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Donald Mitchell Jr., Ph.D.

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Bellarmine University

## Author Note

Donald Mitchell, Jr., Annsley Frazier Thornton School of Education, Bellarmine University.

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Correspondence concerning this chapter should be addressed to Donald Mitchell, Jr., Annsley Frazier Thornton School of Education, Bellarmine University, 2001 Newburg Road, Louisville, KY 40205. E-mail: dmitchell2@bellarmine.edu

# Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Black Greek-Lettered Organizations in the "Post-Racial" Era of Accountability

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLOs) are institutions and organizations that provided African Americans with options for unification and education during years of overt racial discrimination when education and socio-economic comforts were limited for the vast majority of Americans of African descent. Collectively, these organizations have shaped the landscape of higher education, have created avenues for civil rights and social justice conversations and action, and have influenced the upward social mobility of African Americans (Gasman, n.d.; Mitchell, Weathers, & Jones, 2013). Perhaps appropriately, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Morehouse College and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.); Barbara Jordan (Texas Southern University and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.); the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Sr. (Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.); Shirley Chisholm (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.); W.E.B. Du Bois (Fisk University and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.); and Oprah Winfrey (Tennessee State University) all have connections with either one or both of these historic institutions. These organizations continue to produce leaders of the African American community and the United States.

However, in the "post-racial" era of accountability, questions surrounding the relevance of these higher education organizations have become common discourse. Accountability can be defined as higher education institutions being held "accountable for results" (Burke, 2003, p. 67) for students' educational outcomes to taxpayers, families, businesses, and accrediting agencies (Heller, 2001). Post-racial refers to the notion that "race matters much less than it used to, that the boundaries of race have been overcome, that racism is no longer a big problem" (Lum, 2009, para. 1).

In 2009, Georgia State Senator Seth Harp proposed that two HBCUs be merged with nearby predominantly White institutions. Senator Harp stated HBCUs are "unconstitutional" and "vestiges of segregation" in a post-*Brown v. Board of Education* era (as cited in Rivers, 2010). Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour proposed similar mergers that same year, and more recently, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal suggested mergers for HBCUs (Rivers, 2010; Stewart, 2011). In addition to HBCUs being "segregated" institutions, other arguments about relevance that are often cited include economic issues (Jones, 2009); lower graduation rates in comparison to predominantly White counterparts (Stewart, 2011); and African American students now having more options to attend a variety of institutions (Britton, 2011). The broader question—"Are HBCUs still relevant?"—is being felt across the HBCU community. BGLOs face a similar concern.

In "Broken Bonds: Are Black Greek Organizations Making Themselves Irrelevant?," an article published in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, Hughey and Parks (2007) wrote about the relevance of Black Greeks in the 21st century. The authors noted that, for BGLOs to continue to be relevant, they would have to address external perceptions that BGLOs focus solely on stepping and hazing, build better relationships among members by training and supporting them to become lifelong active members, and address gender issues within organizations associated with masculinity and femininity. Later, Parks (2008) released his edited text, "Black Greek-Letter Organizations in the Twenty-First Century: Our Fight Has Just Begun," which explored issues such as academic advising, eating disorders in Black sororities, and the "thug" or "gang" perception of Black fraternities. Parks' volume can be considered a foundational text on BGLOs because it provides readers with a scholarly text that addresses current BGLO issues. It also adds to the historical overview provided by Ross (2001) in "The Divine Nine: The History of African

American Fraternities and Sororities" and the exploration of the culture and customs of these groups provided by Kimbrough (2003) in "Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities." Kimbrough (2005) has also questioned BGLO structures in their current form. Note that Parks and Kimbrough have questioned BGLO relevance as BGLO members and have attempted to push BGLOs to grow by asking tough questions and proposing novel ideas.

I am proud to be an alumnus of Shaw University (a historically Black university founded in 1865, located in Raleigh, North Carolina) and a life member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (a historically Black fraternity founded in 1911 at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana). A significant point of pride is my acknowledgement of the similar benefits I have gained from these two distinct organizational types. Still, I am intrigued and perplexed by the overlap in HBCU and BGLO research, successes, and issues that have not yet been analyzed, synthesized, or even acknowledged in significant ways. Research and documentation on the intersections and parallels of these organizations is long overdue. These parallels can be established (a) through innovative research on students who join BGLOs at HBCUs that focus on academic and social integration or educational outcomes, (b) through meaningful HBCU-BGLO partnerships promoting their common successes as documented through research and successful practices, and (c) by implementing policies and practices to address the overlapping issues that plague both types of organizations. The salient, yet unexplored, relationship between HBCUs and BGLOs can no longer be ignored.

Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to promote the need for research and scholarship that explores and highlights the parallels and intersections of today's HBCUs and BGLOs. I approached this chapter from a student-focused lens, with the assumption that improving African

American students' educational outcomes is an end goal for both HBCUs and BGLOs. In addition, I approached this chapter from the perspective that HBCUs and BGLOs *are* relevant as the benefits—historically, and in recent research and scholarship—of these organizations for African Americans are well documented.

## Conceptual Framework

Lin's (1999) network theory of social capital highlights the idea that social capital is embedded in resources in social networks. Lin generally defined social capital as an "investment in social relations with expected return" (p. 30). He then defined social capital more specifically as an "investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions" (p. 39). Lin's network theory of social capital is explained using three key elements: (a) inequalities, (b) capitalization, and (c) effects. First, individuals do not possess the same amount of social capital; therefore, there are inequalities. Second, individuals gain capital by accessing and mobilizing social capital. Third, the effects are the returns or the benefits associated with the social capital gained. These returns can be broken down into two outcomes: (a) returns of instrumental action and (b) returns of expressive action. Returns of instrumental action are resources gained that were not originally possessed by the individual. Returns of expressive action are the maintenance of resources that were already possessed by the individual. I would adapt Lin's theory to include negative returns (e.g., hazing) when examining the social capital possessed in BGLOs (Mitchell, 2012).

It is common to hear that the United States is in a "post-racial" era or the "Obama-era" (Lum, 2009). However, the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow segregation are still evident in American higher education and the United States. Before meaningful conversations about HBCU

and BGLO relevance can happen, racial privilege, as well as societal and institutional norms that do not challenge racial privilege, must be deconstructed. This need aligns with critical race theory (CRT). According to Treviño, Harris, & Wallace (2008), CRT is:

> . . . committed to advocating for justice for people who find themselves occupying positions on the margins—for those who hold 'minority' status. It directs attention to the ways in which structural arrangements inhibit and disadvantage some more than others in our society. (p. 8)

Integrating Lin's (1999) network theory of social capital and CRT, I propose that African American students who attend HBCUs or join BGLOs gain social capital in the forms of academic and social integration. This thesis is supported by existing literature on HBCUs and BGLOs, which shows that these organizations have positive effects on African American student experiences.

## BGLOs and Student Outcomes and Experiences

Today there are nine college BGLOs, which are 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. (See Ross' "The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities" for detailed histories of the organizations). While empirical BGLO research continues to emerge, the research is almost always done at predominantly White institutions (Harper, 2000; Harper, 2008;

Kimbrough 1995; McClure, 2006; Mitchell, 2012). In addition, research documenting academic and social integration outcomes of BGLO members at HBCUs is needed.

In the absence of a healthy body of research on educational outcomes associated with BGLOs at HBCUs, I have synthesized existing BGLO research to serve as a potential baseline for future studies that focus on BGLO members at HBCUs. This research documents educational outcomes and students' experiences associated with BGLO involvement generally, and also highlights how that involvement mirrors students' educational outcomes associated with attending an HBCU.

**Student Engagement and Social Integration**

In 1995, Kimbrough examined students' college engagement and leadership skills by comparing the self-assessments of African American students in BGLOs to those of non-Greek students. He hypothesized that similarities would exist in the self-assessment of leadership skills between the two groups; that BGLO members would hold more positions in organizations (i.e., residential advisor, student government official, BGLO officer) than non-Greek students; and that BGLO students and non-Greek students would both find value in BGLOs. The sample consisted of 61 African American students attending a predominantly White institution in the Midwest. The author developed an original two-part questionnaire to complete the study. The first part of the questionnaire elicited nonparametric responses, and the author used MANOVA to test the significance differences in the second part of the questionnaire.

In the analysis, Kimbrough reported that 74.1% of the students involved in BGLOs participated in two or more student organizations (including involvement in a BGLO) and held at least one leadership position, as compared to 44.2% of the non-Greek students. In addition, 54.8% of the non-Greek students believed membership in a BGLO would improve their

leadership skills, and 82% had considered joining a BGLO. Sixty-three percent of students involved in BGLOs believed they developed leadership skills as a result of fraternity or sorority involvement.

In the discussion, Kimbrough stated that his hypotheses were confirmed and concluded that BGLOs appear to be a source of leadership development opportunities for students. He called for research exploring gender differences that might be salient among students involved in BGLOs. Lastly, he suggested the need for further exploration of the perceptions about leadership and BGLOs held by African American students at HBCUs. Unfortunately, I am writing a response to—and echoing—his call for BGLO research at HBCUs almost 20 years later.

Following his initial work, Kimbrough collaborated with Hutcheson to further explore the effects of BGLO involvement on college student engagement. Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) investigated the influence of BGLO involvement on African American students' involvement in campus activities and their leadership development skills. The authors targeted a sample of 1,400 African American students in seven Southeastern states. Their target sample consisted of 50 African American students involved in BGLOs and 50 non-Greek students at one predominantly White institution and one public, historically Black institution in each of the seven states. The surveys administered were: (a) the *Student Involvement and Leadership Scale*, which assessed levels of involvement and students' perceptions of their leadership ability relative to peers; (b) the *Competing Values Managerial Skills Instrument* (CVMSI), which assessed leadership potential; and (c) the *Leadership Assessment Scale*, which assessed the students' perceptions of the ability of different student organizations and student leadership positions to offer opportunities to develop leadership skills. The authors analyzed the data using chi-square analyses and MANOVA.

During the analysis, the authors found strong evidence that, even after controlling for extracurricular involvement in high school, a higher percentage of students involved in BGLOs were in student government, academic honor societies, residential hall assistant groups, residential hall governments, Black student groups, and student ambassador groups. In addition, students involved in BGLOs held more elected leadership positions than non-Greeks at a significant level. Finally, students involved in BGLOs self-reported higher leadership potential, as indicated by the CVMSI.

These two previous studies documented how BGLOs positively affected student engagement and leadership development. More recently, Patton, Bridges, and Flowers (2011) replicated and added to these findings. The authors explored the effects of Greek affiliation on the engagement of African American students at predominantly White campuses and HBCUs using data from the "National Survey of Student Engagement" and regression analysis. They found that Greek involvement had significant positive effects on student-faculty involvement and active and collaborative learning. They also noted that the gains in these areas were even higher at HBCUs, which suggested an added value for Greeks at HBCUs and reinforced the more supportive environment at HBCUs in comparison to predominantly White institutions.

Studies have also shown how BGLOs influence social integration. McClure (2006) used a social constructionist framework to examine the effects BGLOs had on African American men's college experiences. She interviewed 20 African American men at a large, predominantly White, research-intensive institution in the Southeast. Her social constructionist framework focused on the meaning-making process an individual is involved in and the way social processes shape perceptions. In her findings, McClure found that BGLOs increased connections to Black history, the campus, and society. The fraternal history provided members with an

important connection to Black history. Members felt a need to live up to the legacy of Black historical figures, who were also members of the fraternity and personal heroes, as they helped shape Black history. In addition, McClure learned that members were able to connect to the college campus through their fraternity. Students discussed how they were more engaged during their college experiences by being involved in a BGLO. Finally, membership in the fraternity created social network ties that were valuable to members.

**Academic Outcomes**

The findings associated with BGLOs and academic outcomes are complex and need further investigation. Harper (2000) examined the academic standings reports for Greek-lettered organizations (GLOs) from 24 predominantly White colleges and universities with enrollments ranging from 2,300 to 44,000. Nearly 92% of the BGLO chapters had lower GPA averages than the overall GPA average of all students involved in GLOs at each institution in the study. Harper explained that the results of his investigation could be attributed to academic distractions, which included excessive programming and chapter commitments, hazing, step shows, involvement in other organizations, lack of resources, and poor advising. However, his study did not report controlling for other variables that may hinder African American students' GPAs at predominantly White institutions, such as the college environment, parental income, high school GPA, and high school achievement test scores.

Later, Harper (2008) investigated the effects of BGLO membership on classroom engagement in predominantly White classrooms. The study consisted of 131 participants with whom Harper conducted interviews and focus groups at a large, public research university in the Midwest. Harper found that the factors that influenced classroom engagement positively for BGLO members were underrepresentation, voluntary race representation, collective

responsibility, and engaging teaching styles. The factors that negatively affected participation were forced representation and non-engaging teaching styles.

Not only do BGLOs appear to positively influence classroom engagement at predominantly White institutions, they also positively influence persistence toward graduation at these institutions. In a recent study, I explored the influences of BGLOs on the persistence of African Americans at predominantly White institutions (Mitchell, 2012). The study included 12 students at a predominantly White, research-intensive university in the Northeast; data were collected through a series of one-on-one interviews and focus groups. To examine the relationship between BGLO participation and persistence, I used a social capital theoretical framework that defined social capital as investments in social relations. I found that (a) relationships/connections, (b) increased social lives, (c) increased community and administrative experiences, (d) academic monitoring, and (e) leadership development—which were all framed as "returns"—generally influenced persistence in positive ways. However, I also noted that other academic outcomes, such as GPA and completed assignments, may be negatively influenced because of "over-involvement." For example, students talked about starting on assignments later than they should have because of fraternity or sorority work.

**Pledging and Hazing**

While the existing empirical research on BGLOs is largely positive, the media often reports the negative aspects of BGLOs, particularly focusing on pledging and hazing. While hazing is not an educational outcome like student engagement, GPA, persistence, and leadership development, pledging and hazing do affect the educational experiences of BGLO members.

Pledging and hazing have long been associated with college fraternities and sororities. Parks and Brown (2005) stated:

> Despite their long history of civic involvement, community service, and philanthropy, what most people know about black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) is limited to two areas: stepping and pledging, particularly those mentally and physically violent aspects of the latter known as hazing. (p. 437)

Pledging is deeply rooted in the history of BGLOs and has both African and European roots. As early as the 1910s, pledge clubs emerged for BGLOs. Pledges were required to participate in activities such as shaving their heads, eating the same meals, dressing alike, and walking in lines. However, the objectives and goals of the processes differed by organization, chapter, and location, and they changed as time progressed (Parks & Brown, 2005).

While pledging and hazing have also been opposed since the early years of BGLOs, they were not officially banned by BGLOs until 1990, after Joel Harris, a pledgee of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., was killed on the campus of Morehouse College in October 1989. However, since the official ban, hazing has actually increased among BGLO chapters (Parks & Brown, 2005). While BGLOs have individually and collectively distanced themselves from pledging and hazing, individual members, pledges, nonmembers, or suspended and expelled members continue the practice. Some members continue to haze because it was done to them; others do it for belonging, brotherhood, sisterhood, self-esteem, or tradition. In addition, some members argue that it creates an institutional continuity among members nationwide as they share pledge stories (Parks & Brown, 2005). Nevertheless, in a recent quantitative study conducted by Rogers, Rogers, and Anderson (2012), they found no significant difference in alumni member involvement when comparing those who participated in pledge processes to members who did not.

In sum, the influences of BGLOs on student experiences are mixed. While hazing appears to be a negative aspect of joining some BGLO chapters, and the limited research done on academic outcomes should be further explored, there have been many educational outcomes documented as beneficial. These include social integration, increased classroom engagement, the development of leadership skills, and positive effects on persistence. BGLOs should build on these findings and, more specifically, explore the relationship between BGLOs at HBCUs.

The aforementioned BGLO research highlights the similarities in the educational outcomes gained from attending an HBCU. For example, researchers have documented that HBCUs and BGLOs both have positive effects on student-faculty relationships (Allen, 1992; Patton et al., 2011); student involvement and engagement (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998); social support and social integration (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Kimbrough, 1995; McClure, 2006); and academic achievement (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Mitchell, 2012). Yet amidst the positive educational outcomes, HBCUs and BGLOs both deal with issues of hazing (Parks & Brown, 2005; Stuart, 2012) and lower graduation rates (Gasman, 2011; Harper, 2000) when compared to their White counterparts at the student and institutional levels. Based on the documented parallels of HBCUs and BGLOs and the influence these organizations have had on the African American community and African American students' educational outcomes, I propose the following recommendation.

## HBCU-BGLO Partnerships

HBCUs and BGLOs must form partnerships to share empirical research findings, develop best practices, and address issues within these institutions and organizations. For example, after the death of Robert Champion, a drum major in Florida A&M University's (FAMU) Marching 100 who died during a band hazing ritual, the media highlighted the culture of hazing at HBCUs

(Phillip, 2012). Some outlets shifted the conversation to BGLOs even though they were not involved in the incident. In response to Champion's death, FAMU suspended its marching band indefinitely (it has since been reinstated), the president resigned, and the university developed an anti-hazing campaign that involves students signing an anti-hazing pledge to enroll in classes (Kingkade, 2012). The institution also launched *StopHazingatFAMU.com* (Florida A&M University, n.d.). I encourage BGLO organizational leaders to partner with FAMU and other HBCUs, and vice versa, to discuss the issue of hazing and how it affects HBCUs and BGLOs.

I also encourage HBCU and BGLO leaders to (a) partner in the development of educational programs for students, particularly African Americans, at all educational levels; (b) conduct and share research on educational outcomes; and (c) establish task forces, committees, and professional associations that focus on organizational improvements and the students they serve. I recognize that BGLOs also exist on predominantly White campuses, and am not suggesting that BGLOs lose sight of students who attend those institutions. Still, because of the histories of BGLOs, their longstanding commitment to racial uplift and social justice, and because they provide similar educational outcomes as HBCUs, HBCU-BGLO partnerships must be developed as part of BGLOs' national initiatives and programs. For example, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (n.d.) has an educational initiative called "Connections to HBCUs" that assists with HBCU recruitment and enrollments. Similar actions and programs should be replicated, built upon, and improved in other BGLOs; HBCUs should initiate similar programs, partnerships and initiatives as well.

## Future Research

As mentioned previously, HBCUs and BGLOs should partner to further research concerning HBCUs, BGLOs, and their connections. HBCUs have demonstrated that they can

successfully educate African Americans and have provided social college experiences very different from those at predominantly White institutions. Studies that examine how BGLOs influence educational outcomes at HBCUs would help scholars learn what further improves students' experiences or what should be improved within historically Black institutions. Similar studies at HBCUs would also give researchers data to compare the influences of BGLOs on educational outcomes at HBCUs to BGLOs at predominantly White institutions. This would inform practitioners and BGLO governing bodies about the different approaches they could use in monitoring students at the two types of institutions.

Studies should also be conducted at different types of HBCUs (e.g., small, liberal arts, private, research-intensive, different geographical locations). This would allow researchers to explore any differences in the influences of BGLOs on educational outcomes at different types of HBCUs. Again, the results would inform practitioners and BGLO governing bodies about the different approaches they could use in monitoring students at those specific institutional types.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods should be employed when conducting research on BGLOs at HBCUs. By conducting quantitative research, scholars can make broader generalizations about the effects of BGLOs. For example, scholars can make comparisons between African American students involved in BGLOs to non-Greek African American students at HBCUs. Academic measures, such as GPAs, can be compared using large datasets and broad educational outcomes can be documented using surveys like the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity's (n.d.) *Fraternity and Sorority Experience Survey*. Qualitative studies can be used to explain quantitative analyses and/or generate baseline or pilot data to conduct larger quantitative studies through instrument development.

While this list is not exhaustive, it highlights some of the methodological approaches and overarching themes that should be explored. Conducting various studies based on these recommendations will inform scholars, practitioners, members of BGLOs, and students interested in becoming members of BGLOs about the educational outcomes associated with joining BGLOs at HBCUs. In the absence of such research, documented outcomes, and best practices, questions surrounding relevance will continue to shape conversations about HBCUs and BGLOs.

## Conclusion

A goal of President Barack Obama's political agenda for the United States is to become the most college-educated nation in the world by the year 2020 (The White House, n.d.). In addition, the National Science Foundation reports racial/ethnic minorities together will make up the majority of the United States population by 2025 (as cited in Malcom, Dowd, & Yu, 2010). Thus, racial/ethnic minorities must receive a fair share of the degrees produced to reach President Obama's goal and to improve the economic well being of the United States (Mitchell & Daniele, 2015). As the United States moves towards President Obama's goal and the demographics shift, HBCUs and BGLOs must play critical roles in educating and providing social support not only for African Americans, but an increasingly diverse student population. To do this, HBCUs and BGLOs must actively dispel stereotypes of irrelevance while evolving in the "post-racial" era of accountability.

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