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Edge of Extinction: The COVID-19 Lived Experience of National Pan-Hellenic Council Fraternity Presidents

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Mayo et al.: Edge of Extinction: The COVID-19 Lived Experience of National Pan
EDGE OF EXTINCTION: THE COVID-19 LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NATIONAL
PAN-HELLENIC COUNCIL FRATERNITY PRESIDENTS

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Presidents of Black Greek Letter fraternities at predominantly White institutions are a rare breed who constantly live under multidimensional pressure to succeed. And their difficult dedication to fraternal, institutional, and personal expectations was only heightened when COVID-19 first closed and then reconfigured college campuses over the last year. Their experiences prove congruent around several themes - fraternal unity, community service, prioritizing family, and self-investment - that illuminate key areas for potential partnership and support of these students and the chapters they love. With simple effort understanding, caring and compassionate student affairs professionals can truly make a difference for this population.

Keywords: COVID-19, NPHC, Black student experience

The Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLOs) fraternity chapters on a predominantly white institution (PWI) campus were already an endangered species, and then the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID -19) pandemic threatened their extinction. Black male students – while diverse in their backgrounds and educational experiences – often constitute one of the rarest and most challenged populations in higher education (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Therefore, many succeed through their effective use of specific supports including historically Black fraternities (Vance, 2020). However, in order to qualify for initiation into these organizations, Black male students must earn at least a 2.5 grade point average; roughly 45% of this population performs within a half point of this mark (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012). But this achievement must also occur on a campus where one of the five National Pan Hellenic Council fraternities is present despite a consistent decline in these fraternity chapters being recognized as they all have encountered financial and legal troubles (Ruffins, 2007) beyond a growing disap-

proval by younger generations.

This project will explore both how sitting chapter presidents felt during the period of widespread COVID-19 campus shut-downs and how they foresee their chapters rebounding in the coming semesters. Preliminary conversations reveal especially intense feelings of pessimism about the situation on personal, professional, and fraternal levels. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted the families, friends, and even the personal health of these fraternity leaders instilling within them anger, fear, and a sense of powerlessness. These students have experienced academic displacement and potential career derailment as they were forced into operating in virtual formats from home environments that were often the same communities hardest hit by COVID-19. Yet these leaders must look forward to the challenge of rebuilding already struggling chapters on campuses with reduced occupancy, restricted programming and socializing opportunities, and modified recruitment practices that are in stark contrast to their own traditions.

The researchers will utilize a phenomeno-

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logical framework to identify salient campus, fraternal, and personal themes within the interviews of several current BGLO chapter presidents at northeast PWIs. These extractions will inform a set of suggestions for student affairs departments and practitioners committed to supporting the resurgence of these challenged chapters.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has required faculty and students to adapt to an unprecedented challenge and rapidly transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning formats through virtual classrooms. While most campuses trained faculty to ensure quality and maintenance of the curriculum through virtual classrooms, less consideration has been given to training students in leadership positions, who face equal challenges in adapting to this abrupt change in the delivery of the curriculum, student support systems and overall

socio-emotional well-being. Few approaches have been developed for students to facilitate their involuntary transition to virtual classrooms and maintenance of appropriate online learning behaviors and etiquette. Presented here are a series of propositions to help to maintain and enhance the quality of college student engagement and activity in newly founded virtual spaces.

With guidelines from fraternal organizations, college presidents, coupled with city and state restrictions, students find themselves at the pandemic's epicenter with more barriers than support. This paper initiates a meaningful dialogue with National Pan-Hellenic Presidents who are engaged in efforts to cope and adapt to the pandemic while maintaining their social and academic integrity within the margins of being at the edge of extinction. Their stories may prove useful in re-envisioning and re-designing the future in higher education by facilitating future discussions on creating best practices guidelines for students engaged in remote learning, as well as support systems for stu-

dents post the pandemic.

Black Males in College

Black college men are constantly repositioned in higher education discourse as problems and in crises (Brooms et al., 2021). However, there is much to be learned from Black men's lived experiences and engagement in college and the meanings they make from those experiences. Research on Black males' higher education experiences in the United States reveals a range of challenges they face, such as transitioning to colleges, and adjusting to a campus environment that may be culturally foreign to their previous schooling experience. Research has shown that many of these experiences surrounding students' sense of self, sense of belonging, and persistence have adverse effects on retention and graduation (Cuyjet, 2006; Palmer et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2016; Toldson, 2008).

In addition to the academic demands that they must learn and negotiate, navigating the social milieu also is rife with experiences that often pose challenges for Black men's integration and successful transition into campus life. Various interventions, including the use of Living Learning Communities (Cintron et al., 2020), joining BGLOs (Smith, 2019), and other cohort-building initiatives, have shown some effectiveness in bolstering this community and its members. These efforts are and remain necessary as Black men are faced with stereotypes, lowered expectations, and various forms of discrimination and anti-Black racism that can undermine their sense of belonging on campus and their persistence (Boyd, 2017).

An important aspect of Black males' experiences are the ways in which they are imagined, projected, and positioned in educational settings. Often, these projections and framings are situated within and stem from a deficit-oriented viewpoint that ultimately questions Black males' intellect, abilities, knowledge, and presence at many college campuses (Arbouin, 2018; Palmer

et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016). This as well as their cultural identities, (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and nationality) are placed under a lens within various social contexts (e.g., family, peers, and school, leadership roles) and are continually shaped through their collegiate experience (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

BGLO Fraternities

Black male college students' engagement as leaders, political activists, and agents for social change is well-documented (Allen, 1992; Brown, Dancy & Davis, 2013; Fleming, 1984; Harper, 2013; Palmer et al., 2013). Studies reveal how Black males serve Black student communities by facilitating academic and social advancement as well as creating cultural enclaves to navigate Whiteness at predominantly White institutions (Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2003; Gusa, 2010; Smith & Moore, 2000; Yancey, 2003). Black males participate in BGLOs - becoming brothers in the lifeline brotherhood - to bolster commitments to their racial communities (Dancy, 2012) especially as necessary to reinforce and improve Black livelihoods on predominantly White campuses (Arminio et al., 2000; Harper & Quayle, 2007; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Additionally, Black males, while being involved in leadership roles within campus organizations, experienced positive support that was extensively guided by interpersonal interactions and awareness of their racialized identities (Logue et al., 2005).

Despite research that attests to Black male students' intentional practice of culturally relevant leadership in gender-specific fraternal organizations (Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998), this is often challenged on PWI campuses. Patton et al. (2011) found that the positive effects of Greek affiliation on African American student engagement in collaborative academic activities recognized at HBCUs were not matched at PWIs. Even data aggregation could not establish a clear relationship

between Greek organization affiliations and engagement levels. Furthermore, the relationship between the greater connectedness to the campus (McClure, 2006) and providing culturally validating places for leadership development and opportunity (Harper & Harris, 2006) and navigating the barriers of fraternal organization expectations within these leadership roles need to be further examined.

Undergraduate Chapter Oversight and Leadership

However, the existence of the undergraduate BGLO chapters are troubled by prepositions as some argue that they can - and likely will - lead to the demise of the larger organization (Kimbrough, 2005). The perceived and occasionally actual irresponsibility and recklessness of undergraduate brothers has created a narrative where national organizations create detailed training programs to combat negligence and civil lawsuits against the fraternity and its members (Parks & Spencer, 2013). As a result, many BGLO organizations require graduate chapters to oversee the undergraduate chapters on their local campuses. Colleges and universities hosting those undergraduate chapters often expect it as well (Capital University, n.d.).

Fraternity rules also often fail to recognize campus chapters with low to moderate membership, forcing those undergraduate brothers into the local graduate chapters. This creates chapters mainly of older (25 years of age and older) brothers with a few younger (under 25 years of age) brothers mixed in. This imbalance is clearly represented in chapter leadership, as undergraduates are rarely elected to lead groups of older men. As a result, these hybrid chapters often also focus their attention, resources, and time on community - and not campus - service.

However, expectations for undergraduate brothers to serve their campuses come from their chapters, the fraternal organization itself, and their host institutions. Older

fraternity brothers remember their youth on campus - “on the yard” - while also recognizing the need for campus-level recruitment as a means of self-perpetuation. Fraternities often require mandated programs that focus on the care for and development of undergraduate and younger populations that are situated to cater to the needs of the student population and surrounding community members. However, to support both entities (campus community and neighboring towns), students must adhere to campus regulations and policies to be recognized, which allows them the permission to advertise, develop programs, and be covered under institutional insurance are often stacked upon such campus service. Under these pressures but without intra-chapter power, undergraduate brothers must commit to serve their academic communities and peers.

COVID-19 Periods

The COVID-19 pandemic has required faculty, staff, and students to adapt to an unprecedented challenge and rapidly transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning formats through virtual classrooms. While most campuses (later) trained faculty to ensure quality and maintenance of the academic curriculum through virtual classrooms, less consideration has been given to training students who face similar challenges in adapting to this abrupt change in all areas of their student experience. Moreover, there was a lack of training for college students who held leadership roles and served as peer-to-peer mentors; these students were left to navigate virtual channels independently seeking their own social and academic success while also providing quality college student engagement and activity for others.

As colleges and universities attempt to navigate their educational system at the pandemic’s epicenter, students are reliant upon faculty who are themselves engaging in efforts to cope and adapt to the pandemic, inevitably re-envisioning and re-

designing “new norms” that will continue forward. This study is framed in three-time segments that epitomize the phases of COVID-19 disruption:

- “Pre-COVID” captures participants’ lives, impressions, and practices within their academic institutions and fraternities prior to any administrative or behavioral interruption as a result of pandemic precautions.,
- “COVID Closure” represents the Spring 2020 semester where large numbers of academic institutions canceled or postponed events, suspended in-person attendance and residential hosting and transitioned academic instruction and administrative functioning to online/virtual means.,
- “Advanced COVID” refers to the period including the Summer 2020 semester and beyond; this is time in which many institutions have individually and/or systemically decided to incrementally relax COVID-19 protocols restricting essential functions including student presence on campus, in-person instruction, reopening residential facilities, and allowing events and programmatic efforts.

This timeline may facilitate future discussions on creating best practice guidelines for asynchronous/synchronous virtual classrooms post-pandemic. In addition, it will highlight the present experiences of students who transition in various ways within their leadership roles.

Methodology

Taking a phenomenological approach to this project seemed appropriate as its result would describe “the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. X). That fits the present aim of exploring the unique perspectives held and the special circumstances endured by these participants and researchers as a quiet phenomenon constantly occurring on a college campus. As Johnson (2000) noted, “[p]henomenology as an approach lets us

see by helping to uncover what is hidden or concealed” within lived experience as “it tries to let things reveal themselves.” (p. 15). Specifically hermeneutic phenomenology celebrates discovery in which the experiences and knowledge of the researcher is inseparable from the phenomenon itself (Heidegger, 1962/2008).

Researcher importance within phenomenology is further validated by the inclusion of those beyond the primary researcher(s). Hermeneutic phenomenology champions *dasein* – the part of our humanity which allows our wonder and exploration of our own existence – which is clear within primary researchers (Heidegger, 1962/2008). However, Colaizzi (1978) recognizes the importance of both researchers and the research participants and the need to equate them in the research process; Colaizzi posits research is conducted by both researchers and *co-researchers* (participants).

Co-Researchers (Participants)

Within Colaizzi’s (1978) understanding, knowledge creation occurs equally by both researchers and the co-researchers who provide their personal reflections as the basis of the research. While the researcher’s role is traditionally understood, the formative contributions of the participants are often overlooked. Failing to recognize how co-researchers share their perspectives, explicate essential elements within their experience, and collaboratively build themes alongside the researcher devalues and misunderstands the research overall.

Co-researchers in this study included four African-American males, all of whom were members of the same BGLO at different colleges during this project’s COVID-19 timeline. Co-researcher’s ages ranged from 23 to 28 and three of the four hailed from the state in which they pursued their college education (Connecticut, New York); the fourth traveled from Maryland to Pennsylvania. Two co-researchers attended private institutions – one relatively small (less than 5,000 students) and the

other large (greater than 20,000 students) – while the other two attended flagship public institutions of greater than 10,000 students; all universities were PWIs located in the northeast United States. Each participant was initiated into their fraternity within the last five years (2016-2019) and held various leadership roles in addition to their role in their fraternity. The participants were all recommended as prominent student leaders on their respective campuses and were invited into the study based on their known affiliation and prominent role in the undergraduate and/or campus chapter of the specific BGLO. A formally elected position or title within the chapter was not required of any participant nor was his continued matriculation at the time of the interview; all four of the co-researchers were matriculated students during the COVID-19 closure semester and have since graduated from his respective institution.

Researchers

Recognizing the researchers – and more importantly their positionality which inevitably includes a bias – is important here as their reflexivity inherently has shaped this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Both researchers are higher education professionals who have worked in multiple institutions and often with student leaders of all types. Also, both researchers were undergraduate initiates of a BGLO, still presently remain actively connected to BGLO activities in their local areas and have consistently supported BGLO chapters and members on their respective campuses throughout their professional careers. Most relevant to this project, each of the co-researchers was solicited for and recruited into this project by way of a personal relationship with one of the primary researchers.

Design

This study began with the researchers informally sharing information about the project with a number of people affiliated with this NPHC organization in their per-

sonal networks. After gauging respondent interest, the researchers extended invitation to participate to these four co-researchers as they were believed ready to “invest more than a passing interest in the research project in which they [would be] willingly involv[ing] themselves” as co-researchers typically do (van Manen, 2007). As each co-researcher affirmatively accepted, zoom interviews were scheduled with both researchers to be present for as much time as allowed; only one interview was conducted completely by one researcher.

Once online for a confirmed interview, initial introductions and/or pleasantries were exchanged between all researchers present. Then co-researchers were informed of the purpose and design of the study before being advised of their rights to discontinue participation, skip questions, and not be recorded if they wished. All interviews followed a formal interview protocol, included follow-up questions when researchers deemed appropriate to further explore an area of interest, and were allowed to continue through natural exhaustion of co-researcher contributions; co-researchers were also allowed to ask follow-up questions before their interview concluded. All interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom with the permission of the co-researchers.

Procedure/Data Gathering

Each interview lasted more than one hour – none surpassing two – and featured four-question segments – the co-researcher’s background & demographic information and the three COVID time periods. All planned questions were open narrative prompts that allowed co-researchers to expound at their discretion; follow-up questions were asked by either researcher and were always utilized to either bolster that reflection or to clarify information already shared. Researchers typically alternated asking questions by segment except when using discretion to ask a follow-up. Each interview began with asking the co-re-

searcher to describe himself and concluded with an opportunity for the co-researcher to ask questions for his own edification.

Data Analysis

Qualitative studies often incur a tremendous amount of data and careful selection on which data to use is an important part of the analytical process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within this study, many instances were pulled apart and put back together in more meaningful analysis and synthesis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This presented challenges considering each participant was prompted to reflect on past experiences from their time on campus within multiple contexts. This exercise required them to go back in time, remember their experiences pre-covid, during the height of the pandemic and then again into the current state with a deeper understanding into the future and critically interpret them and make meaning of their experiences.

Understanding the data collected in the process of this research was largely led by Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step formulation of the phenomenological method. Researchers first sought to acquire a sense of each transcript by reviewing it independently before collaborating with the other researcher to extract the significant statements; this reiterative process synthesized the effectiveness of two types of thematizing discussed by van Manen’s (2007) – the wholistic/sententious approach (attending to the whole text to derive meaning) and the selective reading approach (focuses on key statements that explicate salient parts of the lived experience). The meanings formulated from these statements were then clustered into four themes in our collective attempt to situate them in a specific place and time. Under those circumstances, we were challenged to differentiate and interpret how several external and internal factors contributed to the students’ lived experiences outside of their institutions and fraternal organizations and the variety of cultural programming they participated in when

they were enrolled in classes. Researcher understandings of these various pressures were documented – both in full detail and as structural beings – before being shared and discussed with the co-researchers whose agreement contributed additional validation

of the projected themes. After this inherent member checking was complete, all researchers subsequently approved colloquial statements that embodied co-researcher comments to serve as headings for these themes:

Table 1
Salient themes of NPHC Presidents during COVID-19

“Pre-COVID”	
Theme #1: “We shall overcome”	<p>“Recruitment was looking real great pre-COVID... Black people was interested in getting to know me more; interested in understanding of why I joined this organization. ... [W]hatever I do I should show the best aspects of it; they see me as a new member of this organization. ... And they want to know where did I get this [positive aura] from; was it [the fraternity] that makes me like this.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Co-researcher RU</p>
Theme #2: “We’ve got work to do”	<p>“So when we first began operating as [fraternity] men on campus, our main focus was reintroducing ourselves to the campus community and also making sure it was understood what were the interests of [the fraternity]. And so we started off with a lot of collaborations... honestly, just about anything we could get our hands on to become more active with the campus so (1) to say “Hey, [the fraternity] is back on campus and (2) we are back on campus and we are looking to do work.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- Co-researcher KN</p>
Theme #3: “Family first”	<p>“My career at [institution] has not been consistent... there was a mishap with my financial aid so I had to take a leave of absence... and then I had issues going on with my family; I had to take another year off. Another leave of absence. It’s been a journey.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Co-researcher KK</p>
Theme #4: “I can do this”	<p>“So I am a leader who has almost always had leadership thrust on him, not necessarily one who would take it on myself... Until college, that is when I realized I could not take as passive a role as I would like because there was more that was required of me and so it was time for me to step and boldly step into those roles that had been presented to me to actively be a face of the change that I thought should take place.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Co-researcher KN</p>

“COVID Closure”

Theme #1:
“We shall
overcome”

“So with COVID, it really put a strain on socializing and getting to know people and getting to know...getting to find worthy men. One thing that I will say, nobody is above reaching out to certain men that we feel has the qualities of someone who could potentially be a part of the fraternity.”

- Co-researcher KK

Theme #2:
“We’ve got work
to do”

“During that time, I was not able to be as physically active in the way that I wanted to be so I moreso was distributing information. So, like, I was on different community message boards and things of that nature to sort on my Facebook to know what’s going on. And for the college students I knew who had stayed in [institution’s location] but are not from [institution’s location] so they do not actually know the area, I was able to provide them with certain local groups because not everyone could go home.”

- Co-researcher KN

Theme #3:
“Family first”

“It was also a time where I had to be, for lack of a better word, selfish. I had to really just focus on me and my own things in terms of education and family because I did not have the capacity at that time to really be worrying about other things. And if I took that time to do that, I know that, one, I could not change any of those things and so me worrying about them did not help.”

- Co-researcher KN

Theme #4:
“I can do this”

“[I]t actually allowed me time to wrap my head around things; you know, get myself reorganized. And just refocus myself so I could get in the mode of school and getting back on the track of graduation. So personally I did not take it too hard aside from the health problems people have faced. Just personally, I used it as an opportunity to get myself on track.”

-Co-researcher KK

“Advanced COVID”

Theme #1:
“We shall
overcome”

“For my chapter specifically, this has been one of our best years in terms of programming and participation. We have had a lot of brothers who could not still be in the area still participate in different fundraisers and events that we hosted throughout this portion of the pandemic. And so I do think that [the fraternity] has done a wonderful job of adapting and finding the creative ways to still do the work that is important to us while making the safety of our members and the communities that we serve.”

- Co-researcher KN

Theme #2:
“We’ve got work
to do”

“We understand that, being in the position we are in, giving back is necessary because its something...its just helping.... We’re in a position where we can help so...that is something I feel we must do.”

-Co-researcher KK

Theme #3:
“Family first”

“At home, I did have one friend...he passed away due to complications from COVID; real close friend. That was one of things I feared most and it came true...it had me taking extra precautions. And I also had my grandmother; she was in the hospital due to complications from COVID.... And then two of her sisters also passed away from complications due to COVID. When you hear stuff on the news, that’s one thing. But then when you experience it in your life, that’s a whole different reality check.”

-Co-researcher KK

Theme #4:
“I can do this”

“One thing I wish I would have done [during quarantine] is... maybe did something to relax myself a lot because I was doing a lot just to keep myself stimulated while being in the house. But I should have took that opportunity to just relax and really try to set an actual very elaborate plan for when I come back to campus for what I want in my personal life.”

- Co-researcher KK

The themes that emerge within any phenomenological research are the chief result. From a functional standpoint, they provide categorization and grouping to the real-life experiences of participants but more importantly they provide “insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure” (van Manen, 2007, p. 79) to a shared phenomenon. This capturing of the phenomenon makes it manageable for both the researcher(s) and

co-researcher(s) to understand and then to share beyond the research. In the instant case, the research themes provide insight and a deeper understanding of the lived experience of a college fraternity President including the relationships that they maintain as students and chapter leaders.

Results

The co-researcher’s experiences during

COVID-19 coalesced around four themes worthy of remarkable examination: (1) “We shall overcome”, (2) “We’ve got work to do”, (3) “Family first”, and (4) “I can do this!”. Embedded within each of these themes is an access point for institutions and their student affairs professionals to provide support for these young leaders existing at the center of several forces.

Theme #1: “We Shall Overcome”

Every co-researcher had concerns about maintaining its chapter on campus prior to any COVID-19 challenges. The perpetually low membership and occasional complete absence of brothers on campus, relative visibility of few members among the student body, and changing attitudes and culture towards fraternities were all issues. Likewise, the regular satisfaction of national organization programmatic expectations often catered to consistent community needs; philanthropic programs rarely served campus constituencies. However, campus brothers remained steadfast that their presence, reputation, and work would continue to interest unaffiliated undergraduate students and that their campus chapters could resurrect themselves if membership graduated out before new initiates arrived. Each co-researchers believed in fraternal unity and perseverance. However, they all deeply considered the challenges that they faced to maintain and sustain participation and membership selection in the height of the pandemic.

The efforts of the local chapters and national fraternity in response to COVID-19 thrust undergraduate brothers further into the co-researchers’ self-sustaining beliefs. In line with the cease & desist orders for in-person gatherings, the national fraternity reinvigorated a two-year-old inward-facing mental health campaign encouraging brothers of all ages to remain connected despite physical separation. This and other efforts to remain in regular communication with the brotherhood elicited a co-researcher to be “proud of my fraternity!” in the ways

in which “things were handled” in spite of the challenge that COVID-19 presented (Co-researcher KN). The co-researchers all reconnected to the bond of the brotherhood in ways where communication and daily check-ins were essential. This led to planning initiatives with several local chapters that convened regularly to meet the needs of the brothers and the student body at prospective campuses and surrounding communities, first on virtual platforms but then eventually in-person with physical distancing precautions. In such an effort to maintain his interpersonal connection to his chapter brother one co-researcher conducted his interview from a side room at one such gathering (Co-researcher RU).

While intrinsically validating each co-researcher’s choice to join the fraternity, essentially, the bonds with the campus community and its undergraduates are paramount to their social existence. However, with no campus interactions and new mandates from national fraternity headquarters, all chapters were obligated to become completely virtual, outright abandoning their traditional philanthropic efforts for those popularized by local charities and media (i.e., financial donations for food and personal protective equipment). These mandates stepped away from unique and reputable activities held by local chapters that attracted undergraduate student populations who were sent away from campuses, remained tied to technology for all academic enrichment, and did not have the financial resources of older adults. Therefore, all co-researchers had concerns about maintaining the chapter’s presence among and reputation with the larger undergraduate student population; concerns on how to overcome a more advanced COVID-19’s return to campus provided only somewhat limited hope of overcoming as many operational restrictions remained in place for the 2020-2021 academic year.

Theme #2: “We’ve Got Work to Do”

Each co-researcher was clear about his

recognition of the fraternity's origin in an enduring commitment to community service. When prompted to describe the fraternity, each spoke of either the inclusion of a helping principle into the founding principles of the fraternity or a historical need in the community that drew the attention of the local or national fraternity. And these are largely connected to the current programmatic efforts that each brother featured for his chapter's service. As one co-researcher offered, after initiation he and his fellow initiates "knew there was work to be done" both on campus and in the community surrounding it (Co-researcher KN).

These undergraduate brothers remained steadfast in their commitment to helping their campus communities through service during the COVID-19 pandemic despite fraternal restrictions. One brother (Co-researcher NN) who remained at his off-campus apartment and owned a car during the height of the shutdown recounted how he provided regular store runs and safe deliveries to friends who still resided on a campus where all eating and shopping facilities were closed. He recognized aspects of his personal privilege in the ease with which he could access basic necessities of living and therefore sought to share them as best he could.

Another co-researcher (Co-researcher KN) felt a similar obligation to help peers and did so despite not having the same means of providing access to necessities. This campus brother employed his ingrained knowledge of the off-campus community – a community he originally hailed from – in tremendous service as an informational resource for out-of-town students remaining on campus and in the city. Unable to provide transportation or other help procuring resources, he found that answering specific questions along with providing regular updates from his community-based sources built upon the university's relatively sparse COVID-19 updates.

These along with several other narratives presented by the co-researchers highlighted

the obligation to "do work" and provide assistance for the student body and the surrounding communities regardless of national and local restrictions placed by the institutions and local government. Each co-researcher felt compelled to go a step beyond their call for duty in ways they could reconnect with their communities.

Theme #3: "Family First"

Concern for community members potentially came second only to the measured and calculated investments made for family. Each co-researcher was unwavering in his commitment to the best plan of action for the health of his family members; for most that required swift returns home where they could hunker down, practice pod quarantining, and support their family members. This physical integration back into their families provided strength to each fraternity member that he reciprocally gave to others in his family. To that end, one brother decided to prolong his stay at home through the summer and fall semesters following his campus closure to remain available to family while the pandemic continued somewhat unchecked (Co-researcher KK).

However, co-researchers' universal commitment to protect family did not require the same action steps of each brother. While most made the discretionary choice to return home relatively soon after the academic transition to remote learning, one brother remained at school until after his Spring 2020 graduation and the end of his campus housing contract (Co-researcher KN). Despite originating from that local community, he recognized his pre-shutdown exposure to the campus at large presented an increased risk to bring the virus home if he returned; he was unwilling to assume and increase that risk for an immunocompromised family member. Through regular video and voice calling, this student moderated his relationship with a family less than ten miles away for almost two months longer than necessary.

The smallest of health concerns ex-

pressed by each of the co-researchers was for their own wellbeing. This is despite the disparately large impact that COVID-19 was having on the Black community at the beginning of the pandemic; and the disparity decreased only slightly later (Lawton et al, 2021). As Black men, a number of compounding social issues – including health care disparities, a lack of resources in their home communities, and racialized stressors – make these fraternity members highly susceptible to severe complications from the COVID-19 virus but none remarked about his personal concern without researcher prompting. These fraternity members knew family, friends, and even other fraternity members – several admittedly very close – who were directly impacted by and others who died from complications of COVID-19, but the virus’ ultimate peril was inexplicably kept at some distance from their own personal wellbeing.

Theme #4: “I Can Do This”

Beyond their sincere conviction to improve the circumstances of others during the pandemic, each co-researcher was preoccupied with individual wellness in its various forms. Most directly linked to their service was the concern about the mental health of individuals as a result of the significant and sudden lifestyle changes experienced by all. Concerns around the future, isolation and understandably physical health were omnipresent in the COVID-19 Closure and Advanced COVID-19 segments of the interviews. Relatively unsure of the resources that would be later available, one brother accepted the mental toll of reacclimating to normal life as the specific charge for his chapter’s educational and programming efforts (Co-researcher KK).

The young brothers also recognized how they themselves needed to be aware of their own stability through it all. Each spoke first of doing what was physically and operationally necessary within the constructs of their family, fraternity, and academic institution, but also pondered the source

of the inner strength that empowered their abilities. For one, it was clearly the same religious faith that had nurtured him – and his family – throughout his upbringing that he turned to during this time (Co-researcher KN). Others cited an innate need to keep going and overcome this tense situation as just another obstacle that stood in front of him.

This strong sense of perseverance was furthered by these brothers’ simultaneous commitment to not just overcome but thrive in this turbulent time. One brother, Co-researcher KK, felt that his newfound time at home was filled with opportunity and thus developed an intense desire to “be better afterward”. He pursued this goal by using on-line resources to teach himself how to play an instrument, boasting that he had learned a number of both traditional and contemporary melodies with decent proficiency. This and many other narratives presented by the co-researchers highlighted the innovative ways coped with mental health and wellness from an individual level in order to provide support for others. So, even in this time when being directly and indirectly challenged by so much, an undergraduate BGLO leader can and will invent, welcome, and strive for success in a new challenge.

Discussion and Recommendations

Each co-researcher story and phenomenological theme featured a blended mass of campus leaders, student experience, and personal life that could not be separated from each other. Each identity that these young fraternity members hold is one in which they can never simply focus on one aim or pursue only one goal; they must inevitably and constantly work in all directions if they want to realize success for their campus, their chapter, and themselves personally. To support their efforts, institutions – and more specifically the student affairs professionals who accumulate the institutional contacts with these and other campus leaders – should formalize ways in which the several and cumulative needs of

each chapter representative on campus are met. That must be done by focusing both on the needs of the person and the needs of the chapter.

Individual Supports

Student affairs professionals can – and may need be – first-line responders to this select group of high-achieving and higher goal-possessing students. In that capacity, they should be ready to guide, nurture, and support them as individuals in the following ways:

Aid Recognition of Reasonable Limits

Undergraduate BGLO leaders are not seeking to be average students or people; they extend, push, and give of themselves in the toughest of situations. This is characteristic of student leaders generally and may be amplified for these students who are asked to do and achieve so much. However, they may not realize their own bounds and therefore give well into their own detriment. Student affairs professionals can provide great service by helping these brothers recognize reasonable limits which fulfill both their personal needs and service-oriented mindsets.

Reinforce sources of personal strength

Simultaneously with help establishing limits, these leaders will benefit from a refocusing of their attention on their own self-care and worth. The various demands – both externally and internally – of these students' experiences can easily cause them to become overwhelmed; student affairs professionals must help students to avoid such a result. Reminding, encouraging, and ensuring that students make adequate time to decompress under their moderately limited demands is essential.

Remain Communicative and Caring

In managing their many roles, these undergraduate brothers are constantly seeking to know enough to do what is necessary and right in every situation. However, they also

rely upon a number of sources that provide incomplete, inaccurate or sometimes no information in trying to do so. A student affairs professional can likely make a significant impact on steadying a stretched leader by remaining available, willing to share and receive information, and earnestly invested in the wellbeing of the person beyond his fraternal and student roles.

Chapter Supports

The concerns of the undergraduate BGLO leader also remain transfixed on the continuity of his fraternal chapter; it was already seen as challenged before and now the pandemic has uncontrollably increased the stakes. Student affairs professionals can help to ease the minds of leaders as they also secure the futures of their chapters through the following interventions:

Support Campus Programming Opportunities

Educational, philanthropic, and social activities are the lifeblood of a vibrant undergraduate chapter in good standing with all of its governing constituencies. However conflicting, misaligned, or nonsequential requirements – e.g., institutions failing to recognize city-wide chapters and therefore not allowing undergraduate brothers to participate in campus events despite those brothers being members of the graduate chapter until they can recruit and initiate a sufficient number of undergraduate men – often leave undergraduates unable to form and take charge of their own chapters in primary service to their campuses. Student affairs professionals who recognize and thwart those regulations in favor of empowering undergraduate brothers to serve their purpose will see their chapters grow and thrive.

Celebrate Community Connections and Engagement

Both the graduate leadership and the philanthropic mission of BGLO chapters direct much of its service into the local community surrounding the college campus; institutions

should join in these goodwill connections. As undergraduate brothers seek to comply with these expectations put upon them, student affairs professionals should encourage their full participation, on-campus recruitment, and even utilization of campus facilities and resources. The positive publicity and relationship building inherent to doing so will benefit the chapter, the institution, and the hearts of all involved.

Assisting Organizational Compliance

Alongside their own administrative policies, campus officials should recognize the regulations that local chapters and national fraternities are seeking for undergraduate fraternity members. While all of these efforts seek to create wholesome and safe interactions between the fraternity and the community, they can be conflicting, duplicative, and beyond the scope of undergraduates' feasibility (e.g., exorbitant insurance premiums). A bit of institutional understanding that considers and does its best accommodation of fraternal order will show that institutions are "not just listening but showing that they are listening" (Co-researcher KK) thereby relieving some pressure from these small chapters and their aspiring leaders.

Conclusion

The experiences explored here, in brief, were not only intriguing but also informative research. A quartet of similarly situated individuals shared shockingly similar stories of challenge, struggle and uncertainty around one of the proudest parts of their collegiate experience; this may mean that the institutions who raised them did not get this part right. Looking deeper to understand the failings, gaps, and parts where these successful undergraduate brothers escaped the alternative should be of utmost importance to anyone truly interested in student success.

Implications

A phenomenological project explores in-

dividual instances of a phenomenon in order to share the essence of the phenomenon itself (Colaizzi, 1978). As a result, this research provides a narrow but intriguing window into a highly specific and somewhat endangered population within higher education. The engaged Black male student who has sought out and taken on leadership positions is a valuable asset to any campus and is a model we should continue to encourage and hope to produce. The student who does this in a fraternal context – demonstrating an obvious recognition of community, history, and philanthropic importance – truly should be revered. And therefore, teaching our administrators and campuses how to better support these students may have tremendous effects on their experience, retention, and both academic and fraternal success.

Strengths

The campus, fraternal, and personal similarities in the experience of all four co-researchers provides a certain credibility to learn from what they shared within this study. Small chapters of BGLO fraternity men on a PWI campus is common in this country, especially in the northeastern states. These experiences are likely congruent between undergraduate brothers who are feeling the effects of leading in a space where they are highly limited in their control. Student affairs professionals who are seeking to connect with these individuals and build meaningful and supportive bonds with their chapters can almost certainly employ these suggestions to do so. Even in situations where the chapters are somewhat larger, greater understanding and institutional advocacy will derive from the stronger partnerships between key stakeholders inevitably resulting in net positive gains for chapters, institutions, and students alike.

Limitations

The relatively small sample size of this project presents its findings as merely anecdotal and potentially not generalizable

beyond those interviewed for the project itself. This study can add to the small body of scholarship on BGLO collegiate chapter support system from colleges and universities. However, although COVID-19 was a global crisis, there were specific needs that had to be met from the unique standpoints from each institution. Therefore, the mode in which student affairs professionals currently advise and oversee these groups may place some universities at risk depending on the nature of culture and community.

In addition, every fraternity has its obligation with a willingness to serve and therefore must be engaged, understood, and supported as such. Likewise, the phenomenon may not be applicable to BGLO sorority members who experience their existence in college very differently than their male counterparts. However, the amount of research into these distinct populations remains relatively limited itself and so there exists great opportunities to further knowledge in this area.

Summary

The researchers with this project wish to begin a conversation between this undervalued population and the education stakeholders in our society; the co-researchers are ready to talk. As they are willing to explore their various identities – including family, gender, race, sexuality, socioeconomic, religion, and others – they present an intersectionality that can inform areas of higher education policy and practice which are in need of serious reform if we want these students to remain successful students. And to increase their participation and number, we may need a revolution.

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