

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF FAT-BODIED STUDENTS WITH NATIONAL PAN-HELLENIC COUNCIL SORORITIES AND FRATERNITIES

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Many college students want to feel connected to their campus community. However, for fat-bodied students, their experiences are often lost in the influx of opinions from students, staff, faculty, and university administrators. The literature on the experiences of fat-bodied students in higher education is minimal, with the literature on fat-bodied students participating in fraternity and sorority life being even more limited. This research serves to highlight the emerging findings of a research study exploring the lived experiences and preconceived ideas of fat-bodied students' engagement with National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) sororities and fraternities, and the professional perspective of higher education professionals.

Keywords: fat-bodied students, National Pan-Hellenic Council, sororities, fraternities

"Lose some weight fatass." This is a direct quote from an undergraduate student who was invited to participate in a study of fat-body students and the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) at Strong Mind University (SMU). Rather than self-selecting not to participate, the student chose to complete the study interest form by answering the questions using fat-shaming language. To us, this speaks to the need to shed light on the experiences of fat-bodied students on college campuses. While a growing number of studies on fat-bodied college students exist (Stevens, 2018; Stewart et al., 2023a; 2023b), we only found one researcher (Selzer, 2013) who explored sorority-affiliated women. Further, Selzer's work only tangentially relates to our topic, as she interviewed the participants regarding their body image, rather than specifically interviewing fat-bodied students. Given the lack of studies, more research is needed.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of fat-bodied students with NPHC sororities and fraternities. Given the relative lack of research on this topic and population, a qualitative study was intentionally chosen to allow these students' lived experiences to emerge organically. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the experiences and perceptions of fat-bodied students with NPHC sororities and fraternities?

Literature Review

A Brief History of NPHC Organizations

The NPHC consists of nine historically Black sororities and fraternities: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.; Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.; Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.; Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.; and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2025). Each of these organizations within this council has different missions and goals but all are centered around education, service, and siblinghood:

Each of the nine (9) NPHC organizations evolved during a period when African Americans were being denied essential rights and privileges afforded others . . . With the realization of such a need, the African American (Black) Greek letter organization movement took on the personae of a haven and outlet, which could foster brotherhood and sisterhood in the pursuit to bring about social change through the development of social programs that would create positive change for Blacks and the country. Today the need remains the same. (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2025, paras. 4-5)

The first NPHC fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, was founded in 1906 at Cornell University, a historically White institution (HWI), during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era. The second NPHC fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, was founded at an HWI, Indiana University, in 1911. Kappa Alpha Psi evolved from its predecessor Alpha Kappa Nu, a Black Greek society formed in response to a dangerous racial climate that included the presence of the Ku Klux Klan on campus (Gillon et al., 2019; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks & Hughey, 2020; Ross, 2000). Unlike the historically White sororities and fraternities that came before, these organizations were founded with the underlying principles of serving their communities. From there, other organizations began to emerge, each to promote an era of society in favor of uplifting predominantly African American communities.

For Black men at Cornell University, Indiana University, and HWIs across the country, “separate but equal” (Cates, 2013, p. 57) may have been the policy, but it was not the practice. Black collegiate men were often excluded from both the academic and social aspects of college life because of racial tension and segregation on college campuses. This led Black men to actualize the need for racial uplift. From this actualization, additional NPHC organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was founded by Alpha Phi Alpha member W.E.B. du Bois, would evolve (Gillon et al., 2019; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks & Hughey, 2020; Ross, 2000).

Nearly in tandem, Black women were facing not only racism, but also sexism on college campuses, both at HWIs and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Howard University, an HBCU founded in 1867 and referred to as the “cradle of Black Greek civilization” (Kimbrough, 2003, p.32), had only 23 female alumni by 1910 (Gillon et al., 2019). Life on campus for those few women who attended Howard was heavily controlled by a patriarchal administration. In 1908, 16 women came together to form what eventually became Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. From its infancy, Alpha Kappa Alpha developed programs which helped both members and the community as a whole. Their founders were active in the campus chapters of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and the NAACP (Kimbrough, 2003). Shortly thereafter, a group of Howard Alpha Kappa Alpha women began to question the practices of their current chapter. Eventually a group of women disaffiliated from Alpha Kappa Alpha and formed Delta Sigma Theta sorority in 1913, which put scholarship and politics at the forefront of their focus (Kimbrough, 2003; Ross, 2000).

As the number of Black college students continued to grow, so did the number of NPHC organizations and members. There are currently “91 active collegiate councils” and “172 active alumni councils” (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2025, Working stronger together via section), each with a varying number of organizations under its umbrella. While each organization has its own guiding principles, all nine organizations share the common thread of being formed from a history of prejudice and injustice and “have a profound commitment to . . . uplifting and promoting the general public welfare” (Ross, 2000, p. 584).

NPHC and Stereotypes

Despite its inclusive nature, stereotypes of the various particular organization members exist. Bryant (2013) describes some of the stereotypes that follow members of NPHC organizations:

Zetas (Zeta Phi Beta Sorority) are supposed to be dark and fat while Kappas (Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity) are supposed to be light skin with a nice grade of hair. AKAs are supposed to be light skin, pretty, with long nice hair and Alphas are supposed to be light skin, with a nice grade of hair but nerdy looking. Sigmas (Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity) are supposed to be country, nice, maybe a little dirty, not well dressed while Omegas are supposed to be super buff, wild, and dark. DST (Delta Sigma Theta) women are supposed to brown skin and either big and butch looking or slim with the Delta bob haircut. If you do not fall into those ideas of what those members look like your membership is often questioned and sometimes you will not be allowed to join the organizations. (Bryant, 2013, p. 97)

These perceptions can cause reservations that may discourage students from joining a particular NPHC organization. With a limited number of students being accepted into these organizations, if fat-bodied students do not feel represented by the membership, they could be concerned about or even afraid of their likelihood of being accepted.

Fat-bodied College Students

In order to better understand the experiences of fat-bodied college students, one must also grapple with the existence of fatphobia. One accepted scholarly definition of fatphobia is “a pathological fear of fatness often manifested as negative attitudes and stereotypes about fat people” (Robinson et al., 1993, p. 468). Other terms frequently used by scholars include anti-fat bias (Phelan et al., 2014), fat hate (Cameron & Russell, 2016), and sizeism (Oswald et al., 2022). Taking a longer, historical view, scholars have noted that fatphobia is a long-standing phenomenon deeply rooted in anti-blackness and racism (Strings, 2019).

As noted above, research on fat-bodied college students is limited, with much of the research emerging quite recently (Brown, 2016; Selzer, 2013; Stevens, 2018; Stewart, 2018; Stewart et al., 2023a; 2023b; 2024). More information exists, however, presented in the form of personal reflections, blogs, interviews, or diaries of fat-bodied students and their experiences. As scholars, we see value in both academic research on the topic and personal accounts of fat-bodied students. In fact, the argument can be made that reflections of fat-bodied students are more valuable than academic research to other fat-bodied students who seek to find community in others like themselves.

Some scholars have authored a combination of both. Notable are the works of Stewart (2018) and Stewart et al. (2023a; 2023b). In his reflective article, “About Fat Campus,” Stewart (2018) shared his personal experience, as well as the experiences of two undergraduate students, of being a fat-bodied person on a college campus. The individual accounts included encounters with fat-phobic students and faculty, fear of not fitting in classroom desks, and feeling marginalized because of their size. Stewart concludes by challenging readers to reflect on their attitudes about fatness. He asserts that as educators, we must center our work on the learning of all students and help make fat-bodied students feel visible and heard.

Stewart continued this assertion in his collaborative research on fat-bodied college students. In 2021, a research team created #FatOnCampus, a social media campaign and website (fatoncampus.com) designed to raise awareness of the experiences of fat-bodied

students on college campuses. Through posts on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and the website, students can share their experiences, both positive and negative, of being fat-bodied in college. Members of the #FatOnCampus research team also conducted a photo narrative study of the fat-body college student experience (Stewart et al., 2023a; 2023b). Their research had multiple implications including mitigating anti-fat bias in classrooms, advocating for fat-bodied students on an institutional and systemic level, and raising faculty and staff awareness of fat-phobia.

The #FatOnCampus movement, however, was not the first time scholars have given voice to fat-bodied college students. Stevens (2018) conducted a qualitative study of 14 current college students and recent graduates. Stevens introduced her study by sharing the story of a demeaning tweet written by a professor regarding "obese PHD applicants" (Stevens, 2018, p. 132). Aligning with Stewart et al.'s (2023a; 2023b) implications, Stevens noted that fat-bodied students face stigma and are less likely to be shown and featured in school advertisements or interviews. This lack of visibility in various mediums contributes to the hyper-invisibility of fat-bodied students in the perception of campus (Stevens, 2018). Stevens postulated that institutions of higher education can lead the way in creating a more body-accepting society, but that cannot occur until anti-fat ideologies, such as those expressed in the tweet, are eliminated.

Anti-fat ideologies were also a theme in Selzer's (2013) research on African American sorority women's body image and Long's (2020) research on the intersection of fatness and queer identity in women. Themed as "weight trumps everything else," "how I look in clothes," and "sorority stereotypes and body image," the women in Selzer's (2013) study discussed feeling like they did not fit society's standards for (White) beauty and that the "perfect" woman needs to be thin (p. 6). Selzer used pseudonyms for the sororities to which the women belonged and did not indicate if they were NPHC organizations. However, the women discussed stereotypes associated with their sorority that aligned with Bryant's (2013) stereotypes above. From this alignment, it can be inferred that some women were members of NPHC organizations. Long's (2020) research was not exclusive to college-aged women, although four of her eight participants were in their 20s. Key findings from Long's study included challenges with the relationship between body size and self-confidence, with the intersection of being both fat-bodied and queer women, and with navigating physical spaces.

The aforementioned research, personal reflections, and social media campaign account for the mostly negative experiences fat-bodied college students have on campus. While not all fat-bodied college students have negative experiences, it is important to highlight the challenges faced by this population. Our study gives visibility to what

has been described as a hyper-invisible population that exists on every college campus.

Methods

We used a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with a social constructivist worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to gain insight on participants' experiences and perspectives through participants' own words and narratives. Also referred to as basic interpretive, the basic qualitative design was ideal for this study as we were interested in learning how fat-bodied students interpret and make meaning of their experiences in college (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Our constructivist worldview further aided our understanding as we interpreted fat-bodied students' experiences in an environment in which they are often marginalized (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Framework

This study is exploratory in its qualitative nature and loosely uses Brown's (2016) fat studies in higher education as its theoretical framework. Brown developed an interdisciplinary framework for studying fat-bodied college students that includes the following core concepts: the importance of activism, language attentiveness, fatness as a medical issue and problem, and centering the individual within the research. With a desire to focus on structures, such as classroom chairs, as the problem over individuals, Stewart et al. (2024) adapted this framework in a recent study of fat-body students and campus environments. This framework, coupled with the reviewed literature and shaped by our positionalities detailed below, provided grounding for this study and data analysis.

Setting

We conducted this study at SMU, a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast which enrolls approximately 10,000 students. The self-reported racial composition of the campus is 49.4% White or Caucasian, 34.7% Black or African American, and 9.5% Hispanic, with Multiracial, Asian, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and unidentified accounting for a combined 5.7% of the total student population. SMU has a robust sorority and fraternity community, particularly within the NPHC. Eight of the nine NPHC organizations have active chapters at SMU, with the ninth NPHC having been active on campus previously. Looking at the broader SMU community, SMU had six active Panhellenic Council organizations, five active Interfraternity Council organizations, and three active Multicultural Greek Council organizations active at the time of this study. Active membership numbers for each of these organizations and the overall numbers for sorority and fraternity life at SMU were not made available to us at the time of this study.

Participant Recruitment and Institutional Pushback

Despite receiving IRB approval, our research team faced several obstacles during the participant recruitment process. We were approved to recruit students via a campus-wide email that included a flyer inviting students to participate. Two cabinet-level administrators, one responsible for approving campus-wide emails to the student body and one who oversees student research, rejected the initial flyer for including the term “fat-bodied.” The administrators felt students would be offended by the terminology and that it was not a good look for the school with the already heated climate from discrimination allegations from a separate incident just weeks prior. The recommendation was that alternative terms to fat-bodied be included in place of the original wording. Plus-sized, wide-statured, big-boned, or large-framed were just a few of the many options given. However, each of those words seemed to deflect from the main topic and theme of the research.

In this search to find a different term to send to students, the cabinet-level administrators never consulted with Mya, who was in charge of the research and whose own battle with weight and acceptance sparked an interest in carrying out this topic. Instead, the administrators went to [Researcher Mentor 1] and Jamie who were SMU faculty committee members who approved the study prior to IRB approval. Not once during the time of writing, collecting, organizing, or interpreting data and responses have the cabinet-level administrators approached the researcher about their concerns and understanding of the term “fat-bodied.” One cabinet-level administrator has final approval of all emails sent to students via the student announcement distribution alias and would not send the email unless the flyer was edited. Ultimately, the flyer was changed to read “plus-size.” While discouraging, [Researcher Mentor 1] and Jamie encouraged Mya to use the alternate wording for recruitment and to continue with the study as intended.

The inclusion criteria included students between the ages of 18 and 23 who weigh over 200 pounds if assigned female at birth and 250 pounds if assigned male at birth. Race, weight, and gender markers were self-identified by the participants. Additionally, participants must be either current members of an NPHC organization or interested in joining one. The reason for including individuals who were interested in joining rather than just current members of an NPHC organization is due to the possibility that fat-bodied individuals may have felt unwelcome in attempting to affiliate with an NPHC organization. Recruiting those interested in joining an NPHC organization allows for these perspectives to be acknowledged and heard. The initial survey email received 117 unique responses; however, many of the respondents did not qualify for participation due to incomplete

responses. Also, as noted above, one student chose to respond to the survey using fat-shaming language. Incomplete or inappropriate results are not included in the data findings. Several students met the inclusion criteria and self-selected to participate; for this article's purposes, we have chosen to highlight three participants. We feel the perspectives of these three best vocalize the experiences and perceptions of fat-bodied students who are members of or who have interest in joining an NPHC sorority or fraternity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Demographic data were collected via a survey linked in the initial recruitment email. Demographics included contact information, pronouns, approximate weight, and affiliation or intended affiliation (if known). Upon completion of the survey, Mya invited students to participate in an interview. She proposed two location options that the participants could choose from to complete the study. Mya gave students the option to interview face-to-face or virtually using Microsoft Teams. Interviews occurred over several months due to participants' schedules. Mya conducted semi-structured interviews, asking follow-up questions based on the responses of the participants.

Mya reviewed interview transcripts and implemented an analysis that best fit the type and style of information presented, and in the case of fat-bodied students, this information provided the audiences with more insight into the lives and experiences of fat-bodied students. With the limited research on fat-bodied students, organizing and displaying the perspectives of students who must face the daily challenges of being overweight makes the story more relatable to a reader with little experience or opinion about the topic. We highlight notable results below.

Trustworthiness

We adhered to the four criteria of trustworthiness to best ensure validity of this study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Mya, as a member of the studied community, was aware of her potential bias. With that, the researcher mentors met with Mya throughout the process to discuss her study and triangulate the data by reviewing several drafts of the findings' write-up to ensure credibility. Findings were considered credible when the respondents' views and experiences "fit" the researcher's representation of said experiences and views (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Dependability was also addressed during meetings with Mya as the research mentors discussed her methods and made sure detailed records were kept throughout the process. This is in line with established parameters for qualitative research to ensure such research is sound logically while also being clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004) While each student's experience is unique, to address

transferability, we intentionally chose to highlight three students who we feel have experiences and perceptions that can be indicative of fat-bodied individuals who are members of or are interested in joining an NPHC sorority or fraternity. Examining transferability on the case-by-case basis (specifically the cases of these three participants) aligns with norms in qualitative research (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Findings are considered to have confirmability when credibility, dependability, and transferability have all been met (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Researchers' Positionality

The research originated from an idea Mya proposed during her first semester of graduate coursework in a class she was taking from Matt. Matt and Jamie, as faculty members in Mya's graduate program, worked with her to design and execute this research project. Mya recruited Marlon to assist with the project. The individual positionalities of the researchers are detailed below.

As a cisgender heterosexual Black woman and member of a sorority within the NPHC, Mya is aware of her own biases and experiences of being a fat-bodied student and her journey to acceptance personally and socially. While she can relate to the experiences of the participants, she removed her opinions and only used her experiences and prior knowledge to clarify terminology that may not be easily defined to someone that is not a part of the NPHC community. She acknowledges that her positionality influenced this project as a reflection of her own experiences but used this research in hopes that it would show that there is still opportunity to make connections and explore the sense of belonging of current and interested members of these organizations.

Matt first heard about this research idea from Mya when she was a student in his Research Methods class during her first semester of the M.Ed. program. Matt was immediately impressed with Mya idea and her desire to explore this topic, and he actively encouraged her to pursue this work during her time in graduate school. Matt is not affiliated with the fraternity and sorority community; however, he has previously served as an editorial assistant for the *Journal of Sorority and Fraternity Life Research and Practice* for just over a year when it was known as *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*. Matt has explored sense of belonging in other marginalized populations with his previous research and found the experience of mentoring/supporting Mya in her work to be illuminating regarding the impact of sense of belonging on the students who bravely participated in this study.

Jamie spent her childhood and most of her adult life as a plus-size person. As a research mentor of this project, she commends Mya and the participants for their body positivity. As she told Mya, "this research

speaks to my soul.” She continues to struggle with body acceptance to this day but hearing the perspectives of others has helped her to grow in this context. Jamie is a member of the sorority and fraternity community but has little experience with the NPHC. Being part of this research team has been enlightening as she has learned about student connections to their organizations and the NPHC.

Marlon has spent his entire life identifying as a fat-bodied person and was not comfortable acknowledging this as a primary and salient identity until graduate school. As a research mentor of this project, he was immediately intrigued by Mya’s research topic and said, “these are my people, my family, and some of my closest friends within our profession.” As a proud and financial life member of his beloved, historically black, NPHC fraternity, he remains eager to share his lived experiences, knowledge, and wisdom with Mya. Marlon has worked with fraternities and sororities across the country for over 20 years. He thoroughly enjoyed this experience and remains eager as a proud supporter of Mya.

Findings

To best be true to the nuanced experiences of the participants, each of the participant profiles is presented as a finding in and of itself. As noted previously, this is an established practice within qualitative research to gain greater insight and understanding into the unique experiences of each participant through telling their own story or narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and has been done previously in qualitative studies with few participants (Smith & Wallace, 2024).

Participant Profiles

Amber

At the time of interview, Amber weighed approximately 225 pounds. She started in face-to-face classes but switched to online after her first year. As expressed in her interview, she had not always been overweight but noted that most of her weight gain accumulated once she started at SMU. At the time of the interview, she was a fully online student. As she pursued her degree, she used the online college platform to work around her business that she started in college and continued to do for extra money: “So, for one, it’s [being an in-person college student] challenging because when I was on campus, it was way more expensive. Now that I’m online, I’m able to focus more on my business.”

Since the ability to attend college is already a privilege, many are not always aware that attending classes still comes with financial hardship. In addition, there are extra costs associated with joining any social sorority. While she was interested in joining a sorority, she was not

sure if she would be able to become a member since she is an online student. However, her curiosity and interest in these organizations remained. When asked what made her interested in joining a social sorority, she replied,

So, you know, growing up, you see it but don't understand it. When people first get on college like this, when you get on campus, there's just a thing. Like, you see people wearing their coats and, you know, some people talk about it, but not too much. And then, from there, you kind of know or meet people, like you were interested and joined, but I liked the sisterhood aspect.

Her response further explained how potential members seek to feel connected to other students through the aspect of siblinghood, one of the three important pillars across all organizations within the NPHC. Amber further elaborated by discussing stereotypes of certain organizations and how fat-bodied individuals are not well represented: "... growing up, like, they tell you AKAs (Alpha Kappa Alphas), they're the prissy ones, the bougie ones. And I don't really see a whole lot of plus-size girls in that sorority."

Amber had a few concerns about how she would be treated or if she would be accepted as a fat-bodied student. In addition to concerns about sorority and fraternity life acceptance as a fat-bodied student, she shared her concerns about not seeing other fat-bodied students in campus advertisements: "Marketing-wise, I don't know, because I had seen [SMU's] Instagram. I don't remember seeing too many [fat-bodied students]." Amber's desire to join an NPHC organization, despite being an online student, further justifies the importance of seeking feedback from all students regardless of how they are classified by enrollment.

Further, Amber has experienced challenges with physical spaces on campus. When discussing classrooms, she said, "I used to try to get to the place early and get me a good seat. I used to bring a little pillow to class too." Similarly, Amber felt as if SMU was not size-inclusive in clothing offerings at the bookstore or campus events. In discussing apparel, she said,

They would all be on the small side, or I just didn't ask. They don't cater to everybody. Well, yeah, they could do a better job ordering sizes or maybe, like, pre-asking people because everybody requires a larger size. A survey would be helpful.

Amber also remembered experiencing challenges with meeting people who looked like her when she was a first-year student and lived on campus:

As far as friends, yes, because it seems like when we,

when I did live on campus, you kind of start to see, like, certain people cliquing up together. And to me, it always seemed like the heaviest girls end up together or either by ourselves, and the skinny girls don't . . . I just clicked with this one girl, and I just kept it like that. Like, this is my friend and, yeah, but we were kind of the same size. She was just a little heavier than me, so we just played that with each other.

While Amber eventually made friends in her residence hall, she still had an interest in joining an NPHC sorority. The cost, her online student status, and the fact that she has not seen plus-size students in the organizations have caused hesitation on her part, but her appreciation of the sisterhood aspect continues to be a motivation to join.

Frank

Frank, who weighs approximately 260 pounds, was in his second semester of graduate school at the time of his interview. He is a member of an NPHC fraternity and received his bachelor's degree from SMU. Frank had been a member of his organization for nearly two years. Reflecting on his reason for joining, he stated,

So, what drew me to my organization is I have a cousin. He was a strong factor. He's very strong in the organization and he really just pushed for me to learn more and pushing me to look into my organization. I was able to do some research to understand what is this organization about. What does this organization stand for? So, as I started to do that, I started to realize a lot of the core values of my organization. They resonated with me as an individual. They really spoke to my personal morals and some of my personal values, and that kind of what helped me say "I like the Alphas." I also looked into myself in the future, so I looked beyond my current state back in 2022 when I joined. Why would I like to be? So, looking into Alpha Phi Alpha, I've seen a whole lot of educators. I've seen a lot of strong educators. I've seen a lot of strong leaders like Martin Luther King and Thurgood Marshall. Some of those strong individuals who lived and were able to display the work of Alpha, and so that's kind of what helped . . . I didn't venture out into a whole lot of other organizations because once I read about Alpha, I knew Alpha was right for me. So, just looking at the person I guess the look of the organizations, I knew it wasn't for me. I just didn't like it. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, but I just could tell it wasn't right for me. So even just looking at the way they presented themselves, like Alpha, the way Alphas look, dressed in suits and ties. The things that Alpha did, their national programs, it just really resonated with me as an individual, especially an

aspiring educator, a lot of the programs are directly tied to helping the youth and, you know, uplifting the youth in our community.

Despite having family members and seeing role models within the NPHC community, Frank initially did not plan to join:

When I first came [to SMU], and I had no intentions of going Greek. I could vividly remember seeing yard shows (member showcase). Not saying strolling is one of the most important things, but even just strolling, like, looking at the other orgs, I knew I was heavy. I can't see myself doing that, jumping around I'm heavy. I can't see myself moving my shoulders. They're kind of wide. I mean because I know a lot of us like to say that strolling is not a big factor, but it does matter.

Despite initial hesitations, Frank did not feel as if his weight has negatively impacted his fraternity experience:

For fraternities, honestly, I would say I don't really feel like weight is a driving factor, because even looking into fraternities on the campus now, like there's more, there's a rise in heavier members. I love to see that because it does show more inclusion and shows that, "hey, you don't have to be skinny to be able to do these things or look a certain way to be a part of these organizations; you can bring your true authentic self." That's one thing I will say about the issue. Now I will say, I don't think I've seen that in every yard (on every campus).

Frank continued by sharing how he feels supported by his brothers:

I feel like they do. I feel like they accept me for that, but at the same time I do feel like they do try to push me to try to lose weight and it's not a bad thing saying, "oh, you're too big." But they do try to push me to just be healthier, to try to live a healthier lifestyle because we all sleep. You know, we all fall sometimes, but they do motivate me. We motivate each other. So, it's not just them motivate me, but we all motivate each other. When we, when we fall short . . . I have to worry . . . where I was the weakest say it was like, you know, and weight and doing more like activities and things like that. So, I need, that's why I needed more support. So, I will say that they did. So, they do support me, and they do help me. Like right now I go to the gym, my brother goes to the gym with me, not saying that he is pushing me to do it, but we are pushing each other. So, we're helping each other.

While being an Alpha Phi Alpha has been an overall positive experience for Frank, there have been some challenging aspects. One particularly challenging time was his new member presentation, which formally introduces new members: "I would say a neophyte presentation is a ceremony that reveals yourself saying that, 'hey, I've joined this organization. This is my showcase. This is what I want to show you what I have learned.'" His concern from this event was to not bring embarrassment to the organization by being a heavier member. He discussed an initial mishap with event attire:

We selected what we were going to wear, and when we selected what we wanted to wear, I'm so glad we did not go through with the original outfit. The first choice we bought was too small for me, and I didn't realize it was too small until after because we changed our outfit, we tried it on. Because all of my brothers like they were a size large or less, so it's easier for them to find an outfit. But for me, even though I was only wearing an extra large at the moment, it still didn't fit. I'm not very bulky; I'm more round it, so when it comes to clothing I have to make sure that it's not too tight because that's [stomach] is my biggest area. They didn't like it, and they didn't like it because it, just the way it look. We just ended up changing the whole outfit, and it worked out for the better.

Frank also discussed other challenges he faced as a fat-bodied student at SMU. When asked about physical challenges, he immediately said,

Desks. I hate sitting in them; they are limited. Even if I was skinny, I feel like I still would not have enough room on my tabletop because if I have a laptop, the desk is so tiny, I only have enough room for a laptop. I don't even have enough room for a laptop and a notebook. So, I have to pick and choose, you know, which one [desk] would I like to sit in and decide if I would like to type my notes or would I like to only write.

Frank continued by discussing auditorium style seating in some classrooms:

I have to sit with my legs closed or, you know, I have to lay backwards like, stretch my legs out a whole lot so that I'm not in somebody's face. Like, here's one thing for me to have space, but I'm also trying to make sure that I'm not taking up anybody else's personal space.

Despite some physical challenges, Frank had a positive experience at

SMU, both with his fraternity, and with other activities:

When I was on campus, I feel based on my weight, I feel like it wasn't based on my weight. It was based on my personality and the way that I interact with these individuals. I made my due diligence to make sure I built a rapport with people on campus. That was one of my main goals coming into college that I left college a whole lot better than I came, and that I made my mark on this campus. The campus activities board and being on that board allowed me to meet a whole lot of "higher ups," especially faculty.

It is clear that Frank did not let his size impact his overall college experience. He seemed to be making great strides in his goal of "[leaving] college a whole lot better than I came and [making] my mark on this campus." Part of his success can certainly be attributed to his positive experience with Alpha Phi Alpha.

KC

At the time of interview, KC weighed approximately 270 pounds and was a junior at SMU. She is a sorority member within the NPHC and was actively involved in other campus organizations and roles. KC's classes were all in-person, and she was very familiar with campus operations and functions. In the past, she served on a student leadership team helping to welcome nearly 800 new students to SMU over the summer. Her influence on student populations did not stop there. She also volunteers with local community outreach programs. Unlike the other participants, she is not the only person in her family who is a member of the NPHC. She shared her experiences with several immediate family members and encouraged her sister and mother to become members while preparing her younger sister to join once she can attend college. When asked about what attracted her to the sorority she joined, KC reflected,

When I first heard of my organization, it had a lot of negative connotations, like it was for the ugly and smart girls or the more masculine girls. People would say they're not the best looking or you're too pretty for them. I liked them because everybody I knew was always genuinely nice.

KC reflects on the sisterhood experience she has had with her sorority:

When I think of a sister, I think of it as somebody who has your back no matter what. These sisters are people who aren't from your same blood, but you've come together at this same moment in the exact same time, and you're, like, literally bound to each other. Not by blood, but by, kind of

like, choice. These ladies they'll always have your back, no matter what. Like, they'll check on you just like a regular sister. If somebody isn't talking to somebody for, like, a week or something, they'll, like, "pull up" on you to make sure you're straight, make sure you got food, make sure everything's okay.

While KC felt a strong connection to her sorority, she expressed that, on a national level, her organization does not receive "enough love":

I was somebody who emphasized my sorority's mottos. We were the last of the Divine 9 (NPHC) sororities. I was watching TikTok, and this video [about merchandise for NPHC organizations] made so much sense to me. There was a trending eyeshadow palette, and one of the colors was named Howard (after Howard University) and then when she was just expressing how vendors don't give enough love to SGRHO (Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.), I felt her explanation. We were not even founded at Howard University. They should have researched our sorority more. When it comes to vendors, you see all this [paraphernalia] for the AKAs (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.) and Deltas (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.). I feel like between SGRHOs (Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.) and Zetas (Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.), we don't get enough love.

KC had similar feelings when trying to order clothing through a website for sorority and fraternity apparel:

I'll be going through [clothing website], and I don't know what size to pick because of course, as a female, a lot of the items are sold in ladies' fit and not unisex, so there's that aspect and you have to convert your size to a man's size. Then you can't even try it on because there's no dressing room, then you'll have to purchase it first. They were tripping [mad] about it. I had to fight tooth and nail for it [change of size]. I don't know what their policy was, but they were not trying to let me return it.

Similarly, KC had an embarrassing experience with attire during her new member presentation. She elaborated,

You're just kind of given what you are supposed to wear, and they purchase it for you. For example, on my pants, there were no belt loops. Because I do have a fuller figure, I was having a malfunction during the show, so someone had to pull my pants up.

She continued by saying the presentation was posted on YouTube

and to date, had over 10,000 views. She lamented, “every time I get to that part, I cringe.”

Despite feeling her organization does not receive the national recognition it deserves and experiencing challenges in finding attire that fits her correctly, KC felt represented as a fat-bodied student at SMU. She mentioned one moment of recognition:

Me and my sister were posted on two advertisements and were on the front of a back-to-school student calendar at a campus event. They had inflatables, bouncy houses, and face painting. We got face paint drawings on our arms. We were taking a picture to send to our mom, and we were posted on Instagram. We did not know, but someone sent the pictures to our mom, and she sent the pictures back to us. It was a surprise.

KC was unsure of the motivation behind this picture, but she did express that it was quite a surprise in her comparison to some of her initial concerns about being fat-bodied, joining a sorority, and feeling accepted. However, this one photo opportunity did not elevate her daily feelings of acceptance. This opportunity, whether intentional or not, did not erase some of the struggles she may have felt over the last several years. This moment lent itself to the fact that if it is possible to photograph a fat-bodied student for one advertisement, then it should be equally possible to advertise fat-bodied students on a more consistent basis across other advertising platforms, including sorority and fraternity life.

Themes and Discussion

In conducting an analysis of interview data and participant profiles, we discovered several themes that are consistent with past research on fat-bodied students and that connect to Brown’s (2016) fat studies in higher education framework.

Influence of NPHC Stereotypes

All three participants discussed stereotypes of different NPHC organizations and how those stereotypes influenced their decisions. For some, stereotypes deterred students from considering or joining a particular organization. Amber was still thinking about joining a sorority but shared what she knew about Alpha Kappa Alpha: “growing up like they tell you AKAs, they’re the prissy ones, the bougie ones. And I don’t really see a whole lot of plus-size girls in that sorority.” Although not directly stated, it can be inferred that based on what she has heard about the AKAs, she did not see herself fitting into that organization as a fat-bodied student. Despite having family members who were in the NPHC, KC had heard negative things about the organization she

ultimately joined:

When I first heard of my organization, it had a lot of negative connotations, like it was for the ugly and smart girls or the more masculine girls. People would say they're not the best looking or you're too pretty for them.

KC did not let the negativity impact her decision. She met current chapter members and found that everyone was "genuinely nice." Moreover, KC has worked to combat these stereotypes by discussing her experience with family members and encouraging her mother and sister to join as well. Both women's perceptions of the respective organizations align with Bryant's (2013) thoughts on NPHC organization stereotypes and Selzer's (2013) participants' reflections on body image in African American sorority women.

One should remember, however, that not all stereotypes are bad, and sometimes they can have a positive influence on a student's decision to join an NPHC organization. Frank appreciated the core values of Alpha Phi Alpha and as a future educator, was aware of role models who were also members. Further, he noted the positive impression he had of the group:

Even just looking at the way they presented themselves, like Alpha, the way Alphas look, dressed in suits and ties. The things that Alpha did, their national programs, it just really resonated with me as an individual, especially an aspiring educator, a lot of the programs are directly tied to helping the youth and, you know, uplifting the youth in our community.

Bryant (2013) described Alphas as "nerdy looking" (p. 97), possibly due to their suits and ties. Frank, however, saw this as a positive attribute, as he connected it to the work of the organization in the community and his own desire to be an educator like his role models Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Thurgood Marshall.

Visibility on Campus as a NPHC Member and as Fat-Bodied Student

Frank and KC, both current members of NPHC organizations, expressed concerns with participating in public presentations frequently seen as key parts of NPHC culture, such as a yard show or new member presentation. Frank described how he did not see himself participating in a yard show because of his size. KC also discussed a time when she was photographed during a campus event, and the photo was posted on Instagram. While this was a positive experience for KC, she described it as a "surprise" and discussed how she did not see a lot of fat-bodied students portrayed in campus advertisements or

social media platforms. The students' experiences with public events and representation are consistent with Stewart's (2018) and Stewart et al.'s. (2021; 2023a; 2023b) findings that fat-bodied students can feel marginalized on a campus, Long's (2020) connection between body size and self-confidence, Selzer's (2013) research theme of "how I look in clothes," and Steven's (2018) assertion that fat-bodied students are not well represented in college marketing.

Need for Size Inclusivity

Considering the implications beyond NPHC sororities and fraternities at SMU, all three participants discussed experiences that indicate a need for SMU to be more size inclusive. Amber and Frank both discussed classroom furnishings and how they could not fit comfortably in desks. Amber shared that she'd often come to class early to "get a good seat" and would bring a pillow to sit on. Frank shared that desks were uncomfortable and did not offer enough space for him to use both a laptop and notebook. He also found auditorium-style seating a challenge because of the way he would need to sit and the proximity to other students. These challenges align with Stewart et al.'s (2023a; 2023b) work with the #FatOnCampus research and awareness-building campaign, as well as Long's (2020) finding that fat-bodied individuals can have challenges with navigating physical spaces.

All three students shared experiences regarding attire and how SMU could be more inclusive with sizing options at the bookstore or campus events. As current members of NPHC organizations, Frank and KC, also shared challenges they had with the clothing they were required to wear for their new member presentations. Frank's initial outfit did not fit, but he was able to get one that did prior to his presentation. KC experienced a wardrobe malfunction during her new member presentation that was eventually posted on YouTube, causing her to "cringe" while watching it. In addition to the studies noted above, Frank and KC's experiences connect to Selzer's (2013) "how I look in clothes" finding. KC's experience may also connect to Selzer's (2013) finding related to body image among African American sorority women. KC expressing that she cringes when watching the clip of her wardrobe malfunction on YouTube could be an indicator of embarrassment, leading to a less positive body image.

Connection to Framework

We made several connections to the four core elements of the fat studies in higher education framework, which was originally developed by Brown (2016) and recently adapted by Stewart et al., (2024). The core elements include the importance of activism, language attentiveness, fatness as a medical issue and problem, and centering the individual within the research. NPHC organizations were born out of a necessity for activism and the participants' need

to feel empowered to advocate like their brothers and sisters who came before them did. Amber and KC both reflected on media and social media portrayals of fat-bodied students at SMU, and KC further believes her association does not receive “enough love” on a national level. While self-advocating and activism may seem daunting, it is an important step that both women can take, not only for themselves, but also for future fat-bodied SMU students, and NPHC members.

We intentionally began this article with the harsh quote Mya received when she sent out the participant interest survey: “lose some weight fatass.” The survey was sent to undergraduate SMU students via [Primary Researcher’s] SMU email address. This asserts the need for more education around language inclusivity (Brown, 2016, Stewart, et al., 2024). While Mya has the self-confidence not to be hurt by the comment, it is both hurtful and inappropriate. What does this say about the community SMU has built amongst its student population? It certainly does not portray a community of inclusion if language like this is used.

Fatness as a medical issue and problem (Brown, 2016, Stewart et al., 2024) was not a prevalent perspective among our participants. We see this as a good thing. Amber briefly mentioned that she was not always a fat-bodied individual but gained weight when she started college; this was the only comment somewhat related to the framework concept. No participants expressed dissatisfaction with their body type or medical concerns with being a fat-bodied individual.

Finally, and most importantly, we centered the participants in this research (Brown, 2016, Stewart et al., 2024). As Mya shared, she is both an NPHC member and a fat-bodied woman. Her desire to explore and illuminate the experiences of those who share those identities could not have been achieved if she did not put the students at the heart of this study. While each participant’s experience was unique, they, like the NPHC organizations they belong to or hoped to belong to, share a common experience of being fat-bodied at SMU.

Implications for Research and Practice

This research is not exhaustive of the total experiences and perspectives of fat-bodied students interested in NPHC organizations. This research was limited by the small sample size and data collection at one regional campus. Researchers could expand to include a larger sample size, a different institutional type, or multiple institutions. Researchers could also conduct studies to develop a deeper understanding of how other sorority and fraternity councils view body image and its influence on potential members. Finally, researchers could explore the intersection of being a fat-bodied individual and other identities.

College and university educators must be considerate and willing to listen to the needs of fat-bodied students before they can break down barriers of why some students feel like outcasts compared to others. Throughout the exploration of research methods, and through the limited information available about the experiences of fat-bodied students, it is beneficial for student affairs and sorority and fraternity educators to read this article with a focus on the students. SMU is only one of the many institutions across the world that may not always consider the opinions of fat-bodied students and their interest in joining or current membership in an NPHC organization. This research is not all-encompassing of every fat-bodied student or every NPHC council. The experiences of the students, faculty, and staff members, and the overall acceptance of students on campus are important to the growth of higher education. As previously mentioned, this research may assist in sharing some of the opinions of fat-bodied students and their feelings of acceptance on campus but will also serve as a reminder that there is still progress to be made within higher education. While this research focused on fat-bodied students, many other student demographic groups may want to ensure that their voices are heard and acknowledged across their campuses.

Conclusion

The participants highlighted in this article each provided unique perspectives regarding their experience with and perceptions of NPHC organizations at SMU. Their experiences may not be indicative of all fat-bodied NPHC members, members of the greater sorority and fraternity community, or fat-bodied college students in general. However, this study, as well as the past research reviewed for the study, indicates a need for change in higher education. As noted above, Stewart (2018) has called on the higher education community to focus our work on student learning and to create communities where fat-bodied students feel visible and heard. We hope this research can serve as a catalyst for change and that as educators, we can work to create campus environments where fat-bodied students feel welcome and can thrive.

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