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A Grounded Theory of the Influence of Black Greek-lettered Organizations on the Persistence of African Americans at a Predominantly White Institution

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For decades, scholars have documented that predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are not fully meeting the needs of African American students, as these students have reported social isolation, discrimination, and low social integration (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Harper, 2013). While the experiences of African American students at PWIs have been well documented, further research on best practices to retain and graduate African American students at PWIs is needed. One particular area where further research is merited concerns African Americans' involvement in Black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLOs). Studies have documented the effects of BGLOs on African American students' experiences at PWIs, particularly in the areas of social support, engagement, and leadership development (Harper, 2008a; Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; McClure, 2006; Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011). Still, scholarship on BGLOs and academic outcomes warrants further attention given the many challenges African American students continue to encounter in pursuit of higher education.

There are nine college BGLOs (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.). Founded from 1906 to 1963, college BGLOs became advocates for African Americans as early BGLO members realized that the collective efforts within their organizations were important for racial, educational, and social progress (Bonner, 2006). In this study, I examine students' social experiences in BGLOs to better understand whether, and in what ways, those experiences influence persistence. I define persistence similar to Reason (2009)—a student's progress toward goal attainment—and, in the present study, graduation is defined as a student's goal. To investigate the relationship, I place emphasis on social capital that may be gained through social networks established in BGLOs. The following research questions shaped this study: In what ways, if any, is social capital gained through African American students' participation in BGLOs? In what ways, if any, does social capital influence the persistence of African American students at PWIs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

African American students' academic and social needs are often left unmet at PWIs (Feagin et al., 1996; Harper, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). African American students have reported feeling left out of curricula, having less satisfactory relationships with faculty, feeling more excluded from campus activities, and having inadequate social lives on campus (Harper, 2013; McClure, 2006; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005). Subsequently, it is important for PWIs to continue to adopt and improve institutional practices that support and engage African American students.

Tinto's (1975) and Astin's (1993) college student impact models have been foundational, influential, and important in student attrition, involvement, and persistence discourse, as many of their claims are consistent with the experiences of several college students. Yet, some researchers have argued there are limitations to the aforementioned models and recommendations (Fischer, 2007). Alternatively, researchers have focused specifically on African American students' engagement at PWIs (Fischer, 2007; Guiffrida, 2003, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Harper, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have documented African American students' engagement within minority and African American student organizations as spaces in which African American students actively search to become engaged at PWIs (Guiffrida, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

Reason (2009) suggests that subcultures are important for underrepresented groups as they help students negotiate the differences between their cultures and dominant cultures and potentially hostile environments. African American student

organizations at PWIs are often safe spaces for African American students to learn about and connect with their cultures (Guiffrida, 2003). Researchers have also noted that minority student organizations have positive effects on leadership development (Dugan, Kodama, & Gebhardt, 2012) and racial-identity development (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Renn & Ozaki, 2010), which improve students' college experiences.

Nevertheless, research related to African American student participation in minority and African American student organizations at PWIs in relation to academic outcomes is mixed. Fischer (2007) found that minority students involved in formal social activities are more likely to persist and Guiffrida (2003) found African American student organizations connect students with faculty, which is positively linked to persistence. Nevertheless, Guiffrida (2004) found that overinvolvement in African American student organizations is sometimes harmful to academic achievement. Guiffrida explained, "Overinvolved students with low grades described spending countless hours working on the business of the [Black student] organization, which they believed to have significantly contributed to their low GPAs" (p. 92). This contradiction highlights the need for further research exploring the impact of African American student organizations on academic outcomes of African American students at PWIs. In the present study, I bring focus to the existing gap in the literature concentrating on BGLOs.

Scholars 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), and social support and integration (Harper, 2008a; McClure, 2006). Still, research related to the impact of fraternities and sororities on academic outcomes—and BGLOs in particular—is inconclusive. Pascarella, Edison, Whitt, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (1996) found that fraternities and sororities have a negative effect on some areas of cognitive development; however, the authors mention there is a slightly positive effect of fraternity involvement on the cognitive development of men of color. Furthermore, Pascarella, Flowers, and Whitt (2001) found that fraternities and sororities have negative effects on cognitive development during a student's first year; however, in a review of Pascarella, Edison, and colleagues' study, Harper, Byars, and Jelke (2005) noted that most BGLO chapters do not allow students to join during their first year. Accordingly, the academic outcomes associated with students involved in BGLOs may be different than those students involved in historically White Greek-lettered organizations.

Research that has explicitly examined the relationship between BGLOs and academic outcomes has primarily been conducted by Harper (2000, 2008a). According to Harper (2000), after examining the academic standings reports for all fraternities and sororities at 24 colleges and universities, nearly 92% of the BGLO chapters had lower GPA averages than the overall GPA average of all students involved in fraternities and sororities at each institution. Later, Harper (2008a)

investigated the effects of BGLO membership on classroom engagement in pre-dominantly White classrooms, interviewing 131 participants at a large, public research university in the Midwest. Harper concluded that the factors that in-fluence classroom engagement positively are underrepresentation, voluntary race representation, collective responsibility, and engaging teaching styles. Harper also found that the factors that negatively affect participation are forced representation and nonengaging teaching styles.

Given the documented benefits of BGLOs on student engagement and social support, researchers should examine how the social aspects of being involved in BGLOs influence persistence. Using a social capital framework, McClure (2006) suggests, "As it relates specifically to connecting members to the university, the fraternity can clearly be considered a mechanism of social integration" (p. 1039). As cultural organizations help socially integrate African Americans on predomi-nantly White campuses, they can be viewed as enclaves of social capital for African American students. Ultimately, in this study, I explore the ways in which BGLOs at a PWI offer participants social capital and the ways in which that capital influ-ences students' persistence.

Social capital is defined through two overarching themes—benefits gained by a community and benefits gained by an individual (Borgatti, Jones, & Everett, 1998; Lin, 1999). Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of social capital places emphasis on the bene-fits accrued by an individual. I used Bourdieu's definition to shape the present study and also built upon Lin's (1999) network theory of social capital to frame the analy-sis. Lin's framework highlights the idea that social capital is embedded in resources in social networks and Lin defined social capital as an "investment in social relations with expected returns" (p. 30). Lin's network theory of social capital is explained using three key elements: inequalities, capitalization, and effects.

First, individuals do not possess the same amount of social capital; therefore, there are inequalities in the social capital possessed. Second, individuals capitalize by accessing and mobilizing social capital. Third, the effects are the returns or the benefits associated with the social capital gained. The returns can be explained in two ways: returns to instrumental action and returns to expressive action. Returns to instrumental action are gained resources not originally possessed by the indi-vidual, and returns to expressive action are maintaining resources that are already possessed by the individual. I use Lin's network theory of social capital to frame how involvement in BGLOs at a PWI influences persistence.

METHOD

I used a grounded theory methodology to conduct this study. When grounded theory was formed by Glasser and Strauss in 1967, the methodology was unique in

that it did not start with a hypothesis (Merriam, 2009). Using a grounded theory methodology allows theories to emerge from the research as participants describe their engagement with, and interpretation of, a given lived experience and researchers seek "not just to understand, but also to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

Researchers bring knowledge, assumptions, and biases into qualitative studies (Charmaz, 2006). I am a member of a BGLO, I approached this study as an advocate for BGLOs, and I acknowledge the experiences of African American students studying at PWIs are sometimes negative. Because of my lived experiences and the knowledge I brought to the study, I did not take an objective stance during the study. Rather, I thought that my positionality would be useful in co-constructing the grounded theory that emerged because "constructivist grounded theorists do not attempt to be objective in their data collection or analysis, but instead seek to clarify and problematize their assumptions and make those assumptions clear to others" (Edwards & Jones, 2009, p. 212). Thus, I consider this study a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Sample

The participants in the present study were students at a large, public, predominantly White research-intensive university located in the Northeast region of the United States. At the time, the university enrolled approximately 35,000 students with approximately 11% of the students identifying as African American. I recruited participants by introducing my study during a BGLO executive council meeting and, after following up with each BGLO chapter, a total of seven women and five men participated in the study. The participants were all members of one of four BGLO chapters that participated in the study, which included two fraternities and two sororities. Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire. The length of BGLO membership ranged from one academic semester to two academic years. Eleven participants were seniors and one was a junior. All of the participants self-identified as African American or Black. Two of the 12 participants identified as first-generation college students. Their college GPAs were self-reported and ranged from 2.4 to 3.7 on a 4.0 scale.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data through focus groups and a series of semi-structured one-on-one interviews. First, all 12 students participated in one of four BGLO focus groups and each focus group was composed of members from one BGLO chapter. Next, I further explored the experiences of eight students through a series of one-on-one

interview sessions, totaling 24 one-on-one interviews. I used both focus groups and interviews as a triangulation method, which allowed me to explore how the participants' collective experiences confirmed, enhanced, or rejected the experiences of the one-on-one interview participants, and vice versa. I also conducted culminating focus groups with the one-on-one participants to confirm or reject themes, relationships, and the grounded theory that emerged.

In grounded theory, data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously, a process referred to as theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the theoretical sampling process, I used codes and themes that emerged from the data to develop questions for the next round of interview questions. This back-and-forth process was employed until I reached data saturation and the grounded theory was formed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Examples of focus group and initial interview questions used included the following: In what ways, if any, have the social networks within your organization influenced your college experience? In what ways, if any, have the social networks within your fraternity/ sorority influenced your college experience as related to your persistence toward graduation? Examples of round 2 and 3 interview questions used were: In what ways, if any, do your relationships with your line brothers/line sisters (joining a BGLO chapter the same semester) influence your persistence? In what ways, if any, have you ever made academic sacrifices because of the demands of your fraternity/sorority?

I reviewed the transcripts, audiotapes, and my research journal to analyze the data and I used the constant comparative method to analyze the data until a grounded theory emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The emergence of concepts, themes, and the grounded theory was a result of using processes of open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding is an analysis that identifies emerging concepts from the data; axial coding is the process of identifying subconcepts, properties, and dimensions to fully explain the continua and relationships between concepts; and selective coding is the process of developing a story or creating a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

I used the criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam, 2009). The techniques I used to ensure trustworthiness were including an audit trail, which is raw data from the study; performing member checks through a culminating focus group with the eight interview participants; triangulating the data by comparing the findings to existing literature and conducting both focus groups and one-on-one interviews; and, by monitoring my biases by documenting my thoughts throughout the study and through member checks. I have also provided detailed information on the participants, the setting, and the procedures used in the study to ensure transferability. In addition, I spent seven months interacting with participants and building relationships with them.

FINDINGS

Within this section, I present the results of the study. First, I introduce the ways in which the participants highlighted inequalities that were present at the institution. Next, I highlight the ways in which the participants decided to join BGLOs and how they used their networks to navigate the campus. Finally, I introduce the returns that were associated with being involved in a BGLO at a PWI. I assigned each interview participant a pseudonym using the first names of African American (s)heroes based on the students' learned identities (e.g., Robin was named after newscaster Robin Roberts because she was a sports management major). Focus group participants were not assigned pseudonyms.

Inequalities

The participants were from different backgrounds, although they were connected by their racial identity. Participants believed their experiences at the institution were different from other students, particularly White students, because they identified as African American. They also articulated differences in being members of BGLOs versus being members of historically White Greek-lettered organizations. These findings are illustrated by the themes: (1) "I want to be normal," which introduces the ways in which the participants highlighted their experiences as African Americans at a PWI; and (2) "getting rid of us," which introduces how the participants articulated their relationships with the department of fraternity and sorority life.

"I want to be normal": Experiences at a PWI

The participants generally believed being an African American influenced and shaped their college experiences. Malcolm simply stated, "Alright, so I'll be straight up. We're always subjected to racism here at this school or any school in general." Amiri referred to his campus's newspaper reports as an example of what he found to be racist:

> So they would have a suspect description and like, this is consistently. They send out a couple of these a week and it [says] Black male and that's it. That's the only description. But if it's a White male, they would just put it's a male, and they would put maybe the height or whatever. But if it's a Black male, they'll put Black male between the ages of 20–25, how they know that, I don't know. But, it's just so broad and applies to like every single Black male.

The students also discussed wanting to feel normal although they did not believe it was possible as African American students studying at a PWI. A member of one fraternity explained his feelings of wanting to be normal:

> I guess a lot of the time, being a Black [person] at a PWI there's this—it's this tendency to want to be "normal." Normal like in America almost always means White. So, you kind of want to fit in, you know, you don't want to be seen as like a sub-group or sub-anything.

While many of the participants talked about these experiences as Black students, two participants told me that they had never experienced these same incidents and feelings on campus. A member of one sorority stated, "Because I am multiracial, I've never experienced any situation where I was discriminated against." Debbie, a member of the same sorority, acknowledged that she does not find the experiences of her peers uncommon, but she explained how she had not experienced what her sorority sisters experienced. She framed it as her being in a "dream world":

> I just don't really see color like that, but cause I really live in a "dream world" … so, as far as being on this campus I can't really pinpoint a moment where I said to myself, "He did that to me because I [am] Black."

While these two students provided a different narrative than the other participants, the theme of racial awareness and wanting to be "normal" was confirmed in seven of the one-on-one interviews and in all four focus groups. Other participants talked about their experiences overcompensating during group work, trying to "sound intelligent" during class discussions, and having to be assigned to groups in academic courses because none of the other students selected them as group members. The participants attributed these feelings and experiences to being Black at a PWI and these feeling transferred to the department of fraternity and sorority life.

"Getting rid of us": Experiences in BGLOs at a PWI

The participants explained that the institution and student affairs professionals in the department of fraternity and sorority life (DFSL) did not appear to value the culture of BGLOs, especially in comparison to historically White Greek-lettered organizations. Malcolm shared that DSFL often threatened BGLOs because of low membership:

> I just know that it's hard being a Black Greek on this campus because everybody is always looking at you and then they always tell you, you must meet these visions, complete these expectations, like thirty something expectations [that doesn't fit BGLOs]. Most of [the BGLO] chapters here … have a [maximum of] seven members. [DSFL tells] us, "You got to have eight. If you don't have eight, you're about to lose your charter."

Robin was disheartened that DSFL and the institution were not supportive of BGLOs, although they are community service–oriented. She could not understand why the university would be so willing to remove the charters for BGLOs on her campus:

> It kind of disheartens me that the campus will still provide that White [Greek-lettered] organization with money and funds to do things that are all socially bound, but [BGLOs] have to struggle for funding, and we have to struggle for that support, and at times [the institution and DSFL] don't even want their name to be behind our particular organization and I feel like that's a huge problem.

These quotes show participants felt they had to constantly fight for their existence even though the groups were important in their college experience and their lives; this was confirmed by all one-on-one interview participants and in all four focus groups. I then asked the participants to reflect on why they joined BGLOs.

Capitalization

The participants capitalized on BGLO membership by first accessing or joining the organizations, then by mobilizing their connections, which helped them navigate the campus. These findings are confirmed by the themes "why I joined," which introduces the ways in which the participants decided to join a BGLO, and "linking with other people," which introduces how the participants mobilized the social capital gained through the social networks within BGLOs.

"Why I joined": Joining a BGLO

Some of the participants were exposed to BGLO membership because they had family members who were also members of the same organization, referred to as "legacy membership." Robin's grandmother suggested that she may want to consider transferring schools after she told her grandmother that she was not interested in her sorority:

> Every member in my family is a member of the organization that I'm in and I completely wanted to be the rebel and go against that. I didn't want to be a part of the organization in the beginning to be honest with you. It was so bad, my grandmother wanted me to transfer schools to see if I would seek to be [states sorority] somewhere else. And she told me before I made any "harsh and rash decisions" that I should do some research on the organization and just find out why so many people in my family chose it.

While Robin did not initially find value in BGLOs, her grandmother pushed her to reconsider. Robin was the only interviewee who identified as a legacy member; however, this theme was supported in three of the four focus groups that included legacy members.

The history and legacy of BGLOs also influenced why the participants decided to become BGLO members; all eight of the interview participants and all four focus groups confirmed this theme. Huey's mom, who is from an African country, loved U.S. African American history and because of her love for African American history, he was attracted to his fraternity:

> A lot of [BGLOs] were born during or before the Civil Rights Movement, which I [have been] real interested in since I was born. Even though it wasn't my country, my mom used to study this kind of stuff. She used to tell about the Civil Rights Movement, [and] the Black Panthers, so that was something I grew up admiring.

Huey linked BGLOs with African American history and because he considered his organization as part of that history, he decided to join. Other participants

spoke about African American civil rights leaders, entertainers, athletes, and business executives who shaped African American history and were also members of BGLOs. The participants exuded a sense of pride that these African American pioneers were connected to their BGLO.

BGLO members who joined prior to the participants joining were also influential in the participants' decisions to become members; this was confirmed by all eight interview participants and in all four focus groups. Amiri felt like he was missing brotherhood:

> I got a sense of the support and the brotherhood from the [members] on the campus. That was one of the things I was looking for that I didn't necessarily find it in some of the groups I was in. I like some of the other activities and groups I did outside of school, but I always felt like it was missing something, which was brotherhood … I liked the [members] who are on the campus. I liked what they were doing.

The participants voices describe the impact others had on the participants becoming BGLO members and once they joined they were afforded a new social network of peers.

"Linking with other people": BGLOs as social networks

Once the participants joined their organizations, they used the social networks to gain access to peers, faculty, and staff, and to navigate the campus, which was confirmed by all eight interview participants and in all four focus groups. A member of one fraternity recognized the social networks he gained with some of his peers when he joined his organization. He identified it as "power":

> I can roll up to a party and just walk in as compared to someone who wasn't Greek, who [may have] to sit there and wait in line or need to know somebody. You do get that sense of power over someone who isn't a Greek. To me, honestly you just get popular, you get hip, [and] everyone wants to know you … It's a powerful feeling.

He identified the benefits of his organization and recognized that his organization provided him with what he called "power" and "special privileges" on campus. These experiences were common for participants. Participants described that BGLO networks connected them to unique opportunities and they did not believe their African American peers who were not members of BGLOs shared these networks; these experiences provided the participants "returns."

Returns

Once the participants became members of BGLOs, they were offered returns and these returns influenced the participants' persistence. The returns are documented by the themes: (1) "after 5:00 p.m. connections," which were the relationships

and connections established because of being involved in a BGLO; (2) "overnight celebrity," which explains the increased social lives of the participants once they became members of BGLOs; (3) "the pledging starts once you're a member," which explains the administrative and community service experiences BGLO membership provided the participants; (4) "implementing academic plans," which explains the ways in which the participants' academic progress was monitored and supported; and, (5) "I'm a role model," which explains how the participants developed leaderships skills on campus.

"After 5 connections": Relationships and connections within BGLOs

The relationships and connections established through BGLO membership were the most salient returns for the participants; all eight interview participants and all four focus groups confirmed this finding. The relationships established were different than any other relationships established in other student groups on campus. The participants attributed these deeper bonds to intake processes—which is when a BGLO member goes through the requirements to join a chapter—and the amount of time they spent together to sustain the chapter. Oprah and Amiri explained these relationships and connections with their organizational members as "after 5:00 p.m." interactions. Oprah noted while most classes and institutional activities are finished by 5:00 p.m., BGLO activities are never done. Amiri added:

> With non-BGLO [groups] it's like everything turns off after 5 o'clock, after business [hours]. You go home or whatever. But in a BGLO you see your brothers even after 5 [p.m.]. You see them on the weekends. You're more involved in any personal issues they may be going through, or they're involved in your personal issues. It just doesn't turn off, it's a continuous thing.

Oprah and Amiri highlighted the impact of BGLO membership in their lives as they explained BGLO membership goes beyond the traditional nature of student organizations. BGLOs became a part of their whole selves.

The relationships and connections fostered influenced the participants' persistence in many ways; namely, because they were often supported, motivated, impelled by chapter members, and encouraged by role models within their organizations because they had achieved academically. One participant shared how her connections with her sorority sisters had a direct influence on her persistence:

> I went through a hardship sophomore year in college … [There] was a death in my family, someone really close [died]. And at that point it was so bad that I could have dropped out of college. It didn't happen because of the people that I was surrounded with including current chapter [members] and older sisters. But so you know, when you build on such a strong foundation when you stumble, you still have people that will catch you.

This participant directly attributed her persistence to the deeper bonds established through BGLO involvement and the quote further illustrates the deeper bonds

that the participants continued to articulate throughout the study. Becoming members of BGLOs also increased the participants' social lives.

"Overnight celebrity": Increased social life

Once the participants became members of their organizations, their social lives increased dramatically, which was confirmed by all eight interview participants and within all four focus groups. Participants spent time with new sorority sisters or fraternity brothers, practiced for step shows, were responsible for membership intake, partied more, and were recognized by more of their college peers. Participants became "instant celebrities" within the Black student community. Amiri explained how his college experience changed once he became a member of his fraternity: "It's almost like an instant celebrity type thing. It's like [people are] looking at you at all times."

Joining a BGLO at this institution pushed the participants into the limelight of the Black student community and that sometimes came with a "party like a rock star" mentality; consequently, with increased social lives also came academic costs. Participating in social events was an integral part of what students did as members of BGLOs, a finding confirmed by seven of the interview participants and all four focus groups. When asked about the social demands of fraternities, Huey said,

> Oh, [the social demands] are major distractions. Because sometimes if you have a step show, I know you're going to have to prepare for it and sometimes practices are going to be after class. So you're going to have to take some time off from your studies. So [social demands] could be, in my opinion, the [biggest] distraction.

The participants shared how the social demands sometimes conflicted with academic assignments and affected grades as participants would temporarily put academics on the back burner. While the social aspects of BGLOs generally appeared to have negative influences on academics, one interview participant and one focus group did highlight the ways in which the social demands positively influenced their persistence. Malcolm said the social demands of his fraternity required him to use any spare time he had wisely:

> [There was] one thing my father always told me when I was growing up. He said, "Whenever you play baseball in the fall or in the spring that's when [you] did the best in school. Because you're so busy with baseball and by the time you get home you don't have any other time but to do homework, so you're so tired you just realize [you] got to study, [you] got to knock this out. You don't have enough free time to just mess around."

While most of the participants articulated the social demands were detrimental to academic outcomes, Malcolm believed BGLO membership and the many social demands made him more time conscious and provided him a structured schedule during his college experience. He noted that the demanding schedule that came along with BGLO membership had positive outcomes on his academics because

he did not have time to "mess around" and so he had to use his spare time wisely. Similarly, focus group participants from one sorority maintained set study hours as an organization because of the social demands that came along with BGLO involvement. In addition, because they had to maintain a certain GPA in order to participate in chapter-sponsored social activities, the organization provided them with an extra incentive to excel academically. Not only did increased social lives influence the participants' academics, organizational responsibilities did as well.

"The pledging starts once you're a member": Organizational work

Once the participants became members of their organization, managing chapters and community service immediately became responsibilities. Given the small sizes of their chapters, nearly every member had to hold some type of office and, when they hosted an event, every member had a primary role. Oprah shared as soon as she became a member she was immediately put to work and it was culture shock trying to balance her new life of school, sorority work, and full-time employment. Because of the added responsibilities, her grades suffered that semester:

> You never had that chance to really adjust. It was like all of a sudden you go from not doing it to doing it all in a few weeks. And you just had no way to adjust it. And then on top of that, you had all of this stuff that you have to do … So on top of trying to save face and try to go everywhere and try to do everything we were [new members] in a chapter. And most of us [were] starting [our] junior and senior years. [Our] classes [were] getting harder, it was just a mess.

The work was demanding for the participants, particularly because of the small number of members in their chapters. Still, the participants took on organizational work as their responsibility and were comfortable with making academic sacrifices for the benefit of their organization, a theme that was confirmed by all eight interview participants and in all four focus groups. Membership in BGLO chapters also provided them academic benefits through a social network that emphasized academics.

"Implementing academic plans": Academic monitoring

The participants' academics were monitored once they joined BGLOs. The monitoring came through GPA requirements for BGLO members, structured academic plans developed by the chapter, and less-formal academic monitoring by advisors, prophytes (older members), and current chapter members. A member of one sorority explained, "Our grades are definitely very important in this organization and to the campus as a whole [and] we have rules and regulations as far as our grades are concerned and they are non-negotiable."

Malcolm, who served as president of his fraternity, referred to an academic plan that he created to help fraternity brothers keep up with academics:

> You had to give this piece of paper, which is signed by the chapter president, to your professor saying, "This is your organization, this is the organization's goal for the [chapter's]

> GPA and if you fall under that, please let [the fraternity] know." Every two weeks, you had progress reports where the professor would say what grades you're on target for based on attendance, or participation, or your homework.

Because of BGLO membership, fraternity brothers and sorority sisters, institutional Greek life advisers, and BGLO advisers all monitored their academics. Rather than persisting on their own, the participants were privy to people within their social networks who were concerned about their academics; this was confirmed by all eight interview participants and in all four focus groups. In addition to this academic support, they were inspired by peers who looked to them as role models.

"I'm a role model": Leadership development

After becoming members of BGLOs, the participants became campus leaders, particularly in the Black student community. As members of BGLOs, campus administrators, student affairs professionals, and their peers looked to the participants to lead by example, and the participants accepted their responsibility as leaders. Correspondingly, many participants were often executive board members of other Black student organizations, and BGLOs were primary sources of programming for Black students on campus. Sean shared:

> Peers look up to us as leaders in the community cause we are the ones doing all the programs and events and holding leadership positions such as the president of [Black Student Union]. [He] is a member of [Black fraternity] and that's [Black Student Union], one of the largest organizations on campus. So I can say that we have a very strong and positive connection with our peers in the community.

As the participants accepted these leadership roles and developed as leaders, they reflected on what it meant for them and how that influenced their persistence. The participants articulated that the "leadership" title required them to make sure they were setting good examples, particularly in reference to academic achievement. Malcolm was adamant about being a leader and setting examples for other students. He explained:

> As a leader I learned in my class you have to model the way. So being a leader you have to show that you have to do good in school. I'm still like everybody else. I want to do well in school [generally] but, I say you have the spotlight on you … So it makes me want to work that much harder knowing that not only are my fellow peers looking at me more, but the University is looking at the [Greek life GPA] statistics over the semester.

By accepting the leadership role, participants realized going to class, striving to make good grades, and leading by example were important characteristics of being student leaders; this was confirmed by all eight interview participants and in all four focus groups.

DISCUSSION

The first research question explored how African Americans may gain social capital through BGLO involvement. In Harper's (2008b) study on high-achieving African American males at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), he noted that African American men access social capital through leadership in student organizations and engagement in campus activities. Harper also noted that minority-focused organizations provide African American men with social networks that generate social capital that they use to navigate a PWI. McClure (2006) added that Black fraternities are important social networks for African American men and provide men social capital. The findings from both studies were replicated in this study; however, this study expands the student affairs literature, as I found that both African American men and African American women who join BGLOs at a PWI gain social capital through the social networks established by becoming BGLO members. In addition, this study highlights and confirms that social capital can be possessed and shared by African American student groups at a large PWI. The social capital the participants gain provides them community and increases the participants' social integration and engagement at the institution.

Furthermore, African American student engagement literature suggests that African American students seek on-campus ties and out-of classroom experiences to socially integrate on predominantly White campuses and those ties reduce campus departure (Fischer, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995). These findings are all consistent with the findings in this study, and it adds to the literature by highlighting BGLOs as a specific African American student organization that positively influences the social integration and engagement of participants.

The second research question explored how social capital gained in BGLOs might influence the persistence of African American students at a PWI. It has been noted that being engaged on-campus through formal social integration activities have positive effects on GPA, persistence, and college satisfaction for African American students at PWIs (Fischer, 2007; Harper, 2013; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005). This study found engagement in BGLOs is supportive of persistence and college satisfaction for all of the participants; yet, as Guiffrida (2004) found, overinvolvement can be harmful to academic achievement. Within BGLOs in particular, Harper (2000) suggests negative academic influences might include excessive programming and chapter commitments, hazing, and step-show preparation.

While I did not intend to measure GPA in this study, Guiffrida's (2004) and Harper's (2000) findings are supported as "returns," such as increased social lives and chapter administration, and sometimes hindered academic outcomes, such as GPA and completed academic assignments. While persistence was my focus beginning the study, GPA and completed academic assignments emerged as important themes when discussing persistence. Consequently, I included GPA and

assignments in the findings because I learned that the participants' definition of persistence included those measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Because of the social integration, increased engagement, and positive effects on persistence the participants experienced, this study may present evidence that student affairs professionals at large PWIs might encourage BGLO involvement. In these instances, student affairs administrators should caution interested students about the possibility of becoming overinvolved. Consequently, student affairs administrators should recognize and promote BGLOs as organizations that offer African Americans support, but caution students that overinvolvement sometimes negatively influences academic outcomes.

BGLOs foster leadership development, classroom engagement, and social integration at PWIs. In addition, this study documents the positive influence BGLOs had on the persistence of the participants at a large, predominantly White research-intensive institution. Perhaps this is initial evidence that BGLO governing bodies should fully support petitions for new charters at large PWIs. BGLO governing bodies should closely monitor members' academics once they join because the students in this study expressed possible issues of becoming overinvolved. BGLO governing bodies may also consider limiting the number of programming activities undergraduate chapters host per semester, without moving too far from the missions of the organizations; this practice might be particularly helpful for small chapters similar to the ones included in this study.

This study revealed that the institutional climate was uncomfortable for the students in the study, which is consistent with previous studies. It is documented that out-of-classroom experiences, social integration through extracurricular activities, and minority social networks have positive outcomes for African American students attending PWIs. In support of the literature, the participants stated that BGLOs supported them academically, socially, and assisted them in navigating a predominantly White campus. Given the findings, large PWIs may consider investing in BGLOs and other identity-based support systems on their campuses. BGLOs and other identity-based student organizations might be some of the most cost-effective, immediate ways to invest in student support for African American students.

CONCLUSION

The BGLOs helped the participants in this study persist at a PWI. Yet, other academic outcomes such as GPA and academic assignments were sometimes hindered. Does persistence toward graduation outweigh a higher GPA, or vice

versa? Or, why should a student have to choose between the two at any higher education institution? It is important for administrators and student affairs practitioners to reflect on these types of questions because it is the responsibility of institutions to graduate the students they admit.

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