Benefits and Trade-Offs: Exploring the Sense of Belonging Among Black College Students in Historically White Fraternities and Sororities

by

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(Under the direction of Georgianna Martin)

ABSTRACT

The concept of sense of belonging is a critical component of student success, retention, and well-being in higher education, particularly for underrepresented students. This dissertation examines the lived experiences of Black students and explores how sense of belonging impacts their collegiate experiences as members of historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS).

Using a critical lens, this qualitative narrative research draws on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine how fraternal structures, practices, and power dynamics within historically white fraternities and sororities shape Black students' lived experiences and sense of belonging. Nine Black students participated in this study, who are fraternity and sorority members of National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) and North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) organizations. Through narrative interviews, the research explored their personal stories, revealing insights into the benefits, racial interactions, emotional responses, and challenges faced by Black members. Findings highlight that while some participants experienced genuine inclusion and meaningful relationships, others encountered racial microaggressions and systemic biases that undermined their sense of belonging within these spaces.

The implications of this research provide critical insights for those seeking to create inclusive environments within fraternal organizations. By applying CRT, this study highlights the systemic barriers that limit a sense of belonging and advocates for structural change,

inclusive policy reform, accountability mechanisms, leadership development, and culturally responsive practices. Recommendations for future practice include intentional and comprehensive diversity training, institutional support for cross-collaboration, and the integration of sense of belonging into student leadership frameworks guided by CRT.

INDEX WORDS: Critical Race Theory, Greek Life, Historically White Fraternity, Historically White Sorority, Social Capital, Sense of Belonging, Tokenism

TRADE-OFFS AND BENEFITS: EXPLORING THE SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG BLACK STUDENTS IN HISTORICALLY WHITE FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES

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DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to past and present Black students as members of historically white fraternities and sororities. Those individuals who fought through microaggressions and stereotypes to become leaders, exerting their voice to make their member organization a safe place for other members who look like them.

I also dedicate this work to my late husband, Jay A. Milner, whom I lost in the second year of my doctoral program. Jay always pushed me outside my comfort zone; he never let me sit on the sidelines and always knew I could do this, even when I thought I could not.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The fraternity and sorority collegiate experience has been a long-standing tradition in the American college and university system since the founding of the first historically white fraternal organization, Phi Beta Kappa, in 1776 (Brown et al., 2005). Fraternities and sororities were created to cater to students' academic and social needs (Brown et al., 2005), replacing debate clubs and literary societies. Glorified for creating campus leaders who set the tone academically (Hughey, 2010), fraternities and sororities are revered for maintaining high scholastic values (Brown et al., 2005). Socially, they are known to create environments that promote brother and sisterhood, encourage individual excellence, develop leadership skills, and provide service to the campus and local community (Brown et al., 2005). Informally, fraternities and sororities have served as a "social vacuum" (Brown et al., 2005, p. 43), offering activities that allow members to party and network as a community (Brown et al., 2005).

From the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 to the late 1800s, fraternity members resembled the college and university student body -- white, homogenous males with ideals and beliefs of modern Protestant Christianity (Barone, 2014; Hughey, 2007). Considered distinguished gentlemen (Barone, 2014), these white Protestant fraternal members believed that establishing discriminatory policies around membership would allow them to maintain “both the tradition and restrictive systems of their social relations” (Hughey, 2014, p. 59). Syrett (2009) contended that:

> By the early 1900s, fraternities added exclusionary codes 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)

The discriminatory and exclusionary constitutional policies stemmed from Black students' acceptance to all-white colleges and universities (Hughey, 2007). This access increased Black student enrollment (Hughey, 2007), prompting historically white fraternal organizations to codify policies to intentionally exclude Black students from membership (Shelnutt, 2012; Torbenson & Parks, 2009).

In response to this exclusion, the early 20th century saw the establishment of historically Black fraternities and sororities (HBFS). These fraternal organizations would provide leadership, support, and a sense of community for Black students. The first of these organizations, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., was founded in 1906 at Cornell University to promote academic excellence, leadership and social activism (Alumni Association of Alpha Phi Alpha, 2009). Two years later, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., the first Black sorority, established at Howard University with a focus on sisterhood, service and scholarship (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., n.d). Over the next several decades, seven other Black Greek-letter organizations were founded, each with a unique mission but all focused on promoting brother/sisterhood, scholarship, community service, and leadership opportunities. Collectively, these organizations would become an important fraternal network, offering Black students' opportunities for personal development, leadership, and community engagement.

Colleges and universities took issue with the intentional establishment of discriminatory and exclusionary clauses, and around the 1950s, college and university administrators united in sending a clear message: any fraternal organization that failed to remove its restrictive policies that prohibited pledging Black students would lose its on-campus recognition (Syrett, 2009).

Higher education administrators' opposition to discriminatory and exclusionary policy mandates drew national attention, forcing inter/national organizations to take note (Barone, 2014). The issues of racial segregation in fraternal organizations gained support from the U.S. Supreme Court (Syrett, 2009). In Brown v. Board of Education, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation of public schools violated the 14th Amendment and, therefore, was unconstitutional, ultimately shifting the public's perception (Torbenson & Parks, 2009). The shift in public perception and enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "pushed organizations to integrate," ending racial segregation of membership within historically white fraternities and sororities (Barone, 2014, p. 4; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Even though lawfully racial desegregation ended, inter/national organizations still demanded that collegiate chapters possess whites-only policies (Syrett, 2009).

With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the removal of discriminatory policies, invitations to join historically white fraternities and sororities were extended to Black students at several institutions (Tillar, 1974). However, despite this progress, pushback by higher education administrators, coupled with the U.S. Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954, which declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional, continued to influence the dynamics of fraternal organizations. Even with these legal changes, fraternities and sororities continue to make headlines for racist antics, racially insensitive parties, and the use of inappropriate costumes that stereotype Black students (Pietsch, 2020; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Current, historically white fraternities and sorority members proclaim that racism and racial exclusion are still prevalent in member organizations' policies and structures (Robertson & Blinder, 2013). The persistent use of discriminatory practices by alumni has provoked current

members to advocate for change, citing the need for inclusivity and social interaction (Hogg, 2020).

Fed up, current and former members of historically white fraternities and sororities are examining issues that have been persistent yet ignored and shedding light on the behaviors within their chapters (Hogg, 2020). In 2018, a photograph surfaced showing a member of a historically white fraternity at California Polytechnic parading in blackface (Abusaid, 2019). The Lambda Chi Alpha chapter at the University of Georgia was suspended after screenshots of a group message emerged, revealing racist comments about a Black student (Petsch, 2020). At Vanderbilt University, a member of the Alpha Delta Pi chapter publicly mocked a Black student, suggesting she was not a suitable fit for the sorority (Cheek, 2020). “Additionally, at Iowa State University, the only Black member of the Sigma Kappa chapter reported experiencing racism when her sorority sisters held up a sign at an intramural game that read 'token,' using it in a derogatory manner to refer to her” (Skinner, 2021). Such repetitive insensitive racial events discredit any theories that inclusivity and social integration exist within historically white fraternities and sororities (Muir, 1991).

Black students' desire for social support, acceptance, and a sense of belonging can make them vulnerable to verbal, nonverbal, and visual insults resulting from isolation, racism, and racial microaggressions (Solorzano et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2008). Regardless of the vitriols experienced, seeking social standing through joining selective organizations is paramount to students’ collegiate experience (Harper et al., 2011). This desire is based on their ability to interact with students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2008), or arguably, the desire can be attributed to perceived privileges derived from membership, such as social and economic influence and employment opportunities (Hughley, 2007). Some Black

students may choose to affiliate with historically white fraternal organizations, despite the discrimination they may face, in part because of the higher social capital, networking opportunities, and status associated with these predominately white selective organizations. These students may believe that affiliation with a historically white fraternity or sorority offers access to influential social circles, career advancement, and economic privilege that might not be as readily available to historically Black fraternal organizations (Hughey, 2007). However, the challenges of exclusion persist, current fraternal members are vocalizing and exposing internal discriminatory practices (within their organizations) that they perceive as deterrents to further prevent Black students and other students of color from becoming members (Hogg, 2020). For example, members of Alpha Gamma Delta at the University of Alabama went on record challenging alumni who asserted it was policy and procedure with the inter/national offices that would not allow the chapter to offer a bid to a Black student who was a high school salutatorian with outstanding scores, from an influential family, and who possessed a fantastic resume (Crain & Ford, 2013). Similarly, members of the Chi Omega chapter at the same university contacted their member organizations inter/national office to request an investigation after the same Black student was dropped after the first round of recruitment (Crain & Ford, 2013). An anonymous source also stated that Alpha Gamma Delta, Chi Omega, and Pi Beta Phi were told their financial support would be cut off if they attempted to offer a bid to the same Black student (Crain & Ford, 2013). No longer intimidated by alumni, members of historically white fraternities, and sororities (HWFS) are exposing the racism and insensitive racial insults they feel are perpetuated by alumni and supported by local and inter/national fraternities and sororities (Cheek, 2020).

The establishment of the #AbolishGreekLife movement has motivated members (past and present) to use their voices to challenge the principles of inter/national fraternity and sorority

organizations (Hogg, 2020). Created by anonymous students at Vanderbilt University, the #AbolishGreekLife movement arose in the wake of the pandemic and on the heels of the murder of George Floyd (Hogg, 2020). HWFS members (past and present) began to question their commitment to organizations that support a fraternal system founded on the "absolute right to exclude," using elements of white privilege to (c)overtly suppress people of color (Harris et al., 2019, p.18). While also enabling behavior that condones racism, hazing violence, sexual assault, and elitism within the fraternal system (Dennon, 2021). White and Black members share how member organizations continue to build and maintain existence through and by exclusion (Harris et al., 2019); this includes stories of racism and internal communications intentionally concealed from the public (Hogg, 2020). Much like members who disaffiliated in the 1960s due to civil unrest, current HWFS members are disaffiliating from their member organizations because of the intolerable history; the racial interpersonal interactions that manifest as insults, jokes, or verbal racial microaggressions (Lewis et al., 2019); and the unwillingness of inter/national member organizations to reform internal practices to be more inclusive (Hogg, 2020), along with the lack of protection, accountability and support (for Black members) from white peers (Gamar, 2021). Hughey (2007) alleged that Black students who join historically white fraternities and sororities are often not recognized or treated as full members. Instead, Black members are often seen as "commodities that furnish the fraternal organizations with cultural creditability," inciting tokenism (Hughey, 2007, p. 55).

Studies show that student peer groups play a significant and influential role in a community's shared commitment (Strayhorn, 2019) and (in positive occurrences) contribute to establishing meaningful relationships. Additional research proclaims that a student of color's lack of connectedness is attributed to subtle and overt messages indicating that they do not belong in

specific environments (Lewis et al., 2019). However, Strayhorn (2019) contended that for African American men (in college), acceptance is based on their interactions with other students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and that heightened student engagement contributes to high levels of connectedness (Lewis et al., 2019).

Sense of Belonging

Acceptance is depicted by Strayhorn (2019) as a sense of belonging, a "feeling that members matter to one another and to a group, with a shared faith that the needs of members will be met through their shared commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Strayhorn (2012) emphasized that although student involvement is pivotal to establishing a sense of belonging, the belongingness of Black students is often vulnerable to harm due to racial stigmatization, racist stereotypes, and microaggressions (Strayhorn, 2012). Black students often report the pressure to conform to majority ideals is due to experiencing social isolation and alienation by white peers (McClure, 2006).

Sense of belonging refers to an individual's sense of identification or positioning to a group, and the primary sense of belonging (need) is to be around and accepted by those with common interests (Strayhorn, 2019). Black students seek out-of-class learning experiences and peer interaction for social integration and involvement (DeSousa & King,1992). The significance of a sense of belonging centers around a student's fundamental need to belong, and in turn, the organization serves an essential function, giving meaning and purpose to the existence of that student (Strayhorn, 2019). The need to connect increases the likelihood of the feeling of belonging in an atmosphere that otherwise could be considered foreign, unfamiliar, or unwelcoming (Strayhorn, 2019).

Maslow (1962) stated that an individual's desire to belong is a human motivator when the psychological and safety needs are satisfied. Studies show that Black students' collegiate experiences are plagued by social isolation, feelings of loneliness, and differential treatment (Carson, 2009). These elements, noted as stressors, contribute to poor psychological and academic outcomes for Black students (Carson, 2009). The decision made by Black students to join an HWFS is often fueled by peer pressure from friends who want to join or current members, a mutual interest with white fraternal members, the student's view of society (Chang, 1996), and the opportunities for post-graduation networking (Hughey, 2007, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Literature on the realities of the lived experiences of Black students in historically white fraternities and sororities is scarce. The "perspectives of nonwhite members who join historically white fraternities and sororities are often absent, resulting in an even greater marginalization of nonwhite voices" (Hughey, 2010, p. 654). Racial indifference and discrimination within historically white fraternities and sororities are indisputable (Hughey, 2007, 2010). The insensitive racial and cultural occurrences in the fraternal system have made it difficult for fraternities and sororities to promote the benefits and advantages of organizational membership (Muir, 1991). Events that challenge the inclusivity and social integration of historically white fraternities and sororities demystify any theories that suggest these groups are socially integrated and inclusive (Muir, 1991). Inconsiderate episodes and national organizations' lack of policy reform led students at Penn State, Tufts University, Duke University, and the University of Richmond to disaffiliate, protest, and support the #AbolishGreekLife movement (Hogg, 2020).

Hughey (2010) noted that fraternities and sororities set the tone for student engagement on college campuses. The acceptance of a Black student as a member of a historically white

fraternity or sorority could be transformative in owning past occurrences of hurt, creating reform that would target every area that served as a discriminatory or exclusionary practice (Hughey, 2010). Hughey (2007) implied that such a change would demonstrate what it means to be racially tolerant, accepting of integration, and understanding, and most importantly, it would suggest that the organization possesses an affirmation of positive social change. Unfortunately, there remains a significant gap in the literature on the experiences of Black or African American students who join historically white fraternities and sororities. Additionally, Hughey (2010) asserted that most research studies on historically white fraternities and sororities surround "nonracial issues" (p. 656) that focus on fraternal organizations' behavior or how diversity is used to give fraternal organizations credibility.

At California Polytechnic State University in 2018, pictures portraying a member from a historically white fraternity in blackface (Hughey et al., 2019) were taken and shared on social media. At the University of Southern Mississippi, a historically white sorority dressed up like the Huxtable family from the popular 1980s sitcom The Cosby Show (Ho, 2011). Consistent occurrences such as these validate the narrative that historically white fraternities and sororities serve as a refuge, a haven for traditional racism (Muir, 1991). In light of the continuous racial incidents that occur, one may question how Black students measure their sense of belonging while holding membership in a historically white fraternity or sorority.

Most research on HWFS focuses on substance misuse, sexual misconduct, hazing violence, and other behaviors of impropriety (Hughey, 2010). What seems trivialized (in student affairs literature) are (1) the voices of Black students who join historically white fraternities and sororities and (2) how Black students navigate the principle of belonging as (HWFS) members (Hughey, 2007). Present-day research falls short of exploring how Black students navigate their

desire to belong and the challenges they may face within HWFS. Further research is needed to explore and understand the impact of a sense of belonging on Black students' lived experience as members of HWFS.

This qualitative study will examine a sense of belonging specifically for Black college students who joined a historically white fraternity or sorority. This study seeks to understand a sense of belonging through the lived experiences of Black students as members of historically white fraternities and sororities.

Significance of the Study

As the #AbolishGreekLife movement continues to gain traction (Hogg, 2020), the demand to create meaningful change within fraternal organizations is paramount. Exploring a sense of belonging as it relates to Black students as members of HWFS opens a dialogue to address the repetitive, insensitive actions of their white fraternal peers. Hughey (2010) declared that it is vital to understand how Black students navigate the racial (color) line as members of historically white fraternities and sororities. Despite this importance, there seems to be very little research exploring Black students' lived experiences as members of HWFS. Hughey (2010) shared that most of the research on HWFS focuses on social and behavioral issues, such as sexual assault, rape (DeSantis, 2007), hazing, hazing-related deaths, alcoholism, and racial and gender discrimination (Banks & Archibald, 2020). Subsequent research on HWFS has included exploring "how contact with diversity influences the cognitive, educational, and co-curricular outcomes" of HWFS (Hughley, 2010, p. 654), and the impact diversity courses, and enrollment play in the positive interactions with nonwhite peers, contributing to increased levels of self-confidence, agency, and critical thinking skills (Laird, 2005).

Black students as members of HWFS are worthy of investigation (Hughey, 2007). Most research studies on Black students focus on how access, equity, preparation, continuation, engagement, and graduation influence their success (Doctor & Dunn, 2018). Some additional research on Black male college students has focused on a sense of belonging as a first-generation in historically white fraternities (Gibson, 2021), a sense of belonging as Black men at predominately white institutions (Strayhorn, 2012), and factors that impact Black male's decision to join HWF (Winkler, 2014). In contrast, studies on Black women as members of historically white sororities have centered on self-awareness, personal development, and how their gender or racial identity influences their interactions and social awareness (Thompson & Kostere, 2017). Additional research studies center around Black women's experiences in historically Black sororities at predominately white institutions (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014), Black women's experiences as a minority at a predominately white institution (PWI) as a member of a historically white sorority (Berris, 2015), Black women's academic success and sense of belonging in culturally based organizations at predominately white institutions (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014), and the intersection of Black women's identities (Porter et al., 2020).

Although much of the research on Black students in historically white fraternities and sororities focuses on either membership exclusion, social-behavioral issues, and the benefits of having Black students as members (Hughey, 2010), very little literature has been presented on the lived experience of Black students' sense of belonging as members of historically white fraternities and sororities.

Exploring the lived experiences of Black students provides an opportunity to understand the environment created by their HWFS member organizations.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore sense of belonging for Black college students who join historically white fraternities and sororities. The following questions will be used to guide this research:

1. What are the membership experiences of Black students who join historically white fraternities and sororities?
2. How do Black students experience a sense of belonging within their historically white fraternity or sorority?

Theoretical Frameworks

Strayhorn's work on a sense of belonging and critical race theory are the theoretical frameworks used to guide this study.

Sense of Belonging

Bollen and Hoyle (1990) defined a sense of belonging as one's identification or position in a group or collegiate community, which may yield an effective response. Hurtado and Carter (1997) described a sense of belonging as a psychological connection where peer acceptance and inclusion drive feelings of pleasure and contentment (as cited in Osterman, 2000). Strayhorn (2012) asserted that a student's desire to belong is a "basic human need" to be a part of a community; it is a desire to be connected and accepted, with the understanding that they matter to their social group (p. 18).

Peer groups are pivotal in developing belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). The establishment of belonging fosters a positive environment that influences academic success, retention, and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2009). The connections between student-to-faculty, student-to-peer, and student-classroom exchanges are essential to maintaining students' feelings of

belonging (Hoffman et al., 2003). However, being excluded and rejected leads to depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Hausmann et al., 2009). How students examine their positions within their social groups determines how the group perceives them (cognitive), impacting their behavior (affective) (Strayhorn, 2012). This understanding influences how students conceptualize the behavior that drives feelings of isolation, intimidation, and alienation (Strayhorn, 2012).

This study seeks to understand the perceptions of belonging related to Black students as members of historically white fraternities and sororities. Sense of Belonging is "a critical aspect in retaining all students, particularly students of color" (Maestas et al., 2007, p. 238). It has been used to explore how racial/ethnic minorities are affected by campus culture, racial climate, and its impact on students' persistence to graduation (Tovar & Simon, 2010). Strayhorn (2012) explains that belonging is guided by feeling valued, needed, and significant within a system or environment. Students who struggle with belonging are encouraged to seek membership in religious associations or fraternities/sororities, as members have a more robust sense of belonging than non-members (Strayhorn, 2012). Such involvement fosters interactions with diverse students, yielding positive associations with an increased sense of belonging (Tovar & Simon, 2010).

Research around a sense of belonging has explored college students' success, persistence, and how a sense of belonging affects academic, social, personal, psychological, cognitive, and structural variables (Tovar & Simon, 2010). Using a sense of belonging as a theoretical framework will help to explore members' perceptions surrounding their collegiate experience, their environment, feelings, lived experiences, and associations as a Black student in a historically white fraternity or sorority.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is a race-conscious tool that analyzes race and racism through various lenses. Scholars have used CRT as a framework and analytical tool to understand how racial stereotypes, cumulative racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate affect the experiences of students of color (Solórzano et al., 2000). This study uses CRT to examine and explore how the tenets of race and racism, whiteness, and colorblindness affect the lived experiences of Black students as members within historically white fraternities and sororities. I explore how the tenets of critical race theory show up and analyze what role (if any) it has on a student's need to be accepted, feel valued, and that they matter and belong within their organization. For this study, CRT can guide me in identifying whether race impacts or influences the lived experiences of Black students as they navigate their membership with their HWFS. CRT is used to understand the different experiences of Black and white students within the same organization (Givens, 2016).

Using a sense of belonging and critical race theory as guiding frameworks assists with understanding the lived experience of Black students as members of HWFS. Black students' experiences foster an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of how the tenets of race and racism, whiteness, and colorblindness manifest and are perceived and how they impact or influence their desire to belong. Additionally, the use of CRT can assist HWFS with dismantling internal systems that have historically been used to marginalize and oppress people of color within HWFS (Park, 2008).

Definition of Terms

- **Belonging** - a student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and essential to the group (Strayhorn, 2012).
- **Historically Black Greek-letter Organizations (HBGLO) or Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities (HBFS)** - are collegiate social organizations founded primarily to provide support, community, and leadership development for Black students in higher education, particularly during periods of systemic racism and exclusion from predominantly white institutions. These organizations promote academic excellence, community service, and cultural awareness among their members (Harrison, 2009).
- **Critical Race Theory (CRT)** – originated from legal studies, Critical Race Theory is a framework comprised of a group of concepts used to examine the relationship between race and the laws and various institutions. The concepts of CRT have been adapted and applied across a range of disciplines, including education, sociology, and political science where it is used to analyze and challenge how race and racism intersect with social, political, and institutional power (Gray, 2024).
- **Fraternal organization** - "plural" term used to describe an organization, social club, or fraternal order which can include a mix of male and female orders; more commonly referenced as either a fraternity or a sorority (Fraternity, 2024).
- **Historically White Fraternities/Sororities (HWFS)** - the term used to describe a private and selective social student organization found at North American colleges and universities – also referenced as Greek Life, whose membership is majority white males or white females, respectively (Fraternities and Sororities, 2024).

- **Inter/National Member Organization –** the governing body that oversees and provides guidance to all the campus-based chapters for a particular social fraternity or sorority, both within the United States and internationally. These organizations are responsible for setting policies, standards, and supporting chapter operations across various campuses (National Panhellenic Conference, 2024).
- **North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC)** – the association that represents 57 historically white male national and international fraternities (North American Interfraternity Conference, 2024).
- **National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC)** – the collaborative umbrella council that represents the nine historically African American fraternity and sorority member organizations, commonly referenced as the Divine Nine (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2024).
- **National Panhellenic Conference (NPC)** – the umbrella organization that advocates for and supports 26 national and international women's sororities for the advancement of the sorority experience (National Panhellenic Conference, 2024).

Overview of the Study

This study will be qualitative in design. I will use narrative inquiry to explore how Black students navigate and experience belonging in their historically white fraternity or sorority. Understanding how Black students navigate and experience sense of belonging in fraternal organizations is more than just a resource for organizations seeking change. It is critical for identifying and addressing the deeply rooted discriminatory and exclusionary practices that persist. Knowing that the desire to belong is a human motivator (Maslow, 1968), it is essential to understand how sense of belonging shapes the experiences of Black members in predominately

white organizations. Ultimately, this study aims to serve as a resource for fraternal organizations who want to be a catalyst for enacting meaningful change to eradicate hidden discriminatory and exclusionary policies and practices to ensure that every Black member (and members of other ethnicities) feel accepted in their historically white fraternal organization. In the following chapter, I review relevant literature on Black students' sense of belonging, the dynamics of historically white fraternities and sororities, and the experiences of Black students within these organizations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Predominantly white fraternities and sororities have long faced criticism for their members' behavior and selective membership policies, which have historically been linked to microaggressions, racist antics, and racially stereotypical behavior (Pietsch, 2020). Despite these issues fraternities and sororities remain central to campus life, offering a primary source of collegiate involvement, particularly for students who identify as Black or African American (Phillips et al., 2010). For many Black students, these organizations provide important opportunities for social engagement and connections. However, research shows that students who interact with peers from diverse backgrounds tend to have a stronger sense of belonging, which is key to feeling supported, accepted, and respected on campus (Maestas et al., 2007). In response to challenges of navigating predominately white social spaces, many Black students choose to join racial or ethnic student organizations out of a strong sense of self, purpose, and increased racial identity (Phillips et al., 2010). For Black women in particular, their decision to join a historically Black sorority if often driven by a desire for friendship, as well as the encouragement and influenced from family and friends (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014).

Nevertheless, some students who joined HWFS did so with the expectation that membership would help them build valuable social networks, both while in college and later, in terms of economic and employment opportunities (Hughey, 2007, p. 71). However, despite these potential benefits, research has shown that African American students often face negative racial stereotypes in these predominately white spaces, having a direct effect on how they make meaning of their sense of belonging. The lack of sense of belonging has been linked to increased

feelings of depression, anxiety, alienation, and loneliness (Boston & Warren, 2017), as students from marginalized backgrounds struggle to reconcile their identity in environments where they may experience elements of racism (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). In fact, research suggests that environments where discrimination historically has taken place have made students question their value and significance within these spaces (Boston & Warren, 2017). While Parker & Pascarella (2018) argue that diverse experiences can lead to positive outcomes, other studies, such as Martin et al. (2015), have found little evidence of a significant impact on students' intercultural competence. Hughey (2007), however, claimed that what is missing in the research of HWFS are the lived experiences of how non-white members function within their member organizations as fraternal insiders and racial outsiders. Similarly, Barone (2014) highlights the lack of research on how race and diversification affect the experiences of members within historically white fraternal organizations.

This literature review gives a historical overview of white fraternities and sororities and defines a sense of belonging. Additionally, this review will examine Black students' sense of belonging and identity and Black students as fraternal members of HWFS.

History of the American Fraternal System

The establishment of the American fraternal system can be traced back to the eighteenth century with the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 at the College of William and Mary (Kimbrough, 2012). Fraternities were created from the image of literary societies (Barone, 2014), described as small groups of self-selected collegians with principles and values independent of the college environment (Phillips et al., 2010). They sought to provide companionship through brotherhood and a social network of loyal, devoted friends with social capital that could benefit their future (Syrett, 2009). Fraternal men modeled themselves after Greeks and perceived

themselves as debaters of philosophy and literature (Syrett, 2009). They felt that using Greek letters as their member organization name would distinguish them from others, garnering prominence, and prestige (Syrett, 2009). Members committed their loyalty, secrecy, and support to their member organizations by establishing secret hand gestures, slogans, symbols, and passwords (Phillips et al., 2010). The development of fraternal organizations permitted a close association with like-minded college individuals, provided activities for students, and sought to correct the wrongs of college administrators (Brown et al., 2005). As fraternal organizations gained popularity, fraternities created constitutions to ensure members understood that their purpose was to maintain their principles focused on education and brotherhood (Syrett, 2009). This change determined what many fraternal organizations would mandate in their constitutions (Syrett, 2009).

The end of the nineteenth century brought about change as women, Black students, Jews, and Catholics gained acceptance into historically white colleges (Syrett, 2009). Predominantly male institutions sought to become co-educational in response to the growing acceptance of female students (Brown et al., 2005). Although women were not banned from joining fraternal organizations, accounts of women as actual fraternal members are scarce (Brown et al., 2005). Even though attempts were made to give women minimal membership status (Brown et al., 2005), women opted to create their own fraternal organizations with similar activities and opportunities (Freeman, 2020). The first women's organizations, Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu, were founded between 1851 and 1852 as women’s fraternities. The first women's organization to use Greek letters was Kappa Alpha Theta, founded by Bettie Locke in 1870 (Brown et al., 2005). The first organization recognized and would coin the term sorority was Gamma Phi Beta in 1874 (Brown et al., 2005).

Expanding beyond the campuses where they were founded, sorority chapters were established only at institutions with students of high scholastic standing who possessed a particular cultural and financial quality (Freeman, 2020). However, the surge in female enrollment and the rapid expansion of new student chapters put a strain on colleges and universities. They faced challenges in managing administrative services, including facilities and resources, student support services, cultural and social adjustments, and equity and inclusion issues, which they were not fully prepared to address (Brown et al., 2005). Sororities organized and created the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) in 1902 as its fraternal system umbrella organization (Freeman, 2020). These organizations would fashion themselves from the philosophy of the antebellum South, denoting young women as white elite southern belles, "physically attractive, superficially polite; a traditionally minded white woman" (Freeman, 2020, p. 22). The popularity of sororities made higher education acceptable for middle-and-upper class white college women, as it stressed how educated women would be better prepared for a conservative homemaking family life with their white fraternity peers (Freeman, 2020).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 allowed Black students to seek membership in white fraternal organizations, marking a significant shift in higher education (Wallenstein, 2009). However, despite these legal changes, Black students still faced significant barriers to join these organizations. In response to this exclusion from predominately white fraternities and sororities, historically Black fraternities and sororities were established to provide Black students with crucial spaces for cultural, political and social support (Freeman, 2020). The first historically Black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., was founded in 1906 at Cornel University, followed by the establishment of the first Black sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. in 1908 (Harris, 2009). Over the following decades, seven

more historically Black fraternal organizations were founded (Harris, 2009; Williams & McClendon, 2011).

At the same time sorority recruitment began to come under increased scrutiny as discriminatory practices were called into question. Leaders of the NPC feared their right to associate and select members was at risk with the integration of African Americans (Freeman, 2020), leading NPC to adopt a more conservative agenda. The NPC used appeals for freedom and association to maintain racial segregation, to ensure membership within their chapters remained exclusively white (Freeman, 2020). Although there were no written provisions within the sorority constitution that explicitly banned membership to people of color, members declared it to be an unwritten rule that was enforced, as demonstrated by their unwillingness to initiate a Negro student (Freeman, 2020).

The enrollment surge of Black students and women on college campuses prompted white fraternities to establish exclusionary clauses to preserve their standing (Syrett, 2009). Fraternal organizations feared that if not explicitly stated, chapters would initiate unsuitable members (Barone, 2014; Syrett, 2009). Adopting white clauses into fraternal constitutions began in the early 20th century, as fraternal organizations sough to preserve their racial and religious homogeneity (Barone, 2014; Syrett, 2009). These clauses ensured that fraternal organizations adhered to white Christian values (Barone, 2014). The white clause stated that membership would be restricted only to Caucasian men whose morals and views aligned with other Christians (Barone, 2014). The white clause sought to exclude students based on race, gender, and religion (Lee, 1955), sustaining a segregated environment (Joyce, 2018). Maintaining a segregated environment promoted an ideology of practices and policies that fought against integrating

minority students into fraternal organizations (Lee, 1955). National organizations threatened to suspend chapters that failed to enforce exclusionary clauses (Lee, 1955).

Scholars and activists strongly opposed the white exclusionary clause (Barone, 2014). National sororities did not explicitly confess to having exclusionary clauses, but instead claimed to use a reference system. Freeman asserts that "reference systems helped sororities avoid the pledging of undesirable white rushees over the years; it could also aid sororities attempting to keep Black women out of their chapters" (Freeman, 2020, p. 172). Similarly, fraternity members debated whether having a Black pledge would discourage white Southern boys from wanting to become members (Barone, 2014). Sigma Chi, the first fraternal organization to have the white clauses publicly referenced in its constitution (Barone, 2014), made national news in 1961 when it suspended the charter of its Sanford University chapter for pledging a Black student (Syrett, 2009; Tobenson & Parks, 2009).

The fraternal system encouraged organizational and individual conformity and penalized member organizations for not obeying exclusionary practices (Lee, 1955). In the early to mid 1950s faculty members from various universities united to establish the National Committee on Fraternities in Education to explore the importance of eliminating discriminatory practices within social organizations (Lee, 1955). In 1958, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a ban at the State University of New York that denied recognition to any fraternity or sorority restricting membership based on race or religion (Barone, 2014). Legal counsel recommended eliminating any constitutional stipulations that hampered the acceptance of individuals based on race (Hughey, 2007). As a result, colleges sought clarity on nondiscrimination policies within fraternal organizations (Lee, 1954). On March 5, 1965, The University of North Carolina Faculty Council unanimously passed a resolution to end discriminatory clauses in fraternal organizations

(Freeman, 2020). In solidarity, university faculty joined administrators in opposition to the fraternal system (Barone, 2014). Institutions took a hard stance on organizations that continued to maintain exclusionary clauses. Four fraternal organizations were forced to disaffiliate from their national organization to align themselves with the university nondiscrimination policy (Lee, 1955). National fraternity and sorority leaders had until September 1, 1966, to remove all national and local discriminatory clauses, and to confirm that their constitutional policies did not bar chapters from accepting Black students as members (Freeman, 2020).

Although racial discrimination clauses were reportedly abolished in the 1960s, their removal did not actively encourage integration (Lee, 1955). Historical records from a fraternity convention revealed a gentlemen's agreement to publicly promote integration while, in practice, continuing to exclude students of color from membership (Barone, 2014). Member organizations were instructed to continue using discriminatory practices to deny membership to Black students (Joyce, 2017). Although college campuses have seen an increase in the diverse makeup of their student body, HWFS has continuously remained predominantly white (Hughey, 2010). Despite removing discriminatory clauses, discrimination and racism have been a persistent issue in HWFS (Muir, 1991).

Black Greek-Letter Organizations

Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) emerged during a pivotal period in American history, particularly in the early 20th century, as African Americans faced rampant discrimination and systemic segregation. The first of these organizations, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., was founded in 1906 at Cornell University. In response to the exclusionary practices of HWFS, which often banned Black students from membership, BGLOs sought to create supportive communities that fostered leadership, academic excellence, and service. These organizations not

only filled the void left by predominantly white institutions but also aimed to empower Black students within the academic landscape that often marginalized them (Harrison, 2009; Williams, 2010).

The struggle for civil rights during this era highlighted the need for spaces where Black students could cultivate their identities and forge meaningful connections. BGLOs emerged as essential support systems, providing mentorship and a sense of belonging that was frequently absent in the broader university environment (Berris, 2015; Strayhorn, 2013). As HWFS organizations were predominantly white and aligned with the societal norms of the time, they maintained practices that reinforced racial exclusion, further underscoring the need for BGLOs (Miller, 2016).

The formation of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) in 1930 was a significant milestone. It provided a unified platform for the nine historically Black Greek-letter organizations, allowing them to collaborate and collectively address the challenges of race, equity, and inclusion in higher education (Harbin, 2019; Hoffman, 2006). The NPHC facilitated advocacy for social justice and support for Black students navigating predominantly white campuses, thus amplifying the voice and influence of BGLOs in a landscape that had long marginalized their existence. Through their establishment and continued evolution, BGLOs have played a crucial role in fostering community, leadership, and social change among Black students in higher education.

However, some Black students have chosen to join HWFS over BGLOs, motivated by factors such as social capital, networking opportunities, and aspirations for greater visibility within predominantly white institutions. Research suggests that the desire for integration and acceptance within a predominantly white campus culture often influences these decisions, as

Black students may perceive HWFS as offering broader social connections (Carter, 2008; Miller, 2016). This dynamic underscore the complexities that Black students navigate when considering their affiliations, reflecting ongoing tensions between cultural identity and social aspiration (Harrison, 2009).

Sense of Belonging

Students' sense of belonging has been acknowledged as the benchmark for measuring success, engagement, and well-being (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). A sense of belonging is essential to understanding how group norms, values, and characteristics are perceived (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) and reciprocated through daily peer interactions (Smiley, 2021). Students navigate college maneuvering through welcomed and unwelcomed campus environments, engaging in curricular and co-curricular activities, and building relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff (Vaccaro & Newman, 2022). The definition and use of 'belonging' or 'sense of belonging' can vary significantly, affecting how it develops and influences the collegiate experience. The term sense of belonging is defined in several ways. Osterman (2000) denoted a sense of belonging to be "a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to being together" (p. 9). Hurtado and Carter (1997) affirmed that a sense of belonging is a psychological connection to feeling valued, needed, and significant within one's environment. Vaccaro and Newman (2022) described a sense of belonging as a developmental process entrenched in a student's basic human need for safety, respect, and the security of acceptance that is motivated by a perception of social support, connectedness, and an experience that fosters acceptance, respect, importance, and value.

Maslow (1962) proposed that the need for knowledge, understanding, and self-actualization serves as a foundation for belonging, suggesting that college students must satisfy

their desire to belong before progressing towards higher-level personal and academic aspirations. Student involvement connects students to student groups, the institution, and the community, thus influencing a student's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Student connection is developed through group membership, which is seen as a personal investment that implies one has the right to belong (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Students' personal investment is advanced through group cohesion, strengthening the emotional connection to the group, making it more meaningful and valuable (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This connection provides students with emotional safety and a sense of identity in their community (Museus et al., 2018). Community, as defined by McMillan & Chavis (1986), is referenced as membership, influence, integration, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. As a community member, a student's desire to feel cared for, valued, and supported is predicated by behavior and amplified by individual and group actions, impacting how they create bonds and build trust and friendships (Strayhorn, 2012). Students who use membership (within various peer groups) meet their belonging needs through specific activities that promote greater group cohesion (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). A research study by Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students who join fraternal organizations, student government, or athletic groups have a stronger sense of belonging than non-members.

Students with a strong sense of belonging possess high academic self-confidence, adjust better to their collegiate experience, and are more engaged in campus life (Freeman et al., 2007). These students seek a sense of belonging for the personal and social opportunities derived from group dynamics (Fouts, 2010). Webber et al. (2013) affirmed that students who engage in higher levels of social and academic activities are more satisfied with their college experiences.

Although research shows that a sense of belonging is crucial for student engagement, Osterman (2000) argued that it is not necessary for achievement or engagement itself. He suggested that a sense of belonging serves as a reward and that individuals' emotional and personal needs are typically fulfilled at home or outside the classroom. Most research on a sense of belonging examines how social groups, retention, and persistence affect students who are valued and accepted at academic institutions (Haslam et al., 2016). However, there is limited research on how a sense of belonging impacts historically marginalized racial groups, especially in terms of meeting their members' emotional and developmental needs (Carson, 2009).

Sense of Belonging, Black Students, and Identity

Student involvement is a best practice that serves as a connector for engagement among students across varied races, ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds (Davonport & Lane, 2006; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Jones, 2001; Strayhorn, 2008). A student's social identity is linked to their sense of belonging and influences the campus environment, their involvement in curricular and co-curricular activities, and relationships with peers and educators (Vaccaro & Newman, 2022). A sense of belonging is referenced as an individual's social connection, sense of community, and support gained from social group membership (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The connection to the community and racial group is fueled by a desire to belong and conceptualized by the perception of reciprocity (Hunter et al., 2019).

Sense of belonging is a tool that is a critical factor in advancing racial identity and enhancing life satisfaction among African Americans (Yap et al., 2011). Research has explored this concept to improve psychological well-being and to assess Black college students' connection to their racial group (Hunter et al., 2014). Black scholars argue that identity literature still has a way to go in adequately addressing the complexities of racial identities (Crenshaw,

2020) and focusing on how white and racialized identities are understood and impact concepts of belonging (Helms, 2017). Because Black racial identity models rely on self-reported evaluations and ideological assumptions about group membership, they provide only a limited understanding of belonging (Neville et al., 2014). Studies show that a strong sense of belonging is critical to retaining students of color and positively affects student behavior and mental well-being (Maestas et al., 2017; Museus et al., 2018).

Black students who struggle with finding a sense of belonging will leave their institution (Strayhorn, 2012) if they feel uncertain about belonging. Strayhorn (2012) wrote, "If African American students perceive the university to be racist, then those feelings can cause them to either transfer, drop out, or continue their education with a chip on their shoulders prohibiting academic growth" (p. 307). For Black students, a sense of belonging materializes when their personal needs align with a larger group (Hunter & Joseph, 2009). Forming connections and developing a sense of belonging is a critical first step toward completing college and narrowing the achievement gap (Vance, 2019). The success of Black students depends on their adjustment to their social environment (Schwitzer et al., 1999) and positive peer interaction (Johnson et al., 2007).

Black Students and the Historically White Fraternal System

Most social fraternities and sororities were established when Black students could not attend historically white colleges and universities (Phillips et al., 2010). The Civil Rights Movement marked the era of desegregation; Black students gained entrance into historically white colleges and universities (Barone, 2014; Syrett, 2009). This enrollment surge initiated the white clause that restricted membership in fraternal organizations to Caucasian men with Christian values (Barone, 2014). Fraternal organizations fought to maintain a segregated

environment through internal policies and practices (Lee, 1955). The segregated environment perpetuated discrimination by recruiting students with high levels of prejudice, reinforcing discriminatory norms and practices (Freeman, 2020). Although no written provisions prohibited membership of people of color (Freeman, 2020), stereotypes and bias have been noted as a factor that has prevented minority students from receiving an invitation for membership (Salinas et al., 2019). Muir (1991) conducted a deep-South study on college campuses and found compelling evidence to support the claim that white Greek social organizations showed less interest in Black students than their non-Greek peers, or students who are members of other clubs and organizations. The study further revealed that, compared to non-Greek individuals, fraternities and sororities exhibited higher levels of racial bias, including negative stereotypes and prejudices towards Black individuals. These findings underscore the prevalence of harmful racial biases within Greek social organizations. (Muir, 1991).

Today, many historically white fraternities and sororities continue to face scruitny for racially insensitive behavior, such as hosting parties where members engage in offensive acts like wearing blackface. These incidents highlight ongoing racist and stereotypical behavior that perpetuates everyday discriminatory practices, policies, and attitudes (Joyce, 2018).

Gaps in the Literature

Historically, white fraternities and sororities (HWFS) have been less welcoming to students of color, with members often holding stereotypes about Black students (Muir, 1991). Issues like racial segregation within these organizations and threats from alumni against accepting Black members persist (Hogg, 2020; Joyce, 2018). Although some efforts have been made to address diversity through a color-blind approach in recruitment (Joyce, 2018), racial biases and segregation remain significant challenges.

Current research predominantly addresses historical legacies and issues such as substance abuse and misconduct but lacks a detailed exploration of racial dynamics and the experiences of Black members. The literature also points out that stereotypes and biases in recruitment contribute to the underrepresentation of minorities but does not deeply analyze how these factors affect membership decisions (Anderson, 2007; Salinas et al., 2019).

Overall, while current literature covers various issues related to HWFS, including their historical context and social problems, it falls short in exploring the racial dynamics and the impact on Black students' lived experiences as members of historically white fraternities and sororities. Additionally, the literature also provides limited strategies for improving inclusivity and addressing racism within HWFS (Hughey, 2007; Park, 2014).

Lack of In-Depth Examination of Racial Dynamics

Historically, white fraternities and sororities are noted as traditionally less accepting of students of color (Muir, 1991). Past studies on race and racial attitudes shared how white fraternity and sorority members were more likely to possess stereotypes of Black students than their peers (Muir, 1991). Joyce (2018) suggested in one interview that Black students were blamed for the lack of integration within these organizations, overlooking the systemic and institutional barriers that contribute to their exclusion. Similarly, Schmitz and Forbes (1994) highlighted how these barriers perpetuate exclusionary practices, reinforcing the marginalization of Black students. However, a study on race and fit in the fraternal recruitment process revealed that fraternal organizations leaned towards a color-blind approach, choosing to eliminate the lack of diversity and placing a deeper emphasis on the qualities and characteristics of an individual (Joyce, 2018). However, a published article referenced how sorority members at the University of Alabama spoke out against alumni for threatening to pull financial backing if they offered a

bid to a Black female student (Hogg, 2020). Findings from a study on fit in the recruitment process found that there is work to do to disrupt the significance of whiteness within the fabric of campus culture (Joyce, 2018). The study further revealed a greater need to understand how diversity impacts the interaction of fraternity and sorority members and their level of racial consciousness when deciding who is fit to become a member (Joyce, 2018).

Scholars debate whether the lack of openness to diversity and the level of diverse interaction and friendship with peers from different races affects fraternity and sorority involvement (Joyce, 2018). Yet, Martin et al. (2015) argued that in comparison to non-fraternal peers, participation in fraternal organizations has not positively or negatively impacted their cultural interactions for the students in the Wabash National Study.

Currently, most research studies on HWFS focus on the historical legacy of the organization, concerns of alcohol and substance misuse, sexual misconduct, hazing, and the inequality of resources among student groups (Hughey, 2010). The present literature on fraternities and sororities lacks an in-depth examination of the racial dynamics within the recruitment processes, policies, and social experiences of Black members in these organizations. The gap in the literature fails to explore how racial minorities navigate their roles as fraternal insiders and racial outsiders and the challenges faced within HWFS.

The Role of Stereotypes and Bias

Research on membership within fraternities and sororities has historically focused on constitutional stipulations denying membership based on race, gender, and religion (Hughey, 2010). Present-day college campuses with a large fraternity and sorority presence have seen increased racial bias and hate crimes reported (Joyce, 2018; Van Dyke & Tester, 2014). Scholars argue that white fraternal organizations have played a negative role in racial relations on college

campuses, with racist-themed parties and accounts of white fraternity and sorority members dressing in blackface (Ho, 2011; Hughey, 2010). Studies show that Black students at PWIs are more likely than their non-Black peers to report experiences of racism and microaggressions (Griffith et al., 2019). In a survey conducted by The American Council of Education (ACE), 60% of Black students reported experiencing racial bias or discrimination on their campuses, which included both overt racism and more subtle forms of discrimination. At the same time, Black female students must challenge Black woman stereotypes that depict them as loud, difficult, and boisterous (Haynes, 2019).

The recruitment process of historically white fraternities and sororities is often criticized by scholars, activists, and students for being a mechanism of exclusion and oppression for students of color. This criticism stems from the fact that the process frequently involves stereotypes and unconscious biases that negatively impact minority students. Studies, such as those by Salinas et al. (2019), highlight how these biases and stereotypes operate within the recruitment process, showing that they are significant barriers to the inclusion of minority students.

Qualitative research on contemporary fraternity recruitment practices, such as Anderson's (2007) study, provides insight into these dynamics. Anderson's research found that while some fraternities have made efforts to increase diversity, this change does not always result in a more inclusive organizational culture. Persistent biases and the need for broader systemic reforms remain major challenges.

Current literature acknowledges that stereotypes and biases hinder minority students' chances of receiving membership invitations. However, it often falls short of deeply examining how these factors operate within historically white fraternities and sororities. Understanding

these mechanisms is crucial for effectively addressing the issues of exclusion and bias in the recruitment process.

Limited Focus on Strategies for Inclusivity and Change

Historically, white fraternities and sororities have established themselves as elite and exclusive on college campuses (Hughey, 2007). Despite criticism for their exclusivity, recent research highlights that fraternal organizations continue to take a passive approach to diversity. These organizations neither actively promote nor oppose diversity, often failing to recognize the value of creating inclusive environments (Garcia, 2019; Joyce, 2018). This passive stance has contributed to fraternities and sororities maintaining some of the lowest levels of diversity on college campuses, with members being among the least likely to form close friendships across racial lines (Griffith et al., 2019).

Studies that have examined whiteness's impact on the fit within the recruitment process found that race and racial attitudes were minimized through color-blindness, thus normalizing the element of whiteness (Joyce, 2018). Such studies cause students of color to perceive fraternities and sororities as more (visibly) white and less inclusive, thus leaving a feeling that they are not welcomed (Garcia, 2019). Comparatively, the lack of a distinct emphasis on recruiting students of color and the disregard for diversity, in general, has left fraternal organizations as predominantly white (Joyce, 2018).

The literature discusses the problems within HWFS but needs to offer comprehensive solutions or strategies for fostering inclusivity, diversity, and equity within these organizations. Future research could explore effective interventions and practices for addressing racism and discrimination in HWFS.

Chapter Summary

Sense of belonging is a tool used to measure acceptance, fit, and mattering (Strayhorn, 2012). It is further used to examine students' mental well-being and gauge their social involvement. Scholars argue that student achievement is based on a student's emotional and behavioral engagement (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). Engaged and socially connected students are more committed to their social groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Fraternity and sorority members have self-reported having greater satisfaction with their collegiate experience than non-members (Charles et al., 2009). Yet, these homogenous social groups do not encourage their members to embrace opportunities to fellowship with students from diverse backgrounds or support diverse learning (Walker et al., 2015). Participation in fraternities and sororities can promote active student engagement and campus involvement (Walker et al., 2015). The chance to connect to the organization fosters a sense of identity, strengthening their emotional connection and impacting a student's sense of belonging (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). Black students who feel marginalized or oppressed may engage in student activities but are often not socially integrated (Pike, 2000), and a sense of belonging is paramount in aiding students in their engagement with their campus environment (Strayhorn, 2012).

Present-day literature speaks to historical aspects of HWFS, social issues that plague these organizations, the relevance fraternal organizations bring to a college campus, and the influence their presence has on the establishment of campus culture. However, the literature lacks a deep dive into the racial dynamics that impact or influence Black students' experience as fraternal insiders and racial outsiders within these HWFS. The literature speaks of the depth fraternal organizations endured to ensure their organizations stayed white. Yet, the literature does not thoroughly examine how stereotypes and biases may have contributed to the recruitment

experience of Black students. Lastly, the literature provides a thorough narrative of the problems within HWFS, yet research on strategies that offer opportunities for improvement and change is scarce.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative narrative research study is focused on understanding the perceptions of belonging for Black undergraduate students who join historically white fraternities and sororities. Using critical theory as a research paradigm assisted with understanding how historical forces influenced an individual's lived experience and challenged the dominant ideology (Jones et al., 2014). The use of critical race theory and sense of belonging as the theoretical framework provided an opportunity to critique dominant ideologies, understand racial dynamics and power structures, and explore the perception and the lived experiences of Black students who joined one of the 26 historically white sororities within the National Panhellenic Council (NPC) or one of the 56 historically white fraternities within the National Interfraternity Council (NIC) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995: Strayhorn, 2019).

In this chapter, I presented the questions used to guide the study, detailed my research paradigm, and described the theoretical framework used to inform and guide the research. I specified the research design, methodology, data collection, and analysis, presented my positionality as the researcher, and discussed how I ensured trustworthiness in the research.

The following questions were used to guide the research for this study:

1. What are the experiences of Black students who join historically white fraternities and sororities?
2. How do these experiences impact Black students' sense of belonging within their historically white fraternity and sorority?

Research Paradigm

Research paradigms serve as guidelines that help shape our opinions and responses to set outcomes. Using a critical paradigm allowed me, as the researcher, to confront the belief system (Jones et al., 2014) surrounding historically white fraternities and sororities. "The main purpose behind an ideology is to offer change in society through a normative thought process" (Asghar, 2013, p. 4).

For the purpose of this study, a critical paradigm is used to understand the power relations and interactions of race (Asghar, 2013), as well as to critique the values and practices used to influence the suppressed class (Asghar, 2013), Black members in historically white fraternities and sororities. The critical paradigm allowed the researcher to explore the problem, address what is wrong with the status quo, identify methods and techniques used to assert change, and present clear standards that address the "criticism and transformation" (Asghar, 2013, p. 3).

Critical Race Theory

For the purpose of this study, the five tenets of critical race theory (CRT) were used as a race-conscious guide that examined the perception of race and racism through the narrative voices of Black students who joined historically white fraternities and sororities.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), as defined by Ladson-Billings (1998), is described as an instrument that provides students with a voice that allows them to identify and name their own reality (p.13). The first tenet of CRT declares that legalized racism is a normal everyday occurrence where the use of "racial epithets" may not be heard, but the policies and procedures that contribute to exclusionary and discriminatory actions are inherently ingrained in institutions and organizations (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 173). Discriminatory clauses guided the governing

policies and practices of fraternal organizations and served as symbols to deter Black students from becoming members (Barone, 2014). White fraternities and sororities, historically, have functioned as safe havens, supporting traditional racism (Muir, 1991).

Fraternal organizations "set the tone" on college campuses, and participation as a member is considered an essential part of the traditional collegiate experience (Hughey, 2010, p. 653). The second CRT tenet implies that white people only support racial progress when it benefits their self-interest (Jones & Abes, 2013), a concept known as interest convergence. Non-white members accepted into historically white fraternal organizations are often not perceived as full members (Thompson, 2000). They are referenced as "tokens, symbols of commodity that provide the fraternal organization with cultural credibility" (Hughey, 2007, p. 55).

Social construct is the third tenet. Social construct reflects how race is experienced over time in various ways (Jones & Abes, 2013). Social construct looks at the challenge of the dominant cultures' ideology of whiteness as property and their unwillingness to sacrifice white privilege (Jones et al., 2014). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argued that race does not match a biological or genetic reality. Race is touted as products, categories that are not objective, inherent, or fixed. Instead, they are outcomes and elements of manipulations created by society for their self-interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The fourth tenet of critical race theory uses narratives, historical context, and storytelling to unpack and understand the consistent structures of racial inequalities (Jones et al., 2014). The ability to accept the lived experiences of Black fraternity and sorority members and their histories is "legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). The use of counternarratives gives a voice to the impact and disadvantages of racism while also responding to conflicting racial

narratives by white peers (Patton et al., 2016). Counter-narratives demonstrate the effect race has on the educational experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) of Black fraternity and sorority members.

The final CRT tenet is intersectionality. This tenet accepts the need for intersectional analysis and action and critiques liberalism and the narrative of racial progress (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This tenet recognizes other uniqueness attributed to experiences of privilege and oppression (Poole et al., 2020). Examining how social identities intersect with race is important because "no person has a stable and fixed, unitary identity, rather various social identities that form the basis of one's identity" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 177). Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Jones & Abes, 2013). As a tenet, intersectionality identifies how social constructs alter how race and racism are defined, encountered, and personalized (Poole et al., 2020).

Racism is both an institutional practice and a system, encompassing a range of acts, behaviors, and attitudes deeply embedded in society (Jones & Abes, 2013). In this study, CRT was used to explore the widespread belief that students feel a sense of belonging on college campuses, despite prevailing notions of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and inclusion (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). There is limited research that explores the impact on Black students lived experiences in historically white fraternities and sororities. This study utilized CRT to pinpoint and focus on individual-specific experiences using narratives to better understand Black fraternity and sorority members' viewpoints as members of historically white fraternities and sororities.

Sense of Belonging

Strayhorn (2019, 2022) defined a sense of belonging as a basic human need to belong that is universal to an individual's ability to engage and adapt to an environment. More specifically, a sense of belonging serves as a need for students to connect, be around, and be accepted by peers with common interests (Strayhorn, 2019). This study explored the existence of belonging for Black students as members of a historically white fraternity or sorority.

Belonging is achieved when four conditions are consistently met: (a) the outcomes of mattering, (b) the intersection of social identities, (c) the display of positive outcomes, and (d) the relevance of context and timing (Strayhorn, 2019). The result of mattering reflects a "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.3). A student's need to belong compels them to pursue opportunities for membership within a fraternity or sorority. Even though belonging is the fundamental motive that drives a student's behavior to seek membership within a fraternity or sorority, that yearning (to belong) is subject to change or be amplified based on a student's vulnerability to alienation, social isolation, or rejection (Strayhorn, 2019).

A student's need to belong is a human motivator when their mental and emotional well-being demands are fulfilled (Maslow, 1998). Black students join historically white fraternities and sororities to satisfy their need to be involved in student life (Hughey, 2010). According to Strayhorn (2022), for Black students, racial stigmatization, stereotypes, and microaggressions are often the outcomes experienced from the desire to belong. Carson (2009) described the lived experiences of Black students as a stressor that contributes to poor psychological outcomes inundated by social isolation, loneliness, and unfair treatment. Black students experience

struggles at a greater capacity than their white counterparts, affecting their sense of belonging (Hunn, 2014).

Previous empirical research has traditionally viewed a sense of belonging as a universal construct that influences students' educational experiences equally, regardless of their racial backgrounds (Boston & Warren, 2017). However, more recent studies indicate that the concept of belonging holds different meanings for urban African American students, particularly in contexts where negative racial stereotypes are prevalent. These studies emphasize the complex and nuanced nature of their social and academic experiences (Nobles & McGruder, 2018). For Black students, key components of a sense of belonging include respect and safety (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Marginalized individuals often face uncertainty about their value in dominant settings, where historical experiences of discrimination persist (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

Recent research further supports these findings, highlighting how stereotype threat and racial climate impact the sense of belonging among African American students. Pérez and Fortuna (2021) explore how stereotype threat affects these students and stress the need for supportive environments. McGee and Martin (2022) examine the intersection of racial identity and academic belonging, revealing how institutional support and racial stereotypes shape students' experiences. Additionally, Thomas and Park (2023) investigate the influence of racial climate on campus experiences, underscoring the significance of a respectful and safe environment. Williams and Johnson (2023) also highlight that respect and safety are crucial in fostering belonging for Black students at predominantly white institutions. These recent studies underscore the ongoing need to address the specific challenges faced by marginalized students in higher education settings.

For this study, Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging served as a comprehensive framework for understanding belonging as a dynamic and relational method that is deeply influenced by social interactions and institutional contexts. The use of this framework fostered an opportunity to explore and understand the specific needs and challenges faced by different groups and allowed the exploration of how to address these within educational settings to ensure equitable experiences for all students.

Research Design

In this section, I used a narrative inquiry as the chosen methodology for this research study. I shared my research design, including an overview of narrative inquiry, my position as the researcher, my research participants, and my data collection and analysis plan. Also included how I planned to ensure trustworthiness in this research.

Narrative Inquiry

A narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to understand and learn more about the lived experiences of the individuals specific to the research. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain that a narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that investigates past and existing stories of individuals, enhancing our perception of peoples' experiences. Narrative inquiry presents research inquiry as a free-flowing method, allowing all participants to have a voice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Additionally, narrative inquiries accept that multiple perspectives are reported and shared in various ways. These lived and living experiences manifest into pictures, rituals, ceremonial events, cultural artifacts, and other objects that contribute to feelings and actions with symbolic meaning (Creswell, 2013). Conducting a narrative research study provided an opportunity to explore the existence of racial discrimination and oppression from a

social, cultural, and historical lens (Jones & Abes, 2013), while identifying the direct or indirect ways the lenses impacted the lived experiences of Black fraternity and sorority members.

A qualitative narrative research study offered the best opportunity to understand the continuity and interaction that promoted the narrative viewpoint of lived experiences that contributed to Black students' sense of belonging in historically white fraternities and sororities. Using a narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to understand better how the past and present of an individual's relational, personal, and social experiences are carried into future experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

In this study, the information shared by the participants guided the direction of this research. Because the researcher and the individuals specific to the research are shaping the direction of the study, it is important for me as the researcher to explore my subjectivity and positionality.

Subjectivity and Positionality

I am a Black woman student affairs professional with over 20 years of higher education experience at a predominately white institution. I am a sorority woman with sixteen years of membership in a historically Black sorority. I am also a widow and single mother to two Black boys. In my current role, I serve as Director for Fraternity & Sorority Life, at a public liberal arts institution, where most of the fraternal community are members of historically white member organizations that fall under the Interfraternity Council and College Panhellenic Council. As a woman, a Black woman, student affairs professional, and advisor, I am acutely aware of how my Blackness is indirectly challenged by conservative statements, viewpoints, and images often displayed by the members of these organizations. The decisions made (by a Black woman) for a

very homogenous white elite community are constantly challenged by volunteer advisors, parents, and students.

This research is personal as I struggle with my sense of belonging in an extremely white profession, where I sometimes feel my voice is silenced, my professionalism is question, and my leadership is challenged mostly by white peers.

In speaking to Black students who are members of some of the historically white fraternal organizations I have advised, I found it essential for students (in member organizations) to learn their influence in setting the tone within their organization and throughout campus. Historically, some of my white students have shared how oblivious they are to the microaggressions and stereotypical behavior they display toward their Black members. As a professional, I can relate to the experience of many of the students. It is difficult to overcome stereotypical narratives that label you a bully, angry, or incompetent because you do not belong to a historically white organization. Of all the identities I wear, those individuals only see the identity that is most salient to them, my Blackness.

As our country spirals from the various political issues that plague our nation, the lack of civility, the inability to value and appreciate cultural differences, the element of elitism and privilege has never been more apparent. There is an importance in creating an environment where every member (regardless of race) feels they belong, that they are valued, and that there is value to the diversity they bring to the member organization.

Looking at my experience as a Black woman student affairs professional, I often reflect on my identity as a mother. As a mother of a college student, and a Black college student on a predominately white campus, the mental well-being of my Black child in a historically white fraternal organization would be of great concern. I am trying to comprehend what would make

my Black child join an organization that historically discriminated against people who looked like him. Students who become members of these predominately white fraternal organizations join to find a space where they matter and belong (Strayhorn, 2019). Terrell Strayhorn (2022) emphasized college students' involvement is related to a sense of belonging. College students tend to have a stronger connection when they are more involved, are familiar with students with shared interests, and have received confirmation that their identity, interests, and values matter.

As I combat my own struggles, I feel obligated to work with students to create a framework that provides education on the importance of creating harmony, inclusion, and a sense of belonging for Black members in historically white fraternities and sororities. It is important to equip students with the educational knowledge and resources necessary to provoke change in a value and belief system that tolerates the ritual celebration and admiring of practices, policies, and procedures used as symbols or exercises that foster racism, oppression, marginalization, and discrimination.

> Whether consciously understood or not, metaphors and symbols communicate the ways groups evolve and characterize themselves. Cultural messages are communicated via institutional actors and through the material culture of buildings, office layouts, language, and other artifacts. (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 120).

I am cognizant of my subjectivity and positionality in this study, as my identities as an advisor, sorority woman, and student affairs professional are connected. To mitigate my feelings, I will not share personal accounts or testify of any experiences, philosophies, or ideologies that may interfere with my participants' stories.

Research Participants

Participants recruited for this study were Black current and former students who joined a historically white fraternity or sorority within the member organizations under the direction of the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) and the North American Interfraternity Conference (IFC). Current and former students in this study attended an accredited public or private accredited institution. The participants met the following criteria: (1) Self-identified as Black, (2) Held membership in an NIC or NPC member organization, (3) Currently attend or graduated from an accredited institution, (4) Initiated into a member organization prior to graduating, (5) Currently an undergraduate member or had graduated within six years of being initiated, and (6) Self-identified their age range is between 18-24.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through one-on-one interviews, which serve as autobiographical stories and oral history (Clandinin & Connell, 2000). Participants were recruited using a multi-faceted approach. A recruitment flyer outlining the study's criteria was shared across various social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram and within professional groups, including the NASPA Fraternity/Sorority Professionals, Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals, Black Student Affairs Professionals, and the Metro Atlanta/GA Black Higher Education Professionals group. The flyer was also disseminated through distribution lists from student affairs organizations like the NASPA Fraternity & Sorority Knowledge Community and member directories of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA), which targeted fraternity and sorority advisors on college campuses. Additionally, personal emails to campus-based professionals and former students were used to outline the study’s guiding questions and

participation criteria. Recruitment strategies such as these are commonly used to reach diverse and geographically dispersed populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A total of 17 participants from public and private institutions across the Midwest and South completed the Qualtrics survey, with 15 students meeting the study's criteria. Of these, nine ultimately agreed to sit for an interview. Utilizing professional networks such as NASPA, ACPA, and AFA—widely used in student affairs and research communities as recruitment resources—enhanced the credibility and reach of the recruitment process (Gray et al., 2020).

For the purpose of this study, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with five participants in person and used online virtual tools, Teams and Zoom to conduct interviews with four participants who were unable to meet in-person. Using an online virtual platform as a qualitative research tool enhanced participants' accessibility and eliminated logistical barriers, such as distance, geographical location, and travel costs, that could hinder face-to-face interactions (Gray et al., 2020).

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) included notetaking and electronic recording. The interviews consisted of semi-structured open-ended questions designed to elicit the views and opinions of the participants. The development of the interview questions focused on identifying the participant's membership experiences in their historically white fraternity or sorority, their perspectives as a Black student in a historically white fraternity or sorority, and their sense of belonging. Semi-structured interviews allow for deep exploration of participants' lived experiences while maintaining flexibility to follow up on emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Once the initial recruitment efforts were completed, the following steps took place:

- **Initial Contact:** Current and former students received an email from the researcher explaining the study. The email contained the researchers contact information for students to express their interest in participating.
- **Consent Form:** Once the student agreed to participate in the study, a Consent Form (see Appendix B) was be provided to them before the data collection occurred.
- **Qualtrics Survey:** Participants were sent a link to a Qualtrics Survey with a series of questions to verify if the participant met the criteria for the study.
- **Interview Scheduling:** Once identified eligible participants were contacted to schedule an interview time.

The interview questions focused on the participants motivation for joining, initial impressions, their perspectives on racial dynamics including challenges, support systems, and experiences of inclusivity or exclusion. Additionally, participants were also asked to reflect on their sense of belonging and community, highlighting both positive and negatives aspects of their membership. Incorporating these reflective questions helped capture nuanced insights into participants' lived experiences and their intersectional identities within historically white organizations (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016).

Data Analysis

A narrative analysis has multiple definitions and approaches and can be conducted in various ways. Narrative analysis looks to understand the lived experiences of individuals through their stories and the interplay between the interviewer and interviewee (Jones et al., 2014). For this study, narrative analysis was chosen to explore and represent participants' subjective evaluations of their lived experiences. The narrative analysis emphasizes recounting a sequence

of events and the unfolding history of an individual's experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jones et al., 2014), allowing the researcher to delve deeply into the participants' perspectives. Following best practices for qualitative reseach, an inductive approach was utilized to analyze the data, allowing themes to emerger organically from the participants' narratives rather than being predetermined by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To identify patterns systematically, I used descriptive coding to break the data into manageable segments. I categorized recurring words, phrases, and ideas such as belonging, career advancement, tokenism, and acceptance, and applied color-coding within an Excel spreadsheet to visually organize these elements. Descriptive coding focused on labeling specific characteristics of participants' accounts, such as events, actions, or key experiences, providing a clear framework for identifying broader themes. Themes were then constructed by grouping related codes and refining categories based on their frequency, context, and relevance to the study's research questions.

The interpretation phase involved connecting these themes back to the guiding questions of the study. I examined how participants' stories collectively illuminated systemic and institutional factors influencing their sense of belonging and how individual experiences reflected broader cultural dynamics. This iterative process of coding, theming, and interpretation ensured that each participant's voice was authentically represented while contributing to a richer understanding of the collective experience. Through this narrative approach, I was able to present findings that not only captured the individual stories but also illuminated the shared realities within the group.

By emphasizing both the unique and collective aspects of participants' experiences, this analysis highlighted the nuanced ways in which social capital, tokenism, belonging, along with

race and racism intersected to shape their narratives. This dual focus ensured that the findings were deeply rooted in the lived realities of participants while contributing to the broader discourse on belonging and inclusion.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the reliability and credibility of sources (Amankwaa, 2016), ensuring that participants are credible and dependable. To establish this, membership verification was conducted by the Fraternity & Sorority Life Department at the institution where the participants were initiated.

Acquiring feedback to ensure the participants' voices are accurately captured builds trust and reduces any elements of ambiguity in the findings of the research. The participant's assessment opens the door for a more profound reflection of the data submitted, providing an opportunity for follow-up interviews. The follow-up interview produces additional data, leading to a more prosperous and robust study.

The trustworthiness of this research is crucial, and several strategies have been implemented to ensure the study's integrity. The researcher refrained from sharing personal details from the subjectivity and positionality statement but did provide other relevant aspects to clarify the participants' understanding of the researcher's relationship to the study. Additionally, the researcher consulted with experienced professional mentors to conduct a review of the data, focusing on accuracy, credibility, reliability, and overall trustworthiness (Jones et al., 2014) to validate the findings.

Chapter Conclusion

This study explored Black students' lived experiences as members of historically white fraternities and sororities. Using a critical theory lens, critical race theory, and sense of belonging

as the framework, this narrative analysis sought to explore the element of belonging of Black students in historically white fraternities and sororities.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This narrative research study centered on the lived experience of Black students' sense of belonging within historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS). It explored how Black members perceive their sense of belonging as members within HWFS. By examining the experiences of Black students, this research offers a unique perspective on the impact historically white fraternities and sororities have on their experiences and their sense of belonging.

Participants

Although 17 individuals expressed interest in participating in the study, only 15 met the eligibility criteria, and nine ultimately completed an interview. Participants were recruited through professional networking platforms, social media channels, and professional distribution lists, ensuring a diverse pool of respondents. Each participant selected a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and required to meet specific selection criteria to qualify for the research.

1. Self-identify as Black.
2. Hold membership in an NIC or NPC member organization.
3. Currently attending or graduated from an accredited institution.
4. Been initiated into a member organization prior to graduating.
5. Be a current undergraduate member or have graduated within 6 six years of initiation.

The participants all self-reported being in the traditional age range of 18-24. Their institutions, all geographically located in the State of Georgia, and represent a diverse range of higher education settings, including public, private, colleges and universities.

Table 1:

Participant Profiles in Random Order

Pseudonym Name	Male/ Female	Ethnicity	Fraternity/ Sorority	Initiation Date/ Classification	Initiation Institution	NIC /NPC Member organization
Cantrell	Male	Black	Fraternity	Sophomore/ Spring 2023	Public Research Metro Institution	NIC Fraternity #3
Sawyer	Male	Black	Fraternity	Graduate/ Fall 2017	Public Liberal Arts Institution	NIC Fraternity #1
Sapphire	Female	Black	Sorority	Graduate/ Fall 2017	Private Women Institution	NPC Sorority #3
Blu	Male	Black	Fraternity	Junior/ Fall 2022	Public Research Metro Institution	NIC Fraternity #3
Victoria	Female	Black	Sorority	Senior/ Fall 2020	Public Research Metro Institution	NPC Sorority #1
Joshua	Male	Black	Fraternity	Graduate/ Fall 2017	Public Liberal Arts Institution	NIC Fraternity #2
Jasmine	Female	Black/ Caribbean	Sorority	Senior/ Fall 2020	Public Research Metro Institution	NPC Sorority #1
Symone	Female	Black/ Jamaican	Sorority	Graduate/ Spring 2019	Public Liberal Arts Institution	NPC Sorority #2
Maverick	Male	Black	Fraternity	Senior/ Fall 2019	Public Research Metro Institution	NIC Fraternity #1

Cantrell: Brotherhood and Belonging

Cantrell, a sophomore at a public research institution in a metropolitan area, unexpectedly found himself drawn to [NIC Fraternity #3] during recruitment. Despite having family members in Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., a historically Black fraternity, joining a Greek organization had never been part of his plan. “Joining a fraternity wasn’t on my radar. I didn’t really see myself in that world,” he admits. His decision to join [NIC Fraternity #3] was ultimately swayed by a combination of personal factors and the welcoming atmosphere he experienced. “The way they treated me—it was different,” Cantrell explains, reflecting on how the brothers of [NIC Fraternity #3] stood out during the recruitment process. Unlike other organizations, they did not stereotype or judge him based on his racial identity. “They saw me for me, not just a Black person walking through their doors,” he says. This genuine, inclusive approach played a pivotal role in his decision to join.

Cantrell attributes much of his comfort and connection within [NIC Fraternity #3] to his upbringing in a predominantly white environment. This background helped him navigate and bond with the fraternity, fostering a sense of brotherhood he describes as rare and meaningful. He feels fortunate to have avoided any forms of marginalization, discrimination, or oppression within his chapter. However, he acknowledges that his experience is not universal. “Some organizations don’t offer the same level of inclusivity, and many Black students don’t receive a warm welcome,” he notes with concern.

Determined to be part of the solution, Cantrell has committed to helping other Black students feel at home in [NIC Fraternity #3]. “For us, it’s not about appearances—it’s about who you are and what you bring to the table,” he emphasizes. Through advocacy and openness,

Cantrell aims to ensure that [NIC Fraternity #3] remains a space where diversity is celebrated, and brotherhood transcends boundaries.

Sawyer: Founding Father, Facing Realities

Sawyer, a graduate of a predominantly white public liberal arts institution, began his college journey with aspirations of joining a historically Black fraternity under the National Pan-Hellenic Council. However, life had other plans. Instead of pursuing that path, Sawyer found himself in a unique and formative role: becoming a founding father of [NIC Fraternity #1] during his sophomore year. “I didn’t really know what to expect,” he reflects, acknowledging his limited understanding of the racial dynamics, historical exclusion, and challenges within historically white fraternities. Yet, with optimism and determination, he embraced the opportunity.

His desire to join a fraternity stemmed from the social, academic, and networking benefits it offered. Specifically, he was drawn to [NIC Fraternity #1] for its inclusive values and the diverse perspectives the founding members brought to building the organization on campus. “The way they focused on inclusivity and leadership really resonated with me,” he shares. This alignment inspired him to take the leap. Sawyer quickly found his place within the fraternity, forming close bonds with brothers who supported him unconditionally. “They showed up for me,” he recalls, highlighting how his fraternity celebrated milestones such as writing his first novel and leading on-campus events. These shared values and unwavering support motivated him to pursue leadership roles, where he worked to create an inclusive environment for other Black students through intentional recruitment efforts.

However, as he progressed into leadership, Sawyer began to observe troubling changes within [NIC Fraternity #1]. New members started making disparaging and discriminatory

remarks about prospective members during deliberations, revealing a lack of understanding and appreciation for inclusivity. “It was disheartening,” he admits. “We started with this vision of diversity and inclusion, and it felt like we were losing that.” His efforts to address these issues often placed him in a challenging position—educating peers on racial issues while striving to avoid being stereotyped or dismissed.

By his senior year, Sawyer increasingly felt marginalized within a predominantly white environment, shouldering the emotional burden of being a voice for change. Reflecting on his experiences as a recent graduate, he recognizes both the positives and challenges of his fraternity journey. “There were incredible opportunities,” he acknowledges, citing the career, networking, and financial gains that came from his involvement. Yet, he also feels a profound sense of loss. “The brotherhood we built in the beginning—the shared values—it’s not the same anymore,” he says with a tinge of sadness. Still, Sawyer remains proud of the foundation he helped establish and hopeful that future leaders will reclaim the inclusive vision that first brought him to [NIC Fraternity #1].

Sapphire: Bridging Traditions, Navigating Exclusion

Sapphire, a graduate of a private all-women’s college with one of the oldest fraternal systems in the United States, entered the Greek world as a first-generation college student. Attending a school steeped in fraternal traditions presented her with the opportunity to navigate the complexities of higher education while bridging the generational gap as the first in her family to attend college. “I didn’t have a blueprint,” she shares. “Everything I did, I had to figure out on my own.” Initially unaware of historically Black fraternities and sororities, Sapphire was drawn to [NPC Sorority #3] after being inspired by a Black female student leader whose collegiate experience embodied the confidence and ambition she aspired to achieve.

The campus environment also influenced her decision. Though diverse, it offered limited representation of historically Black sororities, with only Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. present. Sapphire admired the strong bonds within these organizations. “You could feel their connection—it was real and unapologetic,” she explains, contrasting it with the perceived lack of energy and commitment in many white sororities. While she built meaningful relationships with her [NPC Sorority #3] sisters, cultural differences and exclusionary attitudes often left her feeling self-conscious and disconnected.

“I remember a sister casually using the N-word while drunk,” Sapphire recalls. “Another time, someone made a disparaging comment about a Black member’s dark skin. It was exhausting.” These experiences of insensitivity and exclusion motivated her to step into a leadership role within the sorority. “I couldn’t just sit back. If I didn’t step up, who would?” she says. Her mission became clear: to raise awareness, advocate for change, and create a safe space for other Black members. She also took on a mentorship role, guiding younger members and ensuring they felt supported in navigating their own challenges.

Despite the difficulties, Sapphire acknowledges the personal growth her sorority experience fostered. “It wasn’t all bad,” she reflects. “I learned how to lead, how to find my voice, and how to focus on my strengths.” These skills have been invaluable in her career within the fraternity and sorority life industry, where she works to create more inclusive spaces.

Still, Sapphire admits there’s a lingering sense of what might have been. “I always felt like something was missing,” she confesses. “Being in a historically white sorority made me feel disconnected from the Black community on campus. I regret not experiencing the kind of bond that comes from being surrounded by people who look like you and truly understand you.”

Blu: Balancing Brotherhood and Belonging

Blu, a junior in his first semester at a large research institution, initially had little interest in joining a fraternity, despite his family's legacy in NPHC organizations. “I would have been interested in the family legacy, but they weren’t on campus, so I was open to exploring other options,” he explained. Influenced by high school friends who had joined, Blu decided to attend several [NIC Fraternity #3] events. Quickly, he found himself drawn to the sense of camaraderie he observed. Each event he attended fostered a unique connection that sparked his interest in seeking membership. “I didn’t expect to feel so welcomed,” he recalls. “It was like they genuinely wanted me there, not just to meet a quota or anything.”

Although aware of historically Black fraternities, Blu admits he didn’t know much about the history or dynamics of historically white fraternities. What ultimately drew him to [NIC Fraternity #3] was its strong sense of community, career opportunities, and the potential for lifelong support through alumni connections. “What stood out to me was how connected everyone seemed,” he shares. “These guys were looking out for each other, and I wanted to be part of that.”

Despite feeling a strong connection, Blu acknowledged, “There are moments where I hear things that make me pause,” referring to jokes or comments that could be perceived as racist. “Sometimes, I wonder if they even realize how it sounds to me.” Though he has chosen to overlook these remarks, Blu recognizes their impact. “It’s not always easy to laugh it off,” he reflects. Growing up in a predominantly white environment has given Blu a sense of resilience in handling such situations. “This isn’t new to me,” he says. “I’ve been hearing stuff like this my whole life, so I’ve learned to let a lot of it slide.” However, Blu is confident that his brothers in [NIC Fraternity #3] would defend him if something crossed the line. “I’ve seen them shut people

down before, so I know they'd stand up for me if it got serious," he asserts. "At the end of the day, the support I get outweighs the uncomfortable moments," he adds. "It's about finding people who will push you to be better and stick by you when it matters." Blu concludes by acknowledging that brotherhood isn't perfect—being part of [NIC Fraternity #3] is an opportunity to build meaningful relationships while navigating life's complexities. "And that's what it is," he reflects, "life."

Victoria: Embracing Leadership and Self-Discovery

Victoria, unfamiliar with fraternity and sorority life, joined [NPC Sorority #1] in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic at a research institution. Coming from a family with no prior fraternity or sorority life experience, she approached the recruitment process with an open mind. "I didn't know much about Greek Life, besides what I had seen at SEC schools, but I was willing to see what it was all about," she explained. Her decision was also influenced by her roommate, who wasn't interested in going through recruitment. Victoria recalled that what especially drew her to [NPC Sorority #1] was seeing another Black woman serving as the sorority's president. "That stood out to me immediately," she said. "I'd never seen a Black woman lead a white sorority before, and it felt like a sign that I could fit in here."

Although Victoria attended a university with a diverse student body, she was surprised that the Panhellenic community did not reflect the same diversity. "I remember walking into some of the other chapters during recruitment, and it just didn't feel like home," she said. But [NPC Sorority #1] felt different—there was something inclusive about the leadership that drew her in. "What stood out was the way they made everyone feel like they mattered," she shared. "That really resonated with me and set [NPC Sorority #1] apart from the other chapters."

Reflecting on her sorority experience, Victoria never felt discriminated against or marginalized, but there was one difficult moment. She recalled a hate crime involving a Black male student. “That situation was difficult,” she said. “I remember how quickly some chapter members wanted to forgive the fraternity involved, even though there were still so many unanswered questions about what happened.” Despite this incident, Victoria emphasized that overall, her experience with [NPC Sorority #1] was positive. “I had some of the best times of my life with my sisters,” she said. “I think that’s why I stayed involved, because I could see how much I was growing—both as a leader and as a person.”

At the time of our interview, Victoria was preparing for life after graduation, feeling optimistic about how the academic standards and networking opportunities within [NPC Sorority #1] had equipped her for future success. She recognized that not all Black students had the same positive experiences within predominantly white sororities and expressed concern for those who might feel disconnected. “I know it’s not always the same for everyone,” she said. “Some people don’t always find a space where they can truly belong, and I worry about that.” Reflecting on her own journey, Victoria emphasized the importance of mental resilience and stepping out of one’s comfort zone. “The hardest part is taking that first step,” she said. “Greek Life isn’t always easy, but it teaches you a lot about yourself. It forces you to grow, to challenge your assumptions, and to become the person you’re meant to be.”

For Victoria, her involvement in [NPC Sorority #1] was instrumental in building her confidence, developing essential leadership skills, and helping her break out of her shell—all of which, she believes, contributed to her personal growth. “It pushed me to become someone I didn’t even know I could be,” she concluded. “And I wouldn’t trade that experience for anything.”

Joshua: Navigating Identity and Brotherhood

Joshua graduated from a public liberal arts institution. His exposure to Black fraternities and sororities was initially shaped by the TV show A Different World, and he had little knowledge of historically white organizations before joining [NIC Fraternity #2] in Fall 2017. “I had seen the Black fraternities on TV, but honestly, I didn’t know much about how things worked in a white fraternity,” he shared. “It was kind of like jumping into the unknown.” Despite attending a predominantly white high school and feeling comfortable among white peers, he was unfamiliar with the fraternity recruitment process. Nonetheless, his pre-existing friendships within various fraternities allowed him to embrace the experience. “I wasn’t entirely out of place,” he said. “I had friends who were already involved, and that made it feel like less of a big deal. It gave me some comfort going in.”

Reflecting on his collegiate years, Joshua found it challenging to integrate into his fraternity due to being slightly older than many new members who were already embedded in their social circles. "It felt like most of the guys had already formed their bonds by the time I came in, and I had to kind of work my way in,” he said. “It wasn’t always easy, and at times, I felt like I was an outsider.” Despite these hurdles, he valued the networking opportunities and academic support [NIC Fraternity #2] provided, which contributed to his personal growth and academic success.

Joshua candidly recalls being confronted with stereotypes and pressures to prove himself beyond his identity as the sole Black member. “There were times when I felt like I had to do more to prove myself,” he said. “I wasn’t just representing myself, I was representing an entire community, and it was exhausting at times.” He engaged heavily in [NIC Fraternity #2] activities to validate his presence and broaden his impact, though this commitment sometimes left him

feeling drained. Despite these challenges, Joshua acknowledged the unique opportunities and connections he gained through [NIC Fraternity #2], “I wouldn’t trade the connections I made in [NIC Fraternity #2] for anything,” he said. “I met people, got opportunities, and learned things I probably wouldn’t have had access to in a Black fraternity. It wasn’t always easy, but the experience pushed me in ways that helped me grow.”

Reflecting on his journey, Joshua shared that his experience in [NIC Fraternity #2] was a complex balance of navigating his identity while building meaningful relationships. “It wasn’t a perfect fit, but it was a fit I made work,” he said. “At the end of the day, I learned a lot about myself, and I’m proud of the journey I took. Sometimes, it’s about making the most of where you are, even when it’s not what you expected.”

Jasmine: Navigating Identity & Belonging

Jasmine, a graduating senior, initially attended a private university before transferring to a large research institution. Despite her early hesitations about sorority recruitment, her perspective shifted as she began researching the various sororities on campus. “I didn’t think Greek Life was for me at first, but once I started learning more about the different chapters, I realized I could find a place that aligned with my career goals,” she shared. As a nursing major, Jasmine noticed a distinct difference between Black sororities and National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sororities, particularly in how the latter had stronger ties to specific organizations, such as healthcare facilities. “I wanted to join a sorority that could help me build connections for my future career,” she explained. “I knew NPC sororities had more ties to healthcare, and I thought that would be a great advantage in my field.”

Jasmine joined [NPC Sorority #1] in 2020, right in the middle of the Black Lives Matter movement. Her decision was both personal and professional, but she didn’t anticipate the

challenges she would face. “Some of my Black high school friends questioned my decision, asking if I was only accepted because of the movement, because I was Black,” she recalled. “It was tough to hear that, especially when I was just trying to find a place where I could belong.” These doubts were compounded by incidents of racial insensitivity within her sorority, which left Jasmine feeling even more isolated.

She recalled an incident where her sorority sisters responded nonchalantly to a Black male being the victim of a hate crime, using laughing emojis in their group chat. “I was beyond shocked,” Jasmine said, her voice tinged with disbelief. “How could they find something like that funny? It could have been me. I had to speak up, and I told them how upset I was. I didn’t want to just let it slide.” Jasmine’s frustration was further fueled by an incident where a fraternity member called her the N-word. “It was one of those moments where you freeze, like, did that really just happen?” she said. “It was a reminder of how things can get ugly really fast.”

Despite these painful experiences, Jasmine acknowledged that there were also moments when she felt supported. She appreciated the steps [NPC Sorority #1] had taken to address diversity and inclusion, particularly the inclusion of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) chairs on their executive boards. “It’s good that they’re making strides in that direction,” she noted. “But the reality is, the sorority community is still predominantly white, and that makes it hard for Black members to feel fully accepted and supported.”

Reflecting on her experience in [NPC Sorority #1], Jasmine recognized the complexity of her position as a Black woman in a predominantly white space. “There were times when I did feel supported, when I had my sisters who had my back,” she said. “But there were also times when I felt like an outsider, like I didn’t really belong.” Despite these ups and downs, Jasmine believes her experience has shaped her in meaningful ways. “It wasn’t easy, but it taught me a lot

about myself, and about what it means to find my voice in spaces that aren't always welcoming," she shared.

Jasmine's journey in Greek Life wasn't without its challenges, but it also became a path to self-discovery, resilience, and advocacy. "I've learned that I can't just wait for things to change; sometimes, I have to be the one to make a stand," she said. "I hope that by sharing my story, others will feel empowered to speak up too." For Jasmine, her involvement in [NPC Sorority #1] was not just about the Greek experience—it was about navigating identity, speaking truth to power, and finding a way to belong, even when the road ahead seemed uncertain.

Symone: Bridging Worlds and Building Community

Symone graduated from a public liberal arts university and became a member of [NPC Sorority #2] in 2020. Her journey into fraternity and sorority life, however, was not a straightforward path. Although she had strong family ties to a particular NPHC sorority, her experiences at an interest meeting left her feeling unwelcome. "I was really excited at first because I was familiar with the sorority through my family," Symone shared. "But when I went to the interest meeting and asked questions, the reactions I got were harsh—like I did not belong there." The discomfort and sense of exclusion led Symone to reconsider her interest in joining the NPHC sorority, despite her family's history within it.

Before exploring Panhellenic sororities, Symone had already experienced fraternity life through a co-ed community service organization, but she longed for something more—a deeper connection, a sense of belonging. "I wanted to feel like I was part of something bigger than just community service," Symone explained. Her search led her to [NPC Sorority #2], where she encountered women who were not only welcoming but also genuinely passionate about their sisterhood. "When I met the members of [NPC Sorority #2], it was like a breath of fresh air,"

Symone recalled. “They were warm, enthusiastic, and really showed me what it meant to be part of a sisterhood.” After attending a continuous open bidding event, Symone felt a strong connection with the women there, particularly bonding over the sorority’s Christian foundation and core values. “It just felt right,” she said. “I knew this was where I could find that deeper connection I was looking for.”

However, her journey was not without its challenges. Symone quickly realized that many members of [NPC Sorority #2] seemed unfamiliar with Black culture, which she felt sometimes alienated her. “There were things that didn’t quite resonate with me—some of the stereotypes in their advertising and even some of the traditions,” she admitted. “I had to speak up about these things, which was hard, but I knew it was necessary.” Her feedback, although difficult to voice, led to changes within the sorority, and Symone felt empowered by the opportunity to make a difference. “I’m proud that I was able to make them see that things needed to change. It wasn’t just about me—it was about making sure other women of color didn’t feel the same way I did,” she explained.

While she navigated these challenges, Symone also wrestled with feelings of rejection, particularly from Black female students within the NPHC sorority. “It was tough. I felt like I wasn’t going to be accepted by anyone, and I wondered if I could really belong anywhere,” Symone recalled. “There were moments when I felt like my thoughts and opinions didn’t matter, and I questioned if I was even cut out for this.” Despite these doubts, Symone pushed forward, ultimately finding her place in [NPC Sorority #2]. “At the end of the day, the support I got within the sorority helped me realize that I could make this work,” she said. “It wasn’t always easy, but it was worth it to feel heard and valued.”

After graduating, Symone continued her involvement with [NPC Sorority #2], volunteering at both local and national levels to improve the sorority's inclusivity. "I want to make sure that Black women and women of color feel empowered to speak up and thrive within this space," she shared. "That's been my goal—making sure they know they belong and that their voices matter." Through her efforts, Symone has contributed to ensuring that others can experience the same growth and connection she found within [NPC Sorority #2], but with a clearer path for women of color to truly feel at home.

Looking back, Symone reflects on her unique journey, from the rejection she initially faced to the eventual transformation of the organization. "This wasn't just about finding a place for myself," she said. "It was about changing the system for the better, for the women who come after me. I've learned that real change comes when we step up and speak out, even when it's uncomfortable." Symone's experience, though challenging at times, ultimately became a powerful testament to the importance of persistence, self-advocacy, and the power of sisterhood.

Maverick: Leadership, Diversity, and Finding Belonging

Maverick, currently a graduating senior at a large research institution, joined [NIC Fraternity #1] drawn by its Christian principles, the opportunity to shape the organization as a founding member, and inspired by its first Black president. "I didn't know much about the history of white fraternities," Maverick shared. "But I was drawn to the idea of making a change, and I felt like I could bring something different to the table." Despite the fraternity's historical predominance of white members, Maverick aimed to foster diversity, driven by the university's diverse environment, despite his initial lack of knowledge about white fraternity history. "I felt like I had a responsibility to help this organization reflect the diversity of the campus and make it a place where everyone could feel welcome," he explained. So, he joined [NIC Fraternity #1] in

Fall 2019 and quickly pursued leadership roles, becoming the fraternity's council delegate. In the 2020-2021 academic year, Maverick successfully ran for and became the fraternity's second Black president. He established a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee to strengthen the fraternity's commitment to inclusivity, highlighting the diverse founding class hand-picked by the national expansion team.

Networking opportunities also attracted Maverick to [NIC Fraternity #1], particularly valuable as a business major for overcoming barriers with supportive inner circle connections. Beyond tangible benefits, membership helped alleviate social anxiety, though it also presented challenges. "I knew the connections I made in this fraternity could open doors for me down the line," he shared. "Being a part of [NIC Fraternity #1] was more than just about social life; it was about building a network that could support my professional aspirations."

Reflecting on his experiences, Maverick recalls instances such as discomfort during a trip with Confederate flags, where fellow members failed to understand his unease and instances where his Vice President and others were too casual with racial slurs, including asking permission to use the N-word. "That was one of the hardest moments for me," Maverick said. "I didn't understand why no one seemed to get why I was upset. It was like they couldn't see nor want to understand the pain and history behind those symbols." These cultural differences left him feeling disrespected and alienated. Despite considering joining a Black fraternity due to persistent racial issues, Maverick ultimately returned to [NIC Fraternity #1] in his final year and was warmly received. "It wasn't easy, and it wasn't always comfortable," he said, "but the work I did helped me grow as a person, and I hope it helped others grow too."

Thematic Analysis

The participants in this study shared narratives that highlight the experiences of Black students within historically white fraternities and sororities. These stories reveal the benefits, challenges, emotional responses, racial interactions, and overall experiences of Black members in these organizations. By applying Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study examined the systemic and institutional racial inequities that influenced the sense of belonging among Black members. With race as a central focus, CRT provided a lens to explore how racial dynamics shape Black members' experiences within their member organization. This framework uncovers the complexities of racial exclusion, power imbalances, and subtleties of tokenism.

The theme of belonging in this study surfaces as both a deeply personal and collective experience. It is shaped by individual resilience in navigating challenges, while simultaneously being influenced by the larger institutional forces that can often be exclusionary. Personal perseverance enables some to forge connections and claim a space within predominantly white organizations, but systemic barriers and racial inequities continue to shape these experiences.

Through guided research questions, several recurring themes emerged from participant interviews: (1) Social Capital as a Motivator for Membership, (2) Belonging Through Representation in Fraternal Spaces, and (3) The Racial Undertones of Tokenism. CRT was crucial in understanding how systemic racism operates within historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS). By centering the voices of Black members, CRT emphasizes the role of race and racism in shaping experiences within these historically exclusionary spaces. The five core tenets of CRT—permanence of racism, interest convergence, critique of liberalism, experiential knowledge, and intersectionality—were directly relevant to the participants' narratives in this study.

Social Capital: Motivator for Membership

Participants recognized the value of social capital gained through fraternity membership, particularly in building strong networks for career development, mentorship, and access to opportunities. They described how social capital facilitated connections that were critical for personal and professional growth, allowing them to access career opportunities and build lifelong relationships.

Figure 1:

Social Capital - Navigating the Benefits and Challenges of Membership

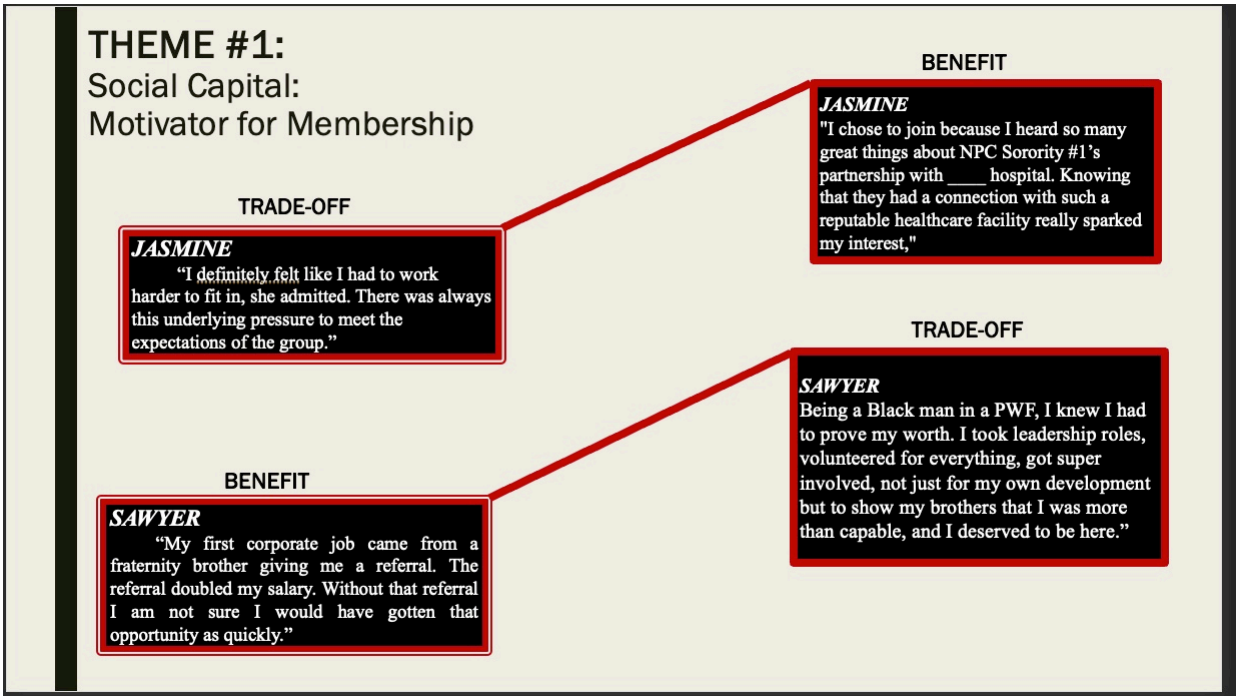


Figure 1 illustrates the dualities experienced by members of fraternal organizations, showcasing both the benefits of belonging and the challenges of meeting group expectations. Jasmine and Sawyer's stories bring these complexities to life, shedding light on the dynamics at play. While fraternity membership often provides access to valuable networks and professional opportunities, participants also faced significant challenges in navigating these spaces. For

members in predominantly white organizations, the pursuit of social capital often came with the added burden of confronting racial dynamics. They described feeling the need to work harder to prove their worth and to fit in. This trade-off required balancing the personal benefits of advancement with the emotional labor of overcoming racial barriers. For many, this struggle felt like working twice as hard to achieve the same recognition or access to opportunities as their peers (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005).

During the interviews, participants were asked about their experiences as Black members of historically white fraternities or sororities. Each participant explained their motivations for joining their respective fraternity or sorority, often linking their decision to future opportunities such as career advancement, entrepreneurial ventures, networking, and other benefits that they saw as advantages of joining a historically white fraternal organization. Despite their differing initiation years (ranging from 2017 to 2023), academic classifications (sophomore to graduate), and institution types (public, private, liberal arts, or research), a consistent set of themes emerged across their narratives.

Many participants agreed that regardless of their academic backgrounds or majors, white fraternities and sororities provided avenues for networking opportunities with businesses, organizations, fellow members, and affiliated individuals. Their decision to join these organizations was motivated by a desire to gain access to these opportunities. However, their narratives also reveal the complexities of navigating these predominantly white spaces as Black members—reflecting both the benefits and the challenges of leveraging social capital within such environments (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005).

Jasmine shared that she was drawn to [NPC Sorority #1] because of its philanthropic partnership with a healthcare facility that aligned with her career aspirations. "I chose to join

because I heard so many great things about [NPC Sorority #1's] partnership with ____ hospital. Knowing that they had a connection with such a reputable healthcare facility really sparked my interest," she explained. However, Jasmine also acknowledged the racial dynamics she navigated as a Black woman in a predominantly white sorority. "I definitely felt like I had to work harder to fit in," she admitted. "There was always this underlying pressure to meet the expectations of the group." Jasmine understood that joining the sorority not only meant pursuing professional opportunities but also navigating a space that was not designed with her experiences in mind.

In Jasmine's experience, sense of belonging was complicated by her racial identity, which shaped her engagement with the organization. While she sought to leverage the organization's social capital for career advancement, she also had to contend with the expectations placed on her as a Black member—a dynamic that Critical Race Theory (CRT) helps illuminate. CRT challenges the notion of meritocracy by emphasizing how race and systemic inequalities can impact opportunities for advancement (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Sawyer emphasized how fraternity membership had a profound impact on his career trajectory, particularly through the connections he made. "My first corporate job came from a fraternity brother giving me a referral," he shared. "That referral doubled my salary. Without that connection, I'm not sure I would have gotten that opportunity as quickly." However, Sawyer also recognized the added burden of proving himself as a Black man in a predominantly white fraternity. "Being a Black man in a predominantly white fraternity, I knew I had to prove my worth. I took on leadership roles, volunteered for everything, and got super involved, not just for my own development but to show my brothers that I was more than capable, and I deserved to be here."

Sawyer's story illustrates how social capital within a fraternity can be a powerful tool for career advancement, but it also underscores the racial disparities that CRT seeks to address. For

Sawyer, the need to "prove his worth" reflects the additional labor and scrutiny that Black members often face in predominantly white spaces. His experience of leveraging fraternity connections while simultaneously navigating racial expectations speaks to the tension between opportunity and inequality—an intersection CRT critically examines (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005).

Like Sawyer, other participants reflected on how leadership roles and connections within their fraternities' opened doors for them. Blu explained, "My fraternity membership created an immediate sense of connection for professional interactions. Going into an interview and seeing someone from your fraternity is like an instant bond... "You don't have to explain your leadership roles or how hard you worked. They get it because they have been there too." But Blu was also keenly aware of the racial dynamics at play. "Yeah, it helps, but there are times when you wonder if it is the same for you as it is for them. You see other brothers get opportunities without having to hustle as much."

For Blu, the fraternity's social capital provided significant benefits, but it also came with questions about equity. His reflections align with the CRT principle of interest convergence, which suggests that racial equity often only advances when it aligns with the interests of the dominant group. In Blu's case, he could benefit from fraternity connections, but he also recognized that his path was different from that of his white counterparts—highlighting the persistent inequalities that Black members face even when accessing the same social capital.

Cantrell emphasized, "Seeing how my fraternity brothers' succussed motivated me to pursue leadership opportunities. Being someone that wants to be an entrepreneur one day, own a business, make my own commission and revenue—it is great to see guys who have jobs lined up making lots of money," he said. "That's just an aspect of being around leaders. I'm blessed to be around leaders, people traveling to New York City for job opportunities and internships, traveling

to Texas for construction management jobs. That is a benefit of the brotherhood." Cantrell's pursuit of leadership roles was not only driven by personal ambition but also by a desire to keep up with his peers, whose success provided both inspiration and pressure.

Cantrell's narrative echoes the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling, his experience as a Black man in a predominantly white fraternity offered an alternative perspective on the benefits of membership. While he gained valuable leadership skills and networking opportunities, his journey was shaped by the need to "prove himself" in ways that white members might not have to. This dynamic speaks to the broader challenges Black members face in finding a sense of belonging within spaces that were not created with their experiences in mind.

Other participants, like Joshua and Sapphire, also noted that they sought leadership roles not only for personal advancement but to empower other Black members who might face similar challenges. Joshua shared, "I used my leadership position within [NIC Fraternity #2]to advocate for inclusivity and representation. Joining [NIC Fraternity #2] and being a leader in the chapter put me in my current position of professional leadership," he explained. "I have better opportunities than others because of my leadership, but I know that I had to work twice as hard because of my race." Joshua's story reflects the struggle that many Black student leaders face in predominantly white spaces—a form of counter-storytelling that challenges dominant narratives by sharing experiences of systemic barriers (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Joshua recognized that his leadership also opens doors for others, aligning with the concept of interest convergence (Bell, 1980), as both his personal growth and advocacy for Black representation have mutual benefits.

Similarly, Sapphire, who currently works in the fraternal industry, reflected on how her experiences as a leader within [NPC Sorority #3] helped her develop leadership skills while pushing for inclusion. "My sorority experience helped refine my skills and instilled in me a sense

of responsibility to create space for other Black members," she explained. I stayed involved as an alumna because I want Black women to know they can have an amazing experience and grow in leadership just like I did. I want to pay it forward, she said. Representation matters." Through Sapphire's narrative, the counter-storytelling emerges once again, as her story disrupts the conventional narrative of Greek life by centering the experiences of Black women, demonstrating the necessity of inclusivity in these spaces (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). She, too, recognizes the interest convergence (Bell, 1980) between her personal advancement and her ability to uplift others.

Across these narratives, participants expressed how social capital within their fraternities and sororities provided valuable opportunities for career advancement and personal development. However, they also highlighted the added burden of navigating racial dynamics within their historically white organization—a challenge that critical race theory helps frame. Participants like Jasmine, Sawyer, Blu, Cantrell, Joshua, and Sapphire navigated their membership by both leveraging the social capital available to them and pushing back against the inequalities embedded within these spaces. Their stories reflect the tension between opportunity and exclusion and highlight the ways in which sense of belonging is shaped by the intersection of race and fraternity/sorority membership.

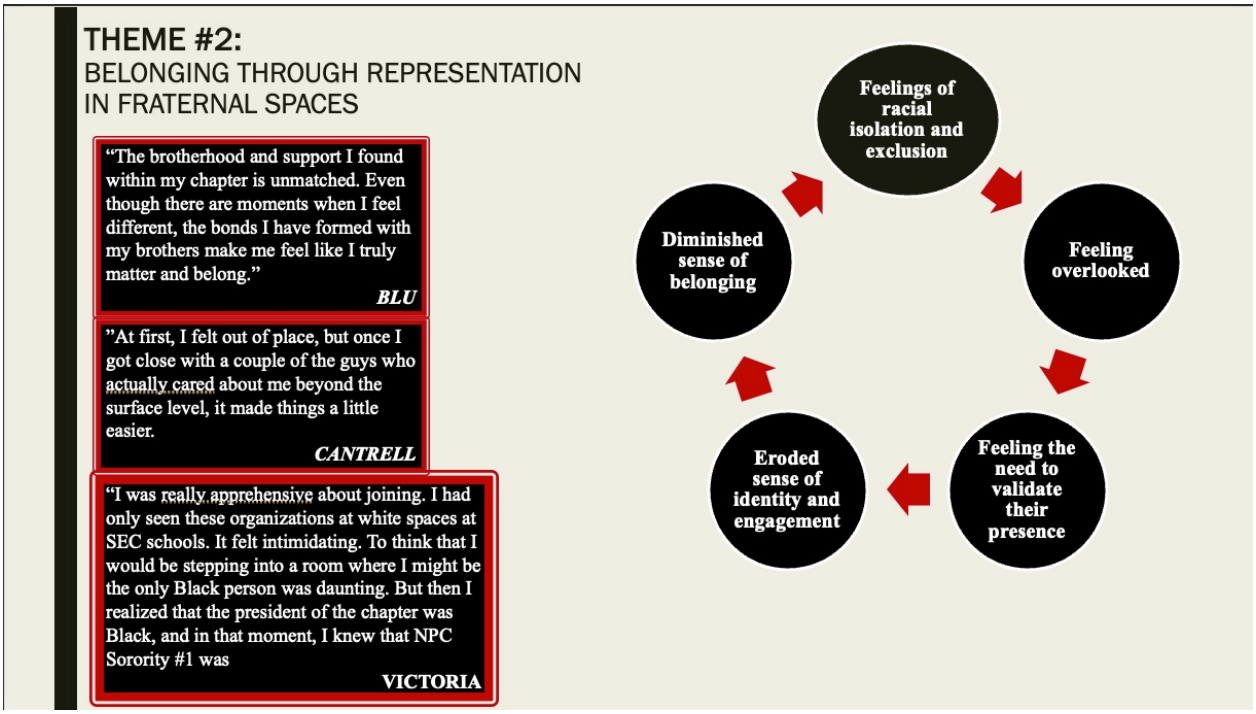
Belonging Through Representation in Fraternal Spaces

Representation within leadership roles provided a critical sense of belonging for participants, offering visibility and role models that affirmed their sense of worth within the fraternity. For some, the opportunity to serve as leaders within these organizations brought a sense of accomplishment and validation of their identity, as they saw themselves reflected in positions of power and influence. Yet, participants also acknowledged that these positive experiences often

came with the complexity of navigating predominantly white spaces. Despite having role models in leadership, they still confronted racial tensions, microaggressions, and the subtle expectation to "fit in," which created a sense of discomfort and the challenge of reconciling their personal identities with the cultural norms of these organizations. This sense of belonging was often tempered by the need to constantly adapt and prove their value in a space where their identities were not fully embraced or understood (Rios, 2011; Robinson & Ward, 1991).

Figure 2*:*

The Role of Representation in Creating Belonging in Fraternal Spaces



As shown in Figure 2, representation plays a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging for marginalized students in historically exclusive organizations. The experiences of Blu, Cantrell, and Victoria underscore the profound impact of representation and support in fostering a sense of belonging within fraternal organizations. Blu highlights how the bonds of brotherhood provided him with a sense of worth and belonging, even during moments of feeling different. Cantrell's narrative reflects the importance of genuine care and connection, which helped him overcome

initial feelings of being out of place. Victoria's story illustrates the transformative power of visible leadership, as seeing a Black woman in a prominent role reassured her that this was a space where she could belong and thrive. These stories demonstrate how representation and authentic relationships can help individuals navigate the challenges of racial isolation and cultivate meaningful connections within predominantly white organizations.

When asked about their sense of belonging as Black members in historically white fraternities and sororities, participants shared a range of experiences. Their stories unfolded like a tapestry woven with threads of vulnerability, discovery, and the desire to belong. Some described forming deep friendships and finding a strong sense of community, reminiscent of the comfort they had experienced in high school. Each journey illustrated a unique path toward belonging, marked by uncertainty and hope.

Victoria's journey began with trepidation. "I was really apprehensive about joining. I had only seen these organizations as spaces for white students at SEC schools. It felt intimidating." She explained how the thought of stepping into a room where she might be the only Black person was daunting. However, as she attended recruitment events and spoke with current members, something shifted within her. A pivotal moment came when she learned that the president of the chapter was a Black student. "Seeing her, that really swayed me," Victoria recalled. "It felt like a signal that this was a place where I could belong." In that moment Victoria felt that [NPC Sorority #1] values resonated with hers, and there was no other sorority for her.

Victoria's story illustrates the profound impact of representation in leadership roles. Seeing a Black woman in a position of power sent a powerful message to her—one that countered the prevailing belief that fraternities and sororities were exclusive spaces for white students. In that moment, she began to envision a space where she could carve out her own identity and find

acceptance. This aligns with critical race theory, which emphasizes the importance of how counter-storytelling can be a powerful tool for marginalized individuals to reclaim narratives and spaces where they have been historically excluded them (Delgado, 1989). In this instance, representation provided not just a sense of presence but a feeling of belonging, signaling that her participation was not only possible but valued.

Sapphire's experience mirrored this theme of representation. Coming from a diverse background, she often felt at home in predominantly white spaces.

> In high school, I was frequently surrounded by white peers, she reflected. I have had my share of feelings—of nervousness, of wanting to fit in. When I joined [NPC Sorority #3], I remembered meeting the chapter president, a Black woman. She helped me move into my dorm, and I thought, if she can do this, so can I... I just remember her being so involved, not just in the sorority but across campus and I wanted to follow in her footsteps. Seeing her made me believe that [NPC Sorority #3] would be a welcoming space and at that moment I made it up in my mind to pay it forward, she explained.

For Sapphire, representation mattered. Her decision to join was influenced by seeing another Black woman in a leadership role, which provided her with a sense of possibility and hope. Sapphire's experience underscores the CRT concept of interest convergence, which suggests that institutions only create spaces for marginalized voices when it benefits them (Bell, 1980). Sapphire's experience pushes against this idea by showing how marginalized students can carve out their own spaces of acceptance and belonging, even within historically exclusive organizations. Belonging, for Sapphire, was not simply about fitting in—it was about finding a space where her identity could thrive, inspired by the leadership example set by the chapter president.

Joshua, on the other hand, approached recruitment with a different perspective. “I grew up around a lot of white people,” he explained, recalling his childhood. “So, when I came into recruitment, I didn’t feel as out of place as some of my friends.” Yet, despite this comfort, he still faced challenges in finding his place within the fraternity. “Even with that comfort, it was hard to fit in at times,” he admitted. Joshua’s experience highlights the complexity of belonging; it’s not just about being in the room but feeling valued and recognized once you are there. As Strayhorn (2019) emphasized, belonging involves feeling valued within a community, and Joshua’s journey required patience as he sought connections that made him feel truly at home.

Symone's story took a different turn. Excited to join an NPHC sorority, she arrived with high hopes, only to be met with a lukewarm welcome. “I was really looking forward to it, but I didn’t get the warm welcome I expected,” she recalled. However, everything changed when she stumbled upon an [NPC Sorority #2] recruitment event. “Honestly, I went in thinking it was not a serious option. But the more I learned about their values, the more I realized how much I connected with the women there.” In that unexpected moment, Symone found alignment with their beliefs and culture, sparking a sense of belonging she had been searching for. This reflects the CRT assertion that while spaces of power may not be designed with marginalized individuals in mind, belonging can emerge through shared values and connections.

For many participants, the process of joining a fraternity or sorority was not just about gaining social capital, but also about discovering their identity and navigating the tensions between fitting in and standing out. Observing Black members who held leadership positions and were active in the organization gave them confidence that they too could succeed. Victoria, Sapphire, Joshua, and Symone all highlighted how these role models served as tangible proof that success, recognition, and belonging were attainable.

As they reflected on their experiences, the challenges of being Black members in predominantly white spaces were ever-present, but so was a profound sense of optimism. Witnessing other Black students thrive filled them with hope. Their journeys intertwined the struggles they faced with the opportunities that arose, enabling them to carve out spaces for themselves within these historically exclusive organizations.

In the end, their stories are not just about overcoming barriers; they embody resilience and the transformative power of community. Through representation, shared values, and personal connections, these individuals found ways to nurture their sense of belonging, illuminating the potential for change within the fraternal landscape. Each narrative served as a reminder that, despite the challenges, the journey toward belonging is not just possible—it is a powerful testament to their strength and determination.

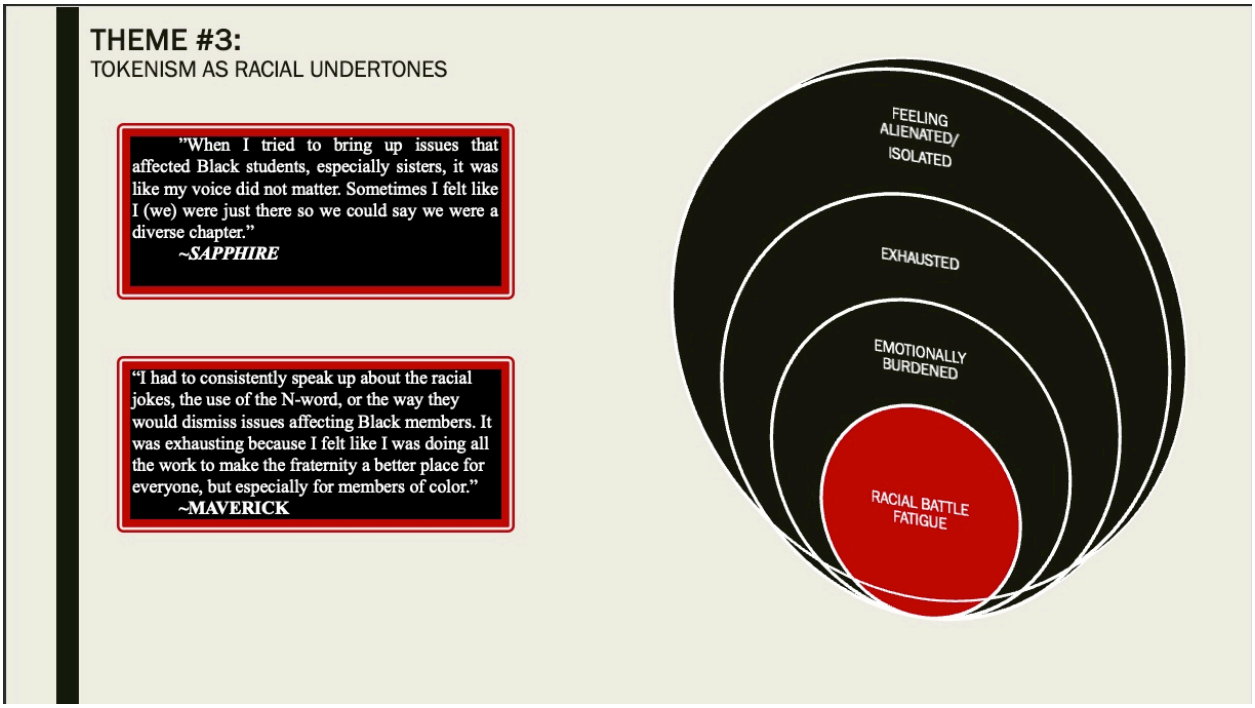
Tokenism as Racial Undertones

The opportunity to take on leadership roles and receive mentorship from more senior members was viewed as a positive outcome of their fraternity membership. This inclusion often signified a recognition of potential and the hope for greater visibility within the fraternity's activities, giving participants a sense of pride and the chance to be seen as valuable members of the community. However, participants also discussed how this inclusion sometimes felt like tokenism, as they were often the only members of color in leadership positions. Although they were given access to opportunities, they often faced microaggressions and racial insensitivity, signaling that their inclusion was less about genuine acceptance and more about fulfilling diversity quotas. This trade-off required emotional resilience, as participants had to constantly navigate these racial undertones while trying to succeed and fulfill their leadership responsibilities. The challenge lay in balancing the desire to make a meaningful impact with the reality of being

included for diversity's sake rather than for their inherent qualifications or leadership abilities (Kanter, 1977; Thomas, 1990; Nkomo, 1992).

Figure 3:

Tokenism and Emotional Burden in Fraternal Spaces



As illustrated in Figure 3, tokenism frequently places members of color in challenging positions, demanding significant emotional labor to confront microaggressions and systemic insensitivity within their organizations. While these members may gain access to leadership opportunities and mentorship, their experiences reveal the intricate complexities of navigating predominantly white fraternal spaces. Sapphire and Maverick's stories poignantly highlight the dual reality of feeling both included and excluded, underscoring the urgent need for genuine inclusivity and cultural competency to foster meaningful belonging within these communities (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1989).

Each participant emphasized that their respective organizations offered a welcoming environment where they felt included and valued. They had opportunities to assume leadership roles that allowed them to showcase their strengths and grow in areas they identified as needing improvement. As an added benefit, having Black members within the organization as mentors provided invaluable guidance and support in navigating internal processes and situations. Yet, while participants acknowledged these benefits, they also shared experiences of racial discrimination and subtle microaggressions that challenged their authentic sense of belonging.

While participants acknowledged the career and leadership development opportunities offered by their organizations, some also shared experiences of racial discrimination and hurtful remarks from their white peers. These participants reflected on feelings of being marginalized or "othered" at times, highlighting the complex dynamics of navigating predominantly white spaces within fraternity and sorority life (Smith et al., 2018; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). These experiences often led them to question the authenticity of the inclusivity their organizations professed.

Sawyer, for instance, initially believed his organization upheld inclusive principles. Sawyer reflected, "I remember being in deliberations where we would go through the students and make notes and vote. I noticed a division between the founding father class and the new members, and our mindsets about what made the [NIC Fraternity #1] man so different. A lot of the acceptance of diversity was missing, and we would have screaming matches about who would or would not be a good fit. Although it was not blatantly stated, the silence made their thoughts clear." Sawyer shared that although no one explicitly stated objections based on race, his observation of subtle cues, the silence, innuendo, and microaggressions were the things he felt conveyed underlying biases and made it evident to him where some members stood on issues of diversity and inclusion within the organization. His observations underscore how the absence of explicit rejection can

mask deeper prejudices, highlighting the conditional nature of belonging in these spaces. Sawyer's experience resonates with the CRT tenet of subtlety in discrimination, where microaggressions and silence communicate underlying prejudices (Sue et al., 2007), despite apparent inclusion, undermining the sense of belonging for marginalized individuals. It further aligns with CRT's tenet of interest convergence, suggesting that true equality will only be achieved when it aligns with the interests of the dominant group (Bell, 1980).

Many participants also acknowledged racial incidents and stereotypical comments taking place within their member organizations, attributing them to cultural insensitivity or their members' misguided attempts at humor. Blu reflected on his upbringing, stating, "Growing up in an all-white high school, you learn to develop thick skin, especially when friends make jokes about controversial or sensitive topics. While they may make little quips at me, I know it is all love and there is no malicious intent behind it. However, when I feel offended, I make it a point to communicate this to my brothers, hoping they will adjust their language and behavior." Blu's experience highlights how, even when unintentional, racial insensitivity can challenge a sense of belonging, leaving individuals to constantly negotiate their space in an environment where they are often the only one of their race. His commitment to addressing these issues further underscores the active role marginalized individuals must take to create spaces where they can feel genuinely accepted.

Additionally, several of the participants shared that within the organization they have voiced frustration over their white peers' lack of cultural competency and awareness regarding Black issues. Despite sharing many similarities in other aspects and receiving support from the chapter in those areas, Black members find it challenging to effectively address issues due to this lack of awareness and occasional carelessness. Participants emphasized that these experiences

frequently left them feeling unsettled and ignored. “There have been a few times when members were a little too comfortable with their words, saying the N-word. But I recall him saying it because the Black girls that lived underneath him was playing loud music. I can’t remember everything he said, I just remember feeling bothered that he felt comfortable saying that” Maverick recounted.

Maverick's experience highlights how racial insensitivity, even when unintentional, can leave Black members feeling unsettled and marginalized affecting their sense of authentic belonging within the organization.

These reflections underscore the concept of tokenism, where Black members may be included but still experience systemic barriers and microaggressions that undermine their sense of belonging (Harris, 1993). This aligns with CRT’s tenet of intersectionality, which acknowledges that individuals experience overlapping identities and social locations that can complicate their experiences of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

Ultimately, their stories reflect the transformative power of belonging through representation and the complex dynamics of acceptance, and the subtle challenges Black students face in predominantly white fraternal spaces. Their experiences highlight the ongoing tension between the desire to belong and the racial barriers that often persist. These narratives emphasize the importance of fostering an inclusive environment through continuous dialogue, cultural competency training, and institutional efforts to address these challenges. By focusing on the intersection of race and Greek life, the study underscores the need for spaces where diversity is not just accepted but embraced (Smith et al., 2018; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter presents the findings from a study on the lived experiences of Black members within historically white fraternities and sororities, drawing directly from participant

narratives. Three prominent themes emerged: (1) Social Capital: Motivator for Membership, (2) Belonging Through Representation in Fraternal Spaces, and (3) The Racial Undertones of Tokenism. These themes are explored in relation to their consistent impact on the participants' experiences. The research questions guiding this investigation were:

1. What are the membership experiences of Black students who join historically white fraternities and sororities?
2. How do Black students experience a sense of belonging within their historically white fraternity or sorority?

Each participant shared personal narratives that addressed these questions and provided detailed explanations of their experiences as Black members. While each participant acknowledged their reasons for joining historically white fraternities or sororities, they also discussed the drawbacks they faced. Despite encountering racial insensitivity or comments, many chose to overlook these issues, believing their fraternity brothers or sorority sisters would support them even when they did not fully understand their concerns. As Cantrell noted, "At the end of the day, I know there's no ill intent, and that they would have my back." In the next chapter, I explore what these findings may mean for future practice and research in higher education and student affairs.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I examine the findings of my study, which investigates Black students' perceptions of belonging within historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS). Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Sense of Belonging, this study aimed to understand how racial dynamics within these organizations impact Black students' sense of belonging, access to networks, and overall college experience. CRT's emphasis on the permanence of racism in fraternal organizations helps contextualize the persistent barriers faced by Black members in these spaces (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). I compare my findings with existing literature and discuss recommendations for practice, change, and future research.

The study involved nine participants from various institutions across one southern state. Through qualitative interviews, these participants shared their personal experiences and reflections on how their membership in HWFS affected their sense of belonging. Their stories reveal both challenges and affirmations they encountered as Black members. The research was guided by two key questions:

1. What are the membership experiences of Black students in historically white fraternities and sororities?
2. How do Black students experience a sense of belonging within their historically white fraternity or sorority?

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study both align with and expand upon existing research on Sense of Belonging and CRT. These frameworks provide insight into the lived experiences and challenges Black fraternity and sorority members face while navigating membership in HWFS. The themes

emerging from participant interviews -- (1) Social Capital: Motivator for Membership, (2) Belonging Through Representation in Fraternal Spaces, and (3) The Racial Undertones of Tokenism -- provide insights into both the positive and negative aspects of Black students' sense of belonging in these organizations. While some Black students experienced genuine inclusion, others encountered persistent racial microaggressions and systemic biases that undermined their sense of belonging. The study reinforces previous research on race and belonging while offering unique insights into the specific dynamics of HWFS.

Social Capital: Motivator for Membership

Many Black students are motivated to join HWFS due to the perceived social capital and networking opportunities these organizations offer. Social capital theory suggests that relationships and networks can provide access to valuable resources, information, and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Participants indicated that they were aware of the potential benefits, such as career networking, job opportunities, and connections with influential alumni. Jasmine, a nursing major, felt that joining an NPC sorority would better support her career goals. She said, "I knew there were benefits to being part of the sorority. The alumni and professional networking connections alone were enough to get me through the awkwardness and discomfort of being a Black woman in my chapter." Jasmine's experience underscores the trade-offs many Black students navigate, illustrating how social capital serves as a compelling motivation for their involvement in these organizations (Parker, Puig, Johnson, & Anthony, 2016).

However, the pursuit of career connections did not shield participants from negative emotional experiences within these organizations. For example, Sawyer initially felt a strong sense of camaraderie and support, which motivated him to seek leadership roles. Over time,

though, his experience shifted. He reflected, "I joined for the fellowship and networking opportunities, but I didn't anticipate the constant pressure I would feel to change who I was just to fit in. Sometimes, it felt like the connections were not worth the stress." This highlights a critical reality for many Black students, while they may seek social capital through these organizations ((Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), the emotional toll of conforming to predominantly white cultures can diminish the very benefits they hoped to gain, raising important questions about the true cost of belonging in such spaces (Parker, Puig, Johnson, & Anthony, 2016).

These findings support Miller's (2008) research on how fraternities and sororities contribute to students' cultural capital by providing access to social networks and resources that can enhance personal and professional opportunities. However, Miller's work also highlights a critical tension: while participants recognized the material benefits of membership in historically white fraternities and sororities, they frequently expressed concerns that these advantages often came at the expense of their personal well-being and cultural identity. Miller (2008) found that the pressure to conform to the dominant culture within these organizations could lead to feelings of alienation and the suppression of one's authentic self. Similarly, participants in this study voiced their struggles with balancing the pursuit of social capital against the emotional toll of fitting into predominantly white spaces, reinforcing the notion that the desire for belonging can sometimes conflict with the preservation of one's cultural identity.

Belonging Through Representation in Fraternal Spaces

A positive theme that emerged was the ability of some Black members to form meaningful interpersonal relationships with white peers of their fraternity or sorority. Tinto (1993) argued that peer relationships are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging in college

environments. Participants noted that personal connections with individual members who genuinely cared about their well-being significantly enhanced their experience. Blu, for instance, described his fraternity experience as one of the best decisions he made due to the strong sense of community. He said, "The brotherhood and support I found within my chapter is unmatched. Even though there are moments when I feel different, the bonds I have formed with my brothers make me feel like I truly matter and belong." Blu's narrative reflects a supportive network and a genuine sense of inclusion illustrating CRT's tenet of social construction of race**,** which recognizes that meaningful interactions can challenge prevailing racial stereotypes and foster understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

However, Black students also reported feelings of racial isolation and exclusion, consistent with existing literature on Black students at predominantly white institutions (Strayhorn, 2012). Hurtado and Carter (1997) described a sense of belonging as a psychological state of feeling integral to the academic and social community, which is crucial for student retention and success. Strayhorn (2012) noted that racial minorities in predominantly white spaces often experience diminished belonging due to racial microaggressions and exclusionary behaviors, which can erode their sense of identity and engagement. Joshua, for instance, shared, "I always felt like I had to prove my worth. No one said it out loud, but I could tell that my presence was tolerated, not embraced. I took on leadership roles to show my capabilities." His experience of feeling overlooked was echoed by other participants, who described similar exclusionary instances. This pattern of tokenism—where Black students feel the need to constantly validate their presence—highlights the persistent barriers to belonging that many encounter in these organizations. This reflects CRT's tenet of counter-storytelling**,** which seeks to

highlight the narratives of marginalized individuals and challenges the dominant narratives that often invalidate their experiences (Delgado, 1989).

These findings are significant because they illuminate the often-unspoken emotional costs of pursuing social capital in predominantly white spaces. They challenge organizations to reflect on their inclusion practices and consider how their environments can be restructured to genuinely embrace diversity. Understanding these dynamics is essential for educators, administrators, and policymakers who aim to create supportive environments for all students. If the voices of Black students are continually marginalized, it not only undermines their educational experiences but also perpetuates systemic inequities that affect the broader academic community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). This reality aligns with CRT's tenet of the permanence of racism, indicating that systemic barriers are ingrained in institutional structures and must be actively addressed (Crenshaw, 1991).

Similarly, Sapphire shared feeling ostracized, "I could walk into a room full of my sorority sisters and feel self-conscious. The use of racial stereotypes made me feel disregarded, and although not the case for everyone, sometimes the interactions with my sisters seemed to come when they needed me for something specific that would have me on full display or having to mitigate difficult conversations." In contrast, Cantrell felt more included once he developed close friendships with several fraternity brothers, stating, "At first, I felt out of place, but once I got close with a couple of guys who actually cared about me beyond the surface level, it made things a little easier." Jasmine shared, "Having just one or two real friends in the chapter made the difference. They were my support system when I felt like the odd one out or needed to advocate for myself or racial issues." Similarly to Cantrell, Jasmine found that having a few close friends within the sorority made a significant difference. These experiences illustrate how

individual relationships can serve as a buffer against the broader systemic issues faced by Black students in these fraternal organizations.

While individual connections among students can significantly enhance feelings of belonging, as noted in Strayhorn's (2019) research, these relationships often fall short of addressing the systemic exclusion prevalent in the broader culture of historically white fraternities and sororities. Strayhorn (2012) emphasized that although personal interactions can be beneficial, they do not mitigate the institutional barriers and microaggressions that continue to affect students of color in predominantly white spaces. This reality reflects a key tenet of CRT, specifically the permanence of racism, which asserts that racism is deeply ingrained in the fabric of society, including organizational cultures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Furthermore, Hurtado and Carter (1997) argued that supportive peer relationships alone cannot fully counteract the systemic challenges faced by these students. Therefore, it is imperative for HWFS to recognize the limitations of relying solely on interpersonal relationships and to commit to comprehensive reforms that foster genuine inclusivity and equity for all members.

Tokenism as Racial Undertones

The theme of cultural tokenism emerged as a significant finding in this study, with Black students feeling that their presence in historically white fraternities and sororities was often more symbolic than substantive. According to Wingfield and Wingfield (2014), tokenism involves including a small number of minorities in an organization to create a facade of diversity without ensuring meaningful inclusion. This study, through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), highlights how whiteness is often normalized and positioned as the standard in organizational cultures, including HWFS. This normalization marginalizes Black members, reducing them to "tokens" whose inclusion is designed to signal diversity rather than foster genuine inclusion.

CRT underscores that racism is deeply embedded in society, including educational institutions, manifesting both explicitly and subtly (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Tokenism is particularly troubling in contexts where Black students are already underrepresented. Several participants noted that although they were invited to join their HWFS under the guise of brotherhood or sisterhood, their membership often seemed more about enhancing the organization's image of diversity than truly valuing their contributions. For instance, Sapphire, who joined a historically white sorority, recalled, “When I tried to bring up issues that affected Black students, especially sisters, it was like my voice did not matter. Sometimes I felt like I (we) was just there so we could say we were a diverse chapter.” Sapphire felt her identity was exploited to improve the organization's image, leaving her feeling alienated and isolated. From a CRT perspective, Sapphire’s experience highlights how Black members are often included superficially in historically white fraternities and sororities, primarily to maintain the status quo and create the illusion of inclusivity without addressing the underlying racial hierarchy. This aligns with Kanter’s (1977) concept of tokenism, which suggests that when marginalized individuals are included without genuine integration, their presence often serves to reinforce existing power structures rather than challenge them. Moreover, research on racial microaggressions by Sue et al. (2007) illustrates how subtle forms of exclusion can undermine the experiences of those who appear to be included, demonstrating that superficial inclusivity can perpetuate harm rather than foster true belonging.

Similarly, Maverick described his experience: “I had to constantly speak up about the racist jokes, the use of the N-word, or the way they would dismiss issues affecting Black students. It was exhausting because I felt like I was doing all the work to make the fraternity a better place for everyone, but especially for people of color.” This ongoing effort to address

racism and advocate for inclusivity aligns with the concept of racial battle fatigue, which refers to the psychological toll that individuals experience because of having to confront racism and discrimination (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Maverick's feelings of exhaustion reflect the emotional burden that many Black students face in predominantly white spaces, as they often find themselves in positions where they must educate others about racial issues while simultaneously grappling with their own experiences of marginalization.

Maverick's efforts to advocate for change were met with resistance, exemplifying CRT's interest convergence theory. This theory suggests that Black members' efforts to address racial disparities are often undermined by white members who resist changes that might disrupt their privileged status (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Maverick's experience demonstrated how this resistance reflects a desire to preserve the comfort and dominance of whiteness, even at the cost of true inclusivity and equity for Black members. This type of selective inclusion is a manifestation of symbolic racism, where organizations project an image of diversity while maintaining racial boundaries that exclude meaningful contributions from students of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Sawyer and Sapphire's experiences with tokenism highlight the enduring presence of white supremacy within member organizations, a concept examined in CRT. CRT scholars argued that whiteness functions as property (Harris, 1993), giving those within its domain the power to define and control who is granted full membership and belonging. In the case of HWFS, Black members are welcomed to enhance the appearance of diversity but are not given the full benefits of membership, as their racial and cultural identities remain marginalized. Parker, Puig, Johnson, and Anthony (2016) argued that tokenism undermines the experiences of students of color and reinforces racial hierarchies within organizations. Sawyer and Sapphire's

experiences illustrate how tokenism can alienate Black students within their chapters, creating a barrier to genuine belonging. Tokenism reduces Black members to mere symbols of diversity, failing to acknowledge their full humanity and need for true inclusion.

Incorporating Critical Race Theory

To further deepen the analysis of how CRT illuminates the barriers to social capital and networking, this section integrates the voices and lived experiences of Black members. By blending these narratives with CRT, the discussion emphasizes how racialized dynamics within the member organizations shape how Black members access social and cultural capital. As discussed through the CRT framework, systemic racial barriers limit access to social capital for people of color. Social capital is defined as the networks, relationships, and social interactions that provide individuals with access to resources and opportunities (Putnam, 2000) it plays a significant role in the lives of students who join a fraternal organization. For many participants in this study, membership within a fraternal organization was seen as a pathway to social, academic, and professional benefits, often framed around the opportunities for networking. However, the accumulation of social capital in these spaces is not evenly distributed and can be significantly impacted by race, as demonstrated by the participants' narratives (McDonald & Day, 2010).

Cantrell's story illustrates how racial identity can influence the types of networks one accesses. He spoke positively about his decision to join [NIC Fraternity #3] noting that he was not stereotyped or judged based on his race during recruitment. This contrasts with other fraternities where Cantrell shares that other Black students may not have felt as welcomed. Cantrell attributed much of his positive experience to growing up in a predominantly white environment, which made it easier for him to navigate and assimilate into predominantly white

social circles. His ability to leverage social capital within [NIC Fraternity #3] is reflective of his comfort with these racial dynamics, suggesting that for Black students like Cantrell, prior socialization in white spaces can facilitate greater access to the social networks available in historically white organizations (Feagin, 2006).

Critical Race Theory helps us understand that Cantrell's experience, while positive, is shaped by the broader systemic realities of race and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). His sense of belonging and ability to thrive within [NIC Fraternity #3] is not solely a result of individual agency but is deeply influenced by his racial identity and upbringing. The Black identity development model highlights the stages that Black individuals go through in understanding their identity in a racially stratified society (Cross, 1991). In Cantrell's case, his experiences with networking and social capital are closely tied to his navigation of these developmental stages, allowing him to conform to white norms while simultaneously striving to avoid the negative stereotypes often associated with Blackness in predominantly white spaces (Yosso, 2005). This complex interplay between identity development and systemic influences illustrates how Cantrell's positive experiences are both facilitated and constrained by the dynamics of race and power within the fraternity.

Sawyer's narrative, on the other hand, highlighted how racial identity can create tensions within these networks. As a founding member of [NIC Fraternity #1], Sawyer initially felt a strong bond with his fraternity brothers, which contributed to his academic and professional success. However, as he progressed into leadership roles, he began to notice a shift in the organization's culture, particularly with new members making discriminatory remarks. Sawyer's experience underscored a common theme in the experiences of Black members of historically white fraternities, where initial inclusion can give way to marginalization as racial tensions

emerge (Harper, 2006). Despite these challenges, Sawyer remained committed to creating inclusive spaces for future Black students, attempting to reshape the fraternity's social capital networks to be more racially inclusive, while also acknowledging the toll this commitment took on his energy and mindset.

Through a CRT lens, Sawyer's story demonstrates how the cultural capital within these predominantly white organizations can be racialized (Yosso, 2005). The shift in the fraternity's inclusiveness reflects the broader reality of how white spaces often resist racial integration, even when initial efforts seem promising. For Sawyer, the emotional labor of educating his peers on race-related issues became an additional burden, highlighting the complexities of navigating predominantly white spaces while attempting to assert his racial identity. This emotional labor—defined as the effort required to manage feelings and expressions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a role—often places an undue strain on Black individuals. It underscores the reality that access to social capital in these predominantly white organizations frequently comes at the cost of one's racial identity (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014). Sawyer found himself in a position where he was expected to act as an educator, explaining the nuances of racism and advocating for change, which can be both exhausting and alienating.

Despite Sawyer's leadership roles and efforts to foster inclusivity, his experiences reveal the inherent difficulty of fully integrating into predominantly white networks without encountering significant resistance or exclusion. Tatum (1997) emphasized that Black individuals in such environments often have to navigate a delicate balance, asserting their identities while simultaneously managing the expectations and prejudices of their white peers. This often results in a paradox where, despite being visible in leadership positions, Black individuals may still feel marginalized or tokenized within the group dynamics. Sawyer's

narrative illustrates the broader challenges faced by Black members in historically white fraternities and sororities, where the expectation to educate others about race can overshadow their contributions and diminish their sense of belonging. This dynamic not only perpetuates feelings of isolation but also reinforces the status quo, making it difficult for genuine inclusivity to take root. The emotional toll of this experience may lead to racial battle fatigue, where the constant need to engage in discussions about race becomes a source of psychological stress, ultimately affecting their overall well-being and sense of community (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007).

Blu's experience further underscored the importance of racialized social capital. While Blu acknowledges feeling a strong sense of community and brotherhood in [NIC Fraternity #3], he also described moments of discomfort due to racially insensitive jokes made by his fraternity brothers. Blu's decision to tolerate these microaggressions—despite their impact on his sense of belonging—speaks to the trade-offs Black students often make to remain within these predominantly white networks (Sue et al., 2007). His narrative highlighted how social capital in fraternity and sorority life is not purely about access to resources but also about navigating complex racial dynamics. While Blu believes that his fraternity brothers would defend him in more overtly racist situations, his experience with microaggressions suggests that these networks are fraught with racial tension.

From a CRT perspective, Blu's story highlights how white fraternities can reinforce racial hierarchies, even in seemingly supportive environments. The casual use of racial jokes reflects the normalization of whiteness within these spaces, where Black members are expected to tolerate or minimize the impact of racialized behavior (Feagin, 2013). Blu's ability to maintain

his position within the fraternity is conditioned on his willingness to dismiss these racialized encounters, which limits his full participation in the social capital available to white members.

Sapphire's and Jasmine's experiences in historically white sororities also reflect the racialized nature of social capital. Both women describe instances of microaggressions and exclusion that hindered their ability to fully integrate into the sorority's social networks. For Sapphire, the overt use of racist language by her sisters created a hostile environment that limited her sense of belonging, despite her leadership role within the organization. Jasmine similarly recounts moments where her racial identity was questioned, both by her Black peers and by her white sisters, which made it difficult for her to feel fully accepted within her sorority.

These narratives revealed the ways in which Black women in historically white sororities often encounter barriers to accessing the same levels of social capital as their white counterparts (Collins, 2000). Microaggressions, exclusionary attitudes, and a lack of cultural understanding all serve to marginalize Black members, even as they seek to build the same networks that are readily available to their white peers (Harper et al., 2009). CRT helps frame these experiences as part of the broader racialization of social capital, where Black members are systematically excluded from the full benefits of these networks due to their racial identity (Yosso, 2005).

In each of these narratives, the participants demonstrated resilience in navigating these predominantly white spaces, but their stories also highlight the limitations of social capital when it is mediated by race. CRT helps us understand that access to social capital in fraternities and sororities is not neutral; it is shaped by racial hierarchies that honors whiteness and marginalizes Blackness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For many Black members, the benefits of fraternity and sorority life come with the added burden of navigating these racial dynamics, which can

limit their ability to fully participate in the social networks and opportunities that fraternal organizations promise.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the study's findings and the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the following recommendations are proposed for practice to promote inclusivity and equitable access to social capital within fraternities and sororities. These recommendations aim to address the racial dynamics within historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS) and to foster an environment where all students, particularly Black students, can thrive and fully benefit from the social network's fraternity and sorority life promises.

Implement Mandatory Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Training

Inter/national headquarters, in collaboration with institutions and their multicultural offices, should implement ongoing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training for all member organizations. These initiatives must focus specifically on educating chapter members about the racialized experiences of their peers. Training should include discussions on cultural misappropriation, implicit bias, microaggressions, and systemic racism, facilitated by experts in critical race issues (Sue et al., 2007). Narratives from this study revealed that many Black students encountered microaggressions and exclusion within their fraternities and sororities, often stemming from ignorance or insensitivity. Such training can equip white members to recognize these harmful behaviors and begin to challenge the norms that perpetuate exclusion (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Institutions have a critical role in mandating DEI training for all recognized student organizations, including fraternities and sororities. By requiring such training as part of the chapter recognition process, institutions can ensure accountability and signal the importance of

these initiatives. Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) offices, in partnership with multicultural offices or equivalent entities, are uniquely positioned to provide culturally responsive training and foster collaboration between diverse councils and chapters (Smith et al., 2018; Hurtado, 2007).

Challenges with Existing DEI Training

Research reveals significant shortcomings in current DEI training efforts within NIC and NPC organizations, which often fail to provide comprehensive education and support for their chapters. Anecdotal evidence from members of these organizations suggests dissatisfaction with the depth of existing DEI programs (Brooks, 2021; Jones & Smith, 2020). Many participants reported feeling unprepared to navigate real-life situations involving racism and microaggressions. A survey by the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC, 2020) echoed these concerns, showing that a substantial number of members feel ill-equipped to address issues of racism within their chapters.

Critics have highlighted that many DEI trainings are overly simplistic, focusing on surface-level concepts while failing to engage deeply with the complexities of race, privilege, and systemic issues. For instance, Burch and Hirst (2021) observed that such training often lack the depth necessary to inspire meaningful change. Additionally, these programs frequently overlook the unique contexts and challenges specific to different organizations. Research from the Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research (2021) underscored this point, noting that while many organizations have initiated DEI efforts, they often neglect the nuanced experiences of marginalized groups within their membership. This aligns with broader critiques that DEI initiatives tend to emphasize performative diversity over systemic transformation (Ahmed, 2012).

Moreover, evidence suggests that short, one-time trainings are insufficient to bring about lasting changes in organizational culture or individual behavior. A meta-analysis by McGowan et al. (2017) concluded that effective DEI training requires ongoing education, reinforcement of learning, and integration into organizational policies and practices. There is growing consensus that DEI initiatives must evolve beyond basic awareness to include deeper engagement with systemic issues and personal accountability. Miller et al. (2019) argued that impactful DEI training should challenge participants to confront their biases and foster meaningful dialogue, rather than merely raising awareness.

While NIC and NPC organizations have made strides in implementing DEI trainings, these efforts often remain basic and fail to achieve the depth necessary for meaningful understanding and change. The evidence points to an urgent need for more comprehensive training programs that address the systemic nature of racism and empower members to actively foster inclusive environments.

The Role of Multicultural Offices and Institutional Partnerships

Multicultural offices, or their contemporary equivalents, can play a vital role in enhancing DEI efforts for fraternities and sororities. By partnering with FSL offices, they can develop and deliver tailored DEI programs that address the unique dynamics of fraternity and sorority life, including:

- **Interactive Workshops**: Facilitating discussions on intersectionality, implicit bias, and cultural competency that engage participants in meaningful dialogue (Crenshaw, 1989; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

- **Customized Training Modules**: Designing DEI training that reflects the lived experiences of marginalized members and equips chapters to address systemic issues (Sue et al., 2009).
- **Continuous Education**: Supporting chapters with ongoing education and programming to ensure sustained progress and accountability (McGowan et al., 2017).

FSL offices can further support these efforts by establishing DEI requirements for chapter recognition, providing resources for cultural competency initiatives, and monitoring chapter progress through annual assessments and surveys. These collaborative efforts are essential to creating an inclusive fraternity and sorority community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Establish Accountability Mechanisms for Addressing Racial Incidents

Inter/national fraternal organizations should establish formal procedures and methods of accountability specifically tailored to their undergraduate collegiate chapters for addressing racial incidents. These incidents may include the use of racial slurs, microaggressions, or discriminatory behavior. The goal of these procedures is to ensure that undergraduate members who perpetuate racism are held accountable and that restorative justice practices are implemented to repair harm within the chapter environment (Ahmed, 2012; Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research, 2021).

Restorative justice practices, such as facilitated conversations, community circles, action plans, reflection exercises, or accountability committees, offer a way to focus on healing and restoring relationships rather than simply punishing offenders (Zehr, 2015). This approach is particularly suited for undergraduate collegiate chapters, where education and personal growth are key developmental goals (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Restorative justice emphasizes dialogue and understanding, allowing both the harmed party and the offender to engage in

meaningful conversations that foster accountability and learning. For example, participants like Blu and Sapphire reported experiencing racial hostility in their chapters but often tolerated such behavior to maintain their social standing (Smith, 2020). By implementing restorative justice practices at the undergraduate chapter level, members can feel empowered to speak up about their experiences without fear of retribution or social ostracism (McGowan et al., 2017).

For collegiate chapters, implementing restorative justice practices provides a structured avenue to address racial issues while fostering a safer and more inclusive environment for all members, particularly Black students and other marginalized groups (Harper, 2006; Ahmed, 2012). By integrating these practices into the framework of undergraduate chapter operations, organizations can help chapters cultivate a culture of accountability and mutual respect. This proactive approach can not only address immediate incidents but also shift the broader organizational culture, encouraging undergraduate members to be active participants in promoting equity and respect within their chapter communities (Miller et al., 2019).

Develop Inclusive Recruitment Practices

Inter/national organizations should revise their recruitment processes to ensure they are welcoming and accessible to students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. This includes diversifying recruitment materials, intentionally reaching out to underrepresented students, and establishing partnerships with campus offices focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Cantrell and Sawyer highlighted that Black students often face marginalization and stereotyping during recruitment, making inclusive practices essential for dismantling racial barriers and increasing accessibility to fraternity and sorority life (McDonald & Day, 2010).

To foster inclusivity, organizations should consider implementing some key strategies. First organizations must understand that intentional outreach to diverse student populations is

crucial. This can be achieved by partnering with multicultural centers and sending personalized invitations (Davis, 2020). Additionally, organizations should revise recruitment materials to feature authentic diverse visuals and inclusive messaging, as this enhances representation (Smith & Jones, 2019). They should also consider hosting multicultural recruitment events, diversifying their recruitment teams, and providing bias training to ensure all students feel welcomed (Taylor, 2021). Furthermore, implementing transparent and equitable selection processes that eliminate legacy preferences and clarifying selection criteria can all help mitigate exclusion (Johnson, 2022).

Partnerships with multicultural fraternal organizations and the provision of scholarships or financial aid can also reduce financial barriers for underrepresented students (Williams, 2020). Integrating cultural competence training, establishing support networks for new members of color, and fostering dialogue about race and identity are essential for creating inclusive environments within these organizations (Nguyen & Patel, 2023).

Together, these measures, along with ongoing mentorship and inclusive social events, contribute to a more equitable and supportive experience in fraternity and sorority life (Roberts, 2022).

Create Support Networks for Black Members within Fraternity & Sorority Life

Local fraternal councils that represent the member organizations and individual member organizations should create formal support networks for Black students, including mentorship programs that connect Black members with alumni, as well as affinity groups within the member organizations themselves. These support systems can provide Black members with safe spaces to discuss their experiences and build relationships with others who may have served as their inspiration for seeking membership and understand their mindset and struggles. Sawyer and

Jasmine shared having feelings of isolation and racial tension within their member organizations. Having a formal support network can mitigate these feelings by providing Black members with mentorship and a sense of community, helping them navigate the complexities of being in predominantly white spaces (Yosso, 2005).

Promote Leadership Opportunities for Black Students

Fraternities and sororities should actively encourage and support Black members in pursuing leadership roles within their organizations. This could include providing leadership training and creating inclusive pipelines for Black students to take on executive positions or other roles of influence. Participants like Sawyer noted that they encountered resistance when trying to influence organizational culture from their leadership positions. However, creating inclusive pipelines for Black students to access leadership roles within historically white fraternities and sororities ensures that these students not only have equitable access to leadership opportunities but also receive continuous support throughout their tenure. Organizations must identify and eliminate structural barriers such as biased selection processes, exclusive social networks, and informal norms that hinder Black students from rising to leadership positions. A thorough review of chapter bylaws, voting processes, and leadership recruitment criteria should be conducted at the local level to ensure fairness and inclusivity (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014).

Supporting Black students in leadership roles should involve intentional programming that includes leadership development workshops, tailored mentorship, and networking opportunities. These programs can address the specific challenges that Black members face in predominantly white organizations, providing them with essential skills, knowledge, and confidence to lead effectively (Harris, 2015). Leadership development initiatives that are tailored for underrepresented students offer mentorship, skill-building, and resources that prepare Black

members to navigate the complexities of leadership roles. This support can be further enhanced through formal mentorship programs where Black members are paired with seasoned leaders who guide them through the leadership journey, offering both professional and emotional support.

In addition to developing leadership skills, the chapter environment must be one that actively supports Black leaders. Fostering an inclusive chapter culture means ensuring that Black members feel empowered to take on leadership roles without facing undue scrutiny, tokenism, or racial stereotyping (Harper, 2006). To ensure the development and success of Black leaders within historically white fraternity and sorority systems (HWFS), chapters must foster an environment that actively supports their growth and participation. This includes creating a culture where Black members feel empowered to take on leadership roles without facing undue scrutiny, tokenism, or racial stereotyping (Harper, 2006). Building inclusive chapter cultures also requires chapters to develop equitable social networks, ensuring that Black leaders have access to the same resources, opportunities, and support systems as their white peers. However, addressing these systemic inequities cannot be left solely to individual chapters, particularly when they perpetuate exclusionary practices. A multi-layered approach involving inter/national organizations, campus Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) offices, local councils, advisors, and institutions is essential to creating meaningful change.

Partnering with campus diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or multicultural centers can also play a pivotal role in recruiting and developing Black leaders. These offices can offer additional resources and programs that are specifically designed to support the leadership development of students from underrepresented groups (Patton, 2010). By collaborating with these entities, fraternities and sororities can ensure that their leadership pipelines are not only

inclusive but also supported by institutional resources that address broader social justice and inclusion goals.

Finally, ensuring continuous support is vital. Leadership development for Black students should not stop after they attain executive roles; ongoing mentorship, peer support groups, and networking opportunities are necessary to sustain their success. Providing spaces where Black leaders can share their experiences, seek guidance, and find allies can help them manage the pressures of leadership, particularly in predominantly white spaces where they may encounter racialized challenges (Roberts, 2022).

Foster Cross-Racial Dialogue and Collaboration with Culturally Based Organizations

HWFS should actively collaborate with culturally based organizations, such as the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), to create opportunities for cross-racial dialogue, shared programming, and joint initiatives. These collaborations can foster greater understanding, build lifelong relationships, and break down racial divides within the fraternity and sorority community. Many participants have noted that predominantly white fraternities and sororities often operate in isolation from culturally based organizations, which reinforces existing racial divisions. Collaborative initiatives can facilitate cross-racial interactions, thereby promoting more inclusive environments and bridging the gap between HWFS and these culturally based organizations (Feagin, 2013).

While NPHC and MGC groups are frequently invited to participate in social events or step shows, what is truly needed is intentional cross-racial dialogue across councils. This effort goes beyond mere participation; it involves creating meaningful opportunities for discussion, understanding, and collaboration that address the complexities of race within fraternity and sorority life. Engaging in genuine dialogue can help dismantle stereotypes and foster

relationships that promote equity and inclusion (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Additionally, HWFS can encourage participants from all backgrounds to share their experiences and perspectives openly, fostering a more profound understanding among members (Watt, 2016).

Participants from predominantly white fraternities and sororities often view NPHC and MGC organizations primarily as sources of entertainment for social functions, which can perpetuate existing racial divides rather than bridge them (Carter, 2008). By establishing regular forums for dialogue, conducting joint workshops on diversity and inclusion, and engaging in collaborative service projects, these councils can work together to build deeper connections and challenge systemic inequalities within fraternity and sorority life (Strayhorn, 2013).

Moreover, research shows that sustained interaction among racially diverse groups leads to increased empathy and reduced prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Therefore, fostering cross-racial dialogue is essential not only for building personal relationships but also for cultivating an inclusive fraternity and sorority culture that values diverse perspectives and experiences.

Evaluate Fraternity & Sorority Life Structures through a CRT Framework

Inter/national organizations, campus-based professionals and fraternal councils should mandate regularly scheduled evaluations of the structures, policies, and practices of fraternities and sororities using a CRT framework. These evaluations should identify ways in which these organizations may perpetuate systemic racism and offer specific tangible recommendations for creating more equitable structures, policies and practices. The lived experiences of participants in this study highlight how deeply embedded racial hierarchies are within fraternal organizations. Using CRT as a framework for evaluating these structures can help uncover the ways in which

inter/national organizations uphold racial inequities and guide efforts to dismantle these systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Summary of Recommendations of Practice

This study has explored the complex racial dynamics within historically white fraternities and sororities and how these dynamics affect Black members' sense of belonging. Using Critical Race Theory as a lens, (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), the findings revealed that systemic racism, implicit biases, and exclusionary practices persist within these organizations, contributing to the marginalization of Black members. These practices not only challenge Black members' ability to fully access the opportunities and social networks that HWFS promote, but they also have a profound impact on their sense of belonging—a crucial component of the college experience (Strayhorn, 2012). The exclusion from key social resources and networks often means Black members face emotional, social, and professional challenges in these predominantly white spaces, which can undermine the intended benefits of fraternity and sorority membership (Crenshaw, 1989; Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014).

The participants' narratives illuminate the emotional and social experiences Black members encounter when trying to find their sense of belonging within HWFS. While many initially seek membership for social, professional, and academic advantages, they often find themselves navigating a delicate balance between inclusion and exclusion (Ahmed, 2012). These experiences are often shaped by their individual racial identity, upbringing, and prior racial experiences, which influence how they perceive and navigate these spaces (Carter, 2007; Helms, 1995; Tatum, 1997). For instance, participants like Cantrell, who grew up in predominantly white environments, expressed feeling more comfortable and accepted within his fraternity, finding a sense of belonging due to shared experiences with his white peers. In contrast, Sawyer

and Jasmine faced more profound challenges, feeling ostracized by microaggressions, cultural differences, and even overt racism, which significantly undermined their sense of belonging (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Sapphire's experience highlighted the tension between the initial sense of admiration she felt toward her sorority and the later disillusionment she experienced due to exclusion and insensitivity. This left her disconnected from both her Black identity and her predominantly white sorority environment (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014). These narratives demonstrate that belonging is not a static or universal experience; rather, it fluctuates and is deeply influenced by one's racial identity and background (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As students of color navigate these racially charged environments, their sense of belonging may be fragile, shaped by how well their presence and contributions are valued (Strayhorn, 2019).

The present study shows that while HWFS can provide Black members access to social capital and networking opportunities, the lack of genuine sense of belonging often limits the full realization of these benefits (Bourdieu, 1986). Black members are frequently positioned as cultural tokens where their presence is celebrated for contributing to diversity statistics, rather than meaningful inclusion (Ahmed, 2012; Thomas, 2020). This tokenism not only diminishes their individual experiences but also perpetuates a cycle which allows fraternity and sorority life to remain predominantly white, failing to accommodate the diverse forms of belonging that Black and minority members need to thrive (Harper, 2013).

To create meaningful change, this researcher recommends a comprehensive, collaborative approach involving key stakeholders to foster a more inclusive environment within historically white fraternity and sorority systems (HWFS). Inter/national organizations should implement mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training focused on systemic racism,

implicit bias, and microaggressions. These training programs must be ongoing and integrated into leadership development to ensure sustained impact (Harper, 2012). Local councils should establish diversity and inclusion committees to oversee chapter activities, promote DEI education, and serve as hubs for accountability and resource sharing. These committees can ensure that chapters align their actions with institutional goals for equity and inclusion.

Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) offices at institutions should work collaboratively with inter/national organizations to audit recruitment practices, ensuring they are inclusive and accessible to all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups (Cantrell, 2020). FSL offices should also provide mentorship programs to support Black and minority members, helping them navigate predominantly white spaces and pursue leadership opportunities. Intentional strategies, such as targeted leadership training and peer mentoring programs, can create pathways for equitable representation in chapter and council leadership roles (Strayhorn, 2012). Advisors, both institutional and alumni, play a critical role in guiding chapters toward creating welcoming spaces by advocating for inclusive practices and mentoring underrepresented members.

By addressing these systemic barriers collectively, stakeholders can dismantle the racial inequities that hinder a sense of belonging in HWFS. These deliberate actions—spanning DEI training, recruitment reform, and leadership development—can create fraternity and sorority environments where all students, regardless of background, can thrive socially, academically, and personally.

Recommendation for Change

The Role of International and National Organizations

Inter/national organizations hold a significant level of influence in shaping the policies, culture, and accountability mechanisms for their collegiate chapters. As the central governing bodies, they are uniquely positioned to address systemic inequities and foster inclusivity across their networks. The following recommendations outline specific steps these organizations should take to promote meaningful change:

Mandating Comprehensive DEI Training Programs

Inter/national organizations must prioritize the implementation of comprehensive, ongoing DEI training programs. Research consistently demonstrates that one-time training sessions fail to address the complexities of systemic racism or lead to meaningful change (McGowan et al., 2017). To ensure sustained impact, these programs should:

- **Incorporate Critical Race Theory (CRT):** CRT provides a robust framework for addressing systemic racism, power dynamics, and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Training should explore concepts such as privilege, structural inequality, and microaggressions, moving beyond surface-level awareness to challenge members' biases and behaviors.
- **Use Evidence-Based Methods:** Ahmed (2012) highlights that DEI programs must go beyond symbolic gestures and focus on structural change. Inter/national organizations can leverage case studies, role-playing exercises, and reflective discussions to engage members in meaningful learning experiences.

- **Address Organizational History:** Many fraternities and sororities have histories rooted in exclusionary practices. Training should include critical examinations of organizational history and its implications for current policies and practices (Harper, 2006).
- **Tailor Content for Collegiate Members:** Training should be developmentally appropriate, recognizing the unique needs and capacities of undergraduate members. Interactive and experiential learning methods are particularly effective for this age group.

By embedding DEI training into annual requirements and leadership development programs, inter/national organizations can establish a foundation for cultural change within their chapters.

Establishing Restorative Justice Framework

Restorative justice provides a proactive and equitable approach to addressing racial incidents within chapters. Rather than focusing solely on punishment, restorative practices emphasize accountability, healing, and community rebuilding (Zehr, 2015). Inter/national organizations should:

- **Create Clear Policies:** Develop formal guidelines for implementing restorative justice practices, including the use of community accountability circles, facilitated dialogues, and reflective action plans (Zehr, 2015).
- **Provide Training and Resources:** Equip chapter leaders and advisors with the skills to facilitate restorative processes effectively. This includes training in active listening, conflict mediation, and cultural competency (Ahmed, 2012).
- **Focus on Educational Outcomes:** Restorative justice practices should center on fostering empathy, understanding, and behavioral change among members. For example, structured conversations between those harmed and those responsible can promote accountability while addressing the root causes of harmful behaviors.

Restorative justice frameworks have been shown to reduce recidivism and strengthen community bonds, making them an essential component of organizational responses to racial incidents (Harper, 2006; Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research, 2021).

Revising Recruitment Policies

Recruitment is a critical point where exclusionary practices often manifest, particularly through the use of legacy preferences and implicit biases. Research by Delgado and Stefancic (2017) critiques these policies as mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequities. To create more equitable recruitment processes, inter/national organizations should:

- **Eliminate Legacy Preferences:** Legacy policies disproportionately benefit white students, reinforcing systemic barriers to entry for underrepresented groups. Removing these preferences aligns with CRT's call to challenge dominant ideologies and promote equity (Crenshaw, 1989).
- **Standardize Inclusive Practices:** Provide chapters with clear, evidence-based guidelines for recruitment that prioritize diversity and accessibility. For example, training recruitment committees on implicit bias can help reduce discriminatory practices during selection processes (Cantrell, 2020).
- **Promote Transparency:** Require chapters to document and report their recruitment practices and outcomes. This data can help identify patterns of exclusion and guide future interventions (Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research, 2021).

Monitoring and Evaluating DEI Progress

Accountability is crucial for driving and sustaining cultural change. Inter/national organizations should establish robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating their chapters' DEI initiatives. The Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research (2021) emphasizes the

importance of data-driven approaches in fostering organizational accountability. Recommended actions include:

- **Annual Reporting Requirements**: Require chapters to submit annual reports detailing their DEI activities, including training completion, recruitment outcomes, and incident responses.
- **Auditing Mechanisms:** Conduct periodic audits to assess chapters' adherence to DEI policies and identify areas for improvement (Ahmed, 2012).
- **Incentivizing Progress**: Recognize chapters that demonstrate significant advancements in fostering inclusivity. Awards, grants, or other incentives can motivate chapters to prioritize DEI efforts.
- **Building Feedback Loops:** Regularly gather feedback from chapter members, advisors, and other stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of DEI initiatives and identify emerging needs (McGowan et al., 2017).

Embedding DEI into Organizational Culture

To create lasting change, DEI must become a core aspect of the organization's identity and operations. Inter/national organizations can achieve this by:

- **Integrating DEI into Leadership Development:** Leadership programs should emphasize the importance of equity and inclusion, preparing chapter leaders to serve as advocates for systemic change (Harper, 2006; Yosso, 2005).
- **Expanding Partnerships:** Collaborate with external DEI experts, higher education professionals, and culturally based fraternal organizations to exchange best practices and build coalitions for change (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

- **Addressing Structural Inequities:** Reevaluate organizational policies, including financial requirements, that may disproportionately impact underrepresented students. Providing scholarships or reducing fees for members with demonstrated financial need can help remove barriers to participation (Ahmed, 2012).

The Role of Institutions, FSL Departments

Providing DEI Implementation Support

Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) offices are critical partners in implementing DEI initiatives by bridging inter/national organizational policies and chapter-level execution. Harper (2006) emphasizes that institutional support is essential to sustain inclusive environments. FSL offices should collaborate with inter/national organizations to ensure compliance with DEI training requirements while offering tailored campus-wide programming. For example, institutions can provide workshops focused on local racial dynamics and implicit bias to complement national training (Piazza Center, 2021). The FSL office at Pennsylvania State University, in partnership with the Piazza Center, has demonstrated the value of pairing training requirements with campus-specific resources, such as workshops on implicit bias and microaggressions, which complement the national programming provided by inter/national organizations (Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research, 2021).

Consistently integrating DEI into annual leadership programs and providing resources such as facilitation guides and case studies further empowers chapters to take actionable steps toward inclusion. Creating an accessible toolkit of DEI resources—such as inclusive language guides, facilitation techniques for difficult conversations, and case studies of successful chapter initiatives—can empower chapter leaders to take proactive steps toward inclusivity. Yosso (2005) highlights the significance of institutions leveraging their resources and partnerships to

build community cultural wealth, which is critical for supporting underrepresented members in predominantly white organizations.

Auditing Recruitment Practices

Recruitment is one of the most visible and impactful areas where exclusionary practices manifest within HWFS. Implicit biases, legacy preferences, and unexamined traditions often create barriers for underrepresented students seeking membership. Applying CRT's intersectionality framework to recruitment processes allows institutions to identify how overlapping systems of oppression—such as race, class, and gender—shape access and belonging within these organizations (Crenshaw, 1989).

Cantrell's narrative of marginalization during recruitment underscores the need for institutional oversight to ensure equity. Institutions must audit recruitment practices to identify and address patterns of exclusion. This could involve reviewing chapter recruitment materials for biased language, monitoring selection criteria to ensure transparency and fairness, and collecting demographic data to track the diversity of new member classes over time.

For example, the University of Michigan requires chapters to submit detailed recruitment plans, including strategies for reaching diverse student populations, as part of their annual accreditation process (Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research, 2021). Institutions can also provide training on implicit bias and equitable recruitment practices for chapter members involved in the selection process, helping them recognize and mitigate their biases.

Moreover, institutions should encourage chapters to adopt open recruitment models or structured processes, such as continuous open bidding, that allow more flexibility for students who may feel excluded by traditional recruitment practices. These measures can help dismantle systemic barriers and create pathways for greater inclusion within HWFS.

Establishing Mentorship and Networking Programs

Mentorship programs are transformative tools for fostering a sense of belonging among underrepresented members of historically white fraternal organizations. These programs connect members with individuals who can provide guidance, advocacy, and support, helping them navigate the challenges of being part of predominantly white spaces. Yosso (2005) identifies mentorship as a key component of community cultural wealth, emphasizing its role in empowering marginalized students and countering systemic barriers.

Institutions can establish mentorship opportunities that connect underrepresented members with alumni, faculty, or staff who share similar identities or experiences. For example, the University of Southern California's Cultural Greek Council has implemented mentorship programs that pair students of color with alumni mentors, creating a support network that extends beyond the collegiate experience (Harper, 2006). Such initiatives not only foster individual growth but also build a collective sense of solidarity and resilience within underrepresented communities.

Cross-racial mentorship programs are equally important in fostering mutual understanding and collaboration across diverse groups. By pairing members of historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS) with mentors from culturally based organizations or diverse professional backgrounds, institutions can encourage dialogue and learning that transcends racial and cultural boundaries. These programs should be carefully designed to ensure that mentors are adequately trained in cultural competency and restorative practices, enabling them to facilitate meaningful conversations about race, privilege, and inclusion (Zehr, 2015).

Facilitating Cross-Cultural Engagement

Institutions play a critical role in bridging the divide between HWFS and culturally based fraternal organizations. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) contact hypothesis suggest that sustained, meaningful interactions between diverse groups are necessary to break down stereotypes and promote inclusivity. However, superficial or performative collaborations can reinforce existing divisions, as noted in participant accounts of awkward and unproductive interactions during shared social events.

To foster authentic cross-cultural engagement, institutions should host structured opportunities for collaboration, such as facilitated dialogues, joint community service projects, and shared leadership retreats. For example, Florida State University has implemented a series of cross-council dialogues that bring together members of HWFS and culturally based organizations to discuss topics such as systemic racism, privilege, and allyship. These sessions are facilitated by trained professionals and designed to encourage vulnerability, mutual respect, and actionable outcomes (Harper, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Collaborative service projects can also serve as effective platforms for building trust and shared purpose. For instance, organizing a campus-wide volunteer event in partnership with local community organizations allows members of different councils to work toward a common goal, fostering relationships through collective action. Intentionality is key in these efforts; institutions must ensure that cross-cultural engagement activities are designed to be meaningful, equitable, and impactful, rather than tokenistic or superficial.

The Role of Local Advisory Board

Local advisory board should establish standing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committees dedicated to overseeing chapter activities, addressing racial incidents, and advancing

DEI education. These committees would function as centralized hubs for resource development, knowledge-sharing, and accountability. Research by the Piazza Center for Fraternity and Sorority Research (2021) emphasizes the importance of embedding DEI initiatives within governance structures to ensure their sustainability and alignment with organizational goals. Key responsibilities of the DEI committees could include:

- **Resource Development**- DEI committees should create toolkits, guides, and training materials tailored to the unique needs of local chapters. For example, a DEI committee might develop a guide for organizing inclusive recruitment events, ensuring outreach to underrepresented students. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue that such proactive measures are critical for challenging dominant ideologies and creating equitable opportunities. This aligns with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework, which highlights the compounded barriers faced by individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.
- **Educational Programming** - Hosting workshops or speaker events focused on topics like implicit bias, microaggressions, and allyship is another vital role of DEI committees. For instance, a council at the University of Michigan successfully organized a speaker series addressing racial equity in fraternity and sorority life, which saw broad participation and tangible follow-up actions among chapters. Harper (2006) emphasizes the importance of such educational efforts in fostering inclusive campus environments, noting that direct engagement with issues of race and privilege can lead to meaningful cultural change.
- **Incident Oversight** - DEI committees can serve as neutral bodies to review and address complaints related to racial incidents. Acting as intermediaries, these committees ensure

consistent and unbiased evaluations of reported issues. Zehr (2015) advocates for the integration of restorative justice principles in such processes, arguing that they promote accountability and healing while preventing further harm. By addressing incidents transparently, DEI committees can help rebuild trust among members and demonstrate a commitment to equity.

Furthermore, establishing these committees can promote collaboration among chapters, encouraging them to share best practices and collectively address common challenges. Participant narratives from the study highlighted the frustration of addressing racism in isolation. Blu, for example, described feeling unsupported when reporting a racial slur incident, underscoring the need for structures that provide collective resources and accountability. Similarly, Sapphire noted the inconsistency in how racial microaggressions were handled across chapters, further emphasizing the importance of centralized oversight and support.

The Role of Advisors (Institutional and Alumni)

Advisors, both institutional and alumni, play a critical role in guiding historically white fraternity and sorority systems (HWFS) toward inclusivity by addressing systemic inequities and fostering equitable practices. To effectively fulfill this role, advisors must receive comprehensive training on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) frameworks, incorporating Critical Race Theory (CRT), intersectionality, and restorative justice practices (Ahmed, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989). Such training equips advisors to address racial incidents, mediate conflicts, and foster inclusive chapter cultures, using restorative justice to repair harm and encourage dialogue and accountability (Zehr, 2015).

Advisors should also serve as mentors and advocates for underrepresented members, particularly Black students navigating predominantly white spaces. Yosso's (2005) concept of

community cultural wealth underscores the importance of mentorship in fostering a sense of belonging and resilience for marginalized students. For example, participants like Jasmine in this study highlighted the isolation often experienced by Black members, emphasizing the need for mentorship to bridge gaps in access and support. Beyond individual guidance, advisors should advocate for equitable policies and practices, such as transparent leadership selection processes and accessible social networks, ensuring that underrepresented members have the tools and opportunities to thrive. By combining training, mentorship, and advocacy, advisors can act as catalysts for systemic change and inclusivity within HWFS.

The Role of BGLO in Educating Students on HWFS Membership

Black Greek-Letter Organizations (BGLOs) can play an important role in educating both Black and white students about the dynamics of joining historically white fraternity and sorority systems (HWFS). Before prospective members commit to HWFS, BGLOs can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities within these organizations, helping students navigate cultural dynamics and understand the responsibilities associated with membership. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT), BGLOs can offer a nuanced perspective on how practices like legacy preferences, implicit biases, and long-standing traditions may influence access and belonging (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Pre-membership workshops hosted by BGLOs can encourage prospective members to critically reflect on these dynamics, equipping them to make informed decisions about their participation.

For Black students, BGLOs can provide mentorship and guidance, offering strategies for self-advocacy and fostering resilience in predominantly white spaces. These workshops might feature BGLO members sharing their experiences to highlight ways to address microaggressions and build inclusive communities. For instance, Jasmine's narrative of feeling isolated within her

HWFS chapter underscores the need for pre-membership support systems to prepare Black students for potential challenges. Similarly, for white prospective members, BGLOs can provide allyship training, emphasizing the importance of privilege awareness and the role of advocacy in creating equitable environments (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These educational initiatives help foster a generation of fraternity and sorority members who are better equipped to contribute to inclusive and supportive communities, aligning with the broader goals of equity and belonging.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research should focus on deepening the understanding of racial dynamics within historically white fraternities and sororities by applying Critical Race Theory (CRT) and exploring the concept of sense of belonging. In particular, studies should incorporate CRT's tenet of challenging dominant ideologies to critically access the long-term effectiveness of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training in these organizations. Research has shown that one-time training sessions are insufficient in addressing the complexities of systemic racism, indicating a need for more sustained and comprehensive approaches (McGowan et al., 2017). Participant narratives, like Sapphire's sense of being unprepared to navigate racial microaggressions within her sorority, underscore the need for more in-depth and sustained interventions beyond surface-level DEI efforts. Future research should focus on exploring how counter-storytelling—a key tenet of CRT—can inform restorative justice practices, as seen in Blu's encounters with racial innuendos, which highlight the importance of amplifying marginalized voices in predominantly white fraternity spaces (Harper, 2006).

Additionally, studies should examine recruitment practices through the lens of CRT's principle of intersectionality to understand how race, class, and gender intersect to shape the experiences of Black members. Cantrell's sense of marginalization during recruitment provides a

case for evaluating how these intersecting identities impact access and belonging in these spaces (Crenshaw, 1989). By centering these narratives and examining recruitment processes through a CRT framework, future research can offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges Black members face within historically white fraternities and sororities.

Research should also investigate how mentorship programs impact Black members' sense of belonging, aligning with CRT's permanence of racism. Jasmine's feelings of isolation indicate that creating supportive networks through mentorship may foster a stronger sense of community for underrepresented members (Yosso, 2005). Moreover, studies should examine the potential for interest convergence in cross-racial dialogues between HWFS and culturally based organizations. Participant accounts of superficial interactions during social events indicate a lack of genuine engagement, suggesting that future research could explore strategies to foster deeper collaborations that challenge systemic divisions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Using the CRT tenet of critique of liberalism, future studies should also evaluate fraternal policies, such as legacy preferences, that maintain racial inequalities and prevent a true sense of belonging for all members (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Further, intersectionality should be explored in leadership development, particularly how overlapping identities affect Black members' pursuit of leadership roles. Participants like Sawyer, who faced resistance when trying to influence chapter culture, demonstrate the challenges posed by intersecting racial and gender identities in these predominantly white spaces (Crenshaw, 1989). Lastly, future research should examine the impact of tokenism on Black members' sense of belonging. Sapphire's experience of being valued for diversity optics rather than for genuine inclusion illustrates how the social construction of race perpetuates emotional and social isolation (Ahmed, 2012). Understanding these dynamics is essential to addressing the

deeper issues of inclusion and belonging within fraternal organizations. These recommendations, grounded in CRT and informed by participant experiences, could provide a roadmap for addressing the systemic barriers that limit inclusivity within fraternity and sorority life, ultimately fostering environments where all members, regardless of race, can thrive.

Final Conclusion

This study explored the complex racial dynamics within HWFS and how these dynamics shape the experiences and sense of belonging for Black members. Utilizing Critical Race Theory as a guiding framework, the findings revealed that systemic racism, microaggressions, and exclusionary practices are pervasive in these organizations, creating significant challenges for Black members seeking both social capital and a genuine sense of belonging (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper, 2012). Participants' narratives exposed the emotional and social tolls of navigating predominantly white spaces, where they often experienced marginalization, tokenism, and a fragile sense of inclusion (Yosso, 2005; Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014).

A key insight from this research is the profound impact that organizational culture has on members' experiences. While HWFS offer social, professional, and academic benefits, Black members frequently found these advantages overshadowed by racial isolation, exclusionary practices, and implicit biases (Ahmed, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). The use of CRT allowed the study to examine how these barriers are embedded in fraternal structures and norms, revealing that DEI efforts within these organizations often lack the depth and sustainability needed for meaningful change (McGowan et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2019). Furthermore, Black members were often celebrated as symbols of diversity without experiencing genuine inclusion, which undermined their ability to fully access the social networks and opportunities typically associated with fraternity and sorority life (Harper, 2006; Thomas, 2020).

The study's recommendations for practice, includes the implementation of comprehensive DEI training, restorative justice practices, inclusive recruitment processes, and support for Black leadership, are designed to address these systemic issues (McDonald & Day, 2010; Roberts, 2022). Additionally, fostering cross-racial dialogues and creating mentorship networks are critical steps toward promoting a more inclusive and equitable environment within these organizations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Strayhorn, 2013). Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, particularly how CRT can be applied to further investigate structural inequalities and how a stronger sense of belonging can be cultivated for Black members in HWFS (Crenshaw, 1989).

In conclusion, this study underscores the urgent need for fraternities and sororities to confront their racialized histories and work toward fostering environments where all members, regardless of race, can thrive. By addressing the systemic barriers revealed in this research, fraternal organizations have the opportunity to evolve into spaces of true inclusion and equity, where belonging is not contingent on racial identity but is available to all members (Strayhorn, 2019).

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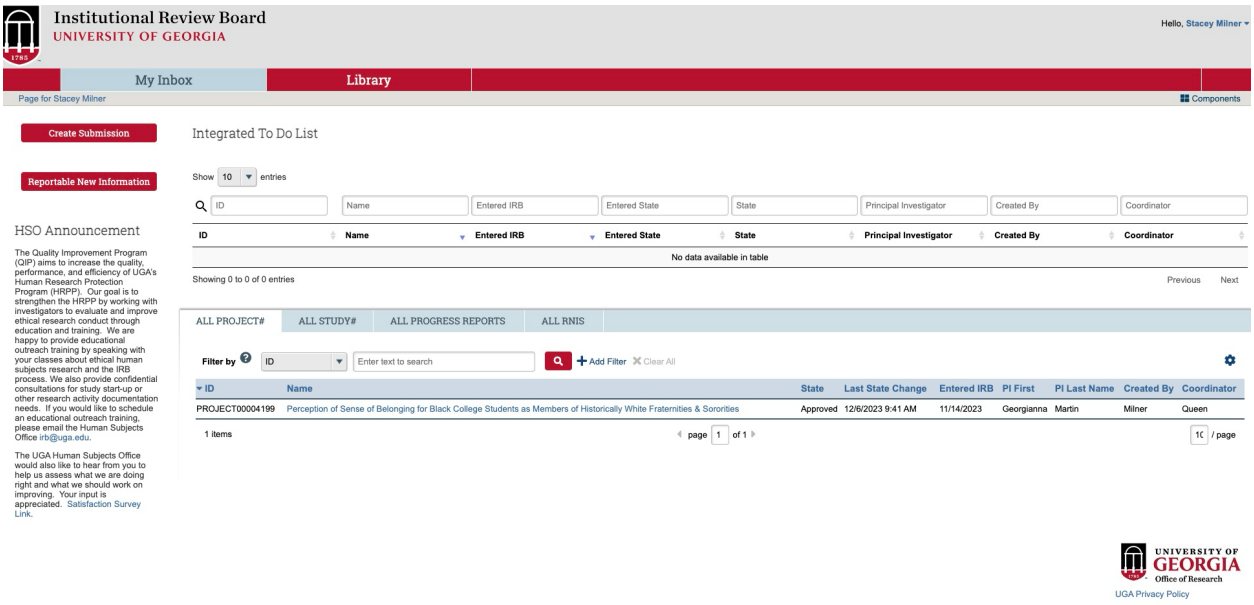
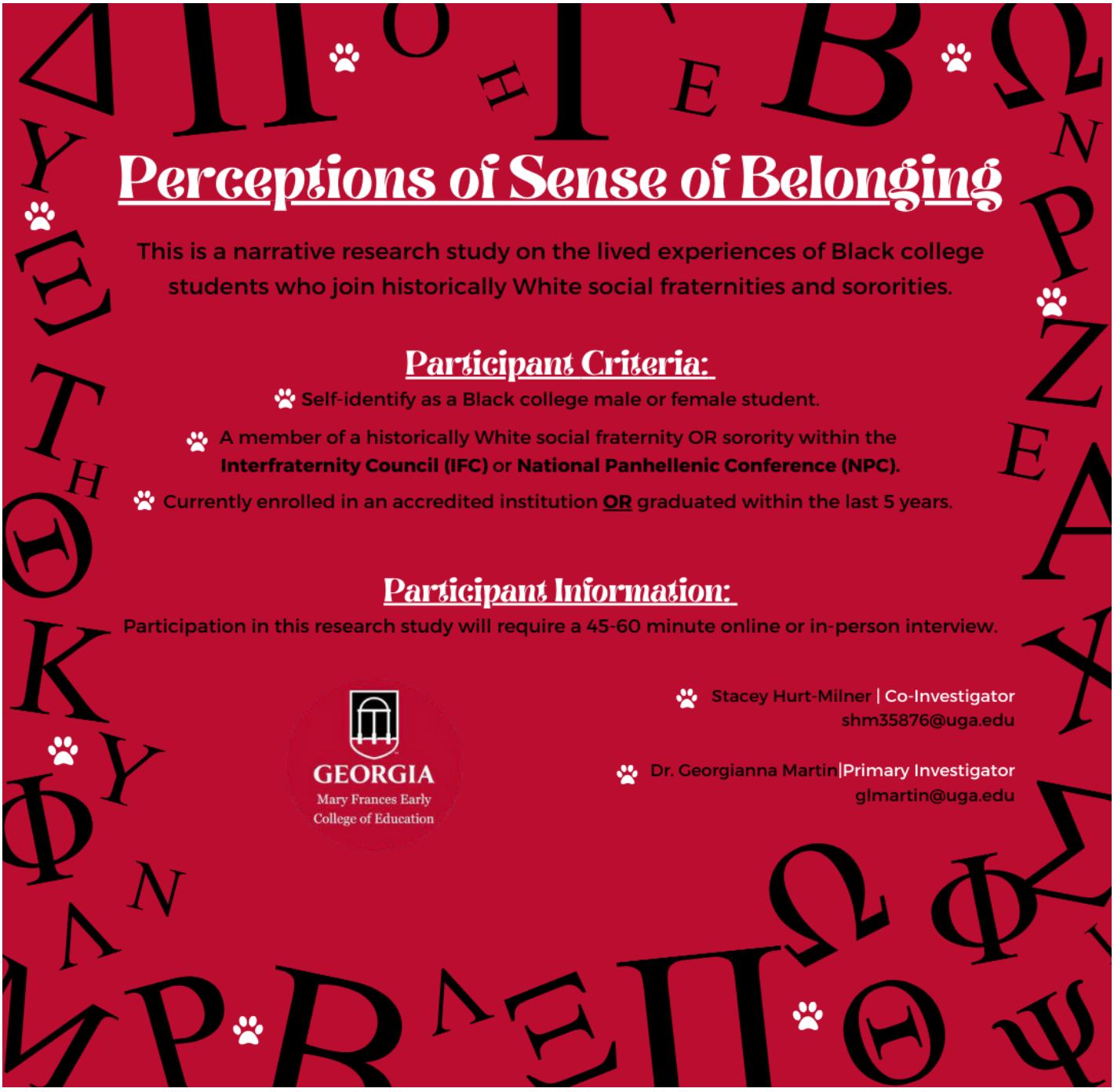
Zehr, H. (2015). *The little book of restorative justice*. Good Books.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: IRB Approval



APPENDIX B: Recruitment Flyer



APPENDIX C: Recruitment Letter

Dear student,

My name is Stacey Hurt-Milner, and I am a graduate student enrolled in the Student Affairs Leadership program at the University of Georgia. As a graduate student, I am conducting a research study to explore the perceptions of a sense of belonging for Black college students who join historically White social fraternities and sororities. This study will examine what Black college students go through as members of a historically White social fraternity or sorority. As a Director who oversees fraternal organizations, it is paramount that fraternities and sororities create an environment where every member feel that they matter and have a sense of belonging within their member organization. I am interested in Black college students willing to share their stories and experiences with me. I hope this research study will assist national/international member organizations and campus-based professionals who advise, work, or engage with historically White fraternities and sororities to understand the experience of Black college students in hopes of supporting and improving the collegiate experience for Black students.

Black college students who joined a historically White social fraternity or sorority are desired for this research study. To be eligible for this study, you should meet the following criteria:

- Self-identify as a Black college female or male student.
- Currently enrolled in an accredited institution or
- Graduated from an accredited institution within the last five years.
- A current member or alumna/us of a historically White social fraternity OR sorority within the Interfraternity Council (IFC) or National Panhellenic Conference (NPC).

Participation is voluntary, and strict confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study.

Participants will select to participate in a 45 to 60-minute in-person or virtual interview.

If you are a Black college student and want to participate in the study, please get in touch with me at shm35876@uga.edu for further information about the study. If you have questions about this study, please call me, Stacey Hurt-Milner, at 478-363-4331 or shm35876@gmail.com.

Thank you so much for your attention and participation.

APPENDIX D: Institutional Review Board Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

CONSENT FORM

Exploring the Sense of Belonging Among Black College Students in Historically White Fraternities and Sororities

Researcher's Statement

I am Stacey Hurt-Milner, a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia conducting research under the direction of Dr. Georgianna Martin, Associate Professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services. We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, you must understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you information about the study so you can decide whether to participate. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything unclear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide whether you want to be in the study. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Georgianna Martin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Counseling & Human Development Services
glmartin@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of Black students who joined historically white fraternities and sororities (HWFS). This research study will focus on these participants' sense of belonging as members of their organization. The participants who consent to participate in this research study will need to meet the following criteria: (a) be a current or former initiated member of a HWFS governed by the Interfraternity Council (IFC) or the National Panhellenic Council (NPC), (b) self-identify as a Black (c) joined a HWFS governed by the Interfraternity Council (IFC) or the National Panhellenic Council (NPC) as an undergraduate student and (d) attend or graduated from an accredited college or university.

Study Procedures and Time Commitment

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. Participants will schedule an appointment at a mutually convenient time and date. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom or Teams, a web video technology platform, telephone, or face-to-face. Before the interview, participants will be asked if they agree to recording their session. Participants will also be able to select a pseudonym to represent their involvement and protect their identity. Data recorded in the interview will be audio via Apple iPhone and video

recorded via Zoom to ensure participant views are accurately represented in the study. To ensure accuracy, participants will be allowed to review the interview transcript.

Questions will pertain to your sense of belonging as it relates to your (a) experiences joining a historically white fraternity or sorority and (b) experiences as a member of a historically white fraternity or sorority (HWFS).

Risks and discomforts

Participants should not experience any risk or discomfort while participating in this research study. However, participants might experience psychological discomforts or triggers, given the topic's significance. Levels of discomfort can manifest in feelings of anxiety, stress, shame, or guilt. Participants can choose to skip questions or withdraw from the study.

Should you participate in this study, we encourage you to keep your participation in this study and your responses confidential. The researcher will maintain your confidentiality throughout the study and destroy the records of your participation three years after the study is complete.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to individuals participating in this study. There is no compensation associated with participation in this study. There are no incentives associated with participation in this study.

Confidentiality of records

For the purpose of this study, every effort will be made to protect participants' confidentiality. Pseudonyms will be used in any participant reference, including direct quotes from responses. This document and any notes or recordings that might personally identify participants in this study will be in a secured location only accessible by the researcher. Participant identity may only be known by the researcher and the faculty advisor. Three years after this research study, all personally identifying information will be destroyed.

This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed. As a security measure, all virtual platforms will require a passcode and link where they will be required to list their pseudonym as their virtual participant’s name. Interview transcripts emailed to participants for editing and accuracy will be protected with an encrypted password. The researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone without the participant's written consent unless required by law.

Participant rights

The main researcher conducting this study is Stacey Hurt-Milner, a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. If you have any questions, you may contact me at smilner@uga.edu or (478) 363-4331 or my faculty advisor, Dr. Georgianna Martin, at glmartin@uga.edu. If you have

any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read this entire consent form and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

APPENDIX E: Interview Protocol

- Participant Name (pseudonym):
- Organization:
- Time of Interview:
- Date:
- Place:
- Can you share what you knew about HWFS before you joined?
- Why did you choose to join your fraternity or sorority?
- Could you share some of your thoughts on what it was like to navigate the fraternity or sorority recruitment process as a Black student?
- Describe your experience as a Black student before joining your fraternity or sorority.
- Describe your experience as a Black student after joining your fraternity or sorority.
- Describe a time when you felt accepted and included within your chapter.
- Describe a time when you felt like you did not belong in your fraternity or sorority.
- Describe a time when you felt like you belonged as a Black fraternity or sorority member.
- Describe any experiences that occurred within the chapter that made you feel stereotyped, oppressed, or marginalized.
- Describe how your fraternity or sorority supports you as a Black member. Can you provide some specific examples?
- What benefits did your fraternity and sorority offer you? How have those benefits contributed to your success academically and socially?
- Can you think of a situation where being a Black fraternity or sorority member impacted you? Share a story that describes this situation.

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me about being a Black member of a HWFS that I have not already asked?
- Acceptable probes:
    - Can you tell me more about that?
    - Tell me about a time when….
    - Can you share an example?