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Examining the Link Between Pledging, Hazing, and Organizational Commitment Among Members of a Black Greek Fraternity

Sean Rogers

Rutgers University, serogers@rci.rutgers.edu

Carmen Rogers

University of Arkansas, cmr008@uark.edu

Treshawn Anderson M.A.

Purdue University College, treander@purdue.edu

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EXAMINING THE LINK BETWEEN PLEDGING, HAZING, AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AMONG MEMBERS OF A BLACK GREEK FRATERNITY

SEAN ROGERS, CARMEN ROGERS, & TRESHAWN ANDERSON

Black Greek-Letter Organization (BGLO) members hold strong opinions about the purposes and efficacy of pledging and hazing as a means of member initiation. Those who argue in favor of the pledge process claim it is needed to help remove those not genuinely interested in membership, develop appreciation for and pride in the organization, and generate long-term organizational commitment and sustained participation. Those who call for an end to pledging argue that whatever benefit might be gained from such bonding experiences is overshadowed by the mortal, legal, reputational, emotional, and financial risks posed for both the associations and the individuals involved. Despite decades of conjectural debate on the efficacy of pledging and hazing, to the authors' knowledge, no empirical study has examined its impact on BGLO alumni-level membership continuance. To address this deficiency, the researchers conducted a logistic regression analysis of survey responses from alumni members of a BGLO fraternity (n = 285). Results revealed no statistically significant relationship between participation in a pledge process and alumni-level membership. The implication of these findings for BGLOs and their members and leaders are discussed.

For better or worse, Black Greek-Letter Organizations (BGLOs) have largely come to be known by their association with pledging and hazing—initiation rituals, rites of passage, and other time-bound processes intended to “make” interested individuals members by subjecting them to various activities of a symbolic, affective, and informative nature. Several authors of recent BGLO scholarship contend that pledging and hazing are among the most defining characteristics of these organizations (e.g., Parks and Brown, 2005), to the point of overshadowing the impressive organizational legacies and membership rosters that contain some of (Black) America’s leading achievements and figures (Foster, 2008).

BGLO participants who argue in favor of initiation practices as a prerequisite for membership claim that they help remove those not genuinely interested in membership, develop appreciation for and pride in the association, generate long-term organizational commit-

ment and sustained participation, and facilitate bonding among fraternity and sorority members (Foster, 2008; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks & Brown, 2005). Those who argue against, frequently cite initiation mishaps that have resulted in physical or mental harm to potential members, including death, and argue that whatever benefit might be gained from hardship experience requirements is overshadowed by the mortal, legal, reputational, emotional, and financial risks posed for both the associations and the individuals involved (Kimbrough, 2009; Parks & Brown, 2005).

Whereas most research on pledging and hazing in BGLOs has focused on individual outcomes, such as member interpretations of the events they endured; the historical, psychological, and sociological bases of initiation rituals; or issues of legal ramifications of hazing, the present study examined the impact of pledging and hazing from an organizational and administrative perspective. Specifically, this study questioned

whether BGLO members who had undergone a hazing-filled pledge process were more likely to remain financially and physically active with the organization once they graduate from college. This question was asked with a perspective toward understanding how pledging and hazing might impact organizational performance, capabilities, and well-being. As Parks and Brown (2005) noted, those who defend pledging point to its ability to strengthen ties between members and the organization, while those opposed “use anecdotal evidence of BGLO members who are not financially active to undermine this argument” (p. 453). The present study shines empirical light on these competing, and heretofore untested, hypotheses.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pledging and Hazing in the BGLO Context

Actions and conditions constituting pledging and hazing vary widely, depending upon the individual defining the terms and relevance to the psychological, sociological, or legal bases from which their definition extends (for detailed definitions and discussions, see for example Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005; Crow & Rosner, 2004; Ellsworth, 2006; Jones, 2004; Nuwer, 1999; Nuwer, 2004). Pledging tends to refer to the overarching process potential members are subjected to, which may or may not contain elements of hazing, while hazing specifically refers to acts of violence including verbal and physical brutality, forced consumption, sleep deprivation, humiliation, intimidation, and similarly harsh activities.

However, as Foster (2008) explained, pledging and hazing are difficult to distinguish among BGLO members because the pledge process is often infused with, and perhaps primarily comprised of, hazing elements such as paddling or “taking wood” and being verbally, mentally, and physically abused. It is the experience of the authors that the two terms are understood synonymously, with most BGLO

members rarely referring to the term hazing. Rather, a common challenge when meeting an unfamiliar member is: “Where did you pledge?” That the two are perceived as synonymous is further highlighted by Parks and Brown’s (2005) proposal for a new, revised membership intake process, wherein they call for a non-hazing pledge process for BGLOs. In this article, the terms pledging and hazing are used interchangeably, and the BGLO pledge process, at least until reformed in a way suggested by Parks and Brown (2005), is assumed potentially to contain hazing elements.

Creating Members for Life – An Enduring Trait of BGLOs

Before proceeding, two important points concerning this study’s approach are highlighted. The first has to deal with the focus on post-college fraternal activity and why it matters. Particularly among BGLOs, membership is intended to be for life, and members are (at least ideologically) expected to remain active participants beyond their college years through financial and activity-based participation in locality-based “alumni” and “alumnae” chapters, and with the national organization. Post-college participation has been a focus of BGLOs since their earliest days, as was reflected by Alpha Phi Alpha’s establishment of an “alumni organization” in 1917, 11 years after its founding, to encourage the continued participation of members in fraternal activities once members passed the college ranks (Wesley, 1996). A unique and enduring feature of BGLOs is that their activities extend well beyond college halls and campus yards, influencing and shaping issues of civil rights, economic development, education at all levels, political action, and community and public service—all of which require an active membership at both the collegiate and, arguably *moreso*, alumni levels. These circumstances make post-collegiate membership trends, and the impact of hazing and pledging on them, salient for BGLOs and similarly-structured organizations

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and their leaders. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that not all fraternal associations and societies follow this organizational model, and as such the present study's results necessarily have limited generalizability.

Focus on Organizational Outcomes

The second point has to deal with the organizational and administrative lens used to examine the impact of pledging and hazing in this study. The BGLO at the center of the present analysis is viewed as an organization that requires inputs and resources to properly function and produce outputs. This input-output description is akin to work organizations, in which firms use employees (inputs) to produce goods and services (outputs). For BGLOs and many member-driven associations, a key input is members (and the resources they bring with them, including financial support), who work to accomplish the mission of the organization, thereby producing such finished goods as educational enhancement programs, volunteer hours, and advocacy. In the same way that voluntary employee turnover is a major concern for managers of firms because it threatens the organization's ability to perform; membership persistence within fraternal organizations is an important concern for organizational leaders because it will likely directly affect the association's capabilities. To that end, in this study, the overarching concern is with hazing and pledging as a determinant of membership persistence, since persistence is likely to affect organizational capabilities and performance. While the complex historical, legal, psychological, sociological, and college administration-related issues tied to hazing and pledging are acknowledged (for detailed analysis see Brown, Parks, & Phillips, 2005; Jones, 2004; Kimbrough, 2003; and Nuwer, 2004), the present study does not focus on these matters, except as they might relate to membership persistence-related organizational performance.

Hazing and Organizational Commitment: Is There a Theoretical Link?

To situate this study, several theoretical perspectives are used to explore how hazing might influence organizational commitment. One theme present in the discussions of hazing and pledging among BGLO initiates is that of organizational commitment. Proponents argue that the pledge process builds the commitment link between aspirants and the organization, while dissidents claim that there exist scores of pledged members who do not remain active, and thus are no more committed to the group than someone who did not endure a hazing-filled pledge process. Although these competing views are anecdotal, several theories from the domain of psychology and organization studies suggest the former argument, providing clues as to how hazing and pledging might positively affect organizational commitment. These include cognitive dissonance theory, self-identity-related theories, and organizational socialization.

Cognitive dissonance. Building on Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, Aronson and Mills (1959) tested the hypothesis that individuals who experienced a severe initiation process were more likely to be attracted to the group than those who had endured a less severe process or none at all. Findings were consistent with their predictions, which became especially true when group members encountered dissatisfying aspects of the group, and were thus presented with internally incompatible beliefs concerning the unpleasant experiences they endured to gain admission and the realities of their present state. One behavioral response to help reduce this dissonance was for members to exaggerate their liking for the group, with higher pre-initiation severity leading to greater expressions of group attractiveness. While group attractiveness is not the same as organizational commitment in psychological terms, the constructs of attractiveness and commitment have been shown to be strongly and positively relat-

ed (Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, & Alge, 1999). This suggests that fraternity members who underwent hazing might be more attracted to, and therefore more highly committed to, the organization than those who did not do so. One way in which this commitment may manifest itself is through long-term membership persistence.

Self-identity theories. Several identity-related perspectives provide more clues into how hazing and pledging might lead to enhanced organizational commitment and membership persistence. Sweet (2004) used a symbolic interactionist approach to describe the ways in which fraternity rituals reconstruct the personal identities of pledges, tearing down an individual's "old self" and replacing it with a new identity that contains new social relationships and group affiliations. The importance of group affiliations is highlighted in the work of Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Turner (1987), who found that individuals create and maintain positive self-image and esteem by casting themselves as members of distinct, personally important categories and groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) also posited that people who categorize themselves into social groupings have strong preferences for groups that are based on these personally important categories, while Stephan (1978) demonstrated that people maintain a strong preference to interact with members of their own social group rather than with members of other groups. Further, research on workplace outcomes has noted that socially similar groups are more likely to experience higher levels of satisfaction and lower turnover (O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989). In short, identity theories suggest that people act in ways to serve in-group interests as a means of enhancing their own self-concept. As Sweet's (2004) findings suggested, if participation in pledging and hazing creates an organization-centered self-identity, and that "new self" becomes an integral part of the initiate's self-concept, it follows that

a member who has endured such an initiation would not readily dispatch his or her organizational affiliation but would instead be motivated to maintain it, and in doing so, would reinforce his or her self-esteem.

Organizational socialization. Finally, organizational theories of human resource management practices can help inform an understanding of the initiation-commitment link. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) outlined several tactics organizations used to socialize newcomers. Each of these socialization strategies resulted in an orientation outcome that corresponded with an individual's fit and sustainability within the organization. Collectivism and divestiture were two common socialization strategies discussed in their analysis. Collectivism included putting individuals through a rigorous, common experience, and divestiture sought to strip away certain personal characteristics of a recruit and replace them with organizational values. The latter is conceptually related to the symbolic interaction process Sweet described (2004). These tactics focused on creating a custodial orientation wherein new members were anticipated to identify with and remain committed to the group. According to scholars who study workplace environments, creating and maintaining a high degree of organizational "fit" during the organization's socialization process is seen as crucial because voluntary turnover is an individual's most common response to poor fit within a group or organization (e.g., Wheeler, Buckley, Halbesleben, Brouer, & Ferris, 2005). Regarding fraternity member organizational commitment, if pledging and hazing processes resemble collectivism and divestiture forms of organizational socialization, such practices might well work to enhance the member's level of fit with the organization, decreasing their chances of "voluntary turnover" and increase the likelihood that they remain active members beyond their college years.

METHODOLOGY

Data and the Protection of Human Subjects

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study of fraternity membership trends. This larger project was conducted during a term in which one researcher served as a fraternity administrator. Because none of the authors were affiliated with an academic institution at the time data were collected, the project and procedures were not submitted to a university Institutional Review Board (IRB); nevertheless, great care was taken to adhere to the principles of ethical research and protection of human subjects. Although gathering information on participation in hazing and pledging presents serious concerns for potential respondents, during data collection at least three factors helped mitigate potential harm to respondents.

First, participation was completely voluntary. The point was stressed both in the email invitation message and in the introductory paragraph of the survey. In addition, respondents were encouraged to skip any question to which they felt uncomfortable responding. Finally, respondents were informed that they could exit the survey and end their participation at any time by simply closing their Web browser window.

Second, the measure of participation in pledging was a single item within a questionnaire of more than 25 items. Because the focus of the primary study for which the data were collected was not hazing, a small percentage of the questionnaire brought attention to issues of pledging and hazing.

Third, the pledging-related questionnaire item, which is described in the sample section below, asked whether respondents had been subjected to pledging as a means of fraternity initiation, *not* whether they had committed hazing themselves. While this distinction may have little meaning in terms of the emotional effects on the individuals involved, there is a great difference from a legal standpoint. Since hazing is a crime in most states (Nuwer, 2004), asking respondents

to indicate whether they have committed a crime would have marked an admission of guilt. However, the question asked of respondents in the present study did not seek, nor did it obtain, admission of criminal activity on their part.

Taken together, in the absence of an academic IRB review of the questionnaire used in this study, these factors helped to mitigate potential harm and risk to respondents. Some rudimentary analysis of the responses provided insight into whether the survey item on pledging and hazing was problematic for respondents. Less than 2% of all respondents, which included both currently inactive and active members, chose to skip the questionnaire item on their participation in pledging and hazing. In contrast, nearly four times that amount of respondents chose not to indicate their household income range. Among the individuals who did not answer the hazing/pledging item, it is plausible that those who were inactive with the fraternity would skip this item more frequently, since their lack of continued membership persistence in the fraternity might be a reflection of discontent with the process they endured. In this dataset, active fraternity members skipped the hazing and pledging item at a greater rate than did inactive members. All of this conjectural evidence suggests that asking respondents about their participation in hazing activities likely did not have seriously negative or unintended consequences.

Overview of the Dataset

Convenience sampling methods were used to invite members from one organization to participate in this study. In particular, a respondent-driven, snowball sampling approach was utilized. Snowball sampling is a common methodological approach used by organization management scholars to collect data for inferential quantitative analysis of organizational phenomena (e.g., Martins, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2002; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1987; Tepper, 1995). A Web-based questionnaire was sent to an email list of approximately 80 fraternity member

alumni contacts of one of the researchers, and those members were encouraged to forward the survey link to additional fraternity members in their social network, resulting in a total of 317 respondents. All participants were solicited from a single fraternal association. Because respondents were not selected from an *a priori* sampling frame, response rate measurements are incalculable and not meaningful when a snowball sampling method is used (Fiegener, Brown, Prince, & File, 1996).

The Web-based questionnaire remained open for data collection from August 2007 to February 2008. Both active and inactive fraternity members comprised the final sample. Membership activity was defined as being in good financial standing with the fraternity (i.e., currently paying membership dues), which reflected the organization's constitutional definition of membership standing. While this might be interpreted as a narrow conceptualization of membership activity and commitment (Parks & Brown, 2005), it reflects a form of participation that provides the organization with the financial inputs necessary to carry out its mission. As such, this conceptualization of membership activity was appropriate given our organizational and administrative conceptual approach to membership persistence.

Overview of the Instrument

Membership activity status was the dependent variable and indicated whether a member was active during the previous fraternal year. The independent variable was whether a member participated in a pledge line process of initiation, with respondents answering either "no" or "yes" to the following question: "Prior to being declared illegal by the fraternity as a manner of initiation, 'pledge lines' were processes used to initiate new members. Activities of such processes (which have never been endorsed by the national organization) included such practices as paddling, sleep deprivation, enduring physical brutality, and being required to maintain a spe-

cific appearance (such as shaving your head bald or cutting all facial hair). Did your membership intake process include your participation in a pledge line?" Several factors that might influence membership persistence of BGLO members at the alumni level, including marital status, parental status, education, income, whether the member is an active member of any other fraternal associations (the questionnaire specifically stated: "such as the [Benevolent and Protective Order of] Elks, the Boule, Freemasons, etc."), and whether the member was initiated while in college or via an alumni chapter, were statistically controlled in the analysis.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The final set of respondents consisted of 317 alumni affiliates (193 active members, 124 inactive members). A total of 32 surveys were excluded from analysis due to missing variables, resulting in a final sample of 285 respondents. No significant differences were found between the excluded cases and the final sample when tested for missing data bias. Table 1 reports the range, mean or proportion, standard deviation, and percentage of missing cases for all variables. Table 2 shows the results of a binary logistic regression used to test the impact of the initiation experience on membership persistence.

According to the model ($\chi^2 = 40.27$, $df = 12$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .183$), membership persistence was not statistically significantly related to having participated in a pledge process ($e^{\beta} = 1.594$, $p = .216$). Therefore, our findings did not support the hypothesis that members who participated in a pledge process during their fraternity initiation were more likely to be active alumni fraternity members compared to those who did not undergo such a process. Regarding the control variables, only education, membership in another fraternal association, and whether a member was initiated during or after college were significantly related to a member's current activity status. Compared to members with bach-

TABLE 1*Descriptive Statistics for the Sample*

| | <i>n</i> | Mean or Proportion* | Standard Deviation |
|---|----------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Dependent Variable</i> | | | |
| Membership activity status (1 = active) | 317 | 0.67 | 0.471 |
| <i>Independent Variable</i> | | | |
| Participation in a Pledge-Line Initiation Process (1 = yes) | 311 | 0.73 | 0.443 |
| <i>Control Variables</i> | | | |
| Marital status (1 = married) | 314 | 0.75 | 0.431 |
| Children (1 = yes) | 313 | 0.68 | 0.467 |
| Income | | | |
| Less than \$40K per year | 53 | 0.18 | |
| \$40K to \$70K per year | 69 | 0.24 | |
| \$70K to \$100K per year | 62 | 0.21 | |
| More than \$100K per year | 110 | 0.37 | |
| Education | | | |
| Less than a bachelor's degree | 4 | 0.01 | |
| Bachelor's degree | 148 | 0.47 | |
| Master's degree | 130 | 0.41 | |
| Professional degree | 21 | 0.07 | |
| Doctorate degree | 14 | 0.04 | |
| Membership in another fraternal organization (1 = yes) | 317 | 0.20 | 0.397 |
| Initiation during college or after graduation (1 = after) | 317 | 0.28 | 0.450 |

*Proportions are reported for categorical variables

TABLE 2*Logistic Regression Predicting Post-College Fraternity Membership Activity*

| | e^B | S.E. |
|--|---------|-------|
| <i>Control Variables</i> | | |
| Marital status (1=married) | 1.312 | 0.336 |
| Children (1=yes) | 1.034 | 0.313 |
| Income | | |
| Less than \$40K per year | -- | -- |
| \$40K to \$70K per year | 0.555 | 0.419 |
| \$70K to \$100K per year | 1.406 | 0.455 |
| More than \$100K per year | 1.263 | 0.417 |
| Education | | |
| Less than a bachelor's degree | 0.378 | 1.198 |
| Bachelor's degree | -- | -- |
| Master's degree | 2.153* | 0.300 |
| Professional degree | 2.760 | 0.624 |
| Doctorate degree | 3.145 | 0.822 |
| Membership in another fraternal organization (1 = yes) | 2.818* | 0.410 |
| Initiation during college or after graduation (1 = after) | 2.729** | 0.386 |
| <i>Independent Variable</i> | | |
| Participation in a Pledge-Line Initiation Process (1 = yes) | 1.549 | 0.377 |
| Constant | 0.508 | 0.529 |
| n | | 285 |
| χ^2 | | 40.27 |
| Nagelkerke R^2 | | 0.183 |

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

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elor's degrees, those holding master's degrees were more than twice as likely to be active members ($e^{\beta} = 2.153, p \leq .05$). While the results for members with even higher levels of education (i.e., professional or doctorate degree) were similar, they were not statistically significant. Members who were active in other fraternal groups were nearly three times more likely to be active in the focus organization than those who did not hold other memberships ($e^{\beta} = 2.818, p \leq .05$), as were those who were initiated after college rather than while in college ($e^{\beta} = 2.729, p \leq .01$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to test whether participation in a pledging and hazing process during initiation into a BGLO was associated with increased fraternity participation at the alumni level. The study was motivated by anecdotal suggestions and theoretical predictions that hazing created stronger bonds between individuals and organizations, thereby leading to increased organizational commitment and sustained post-college participation (Parks & Brown, 2005). Controlling for demographic and familial characteristics, the results of the analysis did not find a statistically significant relationship between participation in a pledging and hazing process and membership activity status among BGLO alumni members.

These findings, contradictory to psychological theories of organizational commitment and perhaps surprising to proponents of a hazing-commitment link, might best be understood through the detailed treatment of BGLO member commitment. Parks and Brown (2005) argued BGLO member commitment is multidimensional and can be best understood as a series of concentric circles where members form commitments to several representations of fraternal life, including their "line brothers and sisters" and their chapter of initiation. The national organization, they noted, represents the outermost circle, the one farthest from the individual member.

Using this imagery, one might suspect stronger bonds to exist between BGLO members and the fraternal elements contained within those circles closer to the hazing and pledging process.

Additional data from the questionnaire used in this study also supported Park and Brown's theory. Of the inactive respondents in the current study's sample, 94% indicated they maintained close contact with their line brothers and other active and inactive members, 89% indicated that they continued to wear and display fraternity paraphernalia such as shirts, jerseys, and license plates, and 56% reported that they attended fraternity events, socials, and even official national conventions and regional and state-wide meetings. This disconnect may warrant further research, as highlighted in the following example.

As noted above, the educational, economic, political, and community-based works that BGLOs are engaged in extend well beyond the college campus and rely upon a financially and physically engaged membership at both the college and alumni levels. As an example, in October 2011, Alpha Phi Alpha dedicated the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. This \$120 million construction effort, spearheaded by the fraternity and its members, would have been likely impossible to achieve if a critical mass of the organization's member base was not committed at all levels of the concentric circles, including the national level via their financial support and physical activity. If members fail to remain committed to their BGLOs beyond their college days, the organization may miss key inputs that it needs (and that it expected to be available for lifelong use when it initiated the individuals) to effectively accomplish its mission and goals.

LIMITATIONS

The present study's findings are not without limitations and should be interpreted with caution. The sampling approach, particularly the use of convenience sampling, may have intro-

duced biases into the analysis. Further, the sample was based on members of a single fraternal association. Additionally, other potentially influential control variables, such as age, were not present. Future investigators should approach these and other issues that could affect the validity and generalizability of the findings with care.

CONCLUSION

The issue of hazing and pledging stirs intense emotions and passionate opinions from both opponents and proponents. The results of the present study suggest that participation in a pledge

process might theoretically influence more proximal dimensions of BGLO identity and attachment such as one's bond with their line brothers or sisters or their chapter of initiation. However, such participation does not guarantee membership persistence and continued financial and physical activity at the alumni and national levels. With this in mind, BGLOs and their members should carefully consider their organization's goals and objectives, and design and implement membership intake policies and programs that promote maximum organizational effectiveness and achievement and that work toward sustaining their positive legacies.

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AUTHOR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Sean Rogers (B.S., M.B.A, Embry-Riddle; Ed.M., Illinois) is a Ph.D. candidate at the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations. He studies volunteerism, organizational diversity, and labor and employment relations. He is a life member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity; served as its district director (chief executive) in Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico from 2006-2008; and is a charter member of the fraternity's college chapter at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. He may be reached at serogers@rci.rutgers.edu.

Carmen Rogers (B.S., Bethune-Cookman; M.B.A., Robert Morris) is an Ed.D. candidate at the University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions. She studies workforce development and education, adult learning theory and practice, and nonprofit and voluntary association management. She is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. She may be reached at cmr008@uark.edu.

Treshawn Anderson, M.A., is a Ph.D. candidate in Human Development and Family Studies at the Purdue University College of Health and Human Sciences. Her immediate research focus is centered on child care and teacher quality for children ages birth to three. She holds degrees in Child Development and Early Childhood Education from California State University, Long Beach. Treshawn is a proud member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. She may be contacted at treander@purdue.edu.