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# A 20-Year History of Black Greek-Letter Organization Research and Scholarship



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Jazzmin D. Weathers  
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CENTER FOR THE STUDY  
OF THE COLLEGE FRATERNITY

cscf



## A 20-Year History of Black Greek-Letter Organization Research & Scholarship

This report was produced by Donald Mitchell, Jr., Jazzmin D. Weathers, and Michael A. Jones.

Donald Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D., is an assistant professor of higher education in the College of Education at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Grand Rapids, MI. His research and scholarship includes Black Greek-letter organizations and other topics related to identity markers in higher education contexts. He was awarded the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity's 2012 Richard McKaig Outstanding Doctoral Research Award for his dissertation, "Are They Truly Divine? A Grounded Theory of the Influences of Black Greek-Lettered Organizations on the Persistence of African Americans at Predominantly White Institutions." He currently serves as editor-in-chief of *Annals of the Next Generation* and as an editorial board member for the *Journal of African American Males in Education* and the *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*. Dr. Mitchell earned a B.S. in chemistry from Shaw University, the first historically Black institution in the South; an M.S. in educational leadership from Minnesota State University, Mankato; and a Ph.D. in educational policy and administration with a concentration in higher education from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He is a life member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.

Jazzmin D. Weathers is a native of Southfield, MI. She earned a B.A. in communication studies from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and is currently pursuing an M.Ed. in higher education with an emphasis in college student affairs leadership at Grand Valley State University. Her future goals include pursuing a Ph.D. in higher education and becoming a student affairs administrator, helping underrepresented minorities matriculate at predominantly White institutions. She is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

Michael A. Jones is a native of Detroit, MI. He is a junior at Grand Valley State University pursuing a B.S. in sociology with a minor in religious studies. He is a proud alumnus of TRiO Upward Bound and a fellow in the NASPA Undergraduate Fellow Program. Upon graduation, Michael plans to pursue a master's degree in education. His career goals include working with youth and developing the next generation of leaders.

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## From the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity

The Center for the Study of the College Fraternity (CSCF) collaborates with the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) to fund researchers engaged in studying aspects of fraternity and sorority life. In addition, CSCF and AFA present individual research awards: the Adele Williamson Outstanding Masters Research Award and the Richard McKaig Outstanding Doctoral Research Award. These awards recognize exemplary research that significantly contributes to the fraternity and sorority field.

Steve Veldkamp, executive director of the CSCF, stated: "The research project, 'A 20-Year History of Black Greek-Letter Organization Research & Scholarship' contributes to the advancement of the fraternal movement's alignment with higher education values and goals and is well timed." This scholarship fits within CSCF's current priority to analyze contemporary research in order to distill best practices and highlight gaps in the literature for future research planning. Taking this into consideration, Kaye Schendel, president of the CSCF, added: "Dr. Mitchell's research is further advancing the body of work that is relevant to fraternities and sororities. We are incredibly excited that we were able to recognize and fund a portion of his work and that it is being featured in this publication."

*Steve Veldkamp, M.Ed., is assistant dean of students and the director of student life and learning at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN. He serves as executive director of the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, based on the campus of Indiana University, Bloomington.*

*Kaye Schendel, M.Ed., is director of global service initiatives for Delta Upsilon International Fraternity in Indianapolis, IN, and national president of Sigma Sigma Sigma Sorority. She serves as president of the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity.*

## Greetings from Grand Valley State University

As I near the end of my 10th year as dean of the College of Education at Grand Valley State University, I am especially proud of the numerous success stories of our faculty, staff, and students, particularly as they relate to our college's mission. In our college, we seek to further teaching, leading, and learning within a democratic society. To that end, we strive to evaluate the social and ethical implications of educational policies and practices and demonstrate a commitment to equity, liberal education, and democratic education. Currently, we have some exciting research initiatives occurring within the college, and Dr. Mitchell's work is one example.

Dr. Mitchell's work fits within the broader scope of students', particularly African American students', sense of belonging, engagement, persistence, and graduation. Since powerful societal forces continue to threaten the educational aspirations of underrepresented populations, these topics are important for every educator, staff member, and administrator at colleges and universities to consider.

Please join us in taking action to support retention of students from underrepresented populations. Here are some ways to begin:

- (a) Raise awareness about challenges and opportunities specific to underrepresented students.
- (b) Revisit the policies and practices of support in your own colleges and universities. If policies are available, ensure that they are well implemented.
- (c) Form consortia of higher education institutions that provide wraparound services to local communities.
- (d) Create cohort systems to provide ongoing companionship and support.

By working together, we can create a safe environment for all students and promote a strong sense of community as part of the learning process.

In closing, the College of Education is happy to partner with the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity. I look forward to disseminating this important work to members of our learning community.

Elaine C. Collins, Ph.D.  
Dean, College of Education

## Introduction

Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) have provided African Americans with options for unification when racial discrimination was not only legal, but widely embraced throughout the nation. BGLOs helped shape the landscape of higher education, created avenues for civil rights and social justice conversations and action, and influenced the upward social mobility of African Americans (Bonner, 2006). Fittingly, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.); Barbara Jordan (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.); Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. (Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.); Shirley Chisholm (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.); and W.E.B. DuBois (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.) are all connected to these historic organizations. BGLOs continue to produce leaders in African American communities, the United States, and the world (Ross, 2001).

Today there are nine college BGLOs, which are often referred to as “The Divine Nine.” These nine BGLOs 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.

Researchers have documented that BGLOs have positive effects on student-faculty relationships (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011); student involvement and engagement (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998); leadership development (Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998); social support and social integration (McClure, 2006; Mitchell, 2012); and academic outcomes (Harper, 2008; Mitchell, 2012). Yet amidst the positive educational outcomes, BGLOs often deal with issues of pledging and hazing (Parks & Brown, 2005). In addition, grade point averages (GPAs) may be negatively affected (Harper, 2000; Mitchell, 2012). However, it is documented that, collectively, African American students’ GPAs generally fall below those of their racial/ethnic peers at many institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), so this evidence is inconclusive. While the existing empirical research on BGLOs is generally positive, media often report the negative aspects of BGLOs, particularly focusing on pledging and hazing (Parks & Brown, 2005). In addition, many student affairs professionals—including those who work in fraternity and sorority affairs—depend on the media, rumors, and stereotypes to learn about and advise BGLOs.

Given the documented benefits of BGLOs, these organizations must be understood and supported by student affairs professionals and broader university communities. Because of the social integration, increased engagement, and positive effects on persistence that BGLOs offer, student affairs professionals might encourage BGLO involvement. However, student affairs administrators should also caution interested students that certain BGLO activities that may hinder student success. In the end, informed advocacy and awareness come through knowledge of BGLOs.

The release of this report by the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity (CSCF) is timely as it fits within the strategic plan of NASPA’s Fraternity and Sorority Knowledge Community. This community highlights (a) diversity and inclusion as significant institutional and fraternal issues; (b) relevance and student engagement as fraternal issues; and (c) advancement of the fraternal movement through education and research by partnering with organizations such as CSCF and the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA; Fraternity & Sorority Knowledge Community, NASPA, 2012).

Further, the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Commission for Student Involvement seeks to advance the mission of fraternity and sorority affairs by collaborating with the CSCF, AFA, and NASPA (S. Veldkamp, personal communication, April 5, 2013). These organizations are planning some exciting initiatives for their fraternity and sorority knowledge communities. The CSCF—which serves as the research arm for the fraternity and sorority life—plans to partner with the ACPA, AFA, NASPA and other organizations to produce a series of research projects and publications like this to advance the mission of the fraternal movement and, ultimately, the missions of colleges and universities across the nation.

The purpose of this report is twofold: (a) to highlight strategies within those works that might help advance BGLOs; and (b) to provide an extensive list of scholarly publications addressing the history, culture, and educational outcomes associated with historically Black college fraternities and sororities that have been published or produced during the past 20 years.

In sum, this report is intended to (a) help fraternity and sorority life professionals, student affairs professionals, and higher education administrators learn more about BGLOs; (b) assemble BGLO scholarship and research for current and future BGLO researchers; (c) aid BGLO governing bodies in improving their organizations through research-based practices; (d) assist potential members by helping them make informed decisions about joining BGLOs; and (e) serve as a resource for anyone interested in BGLOs by providing an extensive bibliographic review along with a synthesis of suggested practices to advance BGLOs.

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## Suggested Practices to Advance Black Greek-Letter Organizations

- Appreciate that BGLOs are separate, unique, and different from “traditional” Greek organizations, particularly at predominantly White institutions (McClure, 2006).
- Actively seek out opportunities to learn more about BGLOs and increase cultural competence regarding BGLOs (Patton & Bonner, 2001; Strayhorn & McCall, 2012).
- Support and establish new BGLO chapters at the undergraduate level, even if chapters are smaller than traditional Greek organizations and below published bylaws requirements (Harper, 2008; Mitchell, 2012).
- Invest in advisors within fraternity and sorority life who work specifically with BGLOs (Harper, 2000; Patton & Bonner, 2001).
- Solicit support from faculty, staff, and graduate students who are members of BGLOs, particularly those involved with the ACPA, AFA, and NASPA (Patton & Bonner, 2001; Strayhorn & McCall, 2012).
- Help BGLO chapters clarify their values and purpose; remind chapters that their students’ primary purpose in attending college is a meaningful education (Harper, 2000; Kimbrough, 1997).
- Conduct annual retreats for BGLOs (e.g., FUBUGreeks.com, IMPACT, Harbor Institute), and financially support BGLO/NPHC chapters to attend Greek leadership development conferences (National Black Greek Leadership Conference; Patton & Bonner, 2001).
- Encourage academic and social collaborations among BGLO/NPHC chapters, as well as collaborations with other fraternity and sorority councils (e.g., Interfraternity Council, Multicultural Greek Council, Panhellenic Council) and other campus-based groups (Harper, 2000; Patton & Bonner, 2001).
- Encourage more academic programming and programs that foster interactions with faculty (Harper, 2000; Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011).
- Create learning communities that focus on BGLOs (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011).
- Closely and actively monitor the academics of BGLO members (Harper, 2000; Mitchell, 2012).
- Caution BGLO members and prospective members that over-commitment and certain activities may hinder academic outcomes (e.g., hazing, excessive programming; Harper, 2000; Mitchell, 2012).
- Address pledging and hazing head-on and renegotiate the membership intake process (Harper, 2008; Parks & Brown, 2005; Patton & Bonner, 2001).



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Note: The bibliography portion of this report is not meant to be all-inclusive. The authors intentionally excluded master's theses, popular press reports, many non-refereed articles, historical publications sanctioned by BGLOs, comparative analyses (e.g., comparisons of White and Black Greeks), chapters within edited volumes on BGLOs, and articles where BGLOs were sub-topics of larger scholarly conversations or research investigations. In addition, the authors may have inadvertently overlooked books, chapters, articles, and dissertations that warranted inclusion, including articles that were in press at the time of this publication. However, the authors hope that this reference list will serve as a guide for stakeholders interested in research and scholarship concerning BGLOs.

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