, BGLO research exploring gender as a critical component of these organizations is limited at best. Furthermore, when gender is explored in BGLO scholarship, it has generally focused on men (e.g., Harper, 2008a; Jones, 2004; McClure, 2006), which is consistent with the broader literature base that has explored the experiences of African American college students. This study adds to the literature base and provides a contribution that documents the experiences of African American women as (a) college students at a PWI and (b) as members of historically Black sororities. In addition, this study examined their experiences intersectionally, highlighting the ways in which race and gender shaped their college and sorority expe-

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[3] *Academic achievement* was defined as attaining a high grade point average and/or moving successfully toward graduation (Guiffrida, 2004; Mitchell, 2012).

riences. In turn, researchers and practitioners may gain more insight on the experiences of African American women involved in historically Black sororities and build on the findings.

## Theoretical Framework

We used an intersectional social capital lens to shape the study. Intersectionality explores and acknowledges the "overlapping identities" (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 797) of gender, race, class, and sexuality and was first used as a theoretical construct by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In addition, intrinsically tied to understanding intersectionality is the exploration of structural inequalities and power dynamics connected to membership in these multiple categories (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Wilkins, 2012). Linder and Rodriguez (2012) noted that using an intersectional lens to understand the lived experience of the study participants is essential because it highlights the need to explore identities as interactive rather than additive. Intersectionality is fundamental to holistically explore the experiences of African American women at a PWI; to view their identities as separate experiences would be an injustice to their experiences as Black women. Through using an intersectional framework, we thought we could better acknowledge how race and gender intersected and shaped the experiences of the participants at a PWI and within historically Black sororities.

Furthermore, historically Black sororities can be considered "intersectional support groups" because they provide African American women a unique space on predominantly White campuses—space where the overlapping of race and gender are acknowledged. McClure (2006) suggested that fraternities connect men to university communities. In a similar fashion, historically Black sororities at PWIs connect African American women to the university community and serves as social support for the women (Phillips, 2005). Because of the social support women gain through sorority participation, they are provided with forms of social capital.

Bourdieu (1986) noted that social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248). So although Bourdieu (1986) recognized the importance of groups in acquiring social capital, he placed emphasis on the benefits obtained by the individual. As such, scholars have also defined social capital using this emphasis on individual gains. For instance, Lin (1999) defined social capital as resources within social networks that produce individual returns. We used Bourdieu's (1986) construct of social capital to help shape this study, just as previous studies that explored the influence of BGLOs on African American students' experiences (e.g., McClure, 2006; Mitchell, 2012). Collectively, using both intersectionality and social capital as theoretical frameworks, we brought focus to the intersectional social capital within historically Black sororities.

## Method

We consider this study a constructivist phenomenological case study. Phenomenological studies seek to explore and interpret the lived experiences of participants; case studies are qualitative studies that explore one person, one program, or some other unit of analysis (Merriam, 2009). Edwards and Jones (2009) explained that constructivist qualitative theorists do not take objective stances but "seek to clarify and problematize their assumptions and make those assumptions clear to others" (p. 212). Ultimately, our backgrounds and involvement in the study helped shape and coconstruct the findings. Furthermore, Brown, Stevens, Troiano, and Schneider (2002) stated that qualitative research is important in exploring college experiences because variables do not divide into independent variables (e.g., race and gender as variables in this study). Brown et al. also noted that qualitative methodologies are useful in exploring the experiences of college students when little is known about a phenomenon under investigation. Given the aforementioned, we found a constructivist phenomenological method was appropriate to conduct the study.

As researchers we served as primary instruments of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). Consequently, it was important for us to acknowledge and disclose our knowledge, assumptions, and biases throughout the study. It was also important for us to recognize and acknowledge our positionalities. England (1994) described positionality is socially constructed

and explains researchers' knowledge in relation to phenomena being studies. What follows is a brief description of our positionalities.

> LG: I identify as a White woman who is non-Greek-affiliated, self-identify as a feminist, and I did not have much of an opinion or knowledge about historically Black sororities or BGLOs prior to this study. While I could relate to the participants' gender identities, I did not relate to their racial identities. In addition, I brought an unbiased and uniformed lens to the study when analyzing historically Black sororities as intersectional spaces of social capital for the participants.

> DM: I identify as an African American man who is a member of a BGLO, approached this study as an advocate for BGLOs, and I recognize the experiences of African American students studying at PWIs are sometime negative because of my lived experiences. I was responsible for data collection during the study. Because I am a member of a BGLO and identity as African American, I brought with me identities that may have been helpful in building rapport with the participants. Nevertheless, I am a man, which could have also influenced the relationships formed with the participants. I was also involved in the data analysis, bringing with me my African American and BGLO identities in the coconstructing of the findings.

## Sample

We extracted the sample from a qualitative study that explored the influence of BGLOs on the persistence of African Americans at a PWI (Mitchell, 2012). The participants were students at a large, public, predominantly White research-intensive university located in the Northeast region of the United States. The university enrolled approximately 35,000 students, where 11% of the total student population identified as African American and 49% identified as women. The study was conducted with institutional review board approval.

Participants for this study included the seven women who participated in the larger study; each one selected through purposeful sampling. As Patton (2002) suggested, the purposeful sampling technique yields insight, not generalization, and the cases are information rich. More specifically, we used criterion sampling, whereby our participants had to (a) self-identify as an African American or Black woman, (b) be a member of a historically Black sorority, and (c) attend a PWI. Because of the criteria participants had to meet, the sample might appear small for a typical phenomenological study. Nevertheless, because the educational experiences of Black women in higher education broadly and in historically Black sororities in particular have been understudied, there is value in documenting the voices of these seven women.

Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire. All of the women identified as seniors. Three of the participants were from two-parent households, whereas the other four participants were from single-parent households. Participants' household incomes were diverse and ranged from below $25,000 to $100,000 or greater. One women identified as a first-generation college student, whereas the others identified as at least second-generation college students. The participants' college grade point averages were self-reported and ranged from 2.7 to 3.4 on a 4.0 scale.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Although we consider this a phenomenological study, we collected data in two stages using a combination of phenomenological and grounded theory methodological techniques. First, we collected data through focus groups with all seven participants. Each student participated in one of two sorority focus groups; each focus group was comprised of members from one historically Black sorority. Second, we further explored the experiences of four students collecting data through a series of semistructured one-on-one interviews, totaling 12 one-on-one interview sessions. We used codes and themes from the focus groups and initial round of interviews to form the next round of interviews and repeated that process until no new themes emerged. We used both focus groups and interviews as a triangulation method. This allowed us to explore how participants' collective experiences confirmed, enhanced, or rejected the individual experiences of the one-on-one interview participants, and vice versa. Questions regarding the importance of gender in BGLOs were part of the interview and focus group protocols. Example questions used are (a) in what ways, if any, does gender matter in the social networks facilitated by your organization on a predominantly White campus? (b) What are the influences of those gendered social networks on persistence on a predominantly White campus?

We reviewed the interview and focus group transcripts to analyze the data. Transcripts were

created from the audiotapes of the interview and focus group sessions and then matched with the audiotapes for accuracy. We used the constant comparative method—which is literally a constant comparison of the data to create themes—to analyze the data (Merriam, 2009). We thought the constant comparison method would be a useful analytical approach for this study even though it is a technique generally used in grounded theory studies. Still, we did not attempt to form a grounded or substantive theory; we only used this method to describe the phenomenon or the participants' lived experiences.

We used the criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). The techniques we used to ensure trustworthiness were including an audit trail; triangulating the data by comparing the findings to existing literature, and conducting both focus groups and one-on-one interviews; and by monitoring our biases by analyzing the data independently of each other, then going through a peer debriefing process. The peer debriefing process included us going through each interview and focus group transcript together as a team to see what common concepts or themes emerged after we first analyzed the data individually. We also sent the current study to three outside peer-reviewers familiar with intersectionality and qualitative methodologies for feedback regarding our analysis and results. Lastly, we provided detailed information on the participants, the setting, and the procedures used in the study to ensure transferability.

## Findings

Our findings highlight (a) the participants' experiences at a PWI as Black women, and how race, gender, and the intersection between race and gender shaped their experiences; (b) why the participants joined historically Black sororities; and (c) the social support historically Black sororities provided the participants as intersectional spaces at a PWI.

### Educational Experiences as Black Women

Participants viewed Black sororities as intrinsically intersectional support groups that provided a level of social support that was not found in other organizations. This social support was narrated as being important as a result of the participants' identities as Black, as women, and intersectionally, as Black women. During a focus group, a member of one sorority discussed how participating in Black student organizations provided places of refuge. Black student organizations were spaces where her identity as an African American was not all that people "heard." When the participants were asked about their experiences as African Americans at a PWI, one participant brought Black student organizations into the discussion:

> I feel like being in the Black organizations gives you a voice because you can be on the [executive] boards, and I feel like people aren't scared to say their opinions when they're in that kind of situation as opposed to if you're in a different group, like a chemistry [club], [or] SGA is a perfect example. A lot of Black people who I know, who are on SGA, leave because they think their voices aren't being heard, and you also don't want to be a burden. You don't always want to be voicing your opinion and people think you're just saying that' cause you're Black.

According to this participant, involvement in a Black student organization provided opportunities for leadership development that were not available in other student organizations because of racial differences. Specifically, Black student organizations offered an environment where she could share her opinion and not become tokenized or have her opinion attributed to her race. It is also significant to note that the participant noted that some Black students ended their involvement in other student organizations because of the negative interactions they endured.

The participants also found gender to be salient in their organizational spaces. For instance, when the participants were asked to reflect on how gender matters in sororities, a participant highlighted the sense of empowerment and pride she felt because she was part of an organization founded by women, just for women:

> [I]t's empowering that we have our own thing; the sorority is not just like a little auxiliary of the fraternity; you're a part of a sorority, you're part of a Greek-lettered organization that is for women, and that's not the same thing as a Black Greek-letter organization that's for men. It's almost like you respected [sororities enough] in saying that [sororities] are not just part of [fraternities]. If you put men and women together because of our society it's always going to be like, "Oh the women, you're copying the men. But I feel like a lot of times maybe the separation helps.

This participant explained that she finds sororities important because they demonstrated the importance of "women only" spaces. By creating an environment that is absent of gender tensions that she found prevalent in coeducational or men dominated spaces, the participant felt valued within her sorority.

The social support Black sororities offered the participants during their educational experiences is also significant when discussing the intersection of race and gender. Participants shared that being in an organization composed of Black women provided a safe space to build community around their shared lived experience. The participants were asked to reflect on the question, "How important is that relationship with your sorority sisters, being that it's an all women group?" A participant responded:

> We've all gone through the same things. We can sit down, [and] we all have the same exact stories; if not the same, a derivative of something similar. But we have all been through at least one thing exactly the same and the fact that we made it through that together we should be able to make it through everything else together and the [Black Students' Union] ain't got nothing on a line sister because they weren't there when the times were hard. They weren't there when I was crying. They weren't there when one of my line sister's grandmother passed away. [The Black Students' Union] wasn't there for that. So it takes a different type of person; it takes a sister to actually be that drive and motivation for me.

This participant felt that because of the experiences she and her sisters have shared as Black women, deep relationships had been built among them. The community and social support that was intersectionally built around being Black women, as told by the participant, was specific to her sorority as she did not have that experience in the Black Students' Union. For instance, when she and her sorority sisters went through significant life experiences, she explained they were able to depend upon each other and articulated that the Black Students' Union did not provide that type of support.

The participants further explained that historically Black sororities are intersectional groups that fill a unique need other student organizations cannot fill. The participants understood and discussed their experiences intersectionally, noting the challenges of being Black women at a PWI. The following participant detailed where she felt Black women were placed in the social hierarchy:

> I think [gender] matters because basically African American women are already at the bottom of the totem pole. You already have Whites at the top and then you have [everybody] else that follows, you know. Then women as a gender are normally under everybody else, and then Black women are pretty much all the way at the bottom. So having a Greek-lettered organization that has all Black women that are doing exceptionally well in school with high GPAs [and] doing things for the community is something pretty good; something that is not always seen and not talked about especially at a [PWI].

She narrated her lived experience as a Black woman as she navigates society and the culture at her university. The participant understood her identity has multiple layers, and that those layers position her and other Black women toward the bottom of social hierarchies. Still, she perceived that her sorority fostered a space wherein her whole identity was celebrated and encouraged, an experience that was not occurring other places.

Similarly, another participant positioned Black women toward the bottom of social statuses and added this intersectional response as she reflected on the most important aspect of the study:

> For me it's persistence as a Black [woman] in a [BGLO] on a [predominantly White campus]. I don't think you can't put it any better than that because all those things [describe] so many different aspects [of the study]. So persistence, I need to get to where I want to be so I can make my money and do what I need to do. As a Black [woman], not too many [women] are doing what I want to do, so that's huge as well. In a [BGLO], it's time for us to start representing what we were once representing back in the early 1900s.

Although the women found solace in Black student organizations, historically Black sororities offered them the most social support at a PWI because of the intersectional nature of the organizations. The participants often described their experiences as "Black women" rather than just using the terms *Black* or *women* independently. In addition, the participants highlighted how their multiple, marginalized identities were often supported in historically Black sororities, as their sororities were safe spaces and provided social support for them. The participants' also described that their reasons for joining historically Black sororities were informed by the intersection of race and gender; they joined because of other Black women.

## Why They Joined

During the interviews and focus groups, the women expressed clear reasons for joining a historically Black sorority. They did not choose to join historically Black sororities once they arrived at a PWI, but instead cited family members, role models, or mentors who were members of a historically Black sorority that influenced their decision to seek membership in their organizations. Participants saw these family members, role models, or mentors as emanating a legacy that the participants wanted to capitalize on and benefit from. When reflecting on why she decided to join a sorority, a participant referred back to her childhood:

> Well, I grew up around women who are in my organization, so it kind of was fostered with me. I kind of always knew I was going to join one, and I was in the little high school group that's connected to our organization and they just instilled in us what it is to be a [states organization].

This participant shared that women in her life shaped her decision to become a member of her sorority because throughout her childhood, the members modeled what it meant to be a member of her sorority. A member of the same sorority, expressed a parallel motivation for joining her sorority: "I always grew up with women that are in my organization, so I just knew the history and the work that they do, so that basically sparked my interest." This participant was familiar with the reputation of her sorority which initially drew her to join a historically Black sorority. Both of the participants explained that alumnae and current members of their sorority had a substantial influence on their decision to join a historically Black sorority.

In a similar fashion, another participant explained she chose to join a BGLO because the women of her organization impressed her growing up:

> I think a lot of my reason had to do with how I view the women of this organization before I came [to this institution]. Growing up as a child, any time I saw women with their paraphernalia on, they always held themselves in a very distinguished way, and I always wanted to be part of like a group of very well educated African American women. And the people that I had met through, or at least in my life up until college, I was just very impressed by. So I knew that this was the organization that I wanted to join.

Within this intersectional narrative, the participant explicitly addressed her identity as both a woman and African American noting several salient points: (a) what it means to be a member of a historically Black sorority was demonstrated before she entered college; (b) being a member of a historically Black sorority equates with being a "very well educated African American women;" and (c) by joining she would have access to a network of distinguished Black women. This participant, before joining, recognized that there was much to be gained from being a member of her sorority and that there is a legacy that could be ascribed to her if she too joined. The women often decided they wanted to become members of a historically Black sorority as children and expressed that members of a historically Black sorority have had a significant influence on them that continued into adulthood. Once the participants joined their sororities, they were afforded benefits as Black women members of historically Black sorority chapters.

## Involvement Within Historically Black Sororities

All of the participants described and acknowledged in varying ways being a member of a historically Black sorority at a PWI influences their college experiences. The participants' involvement was narrated in three ways: (a) access to larger networks and community; (b) academic pressures; and (c) being a part of a culture of high standards. Participants illustrated how Black sororities were spaces of social support due to their identity as Black, as a woman, and intersectionally as a Black woman.

**Access to larger networks and community.** When the participants joined their organizations, they were immediately connected to a larger network. For example, one participant expressed that membership in her sorority provided a platform to gain access to a larger support network. Through gaining access to more social support, she described being pushed academically because of the expectation of success established by her sorority. The participants also reflected on how their experiences differed from students who were not involved in BGLOs. The following participant reflected on the network she gained as a result of her involvement in her sorority:

I feel as though I have a lot more support. For those who aren't involved in BGLOs, you don't really have a common foundation with anybody. So your support system is a lot bigger [being in a BGLO]. You have a lot of people who are willing to back you up with common interests [and] common goals. Academic wise, you all have the same goals at hand. People who aren't in BGLOs, I feel that they don't understand it as much, so I feel like everyone has a goal to come to college hopefully to graduate with some level of success, but with being in a BGLO you have a completely different mentality because you know you have to reach that level of success versus just, "Oh, I'll make it when I make it."

This participant's narrative highlights that her sorority fostered an environment where she felt supported by her network of fellow sorority sisters. She felt that because of her involvement in her sorority she had a sense of community with "a lot of people who are willing to back you up." In addition, the participant elaborated that a part of being involved in her network included pushing herself to be successful because there were high academic expectations embodied in her sorority. There was a culture of high expectations as her sorority shared a common goal of being academically successful (e.g., persisting toward graduation, maintaining a high GPA).

**Academic pressure.** The support established in the sororities went beyond assisting the participants in navigating a PWI as Black women; it also influenced the participants' academics. A participant's narration of her experience captured both the social support and positive academic pressure she gained from being a member of her sorority. She reflected on how her sorority sisters pushed her to do well in college and persist:

They definitely influence my persistence and I'm fortunate enough that we all live together. I live in an apartment, four of us, and there's plenty of times where I wake up and I just think, "Oh today I cannot make it to class," and all three of them, or two of them, whoever is here like to say to me, "Get up, go to class, you have five weeks left of school." So I can definitely say that they've been a huge influence in a good way, not in a negative way at all as far as just pushing me and making sure I'm going to class.

This participant lived with three of her sorority sisters, which had a positive influence on her support network and academic life. Through her and her sorority sisters' involvement in their sorority, she stated they established relationships that held them academically accountable

as they encouraged each other to succeed. With such social and academic support, her persistence toward graduation at a PWI was positively influenced as her sorority sisters fostered an environment where academics were a priority.

Still, although all of the participants recounted the positive academic outcomes associated with being a member of a historically Black sorority, a few participants narrated the negative influence sorority involvement had on their academics. These participants revealed that they would delay doing schoolwork to devote more time to their sororities. For instance, one of the participants narrated that she has often put academics on the back burner for her sorority:

I can say though that there has been times when maybe I've procrastinated on work or set work back to be a little bit more involved in my organization because maybe we're having like a social gathering or something like that, and I might have had something due in two days and now I have only one day to do it.

Because of her involvement in her BGLO, she has made decisions about how to prioritize her time. This sometimes resulted in postponing schoolwork to dedicate time to her sorority, as she indicated that her commitment to her sorority may have negatively influenced her grades as she placed her sorority activities above her academics. The participants' commitments to their sororities were attributed to a culture of high standards within their organizations.

**A culture of high standards.** The expectation for excellence was not limited to academics; it extended to involvement in the organization, community service, and the organizational reputation they wanted to maintain. The following participant shared how her organization expected nothing but excellence:

Well, my chapter expects a certain level of excellence pretty much. That's pretty much what they expect from us, so from that, it just pushes us to do well and excel in our organization or to excel in our grades, excel in service in the chapter, because of the chapter's reputation on the campus they want us to continue to [excel].

Again, excellence was not limited to only academics; this participant described the importance of excellence in a more holistic sense as to maintain the reputation of her sorority on campus. Through the need to maintain this reputation, members needed to perform in a multitude of areas, which reinforced the culture of high

standards. Her sorority provided her a space where members had to work hard to maintain the reputation it valued through academics, committed organizational involvement, community service, and collectively, maintaining high standards within these areas helped maintain the chapter's reputation on campus.

Overall, the participants joined historically Black sororities to be a part of an organization that they respected because of their personal connection with Black women who became members before they joined. Their desires to be a part of the enduring legacy of their sororities were decided before they attended college. The social support their sororities provided was described in three distinct, but often overlapping ways. They reported having access to a larger network, which proved support and helped foster a sense of community. The participants noted the academic benefits they received from sorority membership were substantial, as their sororities offered positive academic pressure through reinforcements such as encouraging each other to attend class and providing motivation to succeed even though a few participants reported that their sorority had a negative influence on their academics due to being "over-committed" to their organizations. This finding aligns with the participants' narration of how their sororities cultivated an environment that strives to maintain a culture of high standards, not just academically, but through their organizational involvement. In sum, the participants articulated their gain in social capital was afforded by the intersectional social support that historically Black sororities provided them, noting that they shared a common experience as Black women and felt secure sharing their opinions, being themselves, and navigating a PWI collectively. As Black women, an identity that they described as positioned at toward the bottom of social hierarchies, they found an environment where their identity was supported, challenged, and celebrated; they found an environment where they fully belonged.

## Limitations of the Study

It is important to note the following regarding the findings in this study. First, the study included seven African American women at one PWI in the Northeast, so the participants' experiences cannot be prescribed to all African American women involved in historically Black sororities at PWIs. However, we did not seek to make any generalizable claims. In addition, given historically Black sororities are under-theorized as intersectional support groups, this study might serve as baseline data for future studies exploring the influence of Black sororities as intersectional support groups for African American women. Second, in addition to interviews, we collected data using focus groups. Because the focus groups consisted of multiple participants, the voices of some participants might have silenced, overshadowed, or lost during conversations. Conversely, we found that the focus groups added rich data to the study, confirmed themes, and helped fully describe the experiences of the participants. Finally, we must note historically Black sororities are voluntary associations where students have to elect to join and must be selected for membership (McClure, 2006). Given this fact, not all African American women have access to historically Black sororities. Although we have identified these as possible limitations of the study, we are confident that the findings contribute to current research because the experiences of African American women in historically Black sororities at PWIs and as intersectional spaces have been largely unexplored.

## Discussion

In this study we explored the experiences of African American women who joined historically Black sororities at a PWI and how the intersections of race and gender shaped their experiences in a BLGO. Through these two foundational research questions, we documented how Black sororities as intersectional groups fostered social support for African American women at a PWI. Using an intersectional social capital lens, the findings suggest that historically Black sororities provided the participants a level of support not found in other cultural or African American organizations. While other cultural organizations were important, the overlapping identity component of the participants' sororities was unmatched in other places demonstrating the salience of historically Black sororities at a PWI. This point cannot be underestimated as, historically, universities were not created for Black women. This finding supports the reason Phillips (2005) argued Af-

rican American sororities were created in the first place: to meet African American women's unique needs in a society where "Whites and men came first" (p. 341).

This study also highlights that Black sororities might create both a physical and abstract space where African American women's identities are not in tension with dominant identities (Collins, 2000; Strayhorn & McCall, 2011), allowing for greater growth and self-exploration in terms of their identity as Black women. For the participants, Black sororities were a safe space from the rest of campus where multiple parts of their identity often bumped-up against privileged groups (i.e., White people and men) because of structural racism and sexism. Having a space where Black women held leadership positions, made all of the decisions, and were safe to explore who they were as Black women were powerful for the participants because it was not happening in other spaces on campus.

Just as a participant described her identity as a Black woman places her at the "bottom of social statuses," there are structural inequalities both in society and institutions of higher education that necessitate the need for an intersectional support group such as Black sororities (Collins, 2000; Phillips, 2005). Students who hold multiple marginalized identities often experience hostility at universities, which stifles their abilities to explore opportunities for involvement at college. One participant noted that this hostility comes at the cost of withdrawing involvement in other student organizations, as they were not sites of support and celebration for Black women. In addition, Black woman are not only interfacing with the challenges of interacting with students who hold dominant identities at a PWI but also with institutional barriers. Because of this, having a space where shared identity is a foundational component of involvement (i.e., Black sororities) is critical as it comes with a level of shared experience that does not require the explaining or defending that would be necessary across racial and gender differences.

Further, the participants' involvement in historically Black sororities provided them with what we call *intersectional social capital*. Given the intersectional framework used, we moved from intersectionality as a theoretical articulation of multiple marginalized identities at the individual level to using it as

a framework to assess support within historically Black sororities as an intersectional support group/system within a larger system (i.e., higher education). Ultimately, we did not solely theorize intersectionality by focusing on Black women's lived experiences, which is a common critique of intersectionality as a theoretical framework (Núñez, 2014); we also practically explored historically Black sororities as intersectional spaces that influenced the experiences of African American women at a PWI.

Strayhorn and McCall (2011) argue that BGLOs offer African Americans a refuge of support. Within this study, we went beyond BGLO support for African Americans generally, exploring historically Black sororities as intersectional spaces. This space is also significant in that the benefits that Black women can gain from involvement in historically Black sororities will continue beyond college, as membership in their organizations is a lifelong commitment (Phillips, 2005) and the social capital within these organizations go beyond their college experiences.

## Implications for Practice

The support gained through having access to a space where others have a shared common experience is noteworthy as holding multiple marginalized identities is not unique to Black women in historically Black sororities. Frequently students' identities are viewed through singular lenses such as their experience as women or their experience as students of color. Yet, the participants in this study and many students on college campuses hold identities in multiple marginalized categories. Highlighted in this study is how historically Black sororities provide intersectional social support and an actual space where the participants felt secure sharing their opinions and being themselves because they shared the common experience of navigating a predominately White institution as Black women. Given our findings, it begs the question of what other ways could students benefit from using intersectionality as a way of understanding how to provide support. Instead of having a singular identity centers (e.g., women's centers, LGBT centers, or offices of multicultural affairs) where students have to "choose" which part of their selves they are

going to seek services for, universities might begin creating intersectional support groups that support students' multiple identities (e.g., Black sororities). For example, in an intersectional space a student would not have to be a Latina or a woman or bisexual; the space would allow the student to be a bisexual Latina. Students could benefit from physical spaces where their multiple and interlocking identities are embraced, supported, and celebrated.

## Future Research

Based on the results of this study, we recommend the following for future research. First, studies exploring historically Black sororities as intersectional spaces should be conducted using varied research methodologies and frameworks. Furthermore, similar studies should be conducted at historically Black colleges and universities given the documented differences in social support offered at these institutions in comparison to PWIs. Second, using an *intersectional social capital* framework might be useful in future studies. Generally, intersectionality has been used to theoretically explore the experiences of those with multiple marginalized identities at the individual level. Within this study, we shifted intersectionality discourse by focusing on historically Black sororities as spaces/systems that provide intersectional social support within a larger system. Future studies exploring the benefits of other intersectional spaces for college student (e.g., Latina sororities, minority men initiatives) might prove useful to higher education. Third, studies investigating the support single identity groups (e.g., Black Student Unions) in comparison to intersectional support groups like historically Black sororities warrant attention as brought to the surface by the participants in this study. Finally, studies expanding on the intersectional lens used to conduct studies that also include ability, class, gender, and sexual orientation within fraternities and sororities might prove beneficial. Practitioners and scholars need to create physical and theoretical spaces for students who hold multiple marginalized identities to belong; historically Black sororities served as that space for the Black women within this study.

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