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# A Multi-institutional Analysis of Greek Affiliation and Academic/ Involvement Outcomes for African American College Students

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**A Multi-institutional Analysis of Greek Affiliation and Academic/  
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by

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**Abstract**

The academic and social outcomes of college fraternities and sororities remain unclear. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the characteristics and experiences of African American college students (AACSSs) attending seven institutions across the United States, using Greek affiliation as the primary measure of comparison. Quantitative data were used to explore how Greek affiliation influences various academic and social involvement outcomes for AACSSs. Findings suggest that involvement in fraternities and sororities is not associated with grade point average, among other academic outcomes. Findings also suggest that involvement with fraternities and sororities was associated with involvement in student organizations and on-campus employment.

Keywords: African American college students, educational outcomes, fraternity Greek-lettered organizations, sorority

## **Introduction**

The low retention and graduation rates of African American college students (AACSSs) have been longstanding issues (Planty et al., 2009; Wilson, 2007). Perhaps this is because it is well documented that institutions, particularly predominantly White institutions (PWIs), are not fully meeting the needs of some African American students. For decades, research has documented that African American students often feel social isolation and discrimination (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); have less satisfactory relationships with faculty (Allen, Epps, & Hannif, 1991); feel left out of curricula (Fleming, 1984); feel excluded from campus activities (McClure, 2006); and report they have inadequate social lives (Wilson, 2007) on predominantly White campuses. Moreover, racial microaggressions, which are “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60) also permeate PWIs and influence students’ sense of belonging. In contrast, African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) often feel they are satisfied, engaged, and well adjusted (Allen et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason, 2009). Still, many African Americans students are successful across institutional types as they become more socially integrated.

Researchers have indicated that African American students actively search for out-of-classroom experiences to get involved at PWIs (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). These experiences include faculty involvement and interaction (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2007); living on campus (Astin, 1984; Chickering, 1974; Gellin, 2003; Lopez-Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); and involvement in student organizations (Guiffrida, 2004b; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Littleton, 2002; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Perhaps one of the most salient findings is that African American students actively search for minority or cultural student organizations to get involved at PWIs (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001;

Guiffrida, 2004b; Harper, 2008a). One specific cultural activity where research has proliferated since the 1990s involves the experiences and educational outcomes of African American students in Black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLOs) (Harper, 2008b; Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Mitchell, 2012; Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate characteristics of undergraduate AACSSs attending master's-level and research institutions across the United States (US), using Greek affiliation as the primary measure of comparison. The significance of this study includes the following: (a) it captures the experience of both male and female undergraduate AACSSs, which is lacking in the emerging literature; and (b) it is one of the first studies to quantitatively and purposefully explore the academic outcomes of students in BGLOs. Unfortunately, a universal survey or database that identifies students involved in BGLOs does not exist, as larger studies of Greek affiliation have ignored the uniqueness of BGLOs (McClure, 2006). Thus, similar to Patton et al. (2011), the researchers assumed that the students involved in Greek-lettered organizations within this study were overrepresented in BGLOs, given the overwhelming narrative that African Americans who are in fraternities and sororities, particularly at PWIs, are time and again involved in BGLOs.

Three main research questions guided this study:

- Is there an association between involvement in Greek organizations and academic outcomes (i.e., grade point average [GPA], hours per week studying alone, hours per week studying with friends, number of faculty interactions, and retention/persistence) for AACSSs?
- Are there associations in the amount of time spent participating in various educational practices (i.e., student organization involvement) and Greek affiliation for AACSSs?
- Is there an association between employment and Greek involvement for AACSSs?

### **African American College Students**

While the experiences of African American students are well documented, the achievement/opportunity gaps between African Americans and their racial and ethnic counterparts persist. These gaps could be attributed to African American students' increased likelihood of being first-generation college students (Choy, 2001); identification as low-income individuals (Smith, 2009); previous attendance in an underfunded or low-performing school district, which often leads to low academic preparedness (ACT, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2011); or lack of family support, which often ties back to the student's first-generation status (Thayer, 2000). All of these are tied to historical and persistent inequities in the United States. Given these common experiences, or what Astin (1993) and Tinto (1975) call inputs and pre-college characteristics, African American students often leave institutions prior to degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

While the African American pipeline issue is well documented, researchers have, in fact, noted African American students' successful navigation on many campuses despite the abundance of literature that highlights the contrary. Recently, scholars (e.g., Bonner, 2010; Griffin, 2006; Guiffrida, 2004a, 2004b; Harper, 2005, 2008a, 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011) have begun investigating the experiences of high-achieving AACSSs, documenting the ways in which they succeed. However, a majority of this research about high-achievers has focused on African American male students (e.g., Bonner, 2010; Harper, 2005, 2008a, 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011). Nevertheless, a common theme that has emerged about high-achieving African American students is involvement and a sense of belonging (Guiffrida, 2004b; Harper, 2008a). Perhaps these findings are unsurprising; researchers (e.g., Astin, 1984; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) have stated that the amount of time and effort students place on co-curricular activities that encourage academic success does matter during college.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted, "[T]he level of student

involvement and integration in any of the components of an institution's academic and social systems can be a critical factor in students' persistence decisions" (p. 426). Indeed, Tinto (1975) theorized that academic integration and social integration, defined as "the extent to which individuals share the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides [sic] by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or in subgroups of it" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54), predispose students to remain in college. As such, researchers began focusing on educational outcomes associated with minority and, more specifically, African American student involvement (e.g., Davis, 1991; Fischer, 2007; Guiffrida, 2003; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Patilla, Trevino, & Gonzalez, 1997; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001).

### **African American College Student Involvement**

Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) noted how important social integration through extracurricular involvement is for African Americans attending PWIs. Similarly, Fischer (2007) found that formal on-campus ties had significant positive effects on GPA and college satisfaction for African American students attending PWIs. In addition, she found that increased formal and informal on-campus ties significantly reduced college departure for African American students. Further, Hausmann et al. (2007) concluded that African American students who reported more peer group interactions and peer support reported a greater sense of belonging, which Strayhorn (2012) argues is important, yet often overlooked, in predicting postsecondary outcomes.

Reason (2009) suggested that subcultures are important for underrepresented groups in some higher education contexts. He noted that these subcultures help students negotiate the differences between their cultures and dominant cultures in potentially hostile environments. Support for this idea can be seen in the work of Guiffrida (2003), who found that African American student organizations were safe spaces for students to learn about and connect with their cultures. In addition, others have

emphasized the relationship of African American students being engaged in formal social integration (e.g., participation in university recognized student organizations) with the positive effects this formal integration has on GPA and persistence (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001).

However, Guiffrida (2004b) suggested that, while participation in African American student organizations is helpful for students, overinvolvement can be harmful to academic achievement. Subsequently, because of the limited research on academic outcomes associated with BGLO involvement, Guiffrida's analysis of the fine line of involvement versus overinvolvement has been anecdotally assigned to BGLOs.

### **Black Greek-lettered Organizations**

Today, there are nine college BGLOs. They are housed under an umbrella organization called the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) (Ross, 2001). The member organizations of the NPHC are Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.; Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.; Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.; Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.; and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. What follows is a brief summary of scholarship documenting educational outcomes associated with BGLOs.

In one of the earliest empirical studies on BGLOs, Kimbrough (1995) learned that 74.1% of the students involved in BGLOs participated in two or more student organizations and held at least one leadership position, as compared to 44.2% of the non-Greek students included in the study. Furthermore, 63% of students involved in BGLOs believed they developed leadership skills as a result of fraternity or sorority involvement.

Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) found strong evidence that suggests, even after controlling for extracurricular involvement in high school, a higher percentage of students involved in BGLOs were in student government, academic honor societies, residential hall assistant groups, residential hall governments, Black student groups, and student

ambassador groups. In addition, students involved in BGLOs held more elected leadership positions than non-Greeks at a significant level. Students involved in BGLOs also self-reported higher leadership potential. While the findings associated with BGLOs and student engagement are well documented, literature related to academic outcomes associated with BGLOs and African American students are inconclusive and, collectively, minimal at best.

According to Harper (2000), after examining the academic standings reports for all fraternities and sororities from 24 predominantly White colleges and universities with enrollments ranging from 2,300 to 44,000, nearly 92% of the BGLO chapters had lower GPA averages than the overall GPA average of all students involved in all fraternities and sororities at each institution in the study. Harper explained that the results of his investigation could be attributed to academic distractions, which include excessive programming and chapter commitments, pledging and hazing, participation in cultural step shows (see Kimbrough, 2003, for definition of step show), involvement in other organizations, lack of resources, and poor advising. Yet, his investigation did not report controlling for other variables that may hinder African American students' GPAs at predominantly White institutions, such as the college environment, income, high school GPA, and first-generation college status. In addition, researchers have documented that African American students' GPAs often fall below the averages of their racial/ethnic counterparts (Fischer, 2007). On the contrary, Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) found that BGLO affiliation had positive effects on GPAs as they investigated the trends of African American student involvement. However, their study did not focus on BGLO members but African American student involvement more broadly, including Greek affiliation as a byproduct.

Harper (2008b) qualitatively investigated the effects of BGLO membership on classroom engagement in predominantly White classrooms by interviewing 131 students. He found that the factors that influenced classroom engagement positively for BGLO members were

underrepresentation (small number of African Americans in the classroom), voluntary race representation (speaking for African Americans), collective responsibility (a sense of responsibility to represent African Americans and their fraternity or sorority), and teaching styles (engaging and interactive pedagogy). The factors that negatively affected participation were forced representation (questions posed to students about the “African American experience” as if the student could speak for the entire race) and teaching styles (pedagogy that fails to engage students). Patton et al. (2011) found that BGLO involvement had significant positive effects on student-faculty involvement, and active and collaborative learning, at both predominantly White institutions and HBCUs.

Not only do BGLOs appear to positively influence classroom engagement, active learning, and collaborative learning, they also appear to positively affect persistence towards graduation at PWIs. Mitchell (2012) qualitatively explored the influence of BGLOs on the persistence of 12 African American students at a PWI. He found that relationships/connections, increased social lives, gaining community and administrative experiences, academic monitoring, and leadership development influenced persistence in positive ways. He also noted that other academic outcomes, such as GPAs and completed assignments, might be negatively affected because of overinvolvement, as suggested by Guiffrida (2004b) in his study on African American student involvement. Given these mixed findings, additional research documenting the successful paths of African American students and the academic outcomes of BGLOs is needed.

### **Method**

This study utilized a survey instrument designed by the researchers to investigate student involvement at seven masters-level and research institutions across the United States. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board(s) at each participating institution.

### **Participants**

A random sample of undergraduate students self-identifying as African American within institutional records systems were invited to

voluntarily participate in this study. An invitation to participate was sent by various institutions and a reminder was sent one week later. The invitation informed students about the anonymous nature of the survey, how to contact the researchers, that GPAs were not disclosed to the researchers, and that participation was voluntary and could be ceased at any time.

### **Demographics**

One hundred seventy-five (24.2%) students identified as men, 544 (75.2%) as women, three (0.4%) as transgender, and one (0.1%) as other. Class standing was as follows: 196 (27.8%) freshman, 144 (20.4%) sophomores, 164 (23.3%) juniors, and 201 (28.5%) seniors. Students reported the following ages: 399 (55.3%) 18-20, 171 (23.7%) 21-23, 44 (6.1%) 24-26, 18 (2.5%) 27-29, and 89 (12.3%) 30 or above.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to the nature of cross-tabulated data, the sample sizes ranged from 434 (number of employed students) to 726 (total) students. Also, due to the nature of the reporting software and survey, responses to individual questions that were determined to be invalid or skipped were not included in the results rather than completely excluding data of students who did not respond to all questions.

Responses to various questions were analyzed to investigate the association between different variables and Greek affiliation for AACSS. Since categorical variables were utilized, Pearson Chi-Square analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22 to determine significant and non-significant statistical associations. The alpha level was set at .01.

## **Results**

### **Academic Outcomes**

The data suggested there was no statistical association between Greek-lettered organization involvement and hours studying alone per week for the students in the study,  $\chi^2(4, N = 724) = 1.839, p = .765$ . Further, the data suggested there was no statistical association between Greek-lettered organization involvement and hours studying with friends per week for the students,  $\chi^2(4, N = 723) = 5.960, p = .202$ . The data also suggested there

was no statistical association between Greek involvement and grade point average for AACCS included in the study,  $\chi^2 (3, N = 668) = 0.419, p = .936$ . In addition, there was no statistical association between Greek-lettered organization involvement and students considering leaving an institution (retention/persistence) for the population,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 724) = 0.097, p = .756$ . Finally, the researchers found no statistical association between Greek-lettered organizational involvement and the number of hours involved with faculty outside of the classroom for students in the study,  $\chi^2 (4, N = 726) = 4.871, p = .301$ . Collectively, the data supported the null hypothesis—that there is no association between academic achievement and Greek-lettered organization involvement for AACCS.

### **Social Involvement**

The data suggested that there was a statistical association between hours involved in student organizations per week and Greek-lettered organization involvement for AACCSs involved in the study,  $\chi^2 (4, N = 724) = 30.033, p < .001$ . Further, the data suggested that there was a statistical association between hours involved in cultural student organizations and Greek-lettered organization involvement for AACCSs in the study,  $\chi^2 (4, N = 713) = 22.854, p < .001$ . The data also suggested that there was a statistical association between hours per week involved in non-cultural student organizations and Greek-lettered organization involvement for AACCSs in this study,  $\chi^2 (4, N = 717) = 27.310, p < .001$ . In all areas, the data suggested that AACCSs involved in Greek-lettered organizations were more likely to be involved for more hours per week than AACCSs not involved in Greek-lettered organizations. Figures 1-3 depict the significant social involvement findings.

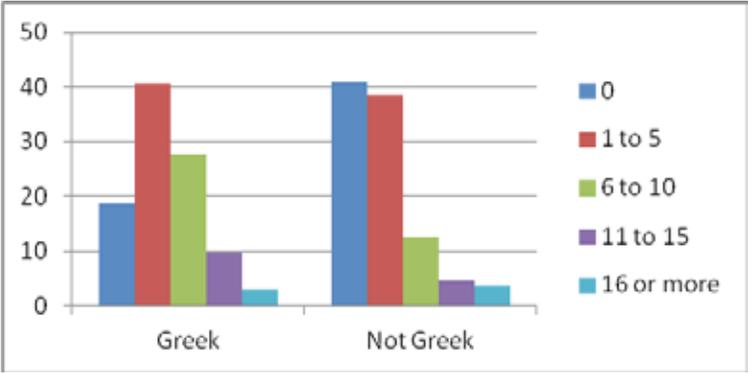


Figure 1. Hours involved in student organizations per week, by percent.

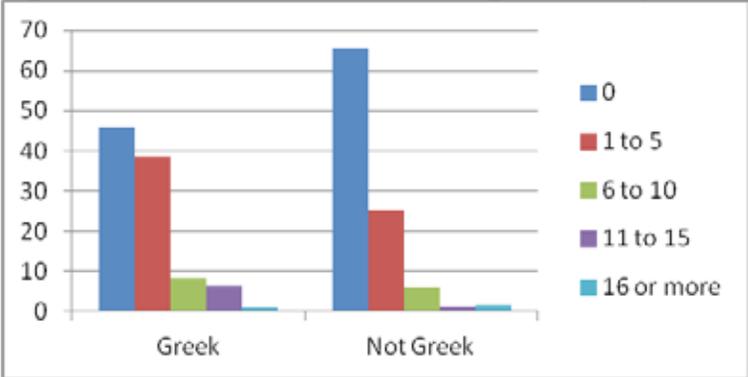


Figure 2. Hours involved in cultural student organizations per week, by percent.

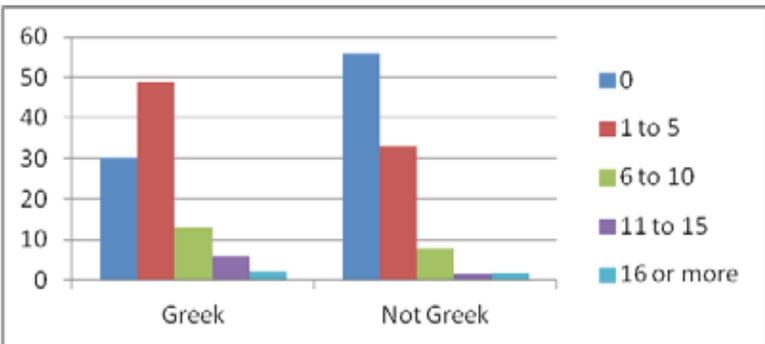


Figure 3. Hours involved in non-cultural student organizations per week, by percent.

## Employment

The data suggested that there was a statistical association between Greek-lettered organization involvement and employment type for AACSS within the study,  $\chi^2 (3, N = 721) = 12.757, p = .005$ . Specifically, AACSS in Greek-lettered organizations were more likely to be employed (73% vs. 57.3%); students were more likely to be employed on campus (41.0% vs. 25.6%). However, the researchers found that there was no statistical association between Greek involvement and hours employed per week for students who were working,  $\chi^2 (4, N = 434) = 0.408, p = .982$ ; the majority of employed students (55.5%) worked 16 or more hours per week, regardless of Greek involvement. Figure 4 displays students' various employment types, by percent.

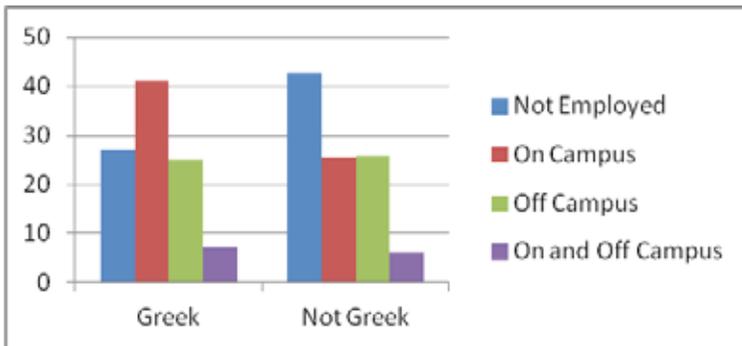


Figure 4. Employment type, by percent.

Table 1 displays summaries of all of the Pearson Chi-Square analyses conducted for this study.

Table 1

Summary of Pearson Chi-Square Analyses

Variable	DF	N	$\chi^2$	p-value
<b>Academic Outcomes</b>				
Considered Leaving	1	724	0.097	0.756
GPA	3	668	0.419	0.936
Hours studying alone	4	724	1.839	0.765
Hours studying with friends	4	723	5.96	0.202

Number of faculty interactions outside of class per semester	4	726	4.871	0.301
<b>Social Involvement</b>				
Student organizations*	4	724	30.033	< .001
Cultural student organizations*	4	713	22.854	< .001
Non-cultural student organizations*	4	717	27.31	< .001
<b>Employment</b>				
Employment type*	3	721	12.757	0.005
Hours employed per week	4	434	0.408	0.982

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Note. \*p < .01

### Discussion

The first research question explored if there was an association between various academic outcomes and Greek affiliation. The researchers found there was no association between time spent studying and Greek affiliation for the AACSSs included in the study. The researchers also found there was no association between GPA and Greek affiliation. Collectively, these findings are inconsistent with previous studies (e.g., Guiffrida, 2004b; Harper, 2000; Mitchell, 2012), which indicated that Greek affiliation may negatively affect GPA and other academic outcomes for AACSSs because of overinvolvement. The findings in this study add to the literature by offering some of the first quantitative evidence regarding the non-association of GPA and Greek affiliation for AACSSs.

The researchers also found no association between students considering leaving an institution (i.e., retention/persistence) and Greek affiliation, and no association between hours spent with faculty outside of the classroom and Greek affiliation. These findings are inconsistent with previous findings where AACSSs have reported Greek-lettered organizations connected them to the institution and to faculty outside of the classroom (e.g., McClure, 2006; Mitchell, 2012; Patton et al., 2011) and should be further explored.

The second research question explored if there were any associations in the amount of time spent participating in various types of involvement and Greek affiliation for AACSSs. More specifically, the researchers explored differences in involvement in various types of student organizations. The researchers found that Greek-affiliated students were more involved in student organizations across organizational types. This finding is consistent with the findings of Guiffrida (2004b), Harper (2000), Mitchell (2012), and Patton et al. (2011), who all reported that African American students in Greek-lettered organizations are more actively engaged on campus.

The third research question explored the association between employment and Greek affiliation for AACSSs. The researchers found those involved in Greek-lettered organizations were more likely to be employed and work on campus. Research relating to the experiences of students of color suggests that off-campus employment negatively influences persistence to graduation (Choy, 2001; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Oseguera, 2005-06). More broadly, as Tinto (1993) suggests, “[E]mployment not only limits the time one has for academic studies, it also severely limits one’s opportunities for interaction with other students” (p. 269). Further studies about employment and academic outcomes are warranted, given that researchers found no association between various academic outcomes and Greek affiliation, even though Greek affiliation was associated with employment.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings and research approach used in this study, the researchers have several recommendations for future research. While the present study confirmed some findings associated with Greek affiliation and social outcomes for AACSSs, it also highlighted inconsistencies in relation to academic outcomes associated with Greek affiliation. These inconsistencies highlight the need for more quantitative, multi-institutional studies investigating academic outcomes associated with Greek affiliation, and BGLO affiliation in particular. First, larger-scale studies, along with more sophisticated statistical analyses, would be useful to determine if

there are broader implications for these findings across diverse institutional contexts. Second, qualitative research building upon the recommended quantitative studies may provide researchers and scholars with a more robust understanding of Greek affiliation and academic/social outcomes, enhancing their ability to make broader recommendations for practice.

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