"Fifty Shades of Black": The Black Racial Identity Development of Black Members of White Greek Letter Organizations in the South

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“FIFTY SHADES OF BLACK”: THE BLACK RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK MEMBERS OF WHITE GREEK LETTER ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOUTH

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in The School of Education

by

Danielle Ford

B.S. Louisiana State University, 2012

May 2018
Don’t Quit

When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
When the road you’re trudging seems all up hill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
   When care is pressing you down a bit,
   Rest if you must, but don’t you quit.

Life is strange with its twists and turns
   As every one of us sometimes learns
   And many a failure comes about
When he might have won had he stuck it out;
Don’t give up though the pace seems slow—
   You may succeed with another blow.

   Success is failure turned inside out—
   The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
   And you never can tell just how close you are,
   It may be near when it seems so far;
   So stick to the fight when you’re hardest hit—
   It’s when things seem worst that you must not quit.

   - John Greenleaf Whittier
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“It always seems impossible until it's done.”
– Nelson Mandela

T.G.I.F.! Thank God I’m Finished! Thank you to everyone who has ever supported me during this journey. Words here cannot express my appreciation and gratitude. There are some people specifically I’d like to recognize.

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ABSTRACT

It could be argued that one of the most segregated settings on a college campus today can be found amongst the sprawling mansions that line a university’s Fraternity and Sorority Row. While many Black students join Black Greek-letter organizations (“BGLOs”), a small number decide to rush and pledge White Greek-letter organizations (“WGLOs”). According to Matthew Hughey, a professor at the University of Connecticut who studies race in Greek life, only 3 to 4 percent of members of WGLOs are nonwhite (Hughey, 2007).

Historically, many WGLOs’ constitutions and policies included official “race clauses” that banned non-White students from membership; those clauses were eliminated by the 1960s and removed de jure” discrimination, but “de facto” discrimination remained (Hughey, 2007). The theories that serve as the theoretical framework for this study are Astin’s Involvement Theory and I-E-O Model and Cross’ Theory of Nigressence (Astin, 1993; Astin 1999; Cross, 1971; Cross 1991). Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher explores the experiences of membership in a traditionally, historically, and predominately White collegiate social organization and how those experiences influence the Black racial identity development of Black members of White Greek-letter Organizations who attended different Predominately White Institutions in the U.S. South. Findings are analyzed and applied, and recommendations for advising and future research are discussed.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There will never be a nigger SAE!

There will never be a nigger SAE!

You can hang him from a tree,

But he’ll never sign with me.

There will never be a nigger SAE! (Pruitt, 2015).

Martin Luther King Jr. once observed that 11:00 am on a Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in the country (King, 1963). It could be argued that one of the most segregated settings on a college campus in the southern United States today can be found among the sprawling fraternity and sorority mansions on the campuses of Predominately White Institutions in the U.S. South. While many Black students join Black Greek-letter organizations (“BGLOs”), a small number decide to rush and pledge White Greek-letter organizations (“WGLOs”).

According to Matthew Hughey, a professor at the University of Connecticut who studies race in Greek-life, “approximately 96 percent of the membership of traditional White Greek-letter organizations are composed of White members today. They are even more segregated and exclusive than the already segregated and excluded predominately White colleges and universities at which they have chapters” (Ellison, 2015).

Historically, many WGLOs’ constitutions and policies included official race clauses that banned non-White students from membership; those clauses were eliminated by the 1960s and did away with de jure discrimination, but de facto discrimination remained\(^1\). There is a difference between allowing Black students to join an organization and creating a welcoming environment for them within their chapters. Unlike admissions data, there is no national database

\(^1\) De jure discrimination denotes discrimination that is codified in policy, rule, or law. De facto discrimination is discrimination that happens in practice.
on racial demographics within Greek life, so it is nearly impossible to track any progress. Ross (2015) stated powerfully, “It may be easier for a Black man to sit in the White House than in a University of Alabama fraternity house” (p. 13).

Quite a few cases and examples illustrate how WGLOs create a hostile or non-welcoming environment for Black students and Black members on college campuses. A simple Google search of “racist fraternity party” brings up 388,000 results. The Kappa Sigma chapter at Baylor University hosted a “Cinco de Drinko” party where revelers dressed up as house cleaners and construction workers (Schmidt, 2017). The Clemson University chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon was placed on probation for hosting a “Clemson Cripmas” party, where attendees dressed up as gang members (Ohlheiser, 2015). Arizona State University revoked the chapter charter for Tau Kappa Epsilon after members threw a Martin Luther King Jr. party that involved basketball player and gang member costumes, using gang signs and drinking from watermelon cups (Hamedy, 2014).

The “there will never be a nigger SAE” prologue comes from a chant that was sung by members of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, a White fraternity, at the University of Oklahoma in 2015 (Glionna, Duara, Branson-Potts & Pearce, 2015). The national office condemned the students, while the students admitted they learned the chant at a national Sigma Alpha Epsilon event. The last Black member of the University of Oklahoma’s chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon (“S.A.E.”) was William Bruce James II, who had joined fourteen years earlier. After the incident, James stated, “I can have no association with this organization as a Black man” (Franklin, 2015). James (2015) further explained his experience as a S.A.E. pledge:

> When race came up it was from a place of genuine inquiry. People wanting to understand a race they hadn’t been exposed to much. And in my own little self-sacrificing way, I wanted to be that for the house. I wanted to be the guy that shattered all those preconceived notions of BLACK MEN; those stereotypes of fear, that I think (it’s just my
thought. It doesn’t have to be your truth) lead to our youth not always making it home from the store with their Skittles. I knew when I joined that house, that I’d be looked at differently. Why would he want to be in that house? And I knew it would come from both sides.

In 2013, the University of Alabama came under fire when Kennedi Cobb, a potential new member, was rejected by all 16 White sororities during formal recruitment. Cobb was seemingly perfect on paper; she graduated from high school with a 4.30 grade point average and was salutatorian of her senior class. She was a Tuscaloosa native (the town in which the University of the Alabama is situated), and her grandfather was on the university’s board of trustees; Kennedi is also Black, (Adler, 2017). Until then, only one Black woman had ever received a bid and joined a traditionally White sorority in the history of the University of Alabama. It was eventually revealed that White sorority members were worried that a Black member would impact the chapter’s social standing on campus. As a response, the university president demanded a new rush take place, in which 11 Black women received bids. The following year, university officials implemented a new policy that ensured that all 21 of the Black women who registered for recruitment received bids. Among those students was Kennedi Cobb, who joined Alpha Chi Omega (Ross, 2015).

The University of Alabama and its WGLOs are still having public racial controversies. In 2015, the Alpha Phi Sorority chapter posted a recruitment video featuring chapter members who were exclusively White, thin, and blonde (Rein, 2015). More recently, Harley Barber, an Alabama student and a member of Alpha Phi Sorority, posted videos on her Instagram account of her saying “nigger” numerous times. Although she is from New Jersey, she stated that she was comfortable using the racial slur because, “I’m in the South now” (Eltagouri, 2018). Within two days of the videos being published, Alpha Phi moved to terminate her membership in the sorority, and the University of Alabama expelled her as a student.
In 2015, a student at Southern Methodist University (located in Dallas, TX) identified as a White sorority member posted a list of reasons why Black female students do not receive bids from White sororities. Amongst those reasons:

Y’all are racist and have your own sororities and fraternities. Y’all created them, so how about utilizing them? Y’all are aesthetically unpleasing to the eye for both actives and the fraternity men we associate with. No, we don’t want to be the house that took ‘the Black’ and end up like Gamma Phi [Beta Sorority], where guys avoid them like the plague. Y’all go to crappy high schools and generally don’t deserve to even be at SMU to begin with. No incentives for bidding you, other than looking diverse. Why do Black women think they’re entitled to joining OUR sororities? Honestly, this puts us off from y’all even more (Ellison, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

There are numerous studies that show the effects of Greek life on the outcomes of White students (Kuh & Lyons, 1990; Pike & Askew, 1990; Mathiasen, 2005; DeBard & Sacks, 2012; Park & Kim, 2013; Asel, Seifert & Pascarella, 2015; McCreaary & Schutts, 2015; McCreaary, Bray & Thoma, 2016; Cohen, McCreaary, and Schutts, 2017); conversely, there are studies that show the effects of Greek life on the outcomes on Black members in traditionally Black Greek Letter Organizations (“BGLOs”) (Hutcheson & Kimbrough, 1998; McClure, 2006; Harper, 2007; Edwards, 2009; Patton, Flowers & Bridges, 2011; Khoury, 2015). However, there is a dearth of research concerning the outcomes of Greek students who are Black who decide to join traditionally White Greek Letter Organizations (“WGLOs”). Once these students cross the color line, they are usually one of the only members of color, let alone Black members. This can cause isolation, tokenism, stereotyping, believing that one has to be the chapter’s expert on Blackness and the struggle of being Black, microaggressions, macroaggressions, discrimination, and a decreased sense of belonging (Franklin, 2015; James, 2015). Black students who join WGLOs may not be perceived or treated as full members of their organizations or may experience
“ostracism and criticism from other Black students who view their membership as a ‘sellout’” (Hughey, 2007; Thompson, 2000).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of membership in a traditionally, historically, and predominately White collegiate social organization and how those experiences influence the Black racial identity development of Black members of White Greek-letter Organizations who attended different Predominately White Institutions in the U.S. South. Cross and Neville (2017) researched how students can experience a “racial awakening” that serves as a trigger and promotes “increased critical awareness of what it means to be Black” (p. 104). W.E.B. Du Bois famously coined the term *double consciousness*, which describes the multifaceted components of one’s identity. Double consciousness is “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2). It would be interesting to understand if Black members of WGLOs experience double consciousness as they navigate college as a member of a WGLO and as Black.

**Research Questions and Study Design**

The primary undertaking of this study is to understand if and how membership in a WGLO affects the Blackness development of Black members. Thus, I will seek to understand this phenomenon by basing my research on the following research questions:

1. How does membership in a White Greek-letter organization influence the Black racial identity development of Black members?

2. How do experiences with members of White Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?
3. How do experiences with Black family members, friends, students, and Black members of Black Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?

4. Post-graduation, how do Black members reflect upon their undergraduate Greek experience and how it has shaped their Black identity today?

To answer these questions, I will be using a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach that explores the phenomenon of membership in a WGLO as a Black person. I conducted interviews with Black men and women who are either current undergraduates or alumni of a four-year institution and who joined a historically, predominately, and traditionally White fraternity or sorority at a Predominately White Institution in the South. Specifically, I asked open-ended questions to allow for the exploration of the participants Black racial identity development.

**Significance**

For the 2014-2015 academic year, 380,487 male undergraduate students were members of a fraternity housed within the Inter-Fraternity Council (North-American Interfraternity Conference, 2017). According the 2015-2016 Annual Report, 411,242 female undergraduate students were members of a sorority housed within the National Pan-Hellenic Conference (National Panhellenic Conference, 2017). Ninety-seven percent of students in WGLOs are in chapters that are either majority or completely White (Park, 2014). How can student affairs professionals, mentors, colleagues, and friends support Black students who decide to join WGLOs if they experience racism from their Greek brothers and sisters or experience negative, disrespectful, or hostile behavior from Black students who do not understand their choices? How can student affairs professionals, mentors, colleagues, and friends help nurture a more inclusive and socially just environment in Greek life on campus?
Theoretical Frameworks

Astin’s Student Involvement Theory & I-E-O Model

Astin (1999) posited that student development can be attributed to the student’s quality and quantity of involvement on campus. Hence, a highly involved student will be an active member of clubs, organizations, participate in various student activities, and be devoted to the academic experience; conversely, an uninvolved student spends little time on campus, neglects studies, and does not attend extracurricular activities on campus (Astin, 1999).

Astin’s Input-Environment-Output (“I-E.O.”) Model was created to explain the relationships between students’ inputs, their collegiate environment and their development or outputs (Norwani, Yusof & Abdullah, 2009). Essentially, the I-E-O Model can be used to describe and explain students’ collegiate experiences and how those experiences affect their development (Renn & Reason, 2013). Input factors are characteristics the student enters college with such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status. The college’s environment can include the student’s courses, peers, where they live, and their social organizations, such as fraternities and sororities. The student’s output or outcomes can be described in a manner of ways, but for the purposes of this study shall be defined as the student’s Black Racial Identity Development.

Cross’ Model of Nigrescence

Nigrescence is a French term that means the “process of becoming Black (Cross, 1991, p. 147). There are three major concepts of nigrescence: personal identity, reference group orientation, and race salience (Cross, 1971; Cross, 1991). Personal identity is comprised of the characteristics and traits that make up one’s personality, while reference group orientation can be described as how one views the world based on values, political views, and personal philosophies (Cross, 1971; Cross, 1991). Race salience refers to how much importance one
places on race in their lives. Thus, a Black person with low race salience places no significance on the fact that they are Black, whereas a Black person with high race salience may have had parents who instilled upon them as children the importance and significance of Blackness (Cross 1991).

There are three patterns of nigrescence. In pattern A, individuals have established their “Black racial identity through interaction with parents and significant others from birth toward adulthood” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, Renn, 2010, p. 256). Pattern B represents those “who are not socialized toward Blackness or have not formed a healthy Black identity…[they] usually experience a conversion during adulthood” (Evans et al, 2010, p. 256). The other option is pattern C, called nigrescence recycling, which is a process of Black identity development throughout adulthood (Evans et al, 2010).

**Subjectivity Statement**

It is important to know that I am a Greek woman, and I identify as a Black woman. I was initiated into Sigma Lambda Gamma, a Latina-based sorority with a multicultural membership, while I was an undergraduate student at Louisiana State University. My first introduction to sororities was in middle school when I received an honors award from a local graduate chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, a Black sorority. When I was in high school, one of my cousins married a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, and I marveled at the song her sorority sisters sang to her at their wedding. The weekend before my first day of classes as a LSU freshman, I watched Black Greeks dance at an on-campus event and knew I was destined to be Greek – specifically Alpha Kappa Alpha.

During my third year at LSU (I graduated in five years), I looked into joining Alpha Kappa Alpha, but the sorority was soon suspended due to hazing, so I was unable to pledge. I
looked into rushing a White sorority or even chartering a different sorority on campus but changed my mind. When I returned to campus for the fall semester, the sorority that I eventually joined, Sigma Lambda Gamma, had been established on campus over the summer. They recruited me, and I joined the organization during my fourth year at LSU. Sigma Lambda Gamma ended up being the right fit for me because at that time in my life I felt that I was too “White” to be in a “Black” sorority yet too “Black” to be in a “White” sorority; Sigma Lambda Gamma had no image to uphold nor a stereotype to live up to, and members could be themselves and create their own experience.

Today, I continue to serve my sorority in a variety of volunteer experiences as an alumna. I’ve served as a Chapter Adviser, Intake Adviser, Colony Operations Adviser, Academic Adviser, Associate Member Educator, President of the Southeast Louisiana Gammas Alumnae Association, and my current role as Vice President of Recruitment for the Alumnae Association. I have twice presented at my sorority’s national conference, and my chapter selected me to be honored at the 2015 LSU Greek Honors Gala.

My experiences as a sorority woman have helped shape me into the woman I am today. I am inclined to believe that most people who join a fraternity or a sorority would say that their involvement in their fraternal organization has had some sort of positive or negative influence on their development. Being in my sorority helped me develop a strong sense of belonging to the LSU community. I no longer felt as if I was one of 30,000 students. Sigma Lambda Gamma helped me find my “home”, and it is my hope that all students who choose to join fraternities and sororities find the same sense of community that I did. I hope that their organizations support their various intersecting and developing identities.
Concluding Thoughts

As discussed in the preceding sections, this study is based on interviews with Black men and women who are either current undergraduates or alumni of a four-year institution who joined a historically, predominately, and traditionally White fraternity or sorority at a Predominately White Institution in the South. Using Astin’s Student Involvement Theory & I-E-O Model and Cross’s Model of Nigressence, I research how these members who are Black (input) and their membership in a WGLO at a PWI (environment) affect their Black Racial Identity Development (output).

Terminology

**Bid**: an invitation to join a particular fraternity or sorority; potential new members may receive bids on the last day of formal recruitment or rush week, which is known as “Bid Day”

**Big**: an initiated member of a fraternity or sorority who mentors and guides new members with chapter affairs

**Black Greek-Letter Organization (BGLO)**: a fraternity or sorority that is historically, traditionally, and predominately Black

**Chapter**: the branch of a particular fraternity or sorority that operates on a college campus; a chapter may have its own Greek letter (i.e. Alpha chapter) or may use the institution where it is operating (i.e. Louisiana State University chapter)

**Divine 9 or D9**: the colloquial term for the nine organizations that comprise the National Panhellenic Council

**Fraternity**: a social club or society whose membership is typically reserved for male college students
**Legacy**: an immediate close relative (usually a son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, brother, or sister) of a person who was formerly initiated into a specific fraternity or sorority

**Little**: a newly initiated member of a fraternity or sorority who seeks guidance from an older member in the chapter as it relates to chapter affairs

**Interfraternity Council (IFC)**: the umbrella organization that oversees traditionally, historically, and predominately White fraternities; non-White students are no longer barred from joining fraternities within the Interfraternity Council

**National Pan-Hellenic Conference (NPC or PHC)**: the umbrella organization that oversees traditionally, historically, and predominately White sororities; non-White students are no longer barred from joining sororities within the Pan-Hellenic Conference

**National Panhellenic Council (NPHC)**: the national umbrella organization that oversees the nine traditionally, historically, and predominately Black fraternities and sororities; non-Black students are no longer barred from joining the organizations within the National Panhellenic Council

**Pledge**: a person who has accepted a bid to join a fraternity or sorority but has not yet been initiated as a member of the organization

**Potential New Member (PNM)**: a college student who is interested in joining a fraternity or sorority and is eligible for recruitment/rush

**Predominately-White Institution (PWI)**: a college or university where the majority of the enrolled students are non-Hispanic White

**Recruitment**: the formalized process by which fraternities and sororities select and invite students to join their organizations
**Rush Week**: a weeklong series when potential new members attend events hosted by fraternity or sorority houses with the hope of receiving a bid to join a chapter by the end of the week

**Sorority**: a social club or society whose membership is typically reserved for female college students

**White Greek-Letter Organization (WGLO)**: a fraternity or sorority that is historically, traditionally, and predominately White; may belong to one of two umbrella organizations – IFC and NPC/PHC
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study explores the Black racial identity development of Black members traditionally associated with Greek Letter Organizations (WGLOs). There is a plethora of research surrounding the outcomes of White members of WGLOs, and conversely the outcomes of Black members of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs). There is not as much research regarding members who join Greek-letter organizations as a racial minority in their organizations. In order to address this gap, it is important to review the current literature that provides the framework for this study.

History of Fraternities and Sororities

The first American fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa, was founded on December 5, 1776 at the College of William and Mary. Its purpose was to create a collegiate organization “devoted to the pursuit of liberal education and intellectual fellowship” (Phi Beta Kappa, 2017, para. 2). Phi Beta Kappa created the foundation that other student organizations would begin to follow: the use of Greek letters, a secret ritual and handshake, a shield or crest that symbolized the organization’s values, and the requirement that all members be undergraduate college students (Newsome, 2009).

While Phi Beta Kappa served an academic purpose, male college students in the 1820s and 1830s sought to redefine the college experience and began establishing social fraternities. These organizations catered to White men and helped foster a sense of exclusivity (Gregory, 2009). As women began to attend college, they created their own Greek-letter organizations called sororities, that provided support and a social setting for female college students (Newsome, 2009). The first modern sorority was Pi Beta Phi, established in 1867 at Monmouth College.
In the 1800s, the makeup of Greek-letter organizations mirrored the college campuses on which they were housed: White and Christian. As college campuses began to diversify and accept racial minorities and Jewish students, some WGLOs established so called “race clauses” into their official policies that served as formalized discrimination in order to maintain their organizations’ sense of exclusivity (Hughey, 2007). These exclusionary policies were created because “a White Protestant male could not be compatible with someone from a different religion or race” (Shelnutt, 2012, p. 200). Syrett (2009) explained:

By the early 1910s… fraternities were adding codes of exclusion to their constitutions mandating that members must be White, Christian males. Although these codes were largely moot, as de facto exclusion had already been established by that point, these codes demonstrate the concern that some renegade chapter might initiate an unsuitable member if it was not explicitly forbidden (p. 172).

In 1953, Phi Delta Theta, a White fraternity, suspended two chapters for pledging students who did not have “full Aryan blood” (Peguero, 2014, p. 20).

As a response to the discrimination they faced in Greek-letter organizations and on campus in general, students of color or non-Protestant religions created their own fraternal organizations. Phi Kappa Theta was created in 1850 for Catholic students. In 1895, Pi Lambda Chi was formed as the first non-sectarian organization, chartered mainly by Jewish students (Newsome, 2009). Alpha Phi Alpha was established as the first Black Greek-letter organization in 1906 at Cornell University. Soon followed Alpha Kappa Alpha in 1908 at Howard University as the first sorority for Black female students. Seven other fraternities and sororities were founded as Black Greek-letter organizations between 1911 and 1963 at both Predominately White Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the nation (Kimbrough, 2003). These nine organizations are collectively known as the National Panhellenic
Council (“NPHC”) or the “Divine 9” (Kimbrough, 2003), the umbrella organization that oversees operations for the traditionally Black Greek-letter organizations.

Even after the creation of the NPHC, some Black students remained diligent in their desire to join White Greek-letter organizations. A Black male student joined Delta Epsilon Fraternity at Bowdoin College in 1946. Fraternity leaders, fearing a decrease in membership in chapters in the Southern region of the United States, urged members of the Bowdoin chapter to revoke his membership for the good of the organization; they refused, but the Black student ultimately decided to withdraw his membership (James, 2000).

At the 1947 National Interfraternity Convention, a motion to investigate the use of exclusionary race clauses and to eliminate failed. David Embury, the 1947 National Interfraternity Council President exclaimed:

> I love the discriminating tongue, the discriminating eye, the discrimination ear, and above all, the discriminating mind and soul. The person for whom I can find no love and no respect is the indiscriminate person. To be indiscriminate is to be common, to be vulgar (Lee, 1955, p. 20).

During the 1950s, fraternities and sororities faced pressure from universities that demanded they integrate or be banned from campus. With the assistance of the U.S. Supreme Court, many universities such as the University of Connecticut in 1954, the State University of New York in 1958, and the University of Minnesota in 1961 took issue with race clauses (Barone, 2014). The most impactful case was 1954’s *Webb v. The State University of New York*, which involved the National Interfraternity Council losing an appeal that allowed the State University of New York to require White Greek-letter organizations to adopt anti-discrimination policies. This allowed SUNY to remove any student organization that discriminated on the basis of race (Lee, 1955).
By the end of the 1950’s, these organizations had eliminated exclusionary race and religion clauses from their national policies (Barone, 2014). While Blacks were technically allowed to join, Black students feared that they would face criticism and ostracism from other Black students on campus (Tucker, 1983). Nordherimer (1972) summarized, “It is paradoxical that Blacks have joined fraternities which have been the symbol of White middle-class elitism on campus to escape a White value system that they condemn” (p. 208).

Although *de jure* or codified discrimination had been eliminated from fraternities and sororities, some believe that WGLOs are still racist and use *de facto* discrimination to keep their organizations majority White. As Lee (1955) stated, “the abolition of restrictive clauses is merely a first step; it ignores other means for maintaining restrictive practices. It may remove an obstacle; it does not promote integration” (p. 19). In 2003, the National Panhellenic Conference added a nondiscrimination clause to its list of policies and best practices, but this clause is recommended but not required by the NPC (Gladu, 2013).

In one study, Edwards (2009) interviewed White members of White sororities to determine their perceptions of racial diversity within their chapters. Most of the participants believed that their organization might not support the recruitment of a diverse membership. One participant stated, “I think that they [women in her sorority] are going to stick with what women before them have done in our chapter” (Edwards, 2009, p. 48). Another participant stated, “[To join the other historically White sororities], an African American girl would have to be absolutely gorgeous or a supermodel” when asked if White sororities might be open to recruiting Black women in the future (Edwards, 2009, p. 50).

The Greek-letter system at the University of Alabama is the largest in the nation, where one in four students belong to a fraternity or sorority (Adler, 2014). The Greek-letter community
at Alabama are also extremely powerful, having created a secret organization known as “The Machine”, which is “a coalition of twenty-eight White fraternities and sororities that uses its collective power to the run the University of Alabama student government, determine which monies go to which campus activities…and sometimes influence matters off-campus” (Ross, 2015, p. 50). In 2001, The Machine allegedly conspired to prevent Melody Twilley, a Black student, from receiving a bid to join a White sorority (Ross, 2015). The year before, Christina Houston joined Gamma Phi Beta, who did not know that Christina’s father was Black. Once her chapter found out her racial background, Houston says they accepted her for the most part but, “lots of times they would forget what they were talking about, and the n-word would go flying out like bullets. When I asked them about it, they would say, ‘Oh, we don’t think of you like that.’ Well, you should, because that’s what I am,” (Ross, 2015, p. 65). Halle Lindsay, an Alabama student shared, “During orientation, someone advised us against rushing…someone told my mom [White] sororities don’t really take Black girls”, (Adler, 2014, p. 1).

While the Greek system at the University of Alabama may seem highly segregated and discriminatory, the culture is seemingly replicated at other Predominately White Institutions in the Southern region of the United States due to tradition, preference, and a lack of racial diversity (Berris, 2015; Hughey, 2007; Park, 2008). One White female Potential New Member (“PNM”) at a university in Mississippi was told during Rush Week by a sorority woman that she feared her chapter was getting “too dark” and nodded her head in the direction of a Black PNM (Gladu, 2013). Until 2006, the Kappa Alpha Order chapter of the University of Georgia held Old South Balls in which members dressed up as Civil War Era Confederate Generals; the founders of Kappa Alpha Order name Robert E. Lee as their Spiritual Founder (Beckner, 2017; Kappa Alpha Order, 2018).
Student Involvement

Most students get involved on campus either through student clubs and organizations, joining an athletic team, or by participating in the classroom, and that involvement can shape or affect at least some component of students’ development. Student involvement theory postulates that the quality and quantity of students’ involvement on campus can influence their development in different ways (Astin, 1999). Astin (1984) defined involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p.297). A highly involved student will spend a considerable amount of time on campus, going to class, being active in student organizations, and interacting with students, staff, and faculty, while an uninvolved student will neglect classwork, not engage in extracurricular activities, and not frequently interact with others either inside or outside of the classroom (Astin, 1984).

Astin’s I-E-O Model

Astin’s Input – Environment – Output Model (“I-E-O”) was developed to help understand how students’ outcomes are affected by their personal characteristics and their collegiate environment (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) explained. “Input precedes everything else. Input leads the person into certain environmental experiences, these in turn combine with input to produce certain kinds of outcomes” (p. 324).

Input “refers to those personal qualities the student brings initially to the education program” (Astin, 1993, p. 18). Inputs include pre-collegiate characteristics, which can include race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or disability status. Environment “refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program” (Astin, 1993, p. 18). Components of a student’s environment can be experiences, interactions with students, faculty, staff, campus climate/culture, organizational involvement, friends, roommates, and institutional
policies. Outputs are “the ‘talents’ we are trying to develop in our educational program” (Astin, 1993, p. 18). Outputs or outcomes are essentially the result of the student’s inputs interacting with the environment. Outputs can include grade point average, retention rate, persistence, or identity development (Astin, 1993).

Maramba and Velasquez (2012) interviewed Black, Chicano, and Filipino students at a Predominately White Institution in order to determine if their campus environment influenced their ethnic identity development. The majority of the participants explored their ethnic identity more at college than before attending college. The participants reported that their involvement in ethnic student organizations and taking ethnic studies courses had the greatest influence on their ethnic identity development (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012). Fhagen-Smith, Vandiver, Worrell, and Cross (2010) considered the Black racial identity attitudes of Black students across gender, socioeconomic status and community type. The researchers found that Black female students and Black students from suburban communities were likely to hold multiculturalist and assimilationist views than Black male students or Black students from urban areas. Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) found that campus involvement facilitated a higher level of Black racial identity development. In particular, their identity development was enhanced by membership in a fraternity.

Student Involvement and Fraternities and Sororities

Astin (1997) also stated, “The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Pike and Askew (1990) showed that fraternity and sorority members tend to be more involved on campus than non-affiliated students and have higher rates of persistence. Greek life “facilitates social integration and enhances the development of close and influential relationships” (Asel, Seifert, &
Pascarella, 2015) which can be in the form of brotherhood and sisterhood. Fraternities and sororities can help nurture a student’s *sense of belonging* at college and provide a space for them to learn and develop (Kuh & Lyons, 1990).

Research has been conducted to understand how students in Greek-letter organizations define and conceptualize brotherhood and sisterhood within WGLOs. McCreary and Schutts (2015) found that Greek men define brotherhood as *solidarity* (“I’ve got your back, you’ve got mine…”); *shared social experiences* (“I do almost everything with my brothers”); *belonging* (“My brothers appreciate me for who I am”); and *accountability* (“My brothers make me a better person”). Comparatively, sorority women defined sisterhood as *shared social experience* (“Having pictures of my sorority sisters and me in letters is one of the best parts of being in a sorority”); *encouragement and support* (“My sorority sisters have my back and are there for me when I need them”); *belonging* (“I feel very connected to my sorority sisters”); *accountability* (“It bothers me when my sisters fail to uphold the sorority’s high standards”); and *common purpose* (“Sisterhood is about being a part of something bigger than yourself”); (Cohen, McCreary, & Schutts, 2017).

DeBard and Sacks (2012) investigated the outcomes for 35,000 students at 17 different institutions. They found that students who joined a Greek-letter organization during their first year of college earned higher GPAs, earned more credit hours during their first year, and had a higher first-to-second year retention rate than students who did not join a fraternity or sorority. Mathiasen (2005) researched the relationship between fraternal involvement and moral development. He found that a positive influence on participants’ moral development, namely upholding tradition and values and participating in service.
There are negative outcomes associated with membership in a White Greek-letter organization. One such outcome is violent and/or risky behavior associated with hazing, excessive drinking, and sexual aggression. McCreary, Bray, and Thoma (2016) found that fraternity members were less likely to intervene in a hazing scenario. They also found that participants are more likely to respect the social structure of the organization, so it would stand to reason that if the organization (on a local level) approves of or permits hazing, fraternity members are more likely to engage in that behavior. In the previously mentioned study by Asel, Seifert, Pascarella (2015) membership in a White Greek-letter organization may facilitate student involvement but has also created a culture of excessive drinking. That culture may explain why sorority women report higher levels of attempted or actual sexual assault that non-sorority women (Minow & Einolf, 2009).

It is important to note that fraternity members are more likely to interact with those inside the Greek community and have indicated less interaction with non-Greeks (Park, 2014), which may explain why members of WGLOs tend to have less diverse friend groups (Park, 2014) and less openness to diversity (Asel et al, 2015). In fact, involvement in Greek life negatively affects cross-racial interactions and interracial friendship, and WGLOs in particular are usually majority or completely White (Park & Kim, 2013). Park (2014) found that WGLOs are “the most racially isolating environment for White students” and 97.1 percent of the students in Greek-letter surveyed were in chapters that were majority White. As previous studies have shown membership in WGLOs provide a mechanism for solidarity, belonging, and shared social experiences, but at the same time, membership in WGLOs is linked to less openness to diversity and fewer interracial friendships (Cohen, McCreary, & Schutts, 2017; McCreary and Schutts, 2015; Park, 2014). Muir (1999) found that White students who are members of White Greek-
letter organizations at the University of Alabama held higher negative stereotypes of Blacks, were more opposed to civil rights, and had exclusionary values than the general campus population.

Black students who are members of Black Greek-letter organizations are also influenced by their involvement. Hutcheson and Kimbrough (1998) found that Black students in Black Greek-letter organizations were more involved in student activities and organizations that non-members. These students were more involved with their fraternal organizations and more involved with non-Greek affiliated activities and organizations. The Greek members also exhibited greater confidence in their leadership skills over the non-Greek students. McClure (2006) found that membership in a Black fraternity helped Black male members build a sense of community and a greater connection to campus.

Harper (2007) focused on the academic outcomes from membership in Black Greek-letter organizations. One major takeaway was that the student participants believed that they because they represented their organization, they had to perform at a higher level academically than if they were not involved in a Greek-letter organization. Minimum GPA requirements also encouraged them to keep their grades high. Another study discovered a moderately strong relationship between Black fraternity and sorority involvement and engagement among Black students, increased interactions with faculty and staff, and higher levels of collaboration with other students (Patton, Flowers, & Bridges, 2011).

While it is difficult to argue against the positive impact that involvement in Black Greek-letter organizations have had on the outcomes of Black members, some have noted negative outcomes associated with membership in these organizations. Khoury (2013) found that the violence that results from hazing during the new member education process results in an identity
development that is hypermasculine. This hypermasculinity is “essentially opposed to homosexuality” (p. 148). Black Greek-letter organizations were originally founded for those who were not allowed to join White Greek-letter organizations due to their race but have seemingly foster an environment that is not welcoming to a different marginalized student population – the LGBTQ community. While Edwards (2009) found that White sorority women showed a lack of openness to increasing diversity in their sororities, the Black sorority women were even less open to diversifying their Black sorority chapters.

**Greeks, Involvement, and Identity**

Involvement in a Greek-letter organization can facilitate the development of students’ different identities including their racial identity, gender identity, and spirituality. Shelnutt (2012) interviewed White male college students who joined White Greek-letter organizations and found that White racial identity development was positively associated with joining a White Greek-letter organization and holding a leadership position. Ray (2013) interviewed both White and Black fraternity members and found that Black members believed they were held accountable for their actions more than White members, which in turn affected their Black race salience.

Branch (1997) interviewed Black students who joined Black Greek-letter organizations. Participants credited their Black Greek-letter organizations with helping them to identify more strongly with their Blackness, particularly because it served as a mechanism for belonging while at a Predominately White Institution. In Peguero’s (2014) study of Black members of White Greek-letter organizations, participants were not raised in households that facilitated a highly race salient environment. “The participants described great pressure from parents to not participate in organizations or programs that were viewed as race/ethnicity-based. There seemed
to be an overall sense of White culture being better and something to strive for” (Peguero, 2014, p. 55).

Butts (2012) interviewed White men who joined Alpha Phi Alpha, a Black fraternity, in order to investigate how involvement in a Black Greek-letter organization affected the participants’ Social Identity:

Participants were assimilated into the Black culture and were influenced by it. Yet they maintained a good sense of identity as White men. They joined the group because they believed it was the best “fit” for them in terms of individuals with whom they would feel comfortable and relaxed and to whom they could relate.

Mitchell (2014) considered the gender salience of Black members of Black fraternities and sororities. Black sorority women enjoyed the “safe spaces” that their one-gender organizations provided for them, while the Black fraternity men overlooked the importance of gender. Goldfarb and Eberly (2011) interviewed both fraternity members and non-affiliated students and determined that involvement with a Greek-letter organization inhibited participants’ spirituality development. They had lower levels of spirituality, reported being less religiously affiliated and reported a higher level of religious skepticism.

**Racial Identity Development**

Racial identity is “the meaning individuals and groups ascribe to membership in racial categories” (Renn, 2012, p. 11). It is the “sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1990, p. 3). *Nigrescence*, or the process of becoming Black evolved as “observers tried systematically to map and codify the identity transformation that accompanied an individual’s participation in the Black power phase (1968-1975) of the Black Social Movement” (Cross, 1991, p. 147). One important component of nigrescence is that it allows for the examination and analysis of “what happens to a person during identity change” (Cross, 1991, p. 147).
The original nigrescence theory was based on five stages that show how the “Black experience is a process” (Cross, 1971). In the Pre-Encounter stage, the person views the world through a Eurocentric lens and may have anti-Black or colorblind views. This person goes beyond simply preferring Whiteness over Blackness and may degrade Blackness. An experience or event that “shatters the person’s current feelings” occurs during the Encounter stage, the third stage (Cross, 1971, p. 17). An example may be the death of Martin Luther King Jr. The person may ask internally, “Have I been unaware of the Black experience, or was I programmed to be disgusted by it?” (Cross, 1971, p. 17). In the Immersion-Emersion stage, the person immerses himself or herself into Blackness and emerses from Whiteness. The person may romanticize Blackness and may develop an idealistic view of what it means to be Black. For example, the person may wear their hair in an afro or don African-inspired garb without analyzing the meaning behind the clothing. In the fourth stage, Internalization, the person may “achieve a feeling of inner security and are more satisfied with themselves” (Cross, 1971, p. 21). In the final stage, Internalization-Commitment, the person has become Black and has developed “personal standards of Blackness” (Cross, 1971, p. 23).

In his Revised Nigrescence Theory, Cross (1991) stated, “Nigrescence is a resocializing experience that seeks to transform a non-Afrocentric identity into one that is Afrocentric” (Cross, 1991, p. 190). There are several attitudes and characteristics that create the Pre-Encounter stage. Persons in this stage may hold low-salience attitudes about Blackness; they do not deny being Black, it simply is not a significant role in their lives. They may attribute success as solely due to inner characteristics and drive. They may also hold anti-Black views and “do not see Blacks or the Black community as potential or actual sources of personal support” (Cross, 1991, p. 191). Pre-Encounter Blacks prefer a Eurocentric cultural perspective and favor Whiteness over
Blackness. Persons in this stage may fear discrimination and stereotyping based on being “too Black”.

In the Encounter stage from the original nigrescence theory, persons may experience a *racial awakening* which is “an experience that triggers personal exploration of one’s heritage…and promotes an increased awareness of what it means to be Black” (Neville & Cross, 2017). The “a-ha” moment may cause the person to feel pride and engage in antiracist activism, or it may cause them to feel disappointment and despair. Nevertheless, the person’s reality is altered and their identity as a Black person is further developed. Cross’s original theory described the *encounter* phase as a “verbal or visual experience that encourages an individual to reinterpret and make new meaning about race” (Neville & Cross, 2017, p. 103). Similarly, racial awakening is a term that encompasses both an external event that promotes “increased critical awareness of what it means to be Black” and internal changes to help shape a greater sense of self, (Neville & Cross, 2017, p. 104). Racial awakening can occur due to personal experiences, formal and informal education, and activism. Outcomes of racial awakening include racial pride, an increase in antiracism activism, and even disappointment and sadness.

Cross and Fhagen-Smith’s Life Span Model of Black Identity Development has six sectors that encompass the three nigrescence patterns discussed earlier (Evans et al, 2010). In sector one (*infancy and childhood*), factors such as family makeup, traditions, social networks, and historical events form the basis for the racial identity of Black children who are not yet aware of race. In sector two (*preadolescence*), low and high race salience begins to take shape. Children may also develop internalized racism and view Blackness negatively. In sector three (*adolescence*), Black children begin to understand their idea of Blackness. Children with low race salience may explore a “nonrace identity” such as being American instead of a Black
American or African American (Evans et al, 2010, p. 257). Children with internalized racism will have their negative beliefs about Blackness strengthened. Section four (*early adulthood*) represents most traditionally aged college students. Blacks with high race salience place a high value on Blackness and do not experience adult nigrescence. Blacks with low race salience favor their other identities over their Black identity but are susceptible to a racial awakening that may shape their racial identity. Those with internalized racism may never experience adult nigrescence, the fifth sector. *Nigrescence recycling* occurs in the sixth and final sector “when an individual’s preexisting Black self-concept is called into question…[they] reflect on the emerging identity issue…[which] results in an identity that has been enhanced or changed in some way” (Evans et al, 2010, p. 260).

Another component of Black identity development is *acculturation* and *enculturation*. Acculturation is “the extent to which and the process through which ethnic/cultural minorities participate in the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the dominant White society”, (Cokley & Helm, 2007, p. 143). Acculturation presupposes that only the dominant group influences the minority group. Enculturation of Black culture is the adoption of “traditional African American practices, beliefs, and values” (Cokley & Helm, 2007, p. 144). One study found that participants who measure with a strong Black racial identity were more encultured to traditional Black culture, and inversely, those with lower measurements were less encultured. These results show that an individual’s Black racial identity development can correlate with their engagement in Black culture (Cokley & Helm, 2007).

**Conclusion**

The preceding literature review explores the historical basis for why there is currently a segregated Greek system and shows both the positive and the negative outcomes that occur due
to membership in a Greek letter organization. The literature review also describes how one’s racial identity development can be shaped or enhanced by their environment. This study adds to the existing literature by showing how experiences with White Greek members and Black family, friends, and classmates shape how Black members in WGLOs feel about their Black identity.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

While there is a plethora of research that explores involvement in fraternal organizations, White membership in White Greek-letter organizations and Black membership in Black Greek-letter organizations and hazing and drinking culture in Greek-letter organizations, there is a dearth of information that explores cross-racial membership in fraternities and sororities, particularly Black members of WGLOs. There is no data that shows the Black racial identity development of Black members of WGLOs. In fact, I could find no peer reviewed article, study, thesis, or dissertation that addressed this specific topic.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research “produces descriptive data – people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior” (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). Quantitative research uses statistical analysis of its data to create results, while qualitative research analyzes words to find common themes as results (Creswell, 2015). Qualitative research is defined as “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning,” (Shank, 2002, p. 5). Qualitative research can be the study of people in their natural environment and the attempt to understand their world and how they fit in it. To understand study participants, the researcher asks them broad and general questions, which can be open-ended, in order to understand the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2015).

This study uses a phenomenological research approach, which “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 57). Those who use a phenomenological approach define the phenomenon and explore what the participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). I used a phenomenological approach because although the participants are members of different
organizations and attended different universities with different campus cultures, I would be able to find commonality in my participants’ experiences. It is important “to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 60). For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon being explored is membership in a WGLO as a Black person. Participants’ experiences are further explored especially as it pertains to their Black racial identity development. This research approach was used in order to answer the following research questions:

1. How does membership in a White Greek letter-organizations influence the Black racial identity development of Black members?

2. How do experiences with members of White Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?

3. How do experiences with Black family, friends, students, and Black members of Black Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?

4. Post-graduation, how do Black members reflect upon their undergraduate Greek experience and how it has shaped their Black identity today?

**Data Collection**

In preparing to do the research for this thesis, I interviewed nine Black males and females who had been initiated into organizations that are members of either the Interfraternity Council or the Panhellenic Council and were either current undergraduates or alumnae of four-year Predominately White Institutions in the South. To ensure participant anonymity, I used pseudonyms in place of participants’ actual names (see Table 3.1), and I obtained approval to
conducted my study from Louisiana State University’s Institutional Review board (see Appendix A).

**Study Sites**

My participants hailed from universities located in the following states: Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee. These states are listed by the U.S. Census Bureau as part of the “South Region of the United States” (Census Regions and Divisions of the United States, 2018). There is a cultural difference regarding race and Greek-letter organizations in the Southern region of the United States that I believe makes limiting my participant pool to this region important. First, I believe that the South tends to be generally more segregated so cross-racial friendships and interactions are not as common. Studies have shown that members of WGLOs have significantly fewer interracial friendships (Park, 2014). Park (2014) explains that “Greek life seems to be particularly racially isolating for White students…and while historically White Greek life may promote community and a sense of belonging for (mostly White) students, it appears to come at a high price: racial exclusivity that is linked to lower openness to diversity, lower interracial interaction, and lower interracial friendship”, (p. 652, 657). Secondly, it would appear that the majority of the racialized incidents that have been committed by members of WGLOs have taken place in the South: the Cripmas Party that was held by a White fraternity at Clemson University in South Carolina; The Machine and their influence over White Greek-letter organizations at the University of Alabama, the Cinco de Drink party at Baylor University in Texas, and the video at the University of Oklahoma (Glionna, Duara, Branson-Potts & Pearce, 2015). Therefore, I limited my pool to participants who joined their organizations at a four-year PWI in the South.
Sampling and Recruitment

To select participants for this study, I utilized purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used when researchers deliberately choose individuals or sites to understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). Specifically, I used homogenous sampling, a type of purposeful sampling where the researcher intentionally selects individuals “based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics” (Creswell, 2015, p. 207). In order to find my participants, I employed different techniques. I attended the 2017 Association of Fraternity and Sorority Advisers Annual Meeting in Atlanta, GA and met two individuals who fit my criteria and were willing to be interviewed after I explained my study. I created a recruitment note, posted it in the “Future Student Affairs Professionals” Facebook group, and received several responses. Once I vetted those individuals, I interviewed them both in person and using the Zoom video conference software.

I knew two women with whom I went to school who are both Black and members of the same WGLO. I reached out to them via Facebook Messenger and text message and sent them my recruitment note; they both agreed to be interviewed.

I also used snowball sampling, which is when one participant recommends another individual to be interviewed (Creswell, 2015). After being interviewed, one of my participants reached out to another woman who fit my criteria and who agreed to be interviewed. I received her phone number and contacted her directly.

Individual Interviews and Data Analysis

I utilized semi-structured interviews this study. Semi-structured interviews allow for some flexibility for additional probing questions or for clarification for answers (Barribell & While, 1994). I had an established set of 11 original questions for my interview protocol, but I
would choose to ask or not ask a question depending on the participants’ responses. For example, if in a previous question a participant answered a future question on their own, I would not ask that question again. Also, if a participant’s response left me confused or wanting to explore their response further, I could ask them a probing follow-up question. The questions were formulated to inquire into the participants’ demographics, undergraduate involvement, experiences with White people and Black people, and participants’ Black racial identity development.

Each participant was interviewed for approximately 30 – 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted either in-person in a private area of a local coffee shop or electronically via Zoom, a computer application that allowed me to record and save the audio files of the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, I read the interview protocol to the participant, which included a description of the project. I then offered participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym in order to build rapport. After that, the participant signed the consent form, and I began the recording. After the recording was over, participants were told that I may email them a follow-up or clarification question, which I eventually did. Finally, I thanked them for their candor and participation in the study.

Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed. During the data analysis stage, I read each transcript multiple times, which helped me recognize patterns in the responses that I eventually used to create the overall result themes. I marked comments on those responses for further review in a process called pattern coding (Patel, 2014). I then grouped common codes using axial coding, which assigned the different sections and comments to the applicable theme or themes (Patel, 2014).
Trustworthiness Statement

I have existing relationships with four of the participants. I had known one of the participants for more than three years before the interview, and I had already developed a close friendship with her. I had known another participant since 2004 because we had gone to high school together. Two of my participants, who I met at the AFA Annual Meeting, had become acquaintances. Due to these existing relationships, I believe these participants trusted me, which allowed them to open up to me. For other participants, our interview was our first and only time communicating. In order to foster trust, I engaged with those participants before beginning the interview, telling them about myself, my Greek story, and my motivation behind conducting this study. I was able to ensure that participants were members of their individual organizations by checking their social media pages, and the social media pages and websites for the organizations they joined.

Participants

I interviewed 9 participants using purposeful and homogenous sampling. Each participant either chose or was given a pseudonym in order to protect their identities. I interviewed four females and five males who ranged in ages from 21 to 30. Two of my participants are currently undergraduate students, and the other seven were all alumni of a four-year institution, and four are current graduate students. Eight of the nine participants were born and raised in hometowns in the South: Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas. One is from Washington D.C. but attended Louisiana State University. Four of the five male participants identified as queer or gay; all four of the female participants identified as heterosexual.
Table 3.1: Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Fraternity or Sorority</th>
<th>Undergraduate Institution</th>
<th>Undergraduate or Alumnus</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
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<td>Sorority</td>
<td>Northwestern State University (LA)</td>
<td>Alumnus</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Kenner, LA</td>
<td>Straight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Researcher Bias**

I am a member of Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Incorporated, a historically Latina sorority with a multicultural membership. I joined my organization on April 10, 2011 at Louisiana State University. On most campuses, my organization may be part of a Multicultural Greek Council, but at Louisiana State University my chapter is a part of the Panhellenic Council but is not a White Greek-letter organization. Before joining my organization, I was initially interested in one particular National Panhellenic Council organization but was not selected to pledge. The summer before my junior year, I expressed interest in rushing a Panhellenic organization to a White female friend, who told me that I would have a harder time receiving a bid. I looked into bringing Theta Nu Xi Multicultural Sorority to campus and then found that Sigma Lambda Gamma had just been chartered on campus, so I joined that organization the following spring.
I have been around the three Greek-letter councils at LSU during my entire undergraduate and graduate career. I would say that as I have matured, I have developed more negative perceptions of WGLOs. I see them as bastions for racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and privilege; and although at one time I was interested in rushing a WGLO, I would never consider that to be a viable option for me now. Ultimately, I support any college student on their quest to find the organization, cause, or space that gets them involved, engaged, and active on campus.

**Limitations**

Originally, I only wanted to interview alumni men and women. I concluded that it would be easier for participants to reflect upon their collegiate experiences and how those experiences shaped their identity if they had already graduated college. Upon reflection, I decided to interview two current undergraduates. I hypothesized that the undergraduates would not be as far along in the racial identity development as the alumni.

In the Greek-letter world, there is a term known as *SEC & Friends*, which are large four-year PWIs, which may or may not be a part of the Southeastern Conference (“SEC”) with large IFC and PHC chapter sizes that may be as old as the institution itself. What is significant about these types of chapters is that they usually have an established chapter culture that is not easily susceptible to change. I was only able to interview participants at two of these types of institutions: three participants from Louisiana State University (30,863 students, 19 IFC chapters, 14 PHC chapters, and 5 NPHC chapters) and one participant from the University of North Texas (38,121 students, 16 IFC chapters, 26 PHC chapters, and 9 NPHC chapters) (LSU Fall Facts, 2017; LSU Greek Life, 2018; UNT, 2017; UNT Greek Life, 2018). Due to the size, demographics, and overall options for involvement, participants who attended universities that
may be considered part of *SEC & Friends* have different motivations and reasons for joining and different experiences than those who attended smaller institutions with smaller Greek communities, such as Tarleton State University (13,011 students, 7 IFC chapters, 5 PHC chapters, and 2 NPHC chapters) and Northwestern State University (10,572 students, 7 IFC chapters, 3 PHC chapters, and 6 NPHC chapters) (NSU, 2017; Northwestern State Greek Life, 2018; Tarleton State University, 2017; Tarleton State University Greek Life, 2018). These differences will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter details the participants’ individual backgrounds, their unique experiences and how they express their Blackness. The results characterize the experiences of the participants and their Black racial identity development in college and beyond. Using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study used personal narratives to explore the experiences of Black members of WGLOs in the South. The four themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed: Reasons for Joining, Experiences with Black and White People, The Fraternal Experience, and Feelings About Blackness and Black Identity. As a note, some colloquial terms such as *um, uh,* and *like* have been edited out from participants’ direct interview quotes in order facilitate readability and comprehension.

**Major Themes**

During the coding phase, four major themes emerged from the data, some with their own subthemes. Each theme is detailed below with corresponding supporting data from the participants’ interviews.

**Reasons for Joining**

The decision to join a Greek-letter organization is one that was not taken lightly. There are many factors to consider when choosing a Greek-letter organization to join: what types of organizations are available to join, if the organization you prefer is willing to offer you membership, whether or not you would fit in and feel comfortable interacting with the members, or if the organization accepts you for who you are and your various intersecting identities. All nine of the participants had to answer those questions before joining their individual fraternities and sororities. They expressed different reasons for why they chose to join a White Greek-letter
organization (“WGLO”) over a Black Greek-letter organization (“BGLO”) and why they joined their specific Greek-letter organization.

The benefits of being in a WGLO

A few participants mentioned the specific benefits of joining and remaining active in a WGLO as a motivating factor for their decision to join. Alexandra shared that being in her organization has provided tangible benefits. “Connections with different people like past al to tell me about scholarships and jobs. In fact, I just got a $1,000 scholarship because of a recommendation from an alum.” Caroline has also enjoyed the same benefits:

I usually told people about the connections that I made. It was like I’d be stupid not to you know take advantage of being in an organization that could literally connect me to anybody. That was really true. I met my first designer through my sorority so that was how I got into my first fashion show. And then from there I just started modeling you know and doing all types of stuff. I never would’ve did that before or if I did who knows how I would’ve done it.

Dawn shared how she learned how to be a “complete woman” who could interact with White people better due to her membership in Kappa Alpha Theta:

[Kappa Alpha] Theta opened my eyes up to what it would mean to be a wife, what it would mean to be a mom, what it would mean to be a woman as a community servant, and what that looks like… I know how to interact with women a lot because of Theta, and I know how to deal with White people, because of Theta. And that’s a gift that keeps on giving.

AJ has two experiences that have shaped his viewpoint of Sigma Chi, his fraternity. The first occurred when he first joined his organization.

When I first got initiated and wore my letters, I actually met someone at a car inspection place, and he was like some old guy from like the 70s, so he saw me with my letters on and he was like, ‘Are you a Sigma Chi?’ , and I was like ‘yeah’ and not even knowing the guy, we had at least an almost hour and thirty-minute conversation.
Another experience, which occurred after graduation, cemented AJ’s positive view of his fraternity. After his father died, around thirty of his fraternity brothers attended the funeral and supported him.

**Experiences with BGLOs and lack of knowledge of BGLOs**

It is interesting to note that some participants initially wanted to join National Panhellenic Council (“NPHC”) organizations but had experiences with those organizations that steered them toward IFC or PHC organizations. Raphael is a legacy for Alpha Phi Alpha. His father is a member, so Raphael wanted to join too, but his experiences with the undergraduate chapter at his university hurt him and made him change his mind:

I was very excited to get involved with them but when I was going through the uh – just the interest meetings and things like that. And they were very shady to me; they did not really make me feel welcomed or like they wanted me to be a part of their organization. Until they found out I was a legacy and then they were like, “oh yeah, we really want you to be involved” and but they totally embarrassed me in front of the other guys before they found that out and so because I’m not the best at public speaking at all and I wasn’t expecting to be the first one to introduce myself to everyone and so I kind of froze and I didn’t really; I kind of lost my train of thought and they just straight up embarrassed me and said, “You can sit down, we’re not gonna mess with you”.

Both Melvin and Andy identify as Queer and noted homophobia and hypermasculinity as reasons why they did not seek out membership in NPHC organizations. Andy stated, “I identify as Queer, so especially the homophobia in the Black community, Black Greek community hurt.” Melvin explained his thoughts:

So, I definitely explored NPHC at my institution. And when I kind of explored it, from my experiences and perspective, they weren’t Queer affirming spaces at that time back in the early 2000s. So, I explored and went to an interest meeting and saw it wasn’t for me…so for me, it was really about finding that fit, and there was an organization that I thought would kind of be the fit, so when I went through exploring that option, about 90% of the chapter was football players., so for me that space wasn’t particularly welcoming. I was an outsider within an in-group. So, a combination of being Queer and not being a football player – it wasn’t a really good space for me so I self-selected out of that experience.
Dawn had a pre-collegiate experience that confirmed her decision to join a WGLO:

I got exposure through the Summer Scholars Program at LSU to a lot of folks that were either interested in Greek life or had already gone into Greek life in an NPHC organization, and my interactions with those individuals, uh, did not lead me to change my decision to rush –, they actually confirmed my decision to rush, because I didn't exactly (pause) like how they represented themselves, , and how they represented their organizations, and I didn't think that it would be something that I would flourish in or be a productive member of.

Several participants explained that they did not join a NPHC organization because they did not know how to navigate the usually secretive interest process or did not want to. Caroline shared, “I was very undecided. It was very much more a mystery than the PHC. I think that’s what it was, PHC seemed like it was all – what you saw is what you got – you know and then NPHC I couldn’t, I wasn’t sure what I was about to get.”

Although Alexandra has family members who are members of NPHC organizations, she still did not know how to get information about the organizations on Louisiana State University’s campus. “I didn’t know a lot about their organizations and recruitment and everything. So, it was just like, OK, just try PHC.” Dawn shared how PHC’s transparency made it the more attractive option:

I think it's always important to remember that rush in the Panhellenic council is a process, and it's a mutually selective process – and for me, that was an attract – more attractive option, than the secretive, kind of, you know, you know kind of going behind the scenes trying to figure stuff out situation that I did understand was a part of the NPHC situation, so I enjoyed rush, the opportunity to get an introduction to ten different – at the time it was ten at LSU – ten different sororities, , and go through a mutually selective process whereby those chapters that were interested in me, and the sororities that I was interested in, , could select each other, and it was less of like, this secretive guessing game, it was more of an upfront, honest, approach – which is something that I personally prefer. With my religion, with my work – transparency, trust and credibility are the things that, are like, really key to who I am as a person.

Caroline’s perception of NPHC influenced her decision to join a PHC sorority. The summer before her first year at Louisiana State University, she received a pamphlet which
detailed the recruitment process for IFC, PHC, and NPHC organizations, and provided additional information about each chapter. Caroline noted the following about the PHC and NPHC organizations:

If you look at the [chapter] pictures – the PHC sororities and organizations, they’re larger in quantity, they have this uniform photo or something. You know, good quality. And then I noticed NPHC, sadly, it’s smaller photos maybe they use some willy-nilly photo off of you know Instagram. They just didn’t have you know high quality, just silly things but they’re things that attract the normal or future college student coming in.

Rose was influenced by conversations with her mother and brother. She stated:

My mom, she talked about joining AKA [Alpha Kappa Alpha], and Zeta Phi Beta, and Delta [Sigma Theta Sorority] and she was interested, but she had always said like “you know I was really interested in joining Black Greek-letter organizations but I don’t like how they truly do nothing for the Black communities that I’ve ever lived in and before paying that amount of money, I would want to see that represented first”. And I was like wow. You know like that really stuck with me. So, when looking at Greek life as a whole, I was just like well what are you doing for the community as a whole not just like yourselves. So, that’s just what always stuck with me.

Rose’s brother, who attended Northwestern State University three years before she did, joined Theta Chi, a WGLO:

But prior to, he was looking at joining NPHC and I was still set on, you know, exploring Greek life – Black Greek life. But at the time that he was also looking at it, they were diminishing on campus. They were not involved and they were dead set on just partying and not doing anything in the community not doing anything for – well and when I say community I mean like the overall Natchitoches community – but also not doing anything for the Northwestern community. I was just like ok well that is basically what my mom has said or shared with us most of our lives so that’s just it like, what are the other options… he was just like “Rose, they’re not really involved like they don’t have socials, they don’t do a lot on like with service or philanthropy.” A lot of them like don’t have good grades to even be on campus like a lot of them, at the time, were kicked off campus for hazing…. so I went through Panhellenic recruitment.

**Breaking the mold and starting a new legacy**

A few participants shared that their decision to join a WGLO was based on a desire to break the stereotype that Black students must join BGLOs. Dawn explained how her upbringing helped make her decision to join a WGLO:
I grew up in a very diverse environment – I grew up dancing in a local dance studio here in Baton Rouge, competitively, where I was the only Black girl on my dance team., I competed in pageants growing up, I was the first Black Miss Teen Louisiana, I'm very – I'm much more comfortable in very diverse situations, and I've never been uncomfortable being the only Black anything.

That upbringing led her to make decisions that defied stereotypes for Black students, including joining a PHC sorority:

So, family reaction – my family has historically just seen me do things different, uh I – Robert Frost "The Road Less Traveled By" is my moniker for life, it is, it – it – it speaks to everything that I do – I always take the road less traveled by, and I mean they pretty much were just like oh that's Dawn just doing something different as always, you know? Didn't necessarily seek to understand why I made that decision, they supported it – obviously they paid for it., you know, they didn't get it, but it was, you know, they were like, oh that's just Dawn doing what Dawn does.

Dawn was the only Black woman out of, what she estimates to be, 1200 women who went through formal recruitment in Fall 2005. She also integrated her chapter becoming the first Black woman in the LSU chapter of Kappa Alpha Theta. Caroline would follow approximately ten years later as a Black member of the same chapter and was one of five Black women in her pledge class in Fall 2014. Heath grew up in a predominately Black hometown in North Carolina. He wanted his Greek experience to challenge his comfort zone:

I’ve navigated that [Black] identity with myself and I was like okay, I need to step out of my comfort zone and I realized joining a D, a D9 organization was staying within my comfort zone and I wasn’t going to challenge myself and as an aspiring student affairs professional, like my philosophy is you do most of your learning when you challenge yourself and step out of your comfort zone, and for me as an aspiring professional, I said if I’m telling my students this in the future, then I need to be able to say that “I have done this” and I wanted to develop an identity of navigating a predominantly White situation.

Two of my participants chartered their chapters on their campuses. Andy was a part of the re-chartering process that brought Sigma Nu back to the University of North Texas. He believed that men of color would have an easier job receiving a bid as a charter member than if they tried to join an established chapter. At Austin Peay State University, Melvin’s alma mater,
Kappa Alpha Order, a White fraternity, sent their national headquarters staff to campus in order to recruit men to charter the fraternity on campus. Kelvin stated that the chance to be a charter member of the fraternity made it an attractive option. “It was through the conversations with headquarters staff and the ability to kind of create a new environment on campus that kind of led me to go through that process”.

**Limited options**

Some of my participants attended small undergraduate institutions that limited their options for participating in Greek life. For example, there was only one NPHC organization active at Tarleton State University while AJ was a student, and it was a sorority, so he could not join it. Alpha Phi Alpha was the only active fraternity on campus at Arkansas Tech University while Raphael was a student and after his negative experiences, he did not want to join that organization. Since there were no other NPHC options, he joined an IFC organization. There were no active NPHC sororities on campus while Rose was a student. There were rumors that one sorority would begin recruiting, but in the interim, Rose decided to rush and ultimately joined Alpha Omicron Pi, a White sorority.

**Experiences with Black People and White People**

Once participants became full and active members of their fraternities and sororities, they often interacted with other members of their organization, fellow students, members of other Greek-letter organizations, their families, and their friends. All of the participants expressed both positive and negative interactions with members of the White community and members of the Black community. Some participants experienced racist or discriminatory behavior from White people, while others were able to develop close and cherished relationships with their White fraternity brothers or White sorority sisters. A great majority of the participants shared
experiences with Black students, family, friends and Black members of Black Greek-letter organizations that were rude, hostile, and hurtful, while others were still able to still form close bonds.

**Interacting with White people**

Participants’ experiences with White people ranged from microaggressive, negative, and racist to overwhelmingly positive. Dawn, who integrated her chapter, generally had positive experiences with White people as a member of her sorority, but she did meet one woman in her chapter who treated her poorly:

There was one girl in particular that was just racist, I mean, you know, she didn't get why I pledged, she didn't like the fact that the chapter accepted me, because her vote – I mean, other than her, I think I – I think she was the only dissenting vote someone told me, you know, and she just, she had her little attitude, and I'm notorious for just, kind of being a little aggressive back to people like that, so I just spent so much extra time around her. I would sit at her table during dinner, you know, just to kind of just, get under her skin and I found it amusing, and eventually she got her life together, and you know whatever, and she realized, she just – she got to know me, which I think was probably the best thing that could happen in her life too.

Caroline, who later joined Dawn’s chapter (they were not members of the chapter at the same time) also dealt with hostility from within her chapter. In one instance, the chapter required all members to straighten their hair for formal recruitment. Caroline has naturally curly hair and had been wearing braids for the summer. She refused to remove her braids or to straighten her hair. She explains:

I remember feeling uncomfortable in that conversation and but nobody was gonna force me to do something that I didn’t have to do. So, of course, I persisted and went on with that. But I do remember feeling girls were just looking at me like how is she allowed to do that, you know and just whispers and I hated that.

In another instance, a member of Caroline’s chapter was allowing women to go upstairs to use the bathroom between parties during formal recruitment. Once Caroline approached the
woman, the sister did not allow Caroline to use the restroom. She detailed the incident that followed:

I literally keep walking and so as I’m walking she pulls my hair backward. (laughs)
Yeah, she pulls my hair and I’m like shook, and I remember looking back at her and I was like “nuh uh” and so I like went into the restroom, and I’m processing everything that just happened. I had went back downstairs, and I was like let me talk to this girl and I told her “You’re not gonna touch my hair like that, you’re not allowed to touch me, my body or anything like that; especially when I’m trying to use the restroom”, and so you know it was uncomfortable, it was awkward, I looked her straight in the eye. She looked like she was about to cry. It was over, it was done. And so, after that I guess in between that time she had went to the recruitment chair, and I had already went to the recruitment chair and it was switched around into a “oh Caroline yelled at [REDACTED] and made her cry” and so it just completely got turned around, and I remember in that moment, I was just like wow this is how it is. And so, I was completely heated but you know it was – it was more of a popularity contest in that situation and there was nothing I could have done about it. I just had to keep it moving and just do what I did – tell her I’m not gonna allow that and yeah but that was probably the worst I’d say. And I did feel like that had you know something to do with maybe like race or whatever being different., cause I’m like who – why else would you (laugh) feel like you can touch me.

Raphael and Heath both shared how members of their organizations would use racial slurs as slang. Raphael shared how he confronted those people:

There were some times where I had to check a couple of my brothers and it really didn’t – it’s one of the current problems that’s going on in, I would say, our society right now is people want to use the “N-word” as a term of endearment. And the other members – the other brothers that were people of color, they didn’t care that they used that word as a term of endearment but I felt differently. And I had to check people on that like this should not be used, you definitely shouldn’t be saying this word, and you are wrong for allowing them to say this word. And I wanna say it made me one of the least popular ones, at least until –, at first it did, until I got older it got to a point where I was the only Black person ‘cause other ones had graduated. So, I was the only Black person but I was also the oldest person. So, as I got to that point they started to respect me a little more and understand like where I was coming from. But, in the beginning, because of the other guys saying “well its ok to say that” you know I’m – I was unpopular at that time because I was the one who would say “oh no you don’t need to say that because that’s not cool and you’re wrong for saying that”. Like and so if you’re gonna call each other that, you can do it while you’re not in my presence or we will have a problem.

Rose mentioned two specific experiences that were negative. Rose oversaw recruitment for her sorority while she was an undergraduate student at Northwestern State University and had
a friend who held the same position in a different White sorority, Sigma Sigma Sigma, Rose was
told:

“Rose, like I – I just feel like I need to tell you this because I know what happened. Phi
Mu was voting and there was one girl who stood up and was like ‘I don’t know if we
necessarily need to have another Black girl”, and I was like what like, who says shit like
that?

In another instance, Rose, now a graduate student at the University of Florida, met a
high-ranking member in her sorority’s national office. Rose was introduced to the woman who,
according to Rose, acted negatively towards her:

Literally, her first thing was just like, I can’t even say it but it’s just a look – it was just
like a (looks). And I was like “Bitch, are you stuck in the twenties?” And then you’re a
regional somebody? And that was the first time that I had ever met anybody from our
international headquarters ever that has like – or a part of a team and the system that has
ever done that or like reacted in some way. Now I’m sure she didn’t catch it, but I caught
that shit, and I was just like well you need to do better with your fucking facial
expressions if you’re gonna feel some type of way you know what I mean… Alright you
look at me and I’m a Black woman – I’m a Black woman so all your [snaps] your mind
immediately goes to NPHC. Completely shook your world that that he said AOPi.

Andy spoke of being stereotyped. He was often confused as a member of NPHC
fraternities, and members of the White Greek community assumed he knew most Black students
on campus and that he could dance. In Caroline’s experience with the sorority sister who grabbed
her hair, she was encouraged by another Black sorority sister to physically fight the one who had
grabbed her, but Caroline did not want to be stereotyped as an angry Black woman, so she
attempted a more peaceful resolution instead.

Not all interactions with White people were negative. When pressed, AJ could think of no
instance when he was stereotyped, discriminated against, or experienced racism or
microaggressions due to his race, even when visiting other chapters in Texas. He does admit that
his stature as a 6’7” former football player may mean that people are less likely to bother him.
Alexandra referred to her experiences very positively noting, “It’s literally like one giant family.
Even though you’re not in the same sorority, we all kinda think the same. We’re all on the struggle bus. We’re all dealing with boys, and school, and everything”.

**Interacting with Black people**

Similar to their experiences with White people, participants’ experiences ranged from positive to negative. Several participants shared how Black members of NPHC organizations reacted harshly to the news that they had joined WGLOs. Rose shared that she attended a new member presentation for a Black sorority and saw a friend from high school who had joined that sorority:

I went up to her and I was like “Hey how are you” and she gave me a hug but she had a really confused look. And I was like “oh yeah what’s going on what’s wrong”. First thing she said was, “I really thought you’d be on that line”. I was like “oh no, I am Greek – like I’m already Greek. I joined my freshman semester. I’m in Alpha Omicron Pi”. And she was like “wait what” and she was like “nuh uh you need to get out of that right now, you need to – you need to try to be an AKA”. And I was like “No, I’m having a great experience, don’t try to deny me that”. It was just very, it made me resent so much in that moment because she was just like – you completely disregarded everything and all of the excitement that I had to share for you and your experience and your new sisters because I wasn’t a part of that. But I have already found my place with my sisters and all of us were here to support y’all but you couldn’t do that for me. But it’s just like damn, why does it have to be just this one way all of the time?

In another experience, Rose, now a graduate student at the University of Florida, was conversing with undergraduate members of different NPHC organizations. They asked if she was in a sorority and when she told them the name of her organization, they accused her of lying and telling a joke. Alexandra’s ex-boyfriend is a member of a NPHC organization who told her, “are you sure you wanna hang out with them [her sorority]?”. Dawn shared how she became known as “that Black girl that pledged the White sorority”, and a lot of her fellow Black Summer Scholars students did not like her choice to join a WGLO. Heath experienced hostility from Black students who are not Greek:
The reaction for a person of color, particularly a Black person, joining a predominantly White organization, they kind of look at you like ‘Why are you doing this? You’re turning your back on us.’ And (pause) I understand it to an extent because for the culture you’re kind of just stepping away but I also had to realize, ‘I’m not just doing this for everyone else. It’s also something for me.’ So, for Black students, when you join a Greek letter organization that is predominantly White, I’ve noticed that you do get a little shunned at first from the Black students.

Melvin had mixed reactions with Black Greeks:

I definitely think there is half of the community that felt like we went against them or we didn’t choose them or we were definitely going against what NPHC was founded for. But there was definitely the side of the community that wanted to collaborate and were happy that we were still part of a larger Greek community. So, I think for the ones I built community with among the NPHC they were just really happy that we could at least build bridges, and we used the identity of being Black to say, “Hey, we know you have membership and you program this way. Can we collaborate and kind of innovate together?”, versus some members of the community who were like “We just don’t want to talk to you”.

Andy shared how he never felt like he was a part of the Black community at the University of North Texas, even though he was involved in student organizations such as the Black Student Union. When he announced on Facebook that he was going through formal recruitment to join an IFC fraternity, he received messages from Black friends and family who accused him of trying to be a part of “White UNT”:

I kept getting nitpicked and getting ‘Oh how dare you?’ type of responses from my friends and from Black UNT and then it was, ‘Oh of course he went IFC. He doesn't want to be around this’, which like I said is weird because I'm a part of BSU and BSU is a part of every Black event, in some way or form or fashion, so I was present, but I wasn't – still wasn't in…I didn’t feel welcome.

Andy also shared that his cousin, who’s a member of Kappa Alpha Psi, a NPHC fraternity commented, “Congratulations but whenever you want to become a part of like a real fraternity let me know”. Andy responded, “I am a part of a real organization. Whatchu mean?”

Raphael also shared instances where he was accused of being a traitor to BGLOs. While wearing a fraternity t-shirt, he was confronted in a Target store:
They were interrogating me about the letters on my chest. They were, “Oh like, so what’s that?” and I’m like “Alpha Tau Omega” and they’re like, “Oh, so that must be a – that must an academics fraternity”. “No, it’s a social organization”. “Oh, so you too good to be in the Black fraternity?” and that’s exactly what he said to me and I’m like, no I just didn’t want to be in one (laughs) and I guess that’s not really the truth either because if they weren’t so shady to me, I would’ve gladly joined Alpha Phi Alpha, but I don’t wanna be somewhere where I’m not wanted.

Not all interactions with Black family, friends, students, and Greeks were negative. Melvin shared that his immediate family supported his decision to charter Kappa Alpha Order on campus. His Black friends “thought it was really dope” that he established a fraternity. An aunt, who attended Auburn University and was familiar with Kappa Alpha Order’s history called it the “Old South fraternity”. Her original visceral reaction was negative but changed once he told her be chartered the fraternity at his university.

After he joined Sigma Chi, AJ noted that Black people, “were pretty cool with it. A lot of em were in those NPHC organizations, but everyone was pretty supportive in my experience and very positive. I can’t really say I had a bad experience.” Rose’s undergraduate interactions with members of Black Greek-letter organizations at Northwestern State University was overwhelmingly positive:

At Northwestern it was like completely different culture. Very embracing like it – it is not a thing to be just like “oh, Rose, why didn’t you join like an NPHC organization?” because we all do stuff together, we all have events together like AOPi’s and AKA’s – when they came back on campus – did all kind of philanthropy and service like because we decided to reach out and make it a known thing to have those staple events. We always had things with Alphas, we did things with Zetas, we did things as Panhellenic and NPHC and then IFC and NPHC. Our Greek community was more unified than any other community that I’ve ever seen.
The Fraternal Experience

Overall, participants spoke positively of their experience, especially how membership in their organizations shaped them into the persons they are today. Caroline shared, “It was a journey. It was a learning experience. I definitely am glad I went through it. I think that it put the cherry on top for my college experience.” AJ said that his overall undergraduate Greek experience was incredible:

Sigma Chi gave me, you know, not really a foundation, it gave me like actual brothers that I can actually count on whenever I need them. They were like, there for me, they cared about me and still do. I feel like being a member of my organization helped shape me into I am as a person. Overall it gave me the tools necessary to be successful in life. It just prepared me to be a contributing member of society in general.

One of the reasons why Andy joined Sigma Nu was to have more close male friendships. His experience inspired his career as a higher education student affairs professional working with fraternities and sororities:

I think it's definitely been very meaningful, but it's definitely been a hard journey, but I feel like the things that you really treasure the most they're always the hardest. I really, thoroughly enjoyed my experience but (pause) I'm not ignorant to the problems that we have in our community, the problems that specifically people in IFC have, and Pan, like these predominantly, historically White organizations have, they're very much so real, and I acknowledge that, but also (pause) I wouldn't, you know want to have it any other way.

AJ and Melvin’s experiences also inspired them to pursue careers in higher education administration. AJ expounded:

It [Sigma Chi] introduced me to, you know, what I want to do for the rest of my life: student affairs. Because when I was in Sigma Chi, I was in the Freshmen Representative Council and SGA, and it kinda just, you know, projected me to all of these leadership roles and positions and uh, got me a part of NASPA and got me a part in all of these other programs and stuff like that. I really credit Sigma Chi with a lot.

Melvin explained:

Because of my KA experience, I found my profession. So, for me I definitely feel like my career trajectory would have looked very different if I wouldn’t have went KA. I think I
grew as a person and as a professional because of the skill set, the ability of access. I applied to work for my national organization, which is a very different experience to say that you enjoyed your organization so much you wanted to go work for it. So, speaking to that “Did you have a positive fraternity experience?” Yes, because I applied to go work for them.

Alexandra, who is still an undergraduate student, has so far greatly enjoyed her experience in Zeta Tau Alpha. “Overall, I’d say it’s one of the best experiences I’ve had in college.” She feels particularly bonded with her sorority sisters, calling some of them her best friends and her future wedding bridesmaids. Heath, another current undergraduate student, remarked:

My overall thoughts about my Greek experience are pretty positive. I’ve made connections with people that I would have never spoken to outside of, you know, just seeing in the class where you’re in this community where we’re so close knit that like I couldn’t-. My community and my network and my family as like, just to simply put it, my family in the Greek community, they are great. I wouldn’t - I wouldn’t trade that.

Some participants did express feelings of regret joining their WGLOs or thoughts of missing out on the NPHC experience. When asked if he ever wishes he had joined a NPHC fraternity instead of an IFC fraternity, Melvin answered:

Yeah, there’s definitely moments. I think for me it’s always bittersweet to go back to undergrad for homecoming. You definitely see NPHC organizations have better alumni engagement. And so, it’s intentional: they wanna go back, they wanna see it. and of course, experiences that dominate social media, like Atlanta Greek Picnic, National Greek Picnic, those experiences like “Aww, I wish I was there” to truly engage and understand that well.

Rose admits that there are times she regrets not joining a NPHC sorority:

Sometimes, I do. Sometimes, I really do. Like (pause) I just look at a strong group of Black women and you think about the adversities that they go through. You think about the conversations that are probably had in personal settings, and group settings, one on one. And it’s just you get it, I know you get it, and it’s always everywhere that’s the thing. Like, no matter where you go, it’s not just our chapter. You can fucking go to Indiana, be from Louisiana, and then you see somebody with your letters on and it’s like y’all joined at the same time. That is not the same thing for me in my organization.
Raphael has no regrets on joining his organization but does wish he would have had the opportunity to explore other NPHC fraternities. However, he remarked:

At the same time, I wouldn’t trade any of my experiences. I’ve met a lot of great people in my organization and my organization has really molded me to be the person that I am today in terms of my confidence and my ability to be a leader. A lot of those values that my organization was built on, I still believe and abide by those values and that’s why I don’t have any regrets about the organization that I chose.

A few participants wish they could have joined both a WGLO and a BGLO in order to have both experiences. Caroline noted:

When you see some cute little photo of some sisters meeting together after years and they’re going on some group trip together. In those moments, that lasting sisterhood I appreciate that. And so, the D9 organizations that truly make sure that that happens, those are the moments I’d say I’m like ‘Dang, I wish I could’ve did that’ because I’m like whatever you guys are doing it’s manifesting some sort of sisterhood and I like that. And I’d say in the situations like homecoming, when you’re just surrounded by people strolling and calling and doing all these things. Like wearing their letters and they’re all beautiful like it makes you think – how could you not want to be a part of that? You see all these beautiful Black women and they look like the best of the Black people (laugh) so I’d say in those moments I wish I could have the best of both worlds. I wish I could do both.

Dawn replied:

To my understanding if I really wanted to pledge an NPHC sorority I still could, I can't pledge another PHC sorority, but if I wanted to go about an interest in a grad chapter, my understanding is that I could. I actually think that it should be acceptable for someone to pledge a PHC sorority their freshman year, and if they so choose, their junior or senior year to pledge an NPHC sorority, I don't think there should be anything wrong with that. I think that should be, A-Okay. And I don't think it should be looked down upon because if this country is going to get where it has got to go, when it comes to the racial divide, that's going to be a key way for us to do it. I mean I look at my son's generation, I look at, you know my peers as they're getting married – there's more interracial couples. What are those kids exactly supposed to do? Are they supposed to choose when they really probably don't understand the magnitude of their decision? Should they be limited?

Feelings about Blackness and Black Identity

Participants had strong feelings about their Black identity, and the role race plays in their lives. I asked every participant, “Which word do you believe best describes your primary
identity: Black or person?” Two of the nine participants replied “person” – AJ and Dawn. Dawn answered:

I've never led with that [Black identity], because it's never gotten me anywhere... I think that because my parents had raised me, and because I had always been successful despite my race, in certain things, I, felt like it was never a limiter, for me... I see Black as more of a culture. It’s more of like a (pause) there-there’s a culture that comes with that, that I certainly participate in at times, but it's not who I am, holistically.

Dawn reflected on her undergraduate Greek experience and reasoned that by not leading with her Black identity, the women in her organization look at her differently now:

I think they looked at me as though – and I think they still do, to some degree, as though, I'm different. And that, what they may see or hear other Black people experience, isn't the same, for me – or I don't have those same concerns, or I don't have those same viewpoints. I posted [on Facebook], ‘I am not the exception’, which is what I wanted people to know. Yes, I am probably one of your only Black friends – yes, I will kick it with you, we will, chop it up, we will have a great time, but (pause) you're silent, because y-y-you think that it's limited to a certain type of Black people, but what people are experiencing are things that I experienced as well – fears that I have, concerns that I have for my son, and they love [SON’S NAME REDACTED], they love my kid, you know, he's he-they-they you know, everybody adores him, but I don't think that they see him, the same as they see Trayvon Martin or Eric Garner, or some of the people that have been victims of police insensitivity, you know. But he is, and I fear those same things for him as those moms fear for their kids.

AJ explained, “Probably the person part. I mean, yeah, I am who I am. I can’t change that but I’m not gonna, you know, let it define me or stereotype me in a way that it kind of holds me back”. I asked AJ if he thought that being a member of his organization shaped his Black identity development at all, and he answered:

I feel like being a member of my organization helped shape me into I am as a person. I know you said Black, but for me it’s not throwing in race and what someone looks like that makes a person’s experience. Overall it gave me the tools necessary to be successful in life. I know you believe I'm avoiding the question of my Blackness. To that I say ‘Why does it even matter in all honesty?’ Yes, I know I'm an African American male in a predominately White fraternity, but it just prepared me to be a contributing member of society in general. They allowed me to be myself and I allowed them to be themselves as well. They never really treated me any differently than brothers who didn't look like me. Hope this is the answer you were getting at. We all believed in the common goal of our
ritual and no matter what skin color you are or race it didn't matter to us. My organization cared for each of us as we went through the experience.

Other participants aligned very strongly with their Blackness and identified as Black over person. Caroline answered, “I think my Blackness just because like I feel like that intertwines with who I am as a person. Like, if I wasn’t Black I wouldn’t be who I am as a person”.

Alexandra said she was proud to be Black and explained further:

When I was younger, I was called an Oreo. They were shocked to hear my name like, ‘Oh your name is [REDACTED]? Like that’s a White name. You don’t sound Black…you don’t look Black or act Black.’ And I’m like what’s a Black person supposed to look at act like? Why are we stereotyping ourselves? There’s so many different colors, there should be so many different personalities. You know? We’re all Black people, there shouldn’t be Team Light Skin, Team Dark Skin, anything like that. We’re just Team Black.

Andy strongly identified as Black and expounded:

I think for me I identify as Black. I don't (pause) I just really am so proud of that identity that I hold, so yes, I'm a person. It's weird but like, initially the first thing that pops up to my head is I'm a Black person, so I have to think yes, I'm a person first and then I'm Black but, I think for me it's I'm a Black person. Like, I am Black. Black is what is a part of me, it's who I am. It’s the most salient identity that I hold.

As a follow-up question, I asked the participants if they believed that being in their organizations shaped their Black racial identity in some way. Caroline replied:

I do feel like being a member of my organization helped to shape me as a Black woman. By being the minority in my organization, I felt I had one of two options: conform to an identity that wasn't my own to “fit in” or embrace what made me different and special. The more I embraced myself, my hair, my skin and my culture the more others did as well. Now, I am a more confident, well-rounded, unapologetic Black woman.

Andy explained that growing up, he knew he was Black, but he did not feel like a Black person. He was tokenized and called an “Oreo”. Once he joined Sigma Nu, he felt an internal change because he had to defend his Blackness so much. He explained that being in a predominately White organization served as a catalyst for owning his Black identity:
Growing up for me I created a sense of what it meant to be Black from my family and the greater community, and while I was constantly surrounded by Black folks, I felt isolated or as if I didn’t fit the mold. Although my organization is historically and predominately White, I was able to figure out that my Blackness was valid, and just because I wasn’t in a Black Greek organization didn’t make me any less Greek or Black. Figuring out my identity emerged more when I began to educate and call out my brothers and others in our community on a lot of the problematic issues that went on in our community for so long… I feel super Black, like, and being proud of feeling super Black.

Heath believed that being a member of his fraternity affected his Black racial identity development in both positive and negative ways:

Being in my organization as a Black male it is made me more aware and more vocal about micro aggressions that are committed by our men in NIC/IFC organizations towards non-White members of our predominantly White organizations. Because of this, I would like to think it has given me to opportunity become more self-aware and it has given me the opportunity to challenge my brothers to become more aware.

In contrast, I feel like being in my organization I have felt like I have always been the token. This feeling has contributed to and intensified my feelings of imposter syndrome. Being the only Black male in my organization and being at a PWI. I have felt that I have always had to prove myself and my worth to others around me. These constant feelings of having to prove myself doesn’t allow me to make time for myself or it makes saying “NO” difficult because I don’t want others to think that I am living up to those known stereotypes of Black men and women in this country.

**I-E-O Model and Nigressence**

Figure 4.1: I-E-O Model and Black Racial Identity
Astin (1993) defined an input as “those personal qualities the student brings initially to the education program” (p. 18). I specify race the key component of my participants’ input. The environment “refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program” (Astin, 1993, p. 18). The participants’ environment can be defined within the confines of experiences due to racism, discrimination, and distinct events known as racial awakenings. Cross (2001) identified three central concepts that shape Black racial identity development. Personal identity are the traits and characteristics that make up one’s individuality. This can include self-esteem, self-confidence, and personality traits. Reference group orientation refers to how one’s sees the world. A final concept is race salience, or the importance race plays in one’s life (Vandiver, 2001). Participants’ race salience comprises their output.

Participants experienced racism from White people within their specific organizations and within the confines of the greater White Greek-letter organization community on their individual campuses. Several participants had experiences that they felt were overtly racist while others had experiences that were more covert and microaggressive. For example, Caroline mentioned that she knew of specific IFC chapters on campus that would not hold exchanges, or parties, with them because their chapter had a few Black sisters. While she did not name those specific organizations, she did name Theta Chi and Theta Xi as fraternities that also had members of color and with whom they would often pair up with for exchanges,

Most participants had interactions with Black family, friends, students, and Greeks that they made them feel discriminated against and ostracized within the Black community and not Black enough. Andy reiterated that he was teased by Black students at his university and by Black family members, which led him to defend his Blackness. During our video interview, I noted that he had posters that said Black Lives Matter and had the Black Power fist on it. I asked
him about that he said, “So much of what I've been learning is making me really feel super Black”.

Several students experienced *racial awakenings* or experiences “that triggered personal exploration…and promoted increased critical awareness of what it means to be Black” (Neville & Cross, 2017, p. 104). For Melvin, those racial awakenings occurred in the classroom. Melvin told me until his second year in college, his identity would have been person-led versus race-led. However, he took a course on Black masculinity that affected him:

> It really made me think critically of what it means to be a Black man in America. And more formally of how I present, how I project, how I engage because of that., so for me, I think, being Black, taking African-American history courses, being Black in my fraternity, really shifted that for me being Black-led.

As mentioned in chapter one, there have been countless instances of racist and discriminatory acts committed by WGLOs in the South such as the Sigma Alpha Epsilon video at the University of Oklahoma or the Panhellenic recruitment controversy at the University of Alabama. I asked all of the participants if events like this affect how they view their membership in their respective organizations. AJ replied that those events had no effect on him. “I know there’s gonna be those bad apples, bad eggs in each organization, and I can’t really just, you know, kind of single out my own organization to see if they have any of those types of members”. Caroline explained:

> I will say sometime during that or when those things were happening, it does makes you as a black person of course look inward. So, it was like – especially somebody who’s so pro-black – I’m just like fight for our rights or whatever just try to be an advocate. So, of course in the moment I didn’t feel like – I’m looking around and I’m just like sometimes just “why am I doing this?”

Neville & Cross (2017) hypothesized that one possible outcome of racial awakening is an increase in antiracism activism. The different acts of racism Caroline witnessed urged her to do more:
I wouldn’t say it makes me less proud to be in my organization it just – it’s frustrating that it still happens, and it almost makes me wish that even more black people would just push the boundary and just more black people would just go and show up to that door because these people need to be educated. At the end of the day, everybody is uneducated and I feel like if they had more conversations with us like all the awkward conversations I’ve had to have throughout the years about Colin Kaepernick and just random stuff. You know the election, I think it would make a difference. So, we just gotta stop you know trying to separate ourselves or thinking that we’re not or that we have to be in NPHC. I would love if more people could just push the boundaries and we could shake it up a little bit.

Participants’ outcomes are explained by their Black racial salience development. It is clear to see that their environment shaped their Black racial identity in some way. These specific participants can be grouped into three categories of racial development: those who already had a high level of race salience before joining their WGLOs, those who entered college with low race salience and whose involvement with their WGLO caused them to become more highly race salient, and those whose low race salience remained the same after joining their WGLO. A participant might say their family did not raise them to place race as a primary factor in their identities, which would show that they have low race salience. Other participants described childhoods in which their parents instilled in them the importance of being Black; these participants would have high race salience. Most participants were raised in an environment that did not stress the importance of Blackness but throughout college and into adulthood, they became more highly race salient.

**Existing High Race Salience**

One participant in particular, Rose, can be characterized as already having high race salience. “My mom has always raised us to know who we are and be true to them…I know that I am a black woman, like nobody’s gonna be able to tell me otherwise.” Her high race salience led her to observe the Black women who were already members of the three White sororities on campus when Rose was going through formal recruitment. She noted that Black women in two
of the organizations were “white-washed and lost”, whereas the Black women in Alpha Omicron Pi, her eventual sorority, were different:

There were other black women that were true to themselves. Natural black women, big afro curly hair, short teeny-weeny afros, dark skin, chocolate skin, fair skin. It was truly a mixture and it wasn’t like the other two sororities where you had straight relaxed hair and you had to stand up straight, you had to speak a certain way. Like they – they spoke Ebonics like they broke it down they were like “if I wanna say ‘y’all’ and I wanna sound country because I’m from Opelousas, I’m gonna sound like I’m from Opelousas and I’m damn proud”. And every single other sister in that room respected that and appreciated you and they did not tear you down in any way, shape or form. They still lifted you up, they still built you up and they were – like it was just the amount of respect and embracing like it was such an embracing culture and I was like, “Wow this is amazing”.

Low Race Salience That Remained Low

AJ, Dawn, and Raphael were all raised in environments that did not promote the importance of race. Dawn specifically noted that her parents did not raise her to strongly identify as Black:

I think, and it's difficult for me to lead with Blackness because I do have a very strong Cajun, French, Creole background. I mean, I have family that very often pass [as White], as we say passé blanc, and so, that's my dad's side of the family. And so, for me to, only try to associate with one side of my life would be disingenuous, and not how my parents raised me. I was probably very vocal (pause) about not being all Black in undergrad, and I think a lot of my friends try to remind me of that and I think when I explain it to them now they get it better, and I probably didn't do a good job when I was saying it, so, you know again, I did not-I never wanted to be, confined to a box, I never wanted to feel, limited, and I never wanted to ignore important parts of my history, and what I represented by being the person that I am. When I did that I think people took that as, “Oh, she thinks she's white, or she's not black blah blah blah”. And that wasn't the case, because in their ignorance they misunderstood it too, but I would say that I was more ignorant then, I was more – I was, you know it's probably, I chose to be more ignorant.

Although Dawn became a member of the Black Student Union during her undergraduate years and did get involved with race related activism, her identity as “a person who is Black rather than a Black person” remained the same throughout her involvement in her sorority and remains the same today.
Low Race Salience That Became High Race Salience

The majority of participants fall into this category. They had a person-led versus a Black-led identity and was not raised to view their Blackness as a primary component of their identities, but that changed after they joined their organizations. As Andy stated, being in his organization has helped strengthen his Black identity. He has become involved with more conversations about racism and has had to defend his Blackness to others – these actions have helped him feel Blacker. Caroline also credited her sorority with helping to further develop her Black identity:

I would definitely say the younger I was, the less I identified with it. Or I would say I was more lost like I was definitely trying to figure out who I was. I feel like I was more easily influenced like I had to change up. I say that because I was changing up my clothes, you know or trying to fit the mold that I thought I was supposed to be a sorority girl or as an LSU girl or whatever. But now I can see myself – like now I would never put a weave in my head or put some straight hair in my head or anything like that. And I’m not gonna walk into a room and feel like I need to be dressed different or change or something because of the women around me. So, I say definitely it has definitely changed so much and I will – I can even credit that to me being in an organization cause it’s like I had to. It was either I was a clone or I had to love myself more. So, it was one of the two and I had to love myself more.

Sub-Phenomena

An intriguing phenomenon that I discovered is that four of my five male participants identified as gay or queer. In my conversations with them, they noted that hypermasculinity and homophobia within Black fraternities is a reason that led them away from joining a NPHC fraternity. Khoury (2013) found that involvement in a Black fraternity heightened members’ concept of hypermasculinity, which in turn could lead to a fraternal environment that is homophobic. While it is difficult to divide their gay identity from their Black identity, participants felt that they would be more likely to experience homophobia from members of Black fraternities than racism from members of White fraternities.
Two of my participants, Andy and Melvin, are charter or recharter members, which means they either established their chapters on campus for the first time (Melvin and Kappa Alpha Order at Austin Peay State University) or they assisted in reviving the chapter on campus after the chapter has been inactive on campus for some significant time (Andy and Sigma Nu at the University of North Texas). I asked them if they believed they had an easier time receiving a bid because they were chartering. Andy said yes. Melvin admitted he had been recruited by men from the national headquarters who were not undergraduate students. He said it would have been more difficult to try to join a fraternity with an established chapter culture like at his graduate institution.

**Conclusion**

The nine participants of this study shared their journey to becoming members of WGLOs as Black members. They shared their motivations for joining these organizations, why they ultimately did not choose to join a NPHC organization, experiences with White fraternity brothers and sorority sisters and Black family, friends, students and Greeks, their overall experience in their organizations, and their Black identity.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of membership in a traditionally, historically, and predominately White collegiate social organization and how those experiences influence the Black racial identity development of Black members of White Greek-letter Organizations who attended different Predominately White Institutions in the U.S. South. Astin’s I-E-O Model and Cross’ Theory of Nigressence serve as the theoretical framework in order to discuss the experiences of the participants. I set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How does membership in a White Greek-letter organization influence the Black racial identity development of Black members?

2. How do experiences with members of White Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?

3. How do experiences with Black family, friends, students, and Black members of Black Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?

4. Post-graduation, how do Black members reflect upon their undergraduate Greek experience and how it has shaped their Black identity today?

This chapter will discuss the findings as they relate to the research questions and recommendations for future practice and research.

Research Questions Addressed

Throughout my time interviewing my participants, I was able to understand the various ways that involvement in their White Greek-letter organizations and their experiences with others have influenced and shaped their Black racial identity development today.
Research Question One:

*How does membership in a White Greek letter-organization influence and affect the Black racial identity development of Black members?*

Participants’ responses reflect that involvement in their organization has affected their Black identity in one of two ways: either the participants’ Black racial identity became stronger and they aligned themselves with their Blackness more, or they did not explore their Black identity further so their race salience remained low.

Research Question Two:

*How do experiences with members of White Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?*

Negative interactions with members of White Greek-letter organizations served to highlight the differences between the Black participants and their White fraternity brothers and sorority sisters. These experiences forced the participants to look inward on their Black identity and explore it further. Positive interactions helped foster a sense of belonging for the participants, and they felt a stronger connection to their chosen brotherhood or sisterhood.

Research Question Three:

*How do experiences with Black family, friends, students, and Black members of Black Greek-letter organizations influence how Black members view their Blackness?*

Negative interactions with members of Black Greek-letter organizations or Blacks who are not affiliated with a BGLO initially caused participants to doubt their Blackness and to not feel as if they could represent the Black community on their college campuses. Further exploration of those feelings forced participants to confront those issues and defend their Blackness, which in turn influenced their racial identity development.
Research Question Four:

Post-graduation, how do Black members reflect upon their undergraduate Greek experience and how it has shaped their Black identity today?

Alumni participants reflect lovingly on most aspects of their undergraduate Greek experiences. Current undergraduate participants have, so far, greatly enjoyed their Greek experiences. Participants note that involvement in a predominately White social setting on the campus of a Predominately White Institution in the American South has, for the most part, further developed their Black racial salience and has given them a better understanding of what it means to be Black.

Recommendations for Advising

While writing this thesis, the movie Step Sisters premiered on Netflix. In the movie, Jamilah is President of Theta Chi Phi, a fictitious Black sorority. She is tasked with helping Sigma Beta Beta, a White sorority, learn how to step, which is a type of dance performed by BGLOs. Saundra, who is one of the ‘SBBs’, as they’re called, is Black. Throughout the film, she is mocked by Jamilah and other ‘Thetas’ for being Black in a White sorority. After a disagreement between Jamilah and the SBBs, Saundra confronts Jamilah and tells her that she is a Theta legacy and attended a Theta interest meeting as a freshman but was rejected for being too “whitewashed”. Jamilah apologizes, but Saundra says, “It’s fine. I dodged a bullet. SBB is not perfect, but at least we judge on actions and not stereotypes” (Stone, 2018, 1:12:20).

I share this excerpt because it is characteristic of the experience of one of my participants specifically (Raphael) but also speaks to the wider experience of Black members of WGLOs while interacting with Black students and Black Greeks. I would recommend that student affairs professionals who advise fraternities and sororities do what they can to develop an inclusive
Greek community. Edwards’ (2009) study on the perceptions of racial integration in sororities showed that women who participated in multicultural training were more likely to be open to recruiting and having a diverse membership in their chapter – both Black women in Black sororities and White women in White sororities.

Intentional conversations about diversity and inclusion in Greek life must be had in order to facilitate a better experience for all. For example, Lawrence Ross, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and the author of Blackballed: The Black and White Politics of Race on College Campuses tours campuses and lectures students on the issues of race and racism on college campuses. In his presentation, he focuses on how White Greek-letter organizations have historically oppressed students of color, particularly Black students, and how they have continued to add to a campus climate that is not welcoming to racial minorities. While some members of White Greek-letter organizations bristled at the idea of being racist, some members listened and reflected internally on how their organization can address racism and discrimination on their campuses.

I do not believe that integration in and of itself will eliminate all issues of prejudice, racism, and discrimination in fraternities and sororities. I also do not believe that chapters should recruit non-White members simply for the sake of having non-White members. I do believe if chapters choose to recruit non-White members, it should not be solely incumbent upon the non-White member to educate the chapter on issues of diversity and inclusion. Rather, the chapter should take action in order to create an inclusive and just environment, which may include self-education so that they may feel more empowered to speak up when necessary.

Several of my participants expressed an initial desire to join a NPHC organization but did not know how to go about navigating that process while joining an IFC or PHC organization is a
much more transparent journey. It is the culture of NPHC organizations to not actively recruit new members, which forces those who are interested to individually learn about the organization they would like to join. For most, it is not culturally acceptable to be interested in more than one organization. NPHC organizations also tend to have individually separate and unadvertised recruitment procedures while IFC and PHC organizations have systematic and public formal recruitment. Professionals who advise NPHC organizations should encourage them to be more visible and transparent with their new member recruitment. The chapters should not essentially blackball an interested student who does not know the preferred way to express interest in an organization or who does not know enough about the organizations to be able to select one. Conversations should be had in order to help NPHC organizations promote more inclusive and understanding recruitment strategies and procedures.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As I stated in chapters one and two, the majority of published research about fraternity and sorority involvement is about the experiences, activities, and outcomes of White members of WGLOs and the experiences, activities, and outcomes of Black members of BGLOs. There is some research regarding the experiences of students of color who join WGLOs and White students who join BGLOs. There is little to no research that explores the outcomes of students who cross the Greek color line.

I was initially interested in studying the inverse of this study: the White racial identity development of White students who join BGLOs. A recommendation for further research is study the White racial identity development of White members of WGLOs or the Black racial identity development of Black members of BGLOs. For me, it would be interesting to compare
the Black racial identity development of my participants compared to Black members of WGLOs.

Another idea is to study members of other types of Culturally Based Greek-letter organizations (“CBGLOs”) such as those that have a multicultural membership, those that focus on the Latinx experience, or those that are Asian-interest. One could research the experiences and outcomes of Latinx members in Latinx organizations, Asian members in Asian-interest organizations, or members who do not identify as the race of the majority of the organization such as a Black member of a Latinx organization.

One could also take a longitudinal research design and study members over time. A researcher could also look at a different outcome than racial identity development, perhaps one could base the theoretical framework on Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development or Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development. Or they can research members’ sexual identity development or gender identity development. Researchers can also consider other outcomes such as retention, graduation rates, or sense of belonging.

It would be interesting to research my sub-phenomenon of gay members and hypermasculinity – either members of White Greek-letter organizations or members of Black Greek-letter organizations. In particular, I would like to delve in more deeply as to why Black gay males join their particular organizations, their experiences as it relates to race, gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation, and various outcomes.

**Conclusion**

The title of this study, *Fifty Shades of Black*, was partly inspired by Cross’s 1991 book *Shades of Black*. I chose this title as a way to state that there is no one prescribed way of being Black or exhibiting Blackness. One can be raised upper class, attend a Predominately White
institution, join an IFC or PHC organization, marry interracially, and have a strong Black racial identity; or one can be raised in an urban setting, attend a Historically Black College or University ("HBCU"), join a NPHC fraternity, marry intraracially, and have a weak Black racial identity. There is truly no one way to be Black.

Before interviewing my participants, I informally hypothesized that these participants would have low race salience and would not have a strong Black racial identity. They proved me wrong. These participants know who they are and have a strong identity. For a majority of these participants, their involvement with a WGLO helped shaped them into the Black person they are today. Through this process I have learned to not judge Black students who join WGLOs but to support them in their decisions. I will use this research to better inform my practice as a student affairs professional.
REFERENCES


Khoury, I. (2013). “It’s a Manhood Thing”: Pledging, Masculinity, and Identity Development in Black Greek Fraternities Educating African American Males: Contexts for Consideration, Possibilities for Practice (pp. 139-156).


Shelnutt, D. J. (2012). “Investigating the White identity of historically White fraternity members:
A descriptive study." University of South Carolina. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.


APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Danielle Ford
   Education
FROM: Dennis Landin
   Chair, Institutional Review Board
DATE: November 16, 2017
RE: IRB# E10767
TITLE: “Fifty Shades of Black”: The Black Racial Identity Development of Black Members of White Greek Letter Organizations
Review Date: 11/16/2017
Approved X Dissapproved
Approval Date: 11/16/2017 Approval Expiration Date: 11/15/2020
Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2a
Signed Consent Waived?: No
Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)
LSU Proposal Number (If applicable):
Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (If applicable)
By: Dennis Landin, Chairman

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:
1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*.
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT POST ON FACEBOOK

“Hello! My name is Danielle and I am writing a thesis on the experiences of Black members of White Greek Letter Organizations. If you are Black, a member of an organization in the National Inter-Fraternity Council or National Pan-Hellenic Conference AND you are an undergrad, preferably on a large campus, please contact me. I'd love to interview you for my thesis!”
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Title: “Fifty Shades of Black”: The Black Racial Identity Development of Black Members of White Greek Letter Organizations in the South

Date:
Time of Interview:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Project Description:

A. Purpose Statement: The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of membership in a traditionally, historically, and predominately White collegiate social organization and how those experiences influence the Black racial identity development of Black members of White Greek-letter Organizations who attended different Predominately White Institutions in the U.S. South.

B. Individuals and Data Source: Individuals who identify as Black/African-American, AND are either current undergraduate students or alumni of a four-year institution, AND has been initiated into a fraternity or sorority that is a member of the National Inter-Fraternity Council or the National Pan-Hellenic Conference. Data collected through in-person interviews and videocall interviews.

C. How I am Protecting Confidentiality: use of pseudonyms

D. Expected length of interviews: 30-45 minutes

[Have interviewee read and sign consent form]
[Turn on recorder and test]

Questions:

1. As an introduction, please tell me the name of your Greek organization, where did you pledge and when, and when did you graduate?
2. Let’s talk about your introduction to Greek life. When and how did you first hear about fraternities and sororities?
   a. Why did you choose to rush your organization?
   b. Why did you choose not to pledge a NPHC organization?
3. What was your rush process like? Did you feel comfortable? Did you feel accepted?
4. After you joined, what was the reaction like from family, Black friends, and other Black students, particularly Black Greeks? How did that make you feel?
5. What is/was the diversity like in your chapter?
6. Do/Did you ever feel stereotyped in your organization, experience any discrimination or microaggressions?
7. In the post-SAE video era, post-Alabama sorority rushing controversy era, how do you feel now about being in your organization?
8. When I say “Black person”, which word describes your primary identity – Black or person?

9. When you were an undergrad, how do you think you felt about your Blackness? How do you feel about your Blackness now?

10. Do you maintain any relationships with your fraternity brothers/sorority sisters today?

11. Do you ever regret your decision?

12. Overall, what are your thoughts about your Greek experience?

13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

Title: “Fifty Shades of Black”: The Black Racial Identity Development of Black Members of White Greek Letter Organizations in the South

Performance Site: Louisiana State University & Agricultural and Mechanical College (Baton Rouge, LA, USA)

Investigator: Danielle V. F. Ford
Available: M-F, 8:00 AM – 4:30 PM

Purpose Statement: The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of membership in a traditionally, historically, and predominately White collegiate social organization and how those experiences influence the Black racial identity development of Black members of White Greek-letter Organizations who attended different Predominately White Institutions in the U.S. South.

Subject Inclusion: Individuals who identify as Black/African-American, AND are either current undergraduate students or alumni of a four-year institution in the U.S. South, AND has been initiated into a fraternity or sorority that is a member of the National Inter-Fraternity Council or the National Pan-Hellenic Conference.

Number of Subjects: 10

Study Procedures: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with participants either in-person, via telephone, or via video conference and will be audio recorded. The interview will take approximately 30 - 45 minutes to complete.

Benefits: There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Risk: Investigator does not see any potential or foreseeable risk in participating in this study.

Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Investigator’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Danielle Vanessa Fefee Ford was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to parents Arthur J. Ford, Sr. and Olivia A. Fefee-Jefferson. She graduated from Baton Rouge Magnet High School in 2007 and enrolled at Louisiana State University. There, she was involved in a variety of activities including joining Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority Incorporated on April 10, 2011. Danielle graduated from LSU in May 2012 with a Bachelor’s of Science in Management and a Minor in French. She then began a career in human resources.

Upon further reflection, Danielle decided to make a career switch to higher education administration and student affairs and enrolled in the Master of Public Administration program at LSU for the Fall 2015 semester. Danielle eventually transferred to the Master of Art – Higher Education Administration program. Danielle anticipates graduating on May 12, 2018.