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The National Pan-Hellenic Council: Hazing in the Community

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The author reviews the literature surrounding the history of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and the organizations that comprise it. Particular attention is given to the problems that have plagued black fraternities and sororities and their individual members since its inception. Additionally, the author examines issues of the pledging and hazing processes, including its prevalence in the Greek campus culture. Finally, the author investigates the current racial tensions within Greek life and the present state of the NPHC and potential positive alternatives to help eliminate hazing.

Researcher Hank Nuwer reports that, “As of November 1, 2007, the number of recorded hazing/pledging/rushing-related deaths in fraternities and sororities stands at 89: 83 males and 6 females” (Hazingprevention.org, 2008). These numbers account for all fraternity and sorority deaths around the country and include those that have occurred within the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc.

The National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc. (NPHC) is an umbrella organization which comprises the nation’s historically Black Greek-Letter Organizations (BGLOs); it consists of five fraternities and four sororities. Five of these chapters originated at Howard University, a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), while another began at Morgan State University, also an HBCU (About the NPHC, n.d.). Each of the three chapters not yet mentioned were founded at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (About the NPHC) at a time when the black student population felt discrimination and a lack of group identity (Giddings, 1988).

Alpha Phi Alpha Inc., the first BGLO to originate did so in 1906 at Cornell

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University twenty-four years before the NPHC was created in 1930 at Howard University (Home, n.d.). Between 1906 and 1930, eight of the nine current organizations that comprise the NPHC were formed. With the emergence of many BGLOs in these years, it became evident that an overall governing organization would be beneficial to the national fraternities and sororities and their respective chapters. The organization would allow them the chance to connect and discuss issues they all dealt with as members of BGLOs (About the NPHC, n.d.). Among these issues were racism, elitism, and white privilege both on their campuses and in their day to day lives (Jones, 2004). Today, the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc. governs Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi, Inc., Omega Psi Phi, Inc., Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma, Inc., Zeta Phi Beta, Inc., Sigma Gamma Rho, Inc., and Iota Phi Theta, Inc.

The fraternities and sororities that comprise the NPHC, since their inception, have brought forward many strong emotions from members and outsiders alike as their emergence in American history marks a time in which young black students were asserting their rights as American citizens. Initially, these organizations were thought to exist in order to advance the black race, according to Henry Callis, a co-founder of Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc (Kimbrough, 2003). Within recent decades however, fraternities and sororities have evoked much negative and limited positive press (Jones, 2004). The harmful publicity is primarily due to the controversial tradition of hazing that occurs within the organizations and continually serves to overshadow the strong affirmative forces these chapters embody by way of supporting their members and providing a place for them to feel comfortable being themselves. There is potential for a bright future for the NPHC and the organizations that comprise it, but hard work must first be dedicated to the effort of restoring the integrity and the merit of the individual BGLOs before the NPHC can begin to move forward as a governing entity.

The following paper explores the tradition of hazing specifically within the BGLO community. It offers possible theories as to why hazing began, comments on the violence that occurs within the organizations, and explains how the NPHC attempted to handle it in the early 90s. Further, it points out how students rejected the Membership Intake Process (MIP) put forth by the NPHC. The paper takes a moment to briefly discuss the ambiguity that surrounds hazing and also looks at a major difference with a similar outcome in hazing between black and white Greek letter organizations. It goes on to revisit the physical assault that occurs in BGLOs and explores why students continue to endure the pain they must go through in order to become members. Finally,

this paper comments on the positive forces behind the NPHC and concludes by suggesting ways in which the fraternities and sororities could concentrate on the production of positive movements within their specific chapters through means of education from BGLO alumni, some of whom are prominent scholars within their respective fields.

Pledging, Hazing and the Membership Intake Process

A crucial subject that researchers have studied repeatedly is the tradition of hazing within NPHC organizations. It is unclear when and how hazing began in black fraternities and sororities but it seems as though it may have been adopted from historically white Greek groups (Ruffins, 1998). While this is a possibility, another theory states that those in the NPHC had to show that they could protect each other from their white schoolmates if ever threatened, so enduring hazing was a way to prove one's strength and devotion to their brothers or sisters (Ruffins). In its purest form, hazing in black organizations initially consisted of pledges, those who received an invitation to join an organization but had not yet been initiated into a chapter, dressing similarly, standing in single file lines and marching together on campus grounds (Giddings, 1988). Pledging, defined in this paper by bonding through hazing, serves as a rite of passage and as a profound accomplishment (Kimbrough, 2003).

In recent decades however, hazing in NPHC organizations has become dangerously violent. It has led to many reported injuries and some deaths (Kimbrough, 1997; Morgan, 1998). Hazing during the pledge period became so intense, harmful, and sometimes deadly in the 1980s that the NPHC abolished both traditions of pledging and hazing and as a result, began the Membership Intake Process in 1990. (Kimbrough; Morgan; Ruffins, 1998). The MIP consisted of a few days of education on the history of the organization the new members were hoping to join (Kimbrough). This was a big change from fifteen week, eight week, and six week long pledge processes that current fraternity and sorority members had endured. Current members already a part of and now running their chapters grew upset with the drastic modification as they felt that a few days was not enough time to establish the bonding that was supposed to happen, instill traditions that occur annually, and form the strong beginnings of friendship that enrich the experience of being Greek (Kimbrough). Additionally, the new initiates were not considered full members until they partook in hazing rituals which served to prove their loyalty to their organization (Morgan). Without the former pledge and haze process in place, present members were unsure of how to know if a new member was dedicated to their organization.

A couple of years after the Membership Intake Process began, students attempted to restore the pledge period in an inconspicuous manner. As a result of the need for secrecy, hazing continued in a more subtle fashion than ever before (Kimbrough, 1997). Members were now hazed after initiation, when they were official fraternity or sorority members so that it would look to outsiders as if no hazing was taking place at all (Kimbrough). The era of post-pledge hazing became evident in 1998 when several Kappa Alpha Psi brothers were hospitalized due to severe bruising on their backsides after they were initiated (Morgan, 1998).

Initially, hazing activities were meant to signify the importance of the group over the individual and build strong bonds between brothers or sisters. While there is still a strong emphasis on bonding in today's Greek organizations, the bond-building within the NPHC chapters seems to take place primarily through the shared experience of enduring physical violence. Therefore, pledging, which has come to be a pseudonym for hazing, continues to be an issue of safety and personal well-being for students (Kimbrough, 2003).

Hazing Ambiguity and Its Racial Contexts

A point that deserves attention is that in the United States, the definitions and consequences of hazing differ across state lines. It is important to note that hazing can be categorized according to the legal system as either criminal or noncriminal depending on the nature of the incident (Nuwer, 1999). No matter which category it falls into however, hazing is generally forbidden both by the NPHC and colleges and universities. The ambiguity of what hazing is, depending on where an organization is located leaves blurry lines and much room for students who partake in Greek life to attempt to decipher what is legal and illegal in their jurisdiction. Pledge events at one university may be considered bond-building while at another university they may be unlawful. It is with this understanding that fraternities and sororities must educate themselves in order to abide by the regulations set forth by their states, their universities and their organizations.

Another point to note is that while they vary accordingly, both black and white Greek students seem to be involved in dangerous traditions through hazing. White fraternities' and sororities' pledging rituals often involve excessive alcohol intake in place of physical assault (Nuwer, 1999) while the opposite is true for BGLOs (Morgan, 1998). Even with these primary differences in hazing culture, a common and colorblind theme of unhealthy risk-taking seems to

be woven into Greek life. It is to this point where both races of Greeks incur overlapping incidences that the national organizations are beginning to work together in an effort to find some way to turn this destructive hazing into something productive and educational (Morgan).

Violent Hazing and Why the Tradition Continues

While the NPHC and campus administrators search for ways to tackle violent hazing activities, it is useful to look at possible reasons for why this type of hazing is so instilled in the traditions of BGLOs. One theory is that there is a link to slavery as students remember the cruelties and violence generations before them endured (Ruffins, 1998). Supporting this idea is the branding culture in which fraternity and sorority members have their organization's Greek letters become part of their skin through a painful process usually using a burning hot hanger (Kimbrough, 2003; Morgan, 1998). A look at this phenomenon, whereby students are willing to endure immense pain, shows that these students may have such a strong desire to be part of something bigger than themselves that they may do anything to join an organization. Furthermore, there can be strong pressure from students' family members who may push them to join fraternities or sororities where they are a legacy, meaning that their family lineage has been a part of an organization for generations, which in turn helps the current student gain admittance to the group. It can be especially hard for students to turn parent or family desires down (Ruffins).

In an effort to look closer at the tradition of violence in black fraternities and sororities, it is important to remember that if a student chooses to go through the hazing and pledging experience to gain entry into an organization, this student does not have to continue the hazing tradition once it comes time for him or her to be the member inflicting the traditions on new pledges. Students know this however, and most choose to continue the process anyway. A former fraternity member states that the only reward for going through all of this was to be able to do it to someone else (Ruffins, 1998).

Rethinking Hazing and Re-owning Black Greek Letter Organizations

Today, as one looks at the organizations which are guided by the NPHC, it is easy to see that these chapters need improvement. After looking at so much data revolving around hazing, it can be challenging to find the positive attributes and qualities instilled in the NPHC chapters and their members in a context without harm. These organizations however, are much more than simply groups

who pledge and haze. The students who are part of NPHC organizations are involved with actively supporting equality initiatives, advocating for the education of black minors, and consistently showing value toward community service (Nuwer, 1999). These practices should if nothing else be more prevalent than those of the hazing culture.

In order to make this goal become a reality, fraternity and sorority members should focus on decreasing the amount of hazing events they partake in within their chapters. One way of implementing this is with the help of university graduate chapters (Kimbrough, 1997). The NPHC could empower black Greek graduate students to take on the role of mentors and train their undergraduate members to influence positive behavior in their chapters. This has the potential to be a great movement as graduate students, traditionally older and more experienced than undergraduates, may have a more realistic understanding of the dangers hazing presents not only to students' lives but to the reputation and continuation of individual chapters as well. A focus of this mentorship could be the history of their chapters, the principles they were founded upon, and the black Greek movement as a whole. Kimbrough (2003) explains that black Greeks are walking around their campuses shouting to one another and throwing up hand signs they do not understand. He urges that to educate members about their organizations and to teach them what makes their groups unique will instill more pride and thus create more respect in members' eyes for the name and the sanctity of their organization they hold so dear.

Understanding, working with, and guiding the NPHC chapters on our campuses to work toward a more respectable status is obligatory for institutions across the country. NPHC organizations and universities are inextricably linked and have the potential to flourish and be strong positive forces in students' lives. The NPHC should continue to look at suggestions from scholars who were active in BGLOs during their undergraduate years. The number of fraternity men and sorority women who have become administrators, scholars, and researchers in academia is an enormous advantage for the NPHC. Their alumni are studying the hazing tradition while actively working to persuade current members to put an end to it. These educators all have post-undergraduate life experiences that allow them to speak to and work with the current Greeks on a level in which they can all relate (Ruffins, 2004). Researchers present challenges to the current Greeks on campuses to get back to their roots and to focus on and emphasize the positive aspects of each of their chapters that are present but often hidden.

The students who want to be involved in Greek life want to be a part of a greater

community while benefitting themselves, their schools, their communities and future black Greeks to follow. With the application of the suggestions previously stated, the NPHC can begin to reconstruct its practices and its image. This would in turn benefit the NPHC, the institutions who are home to BGLOs, the individual chapters, and most importantly, the students who are integral to the functioning of the black Greek organizations.

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