"I JOINED A SORORITY, SO THAT HELPED A LOT . . .": THE CENTRALITY OF BLACK GREEK ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP FOR BLACK STUDENTS AND ALUMNI AT A RURAL PWI

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After realizing drops in Black student enrollment at a rural, public, liberal arts institution, we utilized a mixed methods approach, including secondary data analysis and Black alumni interviews, to understand the impact of these changes. We discovered, consistent with previous research, that for many alumni, their membership in a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organization was central to their satisfaction with their college experience and that their connections to the campus post-graduation were often also facilitated by this membership. In addition, alumni were very aware of the change in campus racial composition over time and noted the impact it had on the health and well-being of their college chapters.

Keywords: NPHC membership, campus racial composition, racial climate, voluntary associations

Much attention has been paid to the recent Supreme Court decision to ban affirmative action in higher education admissions (Aaron et al., 2023). Most of this response assumes, despite much evidence to the contrary, that the desegregation of historically or predominantly White institutions (HPWIs) occurred after the end of the de jure segregation and in concert with affirmative action policies, leading to concerns about the potential "resegregation" of American higher education (Oh et al., 2024). The research reported here is based on interviews with Black alumni of one public HPWI where significant desegregation did occur but has subsequently been reversed, an unusual case that allows us to explore the consequences of potential resegregation for institutions and their alumni. Drawing on a larger collaborative project exploring changes in Black student enrollment over time at a small, public, liberal arts college in the Southeast, Magnolia University (pseudonym), this project broadly focuses on the ways that the campus climate has changed over time due to demographic shifts in the campus racial composition. Those changes are interconnected with changes in institutional mission and concomitant changes in the sociodemographic characteristics of the student body.

Our data reinforce the power and importance of NPHC organizations for their members and host institutions and reveal the potential negative consequences for institutional connections with alumni if they resegregate. In an era of increasing scrutiny of the role and function of Greek organizations on college campuses (Garcia et al., 2022;

Tull & Cavins-Tull, 2018), we believe it is important to meaningfully differentiate NPHC organizations from their predominantly White counterparts (largely but not exclusively affiliated with either the Interfraternity Council or the National Panhellenic Council; McClure, 2006). We hope that this project, alongside the work of Robinson and Williams (2010), will allow these student scholars to tell the story of their experiences, both good and bad, and demonstrate the joy, strength, and community that Black alumni have been able to build for themselves and each other, sometimes even in the face of overt racism and discrimination on the part of other campus community members.

Literature Review

Black College Student Enrollment, Persistence, and Retention

Racial differences in college student access, persistence, and retention are an important equity issue in higher education. Black student enrollment in postsecondary education has declined since 2011 (Ditzel et al., 2023). Over the last decade, 600,000 Black learners have been lost, resulting in lower participation than 20 years ago. Two decades of progress have been erased (Ditzel et al., 2023). This decline is deeply problematic as the economic vitality of Black Americans, as well as the communities in which they live, are in jeopardy. Decades of progress are now being dismantled due to structural systems and a lack of institutional commitment to supporting all students in completing a postsecondary credential. Even for students who reach a college campus, disparities in graduation rates by race persist, with Black students having the lowest graduation rate. For first-time students attending public 4-year institutions full-time, graduation rates within 6 years were 80.1% for Asian students, 73.2% for White students, 48.7% for Black students, 56.1% for Hispanic students, and 49.6% for American Indian/Alaskan Native students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). For these reasons, identifying and supporting organizations and experiences on campus that facilitate Black college student success is crucial.

While research on college student persistence and retention has long detailed the important role that institutions play in facilitating student success (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 1993), more recent scholarship has expanded (and critiqued) these models due to key differences in students' on-campus experiences based on race, socioeconomic status, institutional type, etc. (Johnson, 2022; Leath et al., 2022; Morales, 2021). For example, experiences with racism across a range of campus settings can make achieving meaningful membership in a collegiate setting more challenging for individual Black students (Lee & Hopson, 2019). Therefore, given this wider context, formal organization membership is uniquely important for Black students at HPWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

Black Greek-letter Organizations as Supportive Counterspaces

Previous research suggests that Black student involvement in communal niches, particularly those that may serve as "supportive counterspaces" on predominantly White campuses, can play a critical role in student retention (Morales, 2021, p. 80; see also Grier-Reed, 2010). They can also be central to developing and maintaining connections to campus after graduation (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). The nine organizations associated with the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) serve as examples of the types of organizations associated with this kind of successful social integration. In this way, they can facilitate student success even in the face of challenging campus climates, and as Harper (2015) notes, higher education researchers would do well to focus on organizational contexts and environments that facilitate student success, in addition to research that identifies institutional and structural barriers to that success.

NPHC organizations, also often called Black Greek-letter Organizations, are a form of voluntary associations, defined minimally as any "formally organized named group, most of whose members – whether persons or organizations – are not financially compensated for their participation" (Knoke, 1986, p. 2). As such, they facilitate the development of both bridging and bonding social capital, which is valuable for students both in and after college. Bonding social capital is the level of trust that develops within groups that facilitates an increased capacity for cooperation and collective action which makes it easier for groups to accomplish shared goals. Bridging social capital is the level of generalized trust and cooperation generated by bonds among people that extend beyond their immediate group and encourage tolerance and collective action within communities and societies (Chetty et al., 2022; Putnam, 2000).

These organizations meet many of the requirements identified as necessary for facilitating a "sense of belonging" for students whose specific campus climates do not necessarily meet the conditions outlined in Museus's Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model (Museus et al., 2017). As Patton and Bonner (2001) write, "with their longstanding tradition of scholarship, leadership, community service, and social activism, these [NPHC] organizations have served as an aegis of protection for the African American collegiate and noncollegiate community" (p. 17). In fact, the first of the Black Greek-letter organizations was founded as a strategic and protective response to the hostile campus climate experienced by Black male students at Cornell (Harper, 2013; Ross, 2000). And yet, on many campuses, the unique history and function of these organizations are unknown to the campus community, including students, faculty, and administrators (sometimes including those who are charged with supervising overall campus Greek Life organizations; Garcia et al., 2022; Hughey, 2007; Ray & Rosow, 2012) and are rarely visible in institutional information on

Fraternity and Sorority Life provided on university websites (Garcia et al., 2021).

   Previous research on NPHCs at HPWIs, including one conducted by an author of the current study, demonstrates that these organizations can serve as a communal niche through which students can develop meaningful membership in the campus community and, through the efficacy developed by their organizational membership, successfully navigate the wider campus environment (McClure, 2006; see also Museus, 2008). In addition, Patton et al. (2011) found that "fraternity and sorority involvement [for Black students specifically] promoted increased interactions with faculty members and higher levels of collaboration with peers" (p. 119). The activities of these organizations certainly contribute to creating the "experiential core of college life," and may be some of the key sites for the experience of Black joy on campus. Tichavakunda (2021) describes how NPHC and similar organizations "provide valuable locations of refuge, cultural celebration, and support for members" (p. 304), which is important given the extant literature on Black students' negative experiences at HWPIs. Our research builds on this body of work by offering additional empirical evidence that highlights the ways in which Black Greek-letter Organizations continue to be key sites contributing to a sense of belonging for Black students at HPWIs. Additionally, our work provides college administrators with data to support greater institutional investment in such organizations. As Tichavakunda (2021) explains, "Institutions can either stand in the way of and inhibit Black celebration and recreation or institutions can create conditions and structures that facilitate Black joy" (p. 316).

Study Context and Methods

   Magnolia University was established as a public normal and industrial school for White women in the late 19th century, with the first Black and male students enrolling in the 1960s. As a regional comprehensive institution in the 1970s and 1980s, the student body was primarily from surrounding counties. In 1996, the institution's mission shifted to become the state's public liberal arts university. In the mid-1980s, the college's commitment to desegregated education was unique in the state system, which had been cited by the federal government for its lack of progress towards dismantling their dual system of higher education. The institution had multiple Black students serve as the student body president throughout the 1980s. As seen in Figure 1 below, Black student enrollment peaked at 18.3% in 1994 and has since fallen to 8% in Fall 2023. Figure 2 demonstrates that these changes were not simply due to state-wide demographic changes as the percentage of Black students graduating from high school stayed relatively consistent across this same period.

Figure 1
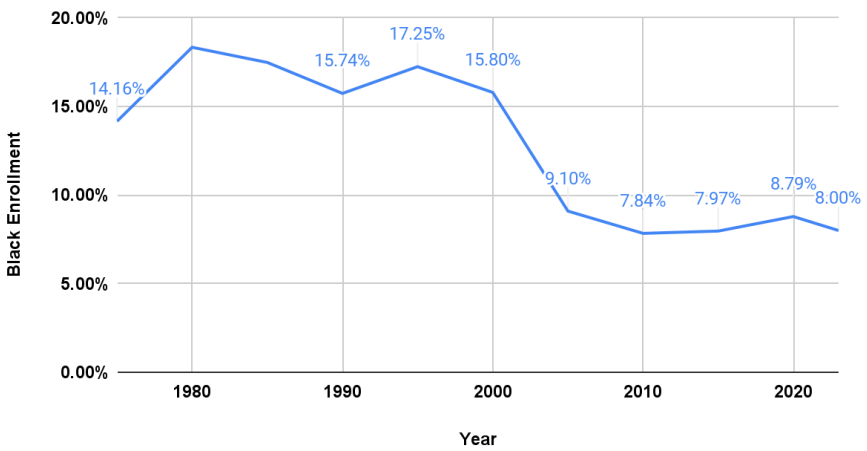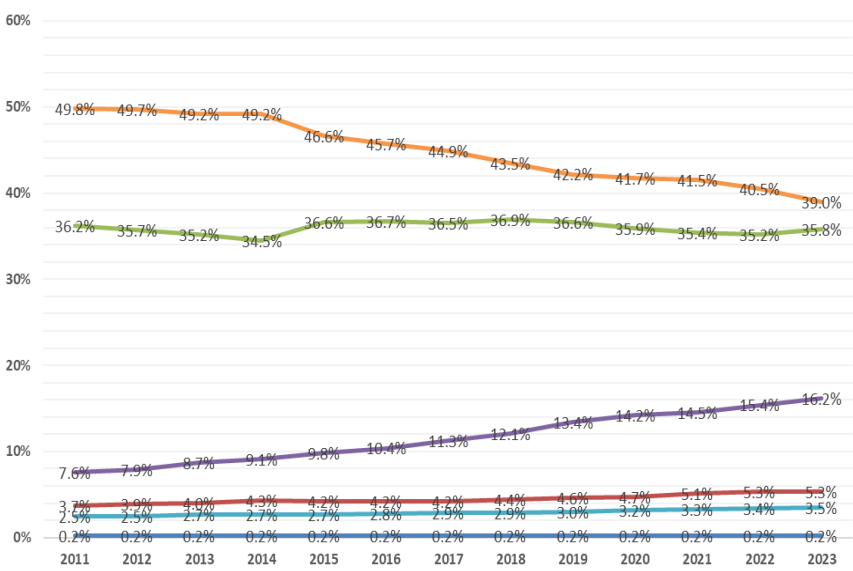*Magnolia University Black Student Enrollment*

Figure 2
Racial Composition of Statewide High School Graduates

To understand the impact of the demographic changes at Magnolia University over time, we sought to hear directly from former students who attended the university prior to and after the mission shift. Each element of this project was conducted with undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in independent study courses or as part of coursework in sociology, public administration, and education policy at the university. We utilized a mixed methods case study design, which included secondary data and formal interviews focused on a single institution over time (Stake, 2005). In Spring 2023, students in an Education Policy/Sociology of Education class, co-taught by two of the authors (Kelley Ditzel and Stephanie McClure), conducted at least one interview with a Black alum. To recruit alumni, we used a snowball sampling approach combined with a direct email from the university's Alumni Engagement office to all Black alumni for whom they had contact information. All potential respondents received a message introducing the study and inviting them to schedule an interview. The interview guide was created with student input and submitted for IRB approval. We instructed the students to use a semi-structured interview style in which they worked from the formal interview protocol but could deviate from it based on individual responses to specific questions (Patton, 2002). The following are examples of questions that we asked:

1. What made you decide to attend Magnolia University?

2. Can you remember how you felt when you first arrived on campus?

3. Were there any particular experiences that made you feel connected to Magnolia University?

4. What has been your involvement with Magnolia University since graduation, if any?

Following the semester's completion, the first authors completed eight additional interviews (18 total interviews). We moved to analysis when we felt we had reached saturation of overall content and themes and that new interviews primarily reinforced existing information (Lareau, 2021). Each interview was recorded and transcribed. See Table 1 for further information about the characteristics of our respondents.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Demographic Characteristic	Number of Participants
Gender	-
Female	11
Male	7
Decade of Graduation	-
1970s	1
1980s	2
1990s	6
2000s	2
2010s	3
2020s	4
First Generation Status	8

Upon transcription of the interviews, we worked to identify themes in the data through a multi-step coding process that was informed by a grounded theory approach (Lareau, 2021; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that aimed to discern how participants made sense of their lived experiences on campus and how those experiences shaped their present-day connection, if any, to the university. Some of the initial codes that we used during the collective coding process were "campus organization/student involvement-religion and Greek life," "satisfaction overall," and "experiences with faculty/staff."

After completing an initial research summary, we shared the findings with our respondents for an informal member check (Jones, 2002). Following a general presentation, five respondents reviewed initial drafts and confirmed that the analysis was consistent with their experiences. Although the importance of NPHC organizations was not the initial focus of our broader study, our analysis uncovered the salience of NPHC membership in fostering a connection to the university. The findings below detail the crucial role that NPHC organizations played for Black Magnolia University alumni.

Findings

While interviewing 18 Black alumni from one university, the importance of their NPHC membership quickly became clear. Of the 18 respondents, 12 were members of an NPHC fraternity or sorority. This involvement was one of the most important factors that affected

their experience at this institution.

Facilitators of Black Student Success

Although the university is an HPWI, these fraternities and sororities made students of color feel included and helped establish a form of **unity and cohesion** among them. As one respondent noted, "The connection was made by necessity where different fraternities and sororities would support each other and go to each other's cookouts and parties" (R10, 2000s graduate). Organizations served as **outlets for help**, which were not always available from other institutional sources. One example mentioned by a respondent was the need for help commuting to and from school: "I did pledge my sorority so we would organize our classes so that we could ride together" (R3, 1990s graduate). This type of help and community building not only made the experience better for students of color but also provided for lifelong friendships as well. Another said,

> *We had a network within ourselves to kind of support each other as well, and that's kind of one of the things that I attribute to my success and finishing school on time and graduating both times is having that network of people that I could rely on.* (R5, 2010s graduate)

For many respondents, their **overall satisfaction** with the institution was defined primarily by their involvement with an NPHC organization. As one respondent noted, "I actually pledged [an NPHC chapter], so that I don't have a quote, unquote 'terrible experience'" (R16, 2010s graduate). Another respondent stated, "I also joined a [NPHC] sorority. So that helped a lot" (R4, 2000s graduate).

NPHC membership is also often associated with **increased student involvement** in other campus groups (McClure, 2006), both those specifically dedicated to Black students (like the Black Student Alliance or the NAACP), as well as other organizations, including the Student Government Association and a multitude of professional or academic organizations. One respondent noted, "It was a Black male student that talked me into joining the Black student association; he was like, give it a shot. You will feel more included" (R4, 2000s graduate). Another said, "So, I was able to meet students through the Black Student Alliance. And from there, that's where I pledged my fraternity" (R9, 2020s graduate). A third respondent stated, "So, once I got really added with the sorority, then it brought me into the other, you know, groups like the BSA" (R12, 1990s graduate). This is consistent with prior research which suggests these organizations not only serve as a communal niche but also provide a basis for wider engagement with the campus community (McClure, 2006).

Structural Constraints

Several of the interviews expressed the feeling of a small minority population becoming even smaller. As one respondent noted, "The minority population at [Magnolia University] was small when I was there, and it's even smaller now ... but we had a very cohesive group" (R1, 1970s graduate). Some even went as far as saying that altogether, it is not the same at all as it was before. As one respondent noted, "It's not the same; I wish it was that way because it was just so different" (R12, 1990s graduate). Another stated:

> When I was at [the university], the enrollment of African American students was so much greater than it is now. So, even though we were a predominantly White institution, we had a large group of African American students, so we were very much engaged with one another. (R2, 1980s graduate)

Some individuals suggested that a change in geographic recruitment was a major force in the racial composition change, something which is consistent with previous research on current and former admissions officers of the same institution (DuBois, McClure, & Bridgeforth, 2019). One respondent noted that before the recruitment changes, "we were country kids. We were from Willow County (pseudonym), Troy (pseudonym) ... it was definitely more local, definitely more" (R12, 1990s graduate). Another said, "[I] saw a change from the 90s to the early 2000s. In the 90s, [the university] was the place to be, especially being a local Black student who wanted to go to college" (R4, 2000s graduate). Another respondent noted, "They must be recruiting from places like [wealthy suburbs far from the college]; when you think of it, it's pretty heavy. I could tell the difference" (R16, 2010s graduate).

Respondents shared how this change impacted the current landscape of NPHC chapters at the institution. Many respondents noted increasing hardships in recruiting new members. As one respondent said, "It's disheartening because, as a member of a fraternity, who you know, we try to recruit and keep the chapter alive. It's a real struggle because you don't have enough people to select from" (R5, 2010s graduate). Another said,

> If you don't have recruits, your Greek life is going to die off because you have to continue to recruit people for your Greek life to continue. I mean, everything was there, you know, the [NPHC organization], you had everything, not now. You hardly have anybody in your chapters. (R11, 1990s graduate)

Another respondent observed this change as well: "It was a great Greek life—Black Greek life—when I was there. When I came back, it just felt different. It was very isolating; not a lot of Black folks" (R16, 2010s

graduate). One change that some alumni noticed when coming back was how there was a lot more intermingling between White and Black girls. Another respondent noted, "The Black girls I saw on campus, they were hanging with all the White girls. So, I just see a stark difference … I don't think they would, you know, pledge a Black Greek organization" (R16, 2010s graduate).

NPHC fraternities and sororities had (and still do have) a significant impact on the school and the community, but as times have changed, it has become harder and harder to recruit and make substantial impacts on the campus and the community. Another respondent said,

> Joining a sorority and understanding that opened my eyes to a lot because when you're on campus and you see your PHC with a big group of members and then other groups with low numbers of people, it's like, okay, what's happening here? Learning the history of that, I understand the why behind things. (R4, 2000s graduate)

The third author, James Bridgeforth, himself an alumnus and member of an NPHC organization, remembers this impacting his own interactions with chapter alums and how difficult it was to try to explain to folks who attended Magnolia University in the eighties and nineties that it was a very different context. The alumni members often thought the undergraduate members were just not working hard enough and not understanding the impact of the changed environment, which is definitely related to racial composition. Given this, it sometimes felt like [the NPHC chapters] were more in competition with each other than a camaraderie or a friendly competition. It was literally a competition for survival. And that is a very different kind of experience.

Overall, these themes highlight the positive impact of NPHC membership for Black students at HPWIs and illustrate the reasons why changing campus racial composition can negatively impact both the viability of these organizations and the feelings of connection to the campus for Black alumni. As one respondent suggested,

> I will say that history is a cycle, and so I think about my godmother who was at [the university] in 1977, and the things that she faced have come back around. It's like it got better, and now it's coming full circle. (R4, 2000s graduate).

Another respondent said,

> There's not a lot of diversity going on right there, and I don't know if what has happened is a result of the change in recruitment practices or if it's just, not sure why it's like that now … it's not a good look when you think about it. (R11, 1990s graduate)

Discussion and Implications

If we take seriously the need to address ongoing gaps in access to and success in higher education (Oh et al., 2024), we should take seriously research that demonstrates the value and power of existing campus organizations for creating a sense of belonging for Black students at HPWI's. NPHC organizations were a significant factor in the retention, inclusion, and satisfaction of many of the Black alumni we interviewed. They helped to create a sense of community and connection and continue to be meaningful after graduation. These organizations facilitate alumni engagement post-graduation in ways that are too often invisible to campus alumni associations (McClure, Ditzel, & Bridgeforth, Under Review). Therefore, we offer the following recommendations for campus administrators based on the findings of this research.

Honor the Histories of Black Student Counterspaces and Organizations

One recommendation is to honor the histories of Black Greek-letter Organizations and to share those histories in spaces across campus. This requires campus administrators to learn more about these organizations and to pay attention to how changes in campus racial composition and the wider structural context impact the health and viability of existing student organizations (Miller McPherson & Ranger-Moore, 1991; Ray, 2013). Changes in campus recruiting and admissions over longer periods impact the ability of organizations to recruit new members, engage their alumni, and maintain their positive impact on student experiences. We urge higher education professionals to consistently engage with NPHC organizations on their campuses to better understand the histories of their local chapters and the present-day challenges that some may face with new member recruitment and chapter sustainability.

Interrogate Existing University Policies and Procedures

A key component of Bensimon's (2007) concept of equity-mindedness is the understanding that the impacts of university policies, practices, and procedures are not race-neutral and can have negative effects on the experiences and outcomes of racially minoritized student populations. Equity-minded practitioners, Bensimon (2007) explains, are cognizant of the disparate impacts on racially minoritized groups and work to adjust both institutional and individual practices in service of dismantling barriers to student success. We encourage practitioners to question the taken-for-granted assumptions within their own departments and institutions through a careful analysis of the policies and practices that are currently in existence. When planning events or developing mandatory policies for campus fraternities and sororities, practitioners may ask themselves,

"How might this policy impact NPHC organizations differently from IFC or NPC organizations?" This may involve working with additional departments to analyze and reimagine required forms or activities that assume large membership rosters (and the accompanying financial resources that often come with more members). As new policies are developed or passed down from senior campus leadership, practitioners might also seek the advice of NPHC members for guidance on a more inclusive form of implementation.

Conclusion

Concerns about access to and success in higher education for Black students have an important economic component:

> If every working Black adult with a high school diploma or GED earned as much as the average Black college graduate (at least an associate degree), their collective additional earnings would equal an estimated $222 billion more … This amount – $222 billion – is larger than the total economy in 19 individual states and the District of Columbia and larger than the combined economies of several states within regions. (Brown, 2024)

The findings shared here are part of a larger research project that, in addition to interviews, will include content analysis of the student yearbook, student newspaper, and institutional archives in the collaborative development of a website dedicated to chronicling (and collecting) the experiences of Black students over time to "restore" the archive and create a sense of community/connection among the alumni (Roy et al., 2022; Wallenstein 2000).

We recognize that the current higher education landscape for many student affairs professionals is increasingly challenging due to the swift growth of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and legislative acts across the nation (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2024). Yet, we join the call from other scholars (Lange & Lee, 2024; Tichavakunda, 2021) that refuses to cede the well-being of marginalized students to the whims of political actors who seek to challenge the benefits of culturally based organizations and programs that provide meaningful connections and experiences to college students. Despite the often-hostile sociopolitical context in which many practitioners are working, it is important, perhaps now more than ever, to continue to support these counterspaces and organizations.

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