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# An Overview of Two Incidents Involving African American Fraternities at Indiana University

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## An overview of two incidents involving African American Fraternities at Indiana University

Eddie R. Cole, Cameron J. Harris,  
Rubin Pusha III and Nadrea Reeves

*The current campus climate facing African American Greek fraternal organizations at Indiana University (IU) can be examined through critical incidents of the past. A historical analysis of data sources associated with two incidents involving these organizations at IU provides a better understanding of the challenges students in these organizations may face. This paper aims to provide practitioners with an understanding of how specific policy changes for these fraternities may affect their members, as well as the student body they serve.*

Over the years of the existence of institutions of higher education in America, enrollment of African Americans students at predominately White campuses has increased; however, the campus climate still remains “chilly” for these students. While studies have examined the structure of universities, the effects of institutions’ potentially hostile racial climate still creates difficulty for African American students’ achievement (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). One of the ways that African American students combat this climate is through the formation of student organizations, which are used as support mechanisms (McClure, 2006). For instance, Indiana University (IU) has a unique relationship with African American student organizations, specifically Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated (KAPΨ), a historically African American collegiate fraternity founded at the university in 1911 (KAPΨ, 2008). The fraternity was founded in response to the racially charged climate commonly found at predominately White institutions (PWI) during the early 1900s. This paper is a historical document analysis of IU administrative responses to two incidents that involved African American Greek fraternal organizations and how these responses both influence and impact campus climate.

These incidents were particularly important because they played a role in shaping today’s campus climate as experienced by African American students. It allowed us to view the campus from the perspective of the students enrolled during that era. In order to examine the campus climate at IU, we approached this study with two specific research questions:

How did IU respond to critical incidents with African American fraternities within the past 25 years?

### Faculty Advisors

1960-1977:	Elizabeth Greenleaf	1990-1996:	George Kuh
1970-1971:	Wanda Deutsch	1996-1997:	Bruce Jacobs
1972-1976:	David Decoster	1997-1998:	Teresa Hall
1977-1982:	George Kuh	1998-2000:	Ada Simmons
1983-1987:	John Schuh	2000-2002:	Jillian Kinzie
1987-1988:	Don Hossler	2002-2004:	Kate Boyle
1988-1989:	Frances Stage	2004-2005:	Lori Patton
1989-1990:	Don Hossler	2005-2009:	Danielle De Sawal

What do two critical incidents involving African American fraternities tell us about the climate of IU?

We will review existing literature on campus climates and the intersection of African American fraternities' impact and influence at PWIs, specifically at IU. This impact includes the influence these fraternities have on the African American student populations and its social activities. Newspaper articles from the *Indiana Daily Student (IDS)* about two critical incidents involving African American fraternities at IU were analyzed. One incident involved a stabbing during a fight between two fraternities in 1988 and the other a shooting associated with a fraternity event in 2005. The results will

By 1979, racially charged events became more prevalent at PWIs across the nation: from the word "niggers" being painted in public places to verbal and physical harassment of African American students (Smith, 1981). As a result of being ostracized on their PWI campus, African American students have used the formation of their own student groups to foster their cultural, political, and economic interests (Smith; McClure, 2006).

The experience of African American students at PWIs is one that has been given increasing attention due to increased enrollments of this population (Peterson, 1978; Allen, 1992). With this increased attention, it has been noted that campus climate and other factors contribute to African American students at PWIs having lower retention rates than their White counterparts (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Not only do African American students at PWIs perform lower than their White counterparts, they also persist at lower rates than their African American counterparts at HBCUs (Allen).

Allen (1992) finds that African American students at PWIs have a lower psychosocial adjustment, less significant academic outcomes and lower cultural awareness than African American students at HBCUs. African American students at PWIs have historically faced difficulty in regards to access and isolation in the environment of an institution where they are the minority (Allen). These factors are evidence of a climate that is less than supportive of African American students.

Longtime IU administrator, Chancellor Herman B Wells, instituted positive change across the Bloomington campus during his tenure, 1938 - 1962. Wells stood up to local businesses that did not want to serve African American students and protested Southern schools that did not want to compete in athletics against IU because of African American athletes (Hinkle, 2001). Members of KΑΨ successfully petitioned to Wells for the eradication of Indiana Memorial Union (IMU) policies that banned African American students from using dining space in the IMU (Hinkle).

The incident of KΑΨ and Chancellor Wells is an example of how these organizations not only impact their members but the overall African American student body. African American fraternities serve as an extension of the campus' African American student population and are integral in creating a same-race support system for this community (Fox & Hodge & Ward, 1987; McClure, 2006). Thus, similarities between White and African American fraternities are often misguided because the latter serves a different function in their community, socially and historically (Fox, Hodge & Ward). In addition to advocacy for African American students, Black Greek Lettered Organizations (BGLOs) take on the "function of socialization for all [African American] students and may assume the form of a quasi-activity office" (Fox, Hodge & Ward, p. 522).

In many ways, the historical vestiges of segregated schools and colleges continue to affect the climate for racial/ethnic diversity on college campuses. Examples include: "resistance to desegregation in communities and specific campus settings, the maintenance of old campus policies at PWIs that best serve a homogeneous population, and attitudes and behaviors that prevent interaction across race and ethnicity" (Hurtado, et al., 1998, p. 4). "Because they are embedded in the culture of a historically segregated environment, many campuses sustain long-standing, often unrecognized, benefits for particular student groups" (Hurtado, et al., p. 282).

Indiana University, founded in 1820, has a history of access for White students only and inequality for African Americans. This history contributes, even today, to the campus climate for African Americans. With an African American student population of 5% (Indiana University, 2008) and a history of racism and ostracism, the climate at this university allows for an in-depth analysis embedded in conflict and inequality. For this reason, our analysis will focus on key incidents that have been influenced and impacted by the campus climate for African American fraternities.

## Methods

We performed a historical document analysis of the *IDS* articles and university policies related to the two incidents which involved African American fraternities at IU. The two incidents selected were chosen because each had an abundance of documents available that detailed the occurrences. The fraternity chapters involved are: the Gamma Eta chapter of ΑΦΑ, the Alpha chapter of KΑΨ, and the Zeta Epsilon chapter of ΩΨΦ. The chapter names are listed to clarify that these incidents are specific to the IU campus, not a reflection of the international organizations. We also found this useful in gaining understanding of the institutional treatment of these fraternities. Each document was examined for details of the actions and treatment of

African American fraternities. While conducting the document analysis, we looked for: references of African American students, suspensions of chapters or judicial documentation of the historically African American fraternities, or reference to the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), the governing body of these organizations. The documents we found served as a thread for us to develop a sense of the campus climate.

News articles from the 1988 and 2005 coverage of the two incidents were used to obtain a historical timeline of administrative moves in regards to a formal response to the two events. These pieces gave a report of the facts and circumstances surrounding incidents pertaining to the African American fraternal organizations' programs. It is when biases seem to appear in these articles that we gained insight as to how the community or the reporting journalists feel about the occurrence. We chose the *IDS* as a source because the portrayal of issues within this publication provides an idea of how other students may also view a situation or issue.

The late-night dance party policy, and its subsequent amendments, helped us see how these guidelines developed into the policies that lead the daily operations of the university. We looked at how the policies came into fruition, what circumstances or incidents influenced change of policy, and if the change originated from a bias or prejudice toward a certain student demographic.

When assessing each source, we looked for distinct characteristics within each piece and language that either insinuates or possesses negative connotations. Specifically, when looking at *IDS* news articles pertaining to these events, we looked for keywords, as previously stated. We also concentrated on these key words when looking at media coverage of these incidents with African American fraternities. We viewed IU's late-night dance party policies before and after the two events with African American fraternities. Those changes were analyzed for what language was used when changing the policy and how African American fraternities were affected by such changes.

Two incidents, which occurred on the IU-Bloomington campus within the last 20 years, are of critical relevance to the campus climate. These incidents are critical to the campus climate because they involve BGLOs and have created controversy, influenced policy and affected not only the members within these organizations, but the overall African American student community.

### Findings

These findings for this study come from our analysis of the incidents that include a stabbing resulting from a fight between members of  $\Omega\Psi\Phi$  and

$\text{KA}\Psi$  in March of 1988 and a fight and shooting occurring during and after, respectively, a party hosted by the Gamma Eta chapter of  $\text{A}\Phi\text{A}$  in 2005.

### 1988 Incident

On March 6, 1988, the Gamma Eta chapter of  $\text{A}\Phi\text{A}$  hosted a Greek Unity event titled the "The Little Sister Step Show Competition" in the Flame Room of McNutt Residence Center. At some point during the event, a violent altercation erupted between the members of  $\Omega\Psi\Phi$  and  $\text{KA}\Psi$ . The altercation resulted in the campus suspension of both  $\Omega\Psi\Phi$  and  $\text{KA}\Psi$ . Throughout the month of March, rumors spread of another potential brawl between these two organizations. All social events in the residential halls were suspended by the Dean of Students for the weekend of March 25 – 27, 1988. Following this, rumors started that members from other Midwestern chapters of  $\Omega\Psi\Phi$  and  $\text{KA}\Psi$  were traveling to IU's campus to retaliate for their respective fraternities. The Dean of Students Office enacted a policy that Indiana University Police Department (IUPD) and IU administrators be present at all BGLO events thereafter.

### Climate of Fear

The *IDS* reports that the event was cancelled as a result of rumors that members from other Midwestern chapters of  $\text{KA}\Psi$  and  $\Omega\Psi\Phi$  were traveling to IU to further agitate the situation. This provides a glimpse of the climate of fear on campus. The assistant to the Dean of Students at the time is quoted in the *IDS* saying:

(The Dean) became aware that if certain circumstances came to pass this weekend, a situation would occur which would endanger students. It was a big weekend for IU with many parents and high school students viewing the campus, and (the Dean) did not want to take any chances (Knight and McKinnon, 1988, p. 1).

Statements such as these suggest a less than comfortable climate existed for African American fraternities on the IU campus. Although the university may have taken great care not to implicate the two organizations as the cause of all residence hall social activities being canceled, awareness of the rumors were still published in the *IDS*. This may have created unwarranted pressure on administrators from faculty, staff, students, alumni, and parents to act so strongly against these groups. This, in turn, may have created some feelings of hostility towards the environmental tone the university administration set by their response to a fight.

### *Non-inclusive policy changes*

The late night policies enacted as a response to the incident which involved KΑΨ and ΩΨΦ were exclusive to African American student organizations. As a result of the incident, these groups had to follow strict late night policy guidelines in order to sponsor an event after hours. The *IDS* reveals that the late night policy only applied to African American student organizations: "The guidelines now will apply only to Black-oriented student groups" (Bowman, 1988).

### *2005 Incident*

It was reported in the Monday, September 19, 2005, edition of the *IDS* that multiple people were arrested after a party hosted by the Gamma Eta chapter of ΑΦΑ ended because of a fight. The atmosphere of the party held in the Indiana Memorial Union (IMU) was described as chaotic because a visiting Indiana State University student was suspected to have fired an automatic weapon multiple times. Due to the description of the student as an African American male, two students who fit the description were apprehended by IUPD officers. These two students and others were released from custody without being charged. The suspect was reported to have been seen later that night but was never found. Students filed complaints with the IUPD out of concern for how the situation was handled. In the article on September 20, 2005, the Vice President for Diversity and Retention expressed concerns about the *IDS* coverage of the incident and suggested that there were more positive stories regarding the activities of African American students and student groups that could have been front page articles.

### *Media portrayal*

We found the media portrayal of the 2005 ΑΦΑ event creates a negative perception of the organization and the African American students involved. The portrayal did so with overly negative coverage of the incident that occurred, as well as associated the Gamma Eta chapter of ΑΦΑ with the shooting which occurred that night.

When the *IDS* initially reported the incident, it received front page coverage. The front page article was accompanied by a large photo of numerous IUPD officers with their guns drawn toward African American male students (fig.1). This is problematic because the overly negative portrayal of the event was presented before all the facts were discovered. The African American male students were depicted as violent. Page (1997) states that when African American males are portrayed as "incompetents of a violent nature" in media images they seem to "threaten White public space" (p. 100). Page states that White public space is:

A highly politicized, shifting symbolic and material dimension in which the dominant racial group routinely benefits from the governmental or corporate control it exercises over information. ...In White public space, things of racial significance are made to seem fair, just, and legitimate, and simplistically obvious when the embodied experiences of racial targets scream that they clearly are not. (p. 108).

Page goes on to say that portrayals such as the one described above contribute to subjecting the African American male to an emphatic White culture that shapes how they are seen in public. Virtually everyone involved and associated with this incident could have fallen victim to such a portrayal.

ΑΦΑ was connected to the shooting by the front page article and by IUPD. The cover article, published the Monday after the shooting occurred, outlined the events of the night. The article mentioned that IUPD officers were dispatched to the event because of a reported fight that occurred in the IMU. In the second paragraph, the *IDS* mentioned ΑΦΑ and explained that the shooting occurred directly after a dance hosted by the fraternity. An IUPD lieutenant at the time claimed that the shots were fired at an after party for the dance. The lieutenant stated in the *IDS* that the possibility of the connection between ΑΦΑ and the shooting would be investigated because the suspected shooters were described as African Americans (Simon & Zinne, 2005). ΑΦΑ was associated with this incident and, therefore, equally associated to the buzz surrounding the shooting until follow-up coverage dispelled rumors of the fraternity's association to the shooting. While we understand that a campus shooting will make the front page of the campus newspaper, we find the *IDS*'s framing of coverage to connect ΑΦΑ to the shooting as unfair.

### *Climate of fear*

The historically fearful climate pertaining to issues with African American fraternities was also found. This climate of fear created by these incidents is evidenced in the news articles. Vice President for Diversity and Retention responded to the IUPD response in September 2005 by saying "we need to know why they reacted the way they did. We need to be able to give our students the assurance that they will be respected" (Simon & Zinne, 2005). This is related to a climate of fear because the Vice President for Diversity and Retention questioned the reaction of IUPD and appropriateness of their response to the incident.

This made public a tense climate for African American fraternities during this time and how this policy was targeted toward the African Ameri-

can student population. Specific policies focused on African American fraternities continued to exist into 2006 as the late night event policy required African American fraternities hosting events to have security at the event, registered guests, attended mandatory event meetings with administrators, and volunteered to assist staff with coordination (Indiana University, 2006).

### **Implications**

This paper presents historical information concerning the founding, purpose, and continued struggles with inclusivity of African American fraternities at IU. It also presents data that suggests the treatment of African American fraternities may be perceived as culturally insensitive and racially motivated. The incidents described in this study affect the members of the three fraternal organizations, which are a part of two larger communities, the NPHC community, which consists of six other organizations, and the African American student population. The BGLOs are an extension of the African American student population on campus and are essential in creating a support system for this community both educationally and socially.

Thus, the findings are important to student affairs professionals and other higher education practitioners, as they provide a number of implications for their interactions with African American fraternity members and the larger African American student body. Being both part of a fraternal and minority community may present a double jeopardy effect for these members. Negative stereotypes of students in both these categories – fraternity member and African American – may unjustly be amplified by incidents such as these. For example, as African Americans enrolled at a PWI have historically come with its own struggles to feel welcome, members of these organizations also combat the stereotypes of being Greek. Both categories have their own struggles to create a positive perception for themselves. Yet, incidents like the two analyzed for this study and the hastiness of administrative reactions, leave members of African American fraternities with a double negative perception to overcome.

In an effort to prevent negative media portrayal of African American fraternities, student affairs professionals and other campus administrators should promote the positive nature of these groups. Administrators should focus the campus' attention on the various community service initiatives, cognitive gains, and development of useful practical skills gained as a result of participation in African American fraternities. Additionally, student affairs professionals should seek the counsel of colleagues who hold membership in these organizations when developing policies and making decisions that affect African American fraternities.

Finally, student affairs practitioners should explore providing educa-

tional workshops, elective courses, and devoting professional development funds to better inform students, faculty, and staff about African American fraternities. When working with these students, professionals should be open to changing the perceptions of the organization and the stereotypes that follow their members. These students are individuals and not a complete extension of their organization.

### **Conclusion**

While much has changed in terms of African American's access to education at PWIs and administrators have made positive changes, the improvement of the campus climate at these institutions is marginal for Black students. This document analysis highlights several important facts about the African American fraternities involved in or unjustly connected to two incidents on the IU campus. The analysis also provides information that suggests a less than favorable campus climate for African American fraternities at IU, negative portrayal in campus media, the formation of non-inclusive campus policies, and a climate of fear towards these particular students. The analysis also revealed a cause and effect relationship between the above mentioned incidents and formation of policies, which affected only African American oriented students groups.

Although the analysis provides ample data on the impact of these incidents on campus climate and policies the study is by no means exhaustive as it only reviews two incidents ranging from 1988 to 2005. In an effort to better understand the climate fostered and policies formed by IU, which affect the African American fraternities, administrators may need to consider the historical foundation upon which these organizations began.

We hope that practitioners can take similar situations at their respective institutions and create roundtable discussions with members of these organizations to assess how they perceive the campus in regards to their organizations. This is critical as literature states that these organizations are a reflection of the entire African American student population. We also encourage new practitioners to examine pre-existing research on the African American fraternal organizations as a way to better understand the culture of these groups. This will prove valuable in being able to support these students in programming that is unique to their missions and will provide better framework for how to respond to future critical incidents involving these groups.

In closing, practitioners can seek the counsel of their respective institutions' chief administrator on diversity. As in the case of IU, the Vice President for Diversity and Retention was a champion for supporting these organizations in a highly critical situation. This support is applicable to any

PWI that has chapters of these organizations. Otherwise, failure to adequately respond to and support BGLOs may only perpetuate the sense of not being welcome on PWIs by members of the organizations, as well as the African American student population at large.

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