

Desiring to Belong: The Role of Fraternity Involvement on the Sense of Involvement for Black Men at a Predominately White Institution

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Abstract

Desiring to Belong: The Role of Fraternity Involvement on the Sense of Involvement for Black Men at a Predominately White Institution The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ten (10) Black male fraternity members regarding the role of fraternity involvement in their sense of belonging at a mid-size, 4-year, PWI (predominantly White institution). To participate in this study, the participants must 1) self-identify as a Black male; 2) was an active member of an active National Pan-Hellenic fraternity at the study institution; and 3) were currently enrolled full-time at the study institution during the time of this study. Framing this study in Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging, the findings of this study highlighted that, as a Black male fraternity member, **relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow students**, the climate of the campus and local community, their experience and influences as a fraternity member, peer connections and their overall experiences at a PWI all impacted their sense of belonging at the PWI.

Keywords: Fraternity, racial micro aggressions, Education, sense of belonging, social transition, success

Introduction and Review of the Literature

Experiences of Black Men in Higher Education

According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2015), only 59% of African American men graduated from high schools in the United States in 2008 versus 80% of Caucasian men. In 2002, African-American men made up only 4.3 percent of students enrolled in higher education institutions, the same ratio as in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Finally, across both sexes and all racial/ethnic groupings in the United States, African-American college completion rates are the lowest (Harper, 2016; Harper & Harris, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010).

Although many African-American students attend PWIs, a sizable proportion of these students graduate from HBCUs (Robertson, 2012). The disparities in the number of Black males graduating from PWIs and HBCUs show that the classroom environment at the PWI may be impeding these men's academic progress. Race, micro aggressions, and encounters between Black males and White faculty members all have a significant impact (Chaney & Robertson, 2017). Because Black males may operate in an atmosphere where subtle forms of verbal and nonverbal racism exist, the likelihood of graduating may be reduced (Chaney & Robertson, 2017).

Black men at PWIs view involvement in organizations as significant to their persistence at their institutions, and the most important factor regarding their social and academic commitment was participation in an ethnically based student support organization (Simmons, 2013). Current literature reveals it is important for Black men to get involved in an ethnic-based organization early in their college career to be successful.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging refers to students' perception of assistance on campus and social support by fellow peers, faculty, and staff. It also includes feelings of being cared about, connected, and valued at the institution (Strayhorn, 2018). Strayhorn (2018) identified the following seven core elements of a sense of belonging: (1) it is a basic human desire, (2) it is a motivator for conduct, (3) it is extremely significant, (4) it is related to mattering, (5) it relates to college students' social identities, (6) it can result in positive outcomes, and (7) it must be reached on a continuous basis and is subject to change as a result of the circumstance and/or location.

A successful academic transfer to university is based on social transition. The formation of a friendship network is an important component of the process (Kantanis, 2000). Without friends, the transition to university is more challenging, but having friends aids students in settling in quickly and progressing in their studies (Worsley et al., 2021). Establishing and maintaining a friendship network necessitates advanced social skills, as well as an outgoing personality, which not all 1st-year students possess. As a result, although expressing a desire to establish friends, some students face significant obstacles in accomplishing this goal. During this transitional era, students have an intense need to belong, to connect with one another, to find a safe place, and to navigate their new identities (Anistranski & Brown, 2021).

Persistence, usage of campus resources, and mental health have all been proven to be positively connected with a sense of belonging for students at 4-year colleges (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). A study was conducted that surveyed 254 African American and 291 Caucasian students who identified as 1st-year students. The researchers sought to determine if sense of belonging is a predictor of persistence at the university. The results indicated that academic integration and parental support were critical in students' having a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the study revealed that institutional commitment, group dynamics, peer support, and family involvement were important elements in helping students develop a sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007). Despite studies that show a favorable relationship between feelings of belonging and indices of mental health (Cruwys et al., 2014), a sense of belonging has not been substantially studied within Black racial identity theories (Hunter et al., 2019). Walton and Cohen (2011) used a sense of belonging as an approach to boost psychological well-being. They discovered that enhancing Black college students' attachment to their academic institution had multiple advantages, including higher grade point averages than control groups, and that such attachments transformed students' perceptions of the significance of difficulties on campus (Hunter et al., 2019). This study also revealed that Black university students felt a connection to and responsibility for fellow Black students (Hunter et al., 2019).

Ahn & Davis (2019) launched a project at a university to investigate a sense of belonging. Participants in the study were invited to complete a self-completion assignment in which they were instructed to write down up to 10 words that came to mind when they thought about their sense of belonging at the university. A total of 2,671 words were collected from 372 participants for the study. The study found that sense of belonging is multidimensional, although most participants agreed that social engagement was the most salient factor (Ahn & Davis, 2019).

A study was undertaken in 2019 to investigate the association between racial microaggressions and the sense of belonging for students of color at PWIs (Lewis et al., 2021). Researchers investigated the association between the occurrence of perceived discrimination (e.g., degrading remarks, microinsults) and a sense of belonging using quantitative and qualitative data from an online survey. According to the data, Black students face much more racial stereotypes and biases than Asian, Latinx, or multiracial

individuals. The study also discovered that the incidence of microaggressions effectively predicted sense of belonging for students of color. The higher a student's number of racial microaggressions, the worse their sense of belonging at the school. The level of comfort was reduced as a result of racial microaggressions and a sense of belonging on campus (Lewis et al., 2021).

The intellectual and social problems that Black men may experience in higher education have been recognized by scholars. These problems include feelings of isolation, marginalization, and alienation both inside and outside the classroom (Strayhorn, 2009). Black college students who identify with their racial group have both conflicts and benefits in terms of their sense of belonging. A college student's sense of community is connected to their sense of belonging. Students who are more engaged on campus feel a greater relationship with each other than those who are less involved or not interested at all in extracurricular activities. By devoting physical time and psychological energy to becoming involved, college students satisfy their need to belong. Some students are even more motivated to become involved on campus to establish a sense of belonging at the institution (Strayhorn, 2018). When students participate with their peers in developmentally meaningful ways, such as clubs and sports-related activities, they gain in terms of student belonging.

Furthermore, engaging with faculty outside of class increases students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Brooms (2020) found that faculty members' teaching approaches and how they display their care for students matters greatly to Black men in college. Student-centered care and mentoring, as well as in-class behaviors and activities both inside and outside the classroom, impact these students' college experience and overall sense of belonging. Overall, the study found that faculty members play a prominent role in creating a college atmosphere that fosters academic success and connectedness to the university (Brooms, 2020).

Black Men in College Fraternities

Given the added stress of navigating an environment in which they may suffer microaggressions and prejudice (Lewis et al., 2021), it is particularly crucial that Black males attending PWIs identify with a peer group. According to researchers, African-American college men who have supportive relationships on campus have higher levels of satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2009). McGowan (2017) conducted a study to explore African Americans' gender identity in the formation of interpersonal relationships. Semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation data for the study were gathered through interviews that were conducted at a large public institution. The findings revealed that individuals desired close relationships with other men and viewed these relationships as a necessary aspect of the college experience (McGowan, 2017).

Greek-life organizations at a specific institution are organized into councils that are frequently segregated by race and gender. Typically, the Inter-Fraternity Council (IFC) is composed primarily of White fraternities. White sororities are often members of the Pan-Hellenic Council (PHC). The NPHC, which governs BGLOs, is comprised of five historically Black fraternities and four historically Black sororities (Ray, 2013).

Beginning in 1906, after being refused admission to White fraternities and experiencing racism and prejudice at PWIs, Black men established their own collegiate fraternities (Hughey & Parks, 2011). Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity is widely credited with founding the BGLO college system in 1906. Three more fraternities and four sororities had been founded by 1922: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (1908), Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (1911), Omega Psi Phi Fraternity (1911), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (1913), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity (1914), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority (1920), and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority (1922). Another fraternity, Iota Phi Theta, was created in 1964. Because of their collaborative grouping under the NPHC, these organizations are popularly referred to as "The Divine Nine" (NPHC). These groups' philosophies, cultural practices, and customs may all be traced back to African cultural heritage. BGLOs distinguished themselves in their early phases by pursuing personal greatness, forging strong familial bonds, and participating in community uplift through action (Agyemang, 2005; Goss et al., 2014). These

groups' goals are to address African Americans' social, political, and economic issues on college campuses. These fraternities' missions are to produce leaders, encourage academic success, and strive for social justice and the academic success of their fraternity members (Hughey & Parks, 2011).

A 2011 study explored the effects of fraternity and sorority affiliation on African-American student engagement at both HBCUs and PWIs. Findings revealed that whereas Black students in BGLOs at HBCUs were active in collaborative academic activities, the same demographic is less engaged at PWIs (Patton et al., 2011). To measure the amount of participation of Black males in BGLOs, a 2020 phenomenological research study used semi-structured focus groups based on the theoretical framework of the sense of belonging. The study discovered that participants' motivation to seek aid and services at the institution is influenced by their sense of belonging. The study also concluded that Greek life and fraternities must work together to assist fraternities in fostering a sense of belonging at the institution (Sharp,

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black male fraternity members regarding their experiences with sense of belonging to a PWI. More specifically, this research explored the experiences of Black men at a 4-year, public PWI in East Texas. Although there is literature regarding the sense of belonging as a theoretical concept, Strayhorn (2009) argued that few studies discuss the sense of belonging at colleges.

This study sheds light on how Black men in PWI fraternities perceive the role of fraternities in terms of their impact on the sense of belonging at the institution. Personal stories from current Black men at the study institution about no cognitive experiences they feel are related to their attainment at the university provided data from which to create strategic planning, policies, programming, and resources that are centered around sense of belonging at the institution. The following study is guided by the following overarching research questions: (1) how do undergraduate Black males who are active members of fraternities describe their experiences regarding the role of the fraternity in their sense of belonging at the institution? and (2) How do college-age Black males who are active in NPHC fraternities describe other experiences, both favorable and unfavorable, that influenced their sense of belonging at a PWI?

Methods

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured individual interviews designed around the theoretical framework of sense of belonging to understand the role of fraternities in academic success, student experience, and sense of belonging at a PWI. This study aimed to explore the experiences of Black men and their fraternity involvement at Texas Wells University. This study also identified how Black men in fraternities at PWIs assess the role of fraternities on academic success, student experience, and sense of belonging at the institution (Maxwell, 2005).

Participants

In February 2022, potential participants were identified through collaboration with the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life at Texas Wells University. Participant selection included the following criteria: (a) self-identify as a Black man at the institution, (b) be an active member of an active National Pan-Hellenic fraternity at the institution, and (c) be currently enrolled full-time at the study institution during the time of this study. Participant recruitment was conducted in several ways. An email invitation was sent to all members of fraternities who met the criteria. Interested participants were asked to respond via email or text. In addition to recruiting students via an invitation email, the researcher attended chapter meetings in person to recruit participants. Snowballing, or recommendations for additional participants (Creswell, 2012) occurred as a result of the two (2) recruitment strategies. A follow-up email was sent to participants, confirming their participation, interview location, and day/time of the interview. The participants were asked to complete an informed consent form. A total of ten (10) participants who met the criteria participated in this study.

Measures and Procedure

The research design for this study was qualitative in nature. The purpose of qualitative research is to comprehend the significance of events and situations for study participants and comprehend the explanations they offer of their life experiences (Maxwell, 2005). In a qualitative approach, research is intended into not only the observable phenomena and behaviors that occur but also into how the study participants make meaning and how their knowledge shapes their conduct (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods have been determined to be the most suitable approach to gain a better understanding of the topic. A qualitative research design was chosen due to interest in advancing the understanding of a particular group of Black male fraternity members and their experiences with a sense of belonging. The aim is to gain the participants' points of view to draw conclusions on a particular phenomenon (Stake, 2010).

Data Analysis

After transcriptions from the personal interviews were finalized, data were read and coded to identify quotations and, when possible, made into major organizing ideas. The two main methods for doing so are deductive coding and inductive coding. Deductive coding is using prearranged codes derived from a philosophical framework and finding data that fit into those codes. Inductive coding is when no prearranged codes exist, and codes are developed as they emerge from participant discussions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) The method used in this analysis was inductive coding—more specifically, constant comparative analysis. To use this method, a codebook, and coding were completed after personal interviews.

Findings

After responses were transcribed, the researcher used MAXQDA software to create initial codes based on interview question categories. After further analysis, more in-depth codes were created, which ultimately led to the formation of themes. Aligning with the research questions are the following themes based on findings from the individual interviews: (a) relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow students, (b) campus and local community climate, (c) fraternity influence and experience, (d) student engagement, and (e) PWI experience. Table 2 summarizes the themes that emerged from the data. Table 1 highlights the overarching themes.

Table 1

Themes from Black Male Fraternity Members at a PWI
Relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow students.
Climate of the Campus and Local Community
Fraternity Influences and Experience
Peer Connections
Experience at a PWI

Discussion

According to this research, fraternity members' campus activity and relationships are associated with a greater sense of belonging at the PWI. In addition, participants' perspectives as fraternity members, Black men, and Black students at the university were explored. Regarding the seven fundamental components of a sense of belonging, the study reveals that a student's feeling of belonging is linked to mattering and social identities (Strayhorn, 2018). Students' replies regarding their need for more significant ties with faculty and staff revealed a desire for support and a need to belong.

According to the findings of this study, fraternity members discussed their relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow students. Regarding the seven fundamental components of a sense of belonging, the study reveals that a student's feeling of belonging is linked to mattering and social identities (Strayhorn, 2018). Students' replies regarding their need for more significant ties with faculty and staff revealed a desire for support and a need to belong. The overarching theme of faculty and staff assistance highlighted the participants' critical need for a strong relationship with them in order to succeed. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Broome's (2020), which found that Black men place a high value on faculty members' concern for their students. The students desired the same faculty understanding and acceptance level as their non-Black colleagues at a PWI. According to the study's findings, being a member of a fraternity allowed the participants to have a certain level of access to faculty and staff, that they would not otherwise have, as a result of being a member of a fraternity. The participants shared that being a member of a fraternity allowed them to be recognized and provided a means to be seen among other students.

The theme of *climate of campus and local community* revealed that the surrounding community's climate is just as essential as the university's climate. It was discovered that unfavorable microaggressions experienced in the town had a similar effect on these students' sense of belonging as a negative encounter on campus. Due to the absence of Black representation on campus, students also expressed feelings of isolation, which is consistent with Strayhorn (2019). As an example, students acknowledged that their sense of belonging were negatively impacted by their experiences of being the only Black male in their classes. These experiences were further exacerbated by being a member of a fraternity. The perception of fraternity affiliation, more specifically black fraternity affiliation brought with it a negative connotation.

The theme of *fraternity influences and experiences* focuses primarily on the fraternity experience of the attendees. The participants' motivations for joining NPHC and their individual fraternities were also discussed. In addition, members regularly emphasized the impact of their college fraternity experience on their sense of belonging. The participants discussed their close relationships with other men in their fraternity. These fraternity affiliations favorably affected their sense of belonging at the university. This study's findings are consistent with previous studies on men of color and Black Greek Letter fraternities. Additionally, it confirms the findings in the literature that once students identify their friendship network, it helps them adjust to university life (Worsley, 2021).

Regarding the theme of peer connections, during the interviews, participants described their own 1st-year college experiences and their path to feeling at home within the institution. As a crucial factor in their decision to remain at the institution, several participants emphasized the need to establish friends and engage in social activities. The participants then discussed the significance of the Black student community at the university and how this connection allowed them to remain there. Finally, several participants acknowledged a sense of obligation to make a difference and leave a legacy at their alma mater upon graduation. They desired to have a positive influence on the Black students who joined the university after them.

The value of friends was also cited by students as having a beneficial impact on their sense of belonging at the university. Many students talked about how their friendships and relationships with other students were the pivotal point in their sense of belonging from their 1st year of college to the present in the peer connection theme. They felt more at home at the institution as a result of their participation in organizations and willingness to open up and engage in interactions with other students.

Many of the participants felt their fraternity membership made them popular among the Black community, giving them an advantage over their other Black counterparts. However, being a Black man at a PWI made many of them uncomfortable, and the fact that they belonged to a fraternity drew unwanted, unfavorable attention from those outside the Black community. The findings of this study are consistent with Walten and Cohen's (2019) research, which discovered that Black students felt a sense of

responsibility and connection to fellow Black students (Hunter et al, 2019). Despite encountering obstacles during their undergraduate careers, these men were fortunate to find spaces, organizations, or relationships on campus where they felt supported and heard. Consequently, these support structures contributed favorably to their sense of belonging and fostered their commitment to the institution and their desire to serve future Black students and fraternity members at the university.

Finally, *sharing their experience at a PWI* was essential for the participants. Some of the participants mentioned that there was a cultural shift and an adaptation made in order to feel like they belonged at the university. Fortunately, as was already indicated, many of these students were able to establish their support networks through relationships with peers and their involvement in fraternities, which aided in their adjustment to the university. The students also expressed a desire to be treated with the same respect as other university Greek Councils, particularly the historically White fraternities and sororities, in this theme. Overall, the participants showed a passion and optimism for the institution's future and a strong desire for change, both via their own personal need to positively impact the university and through their suggestions for improvements for administration.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals and advocates of Black male students

The following organizational suggestions were derived from this study's findings. The recommendations are as follows:

- Build partnerships and conduct diversity training with local community organizations and businesses.
- Provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff on how to serve students of color better.
- Have consistent meetings between the administration and NPHC chapters.
- Highlight the benefits of joining Greek Life at the institution.
- Increase Black representation of institution faculty and staff.

The following sections discuss these recommendations in detail.

Recommendation 1: *Build partnerships and conduct diversity training with local community organizations and businesses.*

The institution and local community partners should develop initiatives to increase communication between the university and local businesses and groups. By having meetings and open discussions, university representatives and students can report incidents of microaggressions and acts of bias. Due to the mutually beneficial connection between the city and the institution, this program can improve the interaction between Black men and the local community. In addition, there should be community-wide diversity training to educate corporate personnel and municipal leaders on diversity terminology and unconscious bias. The university's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion can administer this training alongside qualified faculty and staff.

Recommendation 2: *Provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to serve students of color better.*

Faculty and staff must receive training on serving students of color effectively outside the classroom. Faculty and staff should have access to conferences and guest speakers to learn how to avoid microaggressions and acts of bias and intolerance. In addition, activities involving interactions between Black men and Black faculty and staff should be prioritized. These initiatives should foster trust and rapport between students, faculty, and staff. Roundtable conversations, meet-and-greets, and mentorship programs are examples of activities that can be implemented.

Recommendation 3: *Have consistent meetings between the administration and NPHC chapters.*

It was apparent from the responses to the survey that students did not always believe the administration would keep its promises. The administration only communicated with them when an issue arose so they

might seek remedies. Instead of being reactive to difficulties, the administration is encouraged to conduct consistent meetings with the NPHC and Black fraternities throughout the academic year.

Recommendation 4: *Highlight the benefits of joining Greek Life around the institution.*

Many Black fraternity men believed that instructors, staff, and students at a PWI were unaware of the existence and purpose of NPHC fraternities and sororities. The Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life should provide marketing and education of NPHC fraternities and sororities to university stakeholders in an effective way. In addition, NPHC should be featured on par with other Greek Councils on campus.

Recommendation 5: *Increase Black representation of institution faculty and staff.*

Many individuals reported feeling alienated and alone and having difficulty locating Black professors and staff members. Current Black academics and staff should be highlighted to these students. In addition to their standard job posting websites, Human Resources should advertise available openings on national Black career platforms, such as the Texas Association of Black Personnel in Higher Education, to expand the application pool to bolster the likelihood of employing Black faculty and staff at the institution.

Recommendation 6: *Promote interactions between NPHC and the black non-Greek student body.*

The Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life's goal is to promote and develop programs for Greek Councils, however many students cannot afford to join a fraternity or sorority. It is imperative that the office supports chapters, especially NPHC, in creating programs to not only recruit new members but also to assist and interact with all students, including Black students who choose not to join a fraternity or sorority. These events will foster communication and understanding between NPHC and the whole Black university community, including individuals who are not Greek members.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of ten (10) Black male fraternity members and their experiences with a sense of belonging in a PWI in East Texas. The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the experiences of Black men to understand their experiences as a fraternity members with sense of belonging. The study discovered that, as a Black male fraternity member, the climate of the campus and local community, their experience and influences as a fraternity member, peer connections, and their overall experiences at a PWI all impacted their sense of belonging. The research increases knowledge of Black males in NPHC fraternities and Strayhorn's theory on college sense of belonging. Individual interviews allowed the 10 Black male participants to discuss both positive and negative experiences at the institution. These findings add to the existing literature and seek to enhance the university culture at PWIs across the country.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest we have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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