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Transitioning from GPA Requirements to Holistic Application Reviews

By Donald Mitchell, Jr.

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

My fraternity was founded more than 100 years ago. The men who founded it believed it was important to emphasize brotherhood as a way to help them persist on a predominantly white campus. They went on to serve in the armed services, practice dentistry and medicine, educate our youth, defend the public, and became some of the earliest entrepreneurs and businessmen of color. The fraternity assisted in their success. I contend that when historically black fraternities continue to increase GPA requirements, they negate the founding principles of these organizations because black men who often need the support they offer by failing to meet GPA requirements are denied access without consideration. Some black men need these organizations for social support and integration, leadership development and professional development - particularly at predominantly white institutions – as these benefits positively influence academic outcomes (Harper, 2008; Mitchell, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As college enrollment rates for black men decline, institutions of higher education are seeking novel ways to engage and retain black men who do attend. While historically Black fraternities can serve as a supportive option, GPA requirements sometime marginalize those who may want or need to join historically black fraternities.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Donald Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D., is an assistant professor of higher education at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, MI. His scholarship theoretically and empirically explores the effects of race, gender and underrepresented identity intersections within higher education contexts, with a particular interest in historically Black fraternities and sororities and historically Black colleges and universities.