YOU MAKE THE LETTERS, THE LETTERS DON’T MAKE YOU: A CASE STUDY
ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN BLACK GREEK LETTER
FRATERNITIES AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

BY

BRANDON H. COMMON

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:
Assistant Professor Lorenzo D. Baber, Chair
Assistant Professor Denice Hood
Professor William Trent
Associate Professor Christopher Span
ABSTRACT

Since their formation, the accomplishments of Black Greek Lettered Organizations (BGLOs) are undisputed. While BGLOs boast some of the greatest African American artists, writers, activist, athletes, and legal minds of the 20th century, the contributions of Black Greek Letter alum often succumb to less than ideal media portrayals and high profile hazing incidents. The increased legal turmoil experienced by BGLOs at the national level paired with increased demographic changes in higher education have the potential to threaten the existence of these groups. Not sufficiently addressed in the discourse surrounding BGLOs are the experiences of African American males within these organizations. African America males struggle at all points along the higher education pipeline (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Harper & Harris, 2013). One tool for matriculation for these students is involvement; however, involvement by way of Black Greek life remains largely unscathed. This study contributes to the larger body of literature by utilizing community cultural wealth to investigate the experiences of African American males in BGLOs.

Researchers have utilized Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory in investigating the educational experiences of African Americans. Although providing a useful starting point for this conversation, scholars continue to evaluate the usefulness of Bourdieu’s theory in fully understanding the plight of students of color (Pierce & Lin, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Yosso, 2005). From these conversations have emerged “otherized theories” that better articulate and celebrate the capital the students of color acquire through their culture. Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework
which suggests that students of color own forms of capital that allow them to navigate the education system served as the framework for this investigation.

This project used qualitative case study methods to investigate the lives of African American male members in BGLOs at a large research intensive Predominantly White Institution (PWI) during the spring of 2013. Purposeful sampling yielded 13 participants who ranged in academic level from sophomore to fifth year senior, and represented a diversity of experience as members of the Black and Black Greek Lettered community. Two face-to-face semi-structured interviews took place simultaneously with observations of the campus and Black Greek community. Three themes emerged from participants’ experiences before fraternal membership: 1) using multiple resources to navigate the collegiate context, 2) overcoming real barriers, and 3) decisions to join a Black Greek letter fraternity. Additionally, three themes emerged from participants’ time as fraternity men including: 1) multiple dimensions of brotherhood, 2) impact of involvement, and 3) value added of the Black fraternal experience.
For my Mother Vivian
From the moment I decided to pursue a doctorate, I daydreamed about writing the acknowledgements for my dissertation; now that the time is here, I am at a lost for words. Finishing this degree is not solely about earning the PhD; instead, it signifies the end of one chapter in my life, and the beginning of another one. When I started my educational journey as a young Black boy in St. Louis, MO, I could not fathom the profound impact that education would have on the next 25 years of my life. Now that I reflect on this awesome journey, I cannot help but to feel humbled by my experiences, and the numerous individuals who have touched my life—although cliché, I truly stand on the shoulders of giants!

First, I would like to thank my lord and savior for the supreme blessings that he has bestowed upon me throughout my life. I would also like to thank my family especially my aunts, Mary Ann and Connie, my sister Kalyn, and my parents Vivian and Robert. I did not realize the sacrifice that pursuing a doctorate would require. I know I have missed more than my share of family gatherings, birthdays, and other events in recent years. Thank you for giving me space to chase my dreams, and providing me with unconditional love and support along the way. Special thanks to the greatest blessing in my life, my mother Vivian. Mom, you are my inspiration, my role model, my biggest fan, and the person who keeps me most grounded. You have always seen the best in me and provided the perfect balance of challenge and support to which I own much of my success. There were numerous occasions over the last five years when I wanted to quit because it was too hard, or because I felt that I was not good enough but your loving words willed me to get this thing done. I can never fully repay you for the blessing you have been in my life.
but please take pride in knowing that any success I have achieved is largely because of you—I love you.

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Lastly, I want to thank the men who shared their lives with me so that I could reach my goals. Although I cannot recognize you all by name, you are all exceptional brothers and I am fortunate to have met you along my educational journey. I wish you happiness, health, and success in all of your future endeavors. Thank you again and be blessed.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since their formation, the accomplishments of Black Greek Lettered Organizations (BGLOs) are undisputed. Many of the greatest African American intellectuals, entertainers, political activist, and athletes of the 20th century were members of BGLOs (Ross, 1990). At a time when Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) of higher education practiced blatant forms of racism toward African Americans,¹ BGLOs served as study groups, social support systems, and a voice for a largely marginalized group (Hughey & Hernandez, 2012). At all institutions of higher education these organizations have been sources of pride, and to a large extent represented one of the best results of African Americans entering higher education. As Whaley (2010) expresses, “BGLOs, like White and African American social fraternals, represent who has culture capital and social, political, and economic power in their communities” (p. 25). However, despite their storied histories, BGLOs largely exist on the margins in higher education, and are subject to continued questions about their relevancy.

Criticism of BGLOs has existed almost since their formation (Giddings, 1994; Harris & Hughey & Hernandez, 2012; Mitchell, 2008). For example, during the Civil Rights movement many leaders in Black America called for a greater presence by BGLOs (Kimbrough, 2003; Williamson, 2003). Others have argued that these groups further separate an already fragmented population who has historically needed to present a united front in the face of social and political ills that ravage the African American community. Recently BGLOs have faced an additional critique, —their public

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will use African American and Black interchangeably to describe individuals of African descent born and acculturated in the United States.
perception. Consistently abysmal grade reports, numerous incidents of violence, and less than complementary media depictions of these groups (e.g. School Daze and Stomp the Yard) serve as fuel for detractors who question the purpose of BGLOs.

Lost in less academic discourse about BGLOs are the experiences of members within these organizations—especially African American males. In fact, only recently has literature explored the participation of African American males in this context. Moreover, the result of this dearth in literature is that discourse concerning Black fraternities yields many questions and far less answers. Despite the potential positive impact BGLO membership has on African American males, literature also suggests these organizations might serve as a hindrance (Jones, 2004; Kimbrough, 2003). Within this varying discourse, this study seeks to provide a greater understanding of the role of participation in BGLOs in the lives of collegiate African American males.

Problem Statement

Over the last four decades, the number of full-time students enrolled in higher education has more than doubled (Aud et. al, 2013). Unfortunately, this increase in educational attainment does not hold true in the African American community where males’ representations have been stagnant for decades (Strayhorn, 2008). Although African Americans represent roughly 12 percent of the postsecondary enrollment, African American women account for roughly two thirds of this group, leaving African American males to occupy only one third (Aud, Fox, & KewelRamani, 2010). If the K-12 pipeline for African American males is not difficult enough, scholars find that those who attend PWIs of higher education face significant barriers to their success including feelings of isolation, difficulty fostering relationships with peers, and racism (Allen,
These issues contribute to African American males possessing the lowest matriculation rates when accounting for race and gender (Bowen, et al., 2009).

Due to the documented problems facing this population, literature in this area is expansive; however, issues for African American males continue to persist. What scholars do comprehend from empirical studies is that despite finding themselves in a system that systematically works to their disadvantage, mentorship, village like environments, and involvement can be conducive to their success (Flowers, 2004; Harper, 2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). In particular, involvement (inside and out of the classroom) has the potential to positively shape the experiences of African American males while allowing students to acquire additional capital, foster healthy identity development, and increase overall satisfaction (Guffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008).

BGLOs continue to be a popular source of involvement for African American males however; there remains a dearth in this research. The scant work in this field does address issues around hazing, leadership, and fraternal membership. Considering the importance of involvement in the lives of African American males, and the fact that BGLOs remain a viable option for involvement, more research employing different models and frameworks is necessary.

Purpose Statement

Jenkins (2006) aptly describes the challenges facing those attempting to better the status of African American males in our society as a “social oxymoron” because, as she asserts, the primary challenge lies in “seeking to advance the status of a population that
the larger society has systematically oppressed” (p. 128). Though the systematic oppression that Jenkins alludes to may not be as prevalent in the lives of African American males who have “made it” to college, nonetheless, it does influence the lives of this privileged group.

Possessing an awareness of the larger context in which our society situates African American males is essential when disentangling the minutiae of their experiences in higher education. As is the case for all oppressed groups, African American males have faced both overt and covert political and social practices that have steadily worked to place them in a subordinate position in our society. In the context of education, and higher education specifically, this placement propagates societal views that depict African American males as unintelligible, uneducable, and dangerous (Strayhorn, 2008). As a result, the narrative of the successful African American male has become foreign, as much of the literature highlights deficiencies in their ability to matriculation through the educational system (Harper, 2005; Jackson & Moore, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of African American males in higher education through their participation in BGLOs. More specifically, utilizing Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework, this study allowed the researcher to first consider what forms of capital participants possessed upon arriving to college in helping to understand their experiences in BGLOs. Findings from this study, in cooperation with existing literature addressing African American males can assist higher education administrators in working with this population in higher education settings.
Research Questions

The absence of empirical research addressing the experiences of African American males in BGLOs signifies a salient need for analysis in this area; this study attempts to address this gap in knowledge. Though community cultural wealth establishes six forms of capital for students of color, this study specifically draws upon navigational capital, social capital, and aspirational capital, due to their saliency in the existing literature. Additionally, this study allows for the potential of other forms of capital to emerge from the lived experiences of participants. This study poses the following questions:

- What nexus exists between the capital African American males possess as suggested by Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework and their experience in Black Greek Letter Organizations at a Predominantly White Institution?
- In what ways might BGLOs further cultivate or hinder various forms of capital described by community and cultural wealth?
  - Do these organizations bolster the aspirational capital that Yosso suggests students of color already bring to their educational experience?
  - Does membership ease members’ navigation through their collegiate experience?
  - In what ways does affiliation shape the perceived social capital of members?

In recent years, scholars have challenged theories and models in education that fail to describe multiple uses of capital in education (Winkle-Wagner 2010; Yosso, 2005). This scholarly approach yields perspectives on the role of capital in the lives of students of color that stand in opposition to “majoritarian” stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Anti-deficit cultural capital perspectives empower students of color while simultaneously acknowledging and valuing the backgrounds and circumstances these
students bring to their postsecondary experience. Advocates of anti-deficit approaches posit that the dominant culture reinforces the status quo (the basic belief behind social reproduction) by expressing stories that legitimize the dominant experience while concurrently discrediting students of color, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Followers of this perspective offer counter forms of capital as an alternative way to understand the lives of students of color in education. These perspectives provide a shift in the paradigm of students from having to fit one mold, to moving closer to possessing agency that enables them to author their own experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Messages that implicitly or in some cases explicitly devalue their previous experiences continually bombard students of color at the onset of their collegiate careers. For some students, these heavily skewed messages become their own narrative. This study provides a space to acknowledge what capital African American males bring to their postsecondary experience, and seeks to understand how this capital interacts with their participation in BGLOs. Moreover, this study also enables the analysis of participants’ experiences within the organization through their reflection.

**Context**

The context for this study was a large, public, four-year, research intensive PWI in the Midwestern part of the United States. PWIs have historically participated in exclusionary practices toward women, people of color, and students from lower economic means (Thelin, 2004). Only within the last half century have these institutional types opened their doors to the “masses” of individuals seeking to earn a college degree. During this time, PWIs have substantially increased access to higher education through
institutional, state, and federal initiatives designed to diversify the educational landscape. However, despite enormous strides in access and acceptance PWIs have made in the last half-century; these institutions continually foster unwelcoming environments for African American males (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano at al., 2000).

Hurtado and colleagues (1998) contend that campus climate is a multidimensional phenomenon often shaped by four components including the interaction of internal and external forces, structural diversity, psychological environment, and campus inter-group behavior. The researchers suggest these components provide a rationale behind why African American students struggle to integrate into PWI environments. The rationale rests in the historical legacy of exclusionary practices by the dominant culture towards students of color; structural diversity dictating the presence of certain groups and the absence of others; and inter-group behaviors between students of color and the dominant culture. The current context of this study embodied the history, both positive and negative of PWIs.

**Significance of Research**

The significance of this study lies in its different theoretical approach to understanding the Black fraternal experience. Existing empirical literature on this topic almost exclusively finds that African American males benefit from membership in BGLOs; however, much of this research largely utilizes dominant theoretical frames or none at all. By utilizing a non-dominant framework in order to understand what forms of capital African American males possess before and during fraternal membership, this study provides a counter-narrative to popular discourse on this topic. Further, this study
contributes to the budding literature that approaches African American males from anti-deficit perspectives. Implications from this research hold significance for higher education administrators, research, theory, national Black Greek organizations, and society.

**Practice.** Black Greek Letter fraternities at PWIs across the country continually struggle. Although these groups have their issues and must take a great deal of organizational responsibility for their current predicament, much of the onus for the inability of Black fraternities to be successful also falls on the administrators that work with these groups, and policies that in some cases systematically place these groups at a disadvantage. In our increasingly outcome driven higher education structure, student affairs units (and individuals departments) are being asked to show their effectiveness in providing meaningful educational experiences for students that contribute to their success, and matriculation. Offices of fraternity and sorority life and students activities are no different; however, based on the issues that Black fraternities encounter, this area requires additional research. Scholars like Strayhorn and Mcall (2012) have attempted to provide a framework for working with this group, more practitioners and scholars need contribute to this knowledge base.

This research has the potential to provide additional information that can aide practitioners who work Black fraternity men. Specifically, this study challenges administrators to not approach Black fraternities (and their members) from a deficit model, but instead begin from a baseline understanding that in order to help these groups be successful we must first acknowledge and assess what capital members have so that we understand and can address deficiencies. Moreover, breaking this cycle of oppression
has the potential to produce practitioners who extend how administrators can think about, and help this population be successful.

**Research.** The plight of African American males in higher education is at best stagnant. Despite the robustness of literature on this population, few scholars have sought to analyze specifically African American males in BGLOs (Anderson, Buckley, & Tindall, 2011; Harper & Harris, 2006; Harper & Kimbrough, 2006). As a sub-group within a sub-group, African American males in BGLOs must negotiate different circumstances than their non-Greek counterparts; these differences change the narrative these students bring to their own experiences. Literature that fails to recognize that membership in these organizations add an additional layer of identity for members does not tell the totality of the African American male experience in college.

This study furthers the knowledge of what scholars know, understand, and are able to articulate about African American male undergraduate students. More specific, this study challenges scholars to consider the diversity of African American males’ experiences in college and to consider this diversity with different types of students and within different institutional context.

**BGLOs nationally.** The mantra for BGLOs is that “we are a business”. If this is the case, recent reports indicate that these organizations need to reevaluate their business models. One way this can happen is by organizations attempting to link student development and other theories to their practices. By obtaining a better understanding of the environments in which undergraduate members reside, and their developmental issues, headquarters’ of BGLOs can provide a stronger rationale for their decision-making. By no means does this study provide the breadth of knowledge about
undergraduate members that headquarters staff at BGLOs need continue to help their undergraduate members to develop successfully; however, this study can provide added understanding of Black males that can be considered in policies and practices of the organizations.

**Society.** Countless scholarship explains the benefits of receiving a college diploma (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Perna, 2005). Having more educated individuals decreases unemployment and poverty rates; in addition, working individuals contribute to the tax budget, therefore decreasing demands on the public budget (Baum & Ma, 2007). Baum and Ma (2007) also assert that societies that are more educated yield higher levels of civic participation and increased volunteer work. Despite the well-documented benefits associated with educational attainment, African Americans, males in particular, struggle to experience the same benefits from this perceived vehicle for upward mobility. For this reason, research that yields more insight into the lives of African American males, thus perhaps providing keys for their success, has the potential to have a positive influence for the individual and public.

**Theory.** Finally, this research is significant for future theory primarily concerning how researchers study African American males in BGLOs, and more broadly students of color. Continually, researches approach the experiences of African American males from deficit model. This study conceptualizes how scholars utilize non-deficit frames to understand various components of the Black male experience. Further, this study also creates a space for attempting to understand the intersectionality of race and gender within the context of a non-deficit model. Implications from this study have the potential to challenge research that rely on dominant theories to explain diverse
populations and challenge scholars to seek out theoretical frames that cater to specific populations; and if these frameworks are not available create them.

**Overview of Dissertation**

In this chapter, I introduced the study, provided a context for the problem, explained why this line of research is important, and shared the research questions that guide this research study. In chapter two, pertinent literature to this research receives attention. This chapter also describes the theoretical framework guiding this study, and makes a justification for why this lens is useful for this study. In chapter three, I share the research methodology and discuss the site for this study, data collection and participants, and data analysis and limitations to the research conducted. Chapter four includes a description of the Black Greek community at the site along with a in-depth description of the participants in this study. Chapter five is the presentation of findings along with analysis using the framework for this study. The final chapter will address the primary research questions guiding this study; the balance of the chapter will discuss implications of this work and future directions for research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Provided in the ensuing section is an overview of the published literature relating to this study. In order to address succinctly the many lines of research that amalgamate from the central questions that guide this study, this chapter divides into five sections. The first section situates the experiences of African American students at PWIs by addressing the broad literature in this area. Next, the discussion shifts specifically to the unique experiences of African American males enrolled in PWIs. The review then shifts to BGLOs first briefly discussing their history, and then specifically addressing scholarship on the Black fraternal experience. Finally, community cultural wealth, the framework employed in this study will receive attention.

African American Students at PWIs

Institutional environment often plays a central role in determining outcomes (e.g., academic, social, etc.) for African American students; unfortunately, PWIs have historically been unwelcoming to this population (Allen, 1992; Cuyjet, 2006; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984). PWIs fail to provide this population with the necessary resources to be successful, and typically foster environments that restrict students’ ability to foster meaningful relationships with faculty and peers (Allen, 1992; Allen & Hannif, 1991). Subsequently, African American students feel less institutional support and encounter more harassment than White students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2006).

Scholarship examining the impact of attending a PWI on African American students has existed for several decades. Fleming’s (1984) heavily cited work in this area serves as the foundation for how scholars understand the African American student
experience at PWIs. Gathering information from over 3,000 African American students and from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and PWIs, Fleming arrived to several conclusions concerning African American participation at PWIs. Foremost, Fleming noticed that students attending HBCUs had greater gains in intellectual growth due to having more institutional and emotional support than their counterparts have at PWIs. Additionally, the researcher discovered that although both African American men and women experienced hostile situations at PWIs, men were in a significantly worse shape. Despite these circumstances, a significant finding emanating from Fleming’s work was that PWI students acquired greater coping skills than HBCU students. Fleming’s work, though notable had significant limitations including geographical restrictions and its cross sectional sample; still, this work provides a foundation for understanding the lives of African American students at PWIs.

In a series of analyses of African American students’ experiences at PWIs and HBCUs published in the 1990s, Allen (1992) and Feagin et al., (1996) put forth that PWIs offer potentially harmful experiences for these students. Describing the distinctions between the institutional types, Allen mentions:

On Predominantly White campuses, African American students emphasize feelings of alienation, sensed hostility, racial discrimination, and lack of integration. On historically African American campuses, African American students emphasize feelings of engagement, connection, acceptance, and extensive support and encouragement. Consistent with accumulated evidence on human development, these students like most human beings, develop best in environments where they feel valued, protected, accepted, and socially connected (p. 39).

Allen’s analysis included the experiences of over 2,500 African American students attending several PWIs and HBCUs over the course of several years. The researchers’ quantitative approach, though reaching a sizeable amount of participants did
fail to capture the lived experiences of these students. Feagin et al., (1996) fills this gap using focus group interviews of upper-class students who attend PWIs and their parents. Interestingly, parents of students attending PWIs largely believed that their children’s institution provided a rigorous academic experience but also acknowledged that socially their children faced serious issues transitioning into their collegiate environment, and subsequently lacked support from the institution. Overall, Feagin et al. concluded that the benefits associated with PWIs did not overshadow potential detriments toward African American students.

Drawing from Critical Race Theory, Solorano et al., (2000) investigated the “why” behind the findings suggesting that PWI offer hostile climates for African American students. They posit that students of color at PWIs are subject to racial microaggressions (e.g., subtle insults directed toward people of color either unconsciously or automatically) that influence their overall experience. Drawing from data acquired through focus group interviews, Solorano et al. noticed that students experienced microaggressions both inside and out of the classroom, and that these subtle insults resulted in students feeling increased stress to perform well in their academic studies often times resulting in students wanting to leave their respective institution. Solorano et al. suggest that students of color need “counter spaces” that allow them to avoid the barrage of aggressions expressed toward them—other work has supported this idea as well (Baber, 2010).

Over the last several decades, research chronicling the experiences of African American students at PWIs has found these environments are largely discriminatory and unwelcoming. To a large degree, all African American students come across these
issues; still, gender shapes their lives on an even more nuanced level. As Fleming (1984) suggested in the 1980s, African American males confront their own obstacles at PWIs that often differ from their female counterparts. Much of the literature addressing African American males confirms that many of these obstacles continue to persist.

**African American Males at PWIs**

African American males at PWIs encounter numerous barriers that impede their success (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2009). These factors include but are not limited to financial obligations (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009), academic preparedness (Palmer & Young 2009), sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), disengagement (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2009), and psychological development (Cokley, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008). Existing literature on this group indicate the concerns students face are far-reaching and equally complex because of intersecting identities among African American males (Harper & Nichols, 2009). Consequently, over the last two decades, published literature has investigated the diversity of this population and explored how these identities shape their college experiences.

Aforementioned, students of color and African Americans specifically experience largely hostile climates at PWIs. Campus climate is important when considering the experiences of African American males in college because it has the potential to (and often does) contribute in shaping their college careers. In the case of African American males, climate issues often heighten at the intersectionality of their race and gender. Though research provides numerous descriptors for the relationship between African
American males’ and PWIs (e.g., hostile, unwelcoming, etc.), Harper (2012) asserts these institutions are sometimes racist.

Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) took note of the experiences of 36 African American males across five PWIs (one from each region of the country) and noticed these students were exposed to “racialized domains” in the areas of campus-academic, campus-social, and campus-public space. Within the academic social sphere, they felt White students viewed them as criminals often keeping close surveillance of their actions. Participants felt that institutional agents (e.g., campus police, administrators) were equally responsible for their feelings of marginalization asserting that agents often subconsciously placed them in an outsider role. The cumulative result of this treatment was negative perceptions by participants’ including feelings as though others viewed them as criminals, ghetto, athletes, or anti-academically driven students. Smith et al. conclude that although African American males develop racial battle fatigue because of encountering racial priming throughout their collegiate careers, the effects can influence their ability to be academically and socially successful.

Watkins et al., (2007) also explored campus climate issues at PWIs and HBCUs for African American males and concluded that student experienced heightened stress at PWIs. Although findings indicate both groups of males’ experienced significant levels of stress, the stress of those attending PWIs came from events associated with their institutions, while students at HBCUs credited their stress to factors outside of school. Additionally, those attending PWIs felt their stressors (stereotyping, environment, etc.) greatly affected their ability to be successful and to persist to graduation. The
experiences of the males in Watkins et al.’s (2004) analysis is similar to many males and have become synonymous with the African American male experience at PWIs.

Although there is a litany of scholarship that speaks to attrition issues for African American males in higher education, a growing of segment of literature seeks to understand factors that contribute to their success (Cuyjet, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1997; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2006b). This change in research focus over the last decade represents a shift in ideology in how scholars approach the study of African American males in higher education. More important, this work provides positive images of this population by employing examples that stand in contradiction to the larger narrative that depicts negative portrayals of African American males (Fries-Britt, 1997). Shaun Harper champions this methodology when researching African American males. Harper professes that African American males too frequently are subjected the dominant culture examining them through a negative lens, and endemic called “niggering” (Harper, 2009). A skewed and often racist mindset, Harper suggests, severely impedes the success of these students. In response to these negative perceptions, the scholar calls for empirical research to challenge deficit perspectives in discussing policies, programs, and resources that help African American males to matriculate through college.

Several themes emerge from the literature on high achieving African American males at PWIs (Bonner II, 2010; Harper, 2006; Fries-Britt, 2003). Acknowledging the characteristics, these students arrive with at their respective institutions, these themes focus on the individual and their interaction with various components of the institution. Foremost, research finds that many males who excel believe that they can flourish in their college settings. Much of the research in this area indicates that not one but several
factors shape the collegiate lives of these students. Describing the lives of this population, Fries-Britt (1997) explains, “Whereas gifted students are assumed to have minimal difficulty, black male students are assumed to have considerable difficulty; hence, duality and conflict are often experienced by gifted black men” (p. 70).

After investigating how peers treat high achieving African American males, Harper’s (2006b) findings differ from Fries-Britt (1997). He noticed these students drew inspiration and energy to be successful from classmates and other individuals in their community who encouraged them to be successful. This idea, Harper asserts is in stark contrast to the notion that Blacks depict academically successful individuals as “acting white” and thus alienated from their own communities. In another study in which the researcher utilized critical race theory in providing a counter-narrative of the lives of accomplished African American males Harper (2009) noticed that possessing an awareness of the negative stereotypes expressed toward African American males served as an igniter for their success. Although scholars largely concur that within the unique experiences of high achieving African American males are additional dimensions that factor into the narrative of these students.

In another line of research, several studies have explored African American male masculine identity (Dancy, 2007; Harper, 2004; Harris III, 2011; Martin & Harris III, 2006). Harper (2004) noted that African American males who possess masculine identities in contrast to dominant societal stereotypes of this population are more prone to hold themselves to higher academic standards. The 35 males in this qualitative study felt that African American males who prescribe to placing sharpened emphasis on appearing cool (e.g., heavily pursuing women, playing video games, and dressing in certain way)
were those identified as less successful. Elaborating on these sentiments, one of Harper’s participants explained:

Playing basketball in the rec. center, lifting weights, shooting hoops, partying, and showing off… they think those are masculine activities. I can be blunt, right. How many girls they can screw and whom they’ve slept with. Those are the activities that most brohas’ on this campus would use to define masculinity. You’ll find them talking about these things in a boastful way all the time. I don’t believe that holding a leadership position in student government has quite found its way onto the list of masculinity. (p. 97).

These findings disperse notions that homogeneity exists among masculinity issues for this group. A key short fall to Harper’s research is that he focused on high achieving males; a group perhaps predisposed to be academically motivated and determined to dissipate stereotypes. Likewise, Martin and Harris II (2006) noticed that for African American male athletes, possessing untraditional feelings of their masculinity and gave credit to positive male influences in their lives for possessing a large dedication to civic engagement. Many of the men in Harris and Martin’s II (2006) inquiry stressed the importance of family in constructing their ideals of masculinity and frequently attached their masculinity and eagerness to be successful to the belief that they had to support their families.

In many ways, we can contextualize the lives of African American males at PWIs as a negotiation between family, institutional context, larger societal expectations, and internal perceptions. Much of the literature suggests these students’ ability to separate themselves from societal stereotypes can help to facilitate their success—although this may not always be the case. One commonality that cuts across various lines of research is the importance of involvement. Involvement plays an essential part in shaping the social and academic lives of these students while in college (Flowers, 2004; Harper &
Quaye, 2008). Elucidating the importance of involvement for African American students at PWIs Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) assert “despite incidents of racial and cultural insensitivity at many Predominantly White Institutions, Black students are surviving socially and are involved within the multicultural and traditional campus organizations” (p. 36).

Involvement. Pascarella and Tarenzini (2005) suggest, “the level of student involvement and integration in any of the components of an institution’s academic and social systems can be a critical factor in students’ persistence to decisions” (p. 426). Tinto’s (1993) work on persistence champions the concept of integration suggesting this factor is essential to early matriculation for students. In his theory of student departure, Tinto describes students as entering college with an assortment of pre-entry attributes including family background and exposure to academic rigor among other characteristics. He also asserts that students possess different motivations and commitments to their institutions that together factor into their ability to matriculate. Once students begin their collegiate career, the researcher suggests, their academic (e.g., classes and faculty interaction) and social systems (e.g., involvement in activities outside of the classroom) shape their integration in these two spheres.

Astin’s (1984) work also addresses persistence in proposing that involvement weighs heavily on students’ persistence. He defines involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1984, p.518). In his theory of involvement, Astin uses his I-E-O model to help explain the importance of input (I) and environment (E) in determining student output (O). Inputs are the demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and academic and
social experiences that students bring to college: environment, the full range of people, programs, policies, cultures, and experiences that students encounter in college, whether on or off campus; and outcomes, students characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors as they exist after college. Astin also identifies five postulates to involvement suggesting that involvement requires the investment of physical and psychological energy is a continuous concept, is quantitative and qualitative, ties to the amount of learning development a student has, and must be taken into account when developing policies or practices in higher education.

Scholars largely utilize Astin and Tinto’s models because they are influential in pushing knowledge forward in the areas of persistence, and due to their ability to speak to the experiences of many students. Critiques of these theories suggest they have important limitations to consider. Fisher (2007) mentions that models of student attrition apply to “typical” college students, which in many cases are White and middle class. Rendon et al. (2000) add that “who” persistence theories apply to can be problematic if they fail to account for differences between traditional and nontraditional students. Recognizing the unique experiences and backgrounds of African American students, several scholars focus on their involvement patterns thus filling a gap in the literature (Fisher, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). A substantial amount of the research addressing involvement for African Americans does not separate its impact by gender; nonetheless, this literature provides useful insight for exploring the lives of males.

Investigating involvement and its impact on educational outcomes for African Americans, Flowers (2004) concluded that both in and out of class experiences positively influenced student development. He arrived to this conclusion by gathering data from
over 7,000 students through the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Flowers examined involvement in several different venues including students’ interactions with the library, faculty, humanities, student union, and athletics and recreational facilities. Considering the differing ways in which African American students become involved Flowers noticed that despite benefiting from both types of involvement, involvement in academically based activities (e.g., library, course learning experience) were more beneficial than social involvement.

Guiffrida (2003) explores how involvement shapes the experiences of African American students. After conducting focus group interviews with over 80 students attending a PWI in the Northeast, Guiffrida discovered that students viewed African American student organizations as more welcoming and safer places. Additionally, students felt these organizations provided a support system while providing the opportunity to give back to their community. Further, these organizations served as integral components to the students’ integration in their communities because of the support they provided for participants. Guiffrida’s findings support Tinto’s assertion that African American student organizations are vital for integration. Although the author acknowledges the support African American students organizations provide, he also affirms that too much involvement can be harmful to academic achievement.

Literature addressing involvement and its role in the lives of African American males in college finds that involvement greatly benefits these students, but that this population is not actively involved while in college (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; 2009). For example, Cuyjet (1997) observed the social habits of over 7,000 African American students across various
institutional types and found that males were not concerned with academic performance as indicative of the amount of hours a week they studied, worked on papers, or participated in study sessions. In almost all areas that held significance in the classroom, men fell behind their female counterparts but were overrepresented in attendance at the recreational center and other social locations. Harper et al.’s (2004) work supports Cuyjet’s scholarship that notes a consistent lack of engagement for African American men in the classroom. Specifically Cuyjet concludes that that this is group [Black males] are less academically driven and willing to participate in activities that benefit their education.

A common theme in the literature around high achieving African American males is the importance of involvement in aiding in high achievement (Harper, 2006c). Some of the benefits these students receive from their involvement include exposure to opportunities that extend beyond college and into their careers. Harper and Quaye (2007) explored the impact of student organizations on the development of Black males and found that whether students joined Black or mainstream organizations, a majority of the students did so because of the desire to contribute to racial uplift. Likewise, these organizations afforded the opportunity to develop valued cross-cultural communication skills, facilitated learning from racially diverse groups, and fostered care and advocacy for other disadvantaged populations. Harper and Quaye conclude that both types of involvement assisted participants with their navigation through college and afforded them opportunities in different ways.

Myriad of literature on involvement suggests this factor is essential to the success of all students. Literature specifically addressing African American male involvement
though sparse, also advise involvement as a key factor for success. Although involvement in BGLOs for African American males has received some empirical attention (Harper & Quaye, 2006; McClure, 2006), this area requires greater attention.

**Black Greek Letter Organizations**

Parks (2008) posits that lack of research on BGLOs is an alarming fact when taking into consideration the plethora of successful African Americans who can claim African American Greek affiliation. This is largely because the standard operating procedures for BGLOs differ significantly in comparison to other larger national Greek governing councils. Largely due to history and individual chapter tradition, BGLOs operate in secluded ways in regards to how prospective members seek membership, go through initiation, and participate in different social practices. Each BGLO has a national governing body that sets and maintains policies for their undergraduate and graduate chapters. Within the national structure, there are regional administrators who govern collegiate and graduate chapters in their area. This section highlights the history as well as present issues that Black Greek letter fraternities encounter. Largely, the empirical research that speaks specifically to Black Greek letter fraternities is scant; further, few investigations employ theoretical frameworks in helping to understand the lives of members of these organizations. The literature utilized in this section represents a comprehensive view of what scholars do know and understand about these groups.

**Brief history.** Much of the mystery behind BGLOs derives from their collective histories that in many ways intertwine with the African American experience in college. Originating as social study and literary clubs, the original intent of BGLOs was to provide a space and support structure for African American students in college.
Although the formation of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. (1906) represents the beginning of contemporary Black Greek life, Blacks in and out of college at the turn of the 20th century attempted to establish fraternal groups prior to 1906. Many of these early organizations patterned themselves after White fraternities, which by the beginning of the century had been in existence for several decades (Horowitz, 1987). Highlighting the history of BGLOS, Kimbrough (2003) suggests these organizations owe a debt of gratitude to the Freemasonry (Freemasons). Establish by skilled workers in the fourteenth century, Freemasons established as meeting places and shelters for members. Over the first few hundred years of their existence Freemasons were influential in early Greek life on college campuses. This too was true for Black Greek life, as Kimbrough (2003) asserts, “in order to present an accurate picture of African American fraternal development in the United States, Freemasonry must be mentioned for the sake of historical accuracy” (p. 21).

The first recorded effort by African American students to make a fraternal organization was at Indiana University (IU) in 1903. Alpha Kappa Nu’s formation was an attempt to cultivate a better campus environment for the small number of African American males who attended the institution at the turn of the 20th century. Though this group operated in the fashion of a fraternity, due to numerous issues, the organization went defunct 14 months after its creation (Kimbrough, 2003). While Black students were experimenting with Greek life at IU students at Ohio State University and Wilberforce were also attempting to begin a Greek tradition. At Ohio State, students started Pi Gamma Omicron but never gained momentum and waned quickly. Students at Wilberforce establish Gamma Phi Fraternity in 1905 as the first fraternity at Wilberforce,
Gamma Phi helped to establish several student organizations on campus and remained relevant for several years intermittently until the organization disbanded in 1947 (Kimbrough, 2003).

While African American collegians were attempting a fraternal movement, one group of men sought to establish an organization outside the confines of the collegiate life. A group of professional males (5 doctors and one dentist) established Sigma Pi Phi (also referred to as the Boulé) in 1904 as a graduate fraternity that offered a space for successful African American males to interact with one another. Describing this organization, Graham (1999) mentions that many individuals in the African American community regarded Sigma Pi Phi as the most elite of individuals only accepting African American males who reached the pinnacle of their professional careers. Today, Sigma Pi Phi remains in existence today and remains one of the more secretive less knows of African American Greek Fraternities.

Today, the major BGLOs that exist include Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Delta Sigma Theta, Phi Beta Sigma, Zeta Phi Beta, Sigma Gamma Rho, and Iota Phi Theta. The first eight of these organizations began between 1906 and 1922 while the last of the organizations chartered considerably later in 1965. Three of the organizations, Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Sigma Gamma Rho originated at PWIs. The remaining six organizations, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma, Zeta Phi Beta, and Iota Phi Theta began at Howard University and Morgan State University. Though all BGLOs formed with similar missions and goals, they faced different obstacles at their inception. Whaley (2010) explains these differences, “the Greek-lettered organizations formed at Howard
toed the line between conservative-liberalism and insurgent activism… the groups formed at PWIs would use neutral space to carry on in secret, bonding, social and cultural work” (p. 22).

The founders of the three BGLOs founded at PWIs shared much of the same rationale for wanting to begin Black Greek Organizations at schools that were largely White. Founded in 1906, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity receives credit for being the first African American collegiate fraternity. The primary motivation for the founders of Alpha Phi Alpha was the desire to start a fraternity to respond to low retention rates for African American students at Cornell University. Originating as a social studies club, Alpha Phi Alpha provided its members with a place to stay as well as a social community that was essential for Blacks at that time. Within a few years after its founding, Alpha Phi Alpha had spread to dozens of campuses including the Howard University, a place many regard as the birthplace of African American Greek Life.

Similar to the founders of Alpha Phi Alpha, the men who formed Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity also felt the need for more support within the confines of a PWI in Indiana University. In the fall of 1910 when Kappa founders Elder Diggs and Byron Kenneth came to Indiana from Howard there were only ten African Americans students enrolled at the institution. Although insignificant in numerical size, the issues that these students faced propelled nine students to begin a social organization called Alpha Omega. By the beginning of the winter semester, Alpha Omega decided to become a full fledge fraternity and switched their name to Kappa Alpha Nu Fraternity. By 1914, after some issues over nicknames given to the fraternity, Kappa Alpha Nu made another change to Kappa Alpha Psi. The last of the BGLO, and the only sorority created on the campus of a PWI was
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. Sigma Gamma Rho first emerged at Butler University in Indianapolis, IN. Much like their predecessors who began at PWIs, the founders of Sigma Gamma Rho noticed a need due to intense racial inequalities to begin a sorority whose sole purpose was to help African American women excel (Ross, 2000).

Of the remaining BGLOs not started at PWIs, all started on the campus of Howard University, with the exception of Iota Phi Theta at Morgan State University. Alpha Kappa Alpha was the first African American sorority, and second Divine Nine Organization founded in January of 1908. What separates the founding of Alpha Kappa Alpha, as other African American sororities is that these organizations had to face gender bias in addition to racial issues. Additionally, many of these organizations had the equally large task of seeing that the African American race excel while also paying close attention to the plight of the African American women not only in college, but in the larger society as well. After founding of the first African American fraternity and sorority, and adjacently the formation of organizations at PWIs, the remainder of the BGLOs formed because in some way their founders felt that what was available in other organizations did not meet their liking. Through the founding of these organizations, and as BGLOs matured, competition existed and in many ways raised the level of performance of all organizations.

Throughout their histories, BGLOs in many ways have represented the most positive byproducts of African American participation in higher education, thanks in large part to the mark alumni members of these groups have left on the Black community and society. The rationale behind the formation of BGLOs, promotion of high academic standards, support in historically unwelcome spaces for African American people,
brother/sisterhood, and service remain pillars of these organizations today as evidenced by the research in this area. Still, research and popular discourse describe these groups as potentially positive and negative influencers for students.

**Benefits to African American males.** Copious scholarship addresses in some way the benefits African American males receive from membership in BGLOs (Harper et al., 2005; Harper & Wolley, 2002; Heim, & Nishimura, 1992; Patton & Bonner II, 2001; Schuh, Triponey, Heim, & Nishimura, 1992). For African American males attending PWIs, BGLOs provide a valuable network and support system. These benefits emerge through the opportunities members have to participate in events that benefit their community (e.g., community service and philanthropy) and social events (Harper & Harris III, 2006). This diversity of activities affords males the opportunity to gain experience working with groups different from their own, and to support further issues that influence their community. Sutton and Terrell (1997) speculate that because PWIs are unwelcoming to African American males, BGLOs fill void while in the process unify males and provide them leadership opportunities that are sometimes not available in dominant culture student organizations (Guiffrida, 2003; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). These leadership positions, Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1997) suggest are beneficial to instilling confidence in members that they can be leaders in their communities. As a result, members in these organizations have a higher likelihood of serving as leaders of multiple organizations.

In addition to gaining exposure to leadership opportunities that non-members might not have access too, African American males in fraternities are more engaged in their overall collegiate experience, which is an essential key to retention and
matriculation for all students’ especially African American males (Flowers, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Outside of involvement and its benefits, membership in BGLOs also has the potential to help males develop their practical competence (Harper & Harris, 2006). Drawing from a sample of students across 10 PWIs, Harper and Harris concluded that members of BGLOs operated at higher levels of Black identity development as described by Cross’s model. Member appeared to operate at high levels of identity development and possessed high levels of self-esteem and confidence. Regardless of the literature speaking to the advantages of involvement for African American males as a whole, there is a dearth in research, specifically to the BGLO experience. This research does provide for a deeper understanding of the issues males within these groups face, and how their membership influences their lives.

McClure (2006) explored the lives of 20 African American male BGLO members in one organization in order to understand the role BGLOs play in the success of members. She utilized a qualitative constructivist approach to help recognize how members make meaning of their experiences. Overall, McClure found that membership helped develop closer relationships with fellow members, their campus, and Black culture. Cultural awareness and pride for participants occurred during the research and pledge partition of the BGLO experience. In learning about the alumni of their fraternities and the organizations that emerged because of these the groups (NAACP and Urban League) many members felt additional pride in their organization and culture overall. Possessing this awareness also made students want to abandon popularly held notions of Black masculinity and emulate the accomplishments of their older fraternity brothers. In addition to feeling more of a connection to their race because of
membership, the members also recognized that membership increased their connection and satisfaction with the institution. Several students in McClure’s study felt that BGLOs not only limited social alienation, but also helped the larger Black community by providing social outlets especially targeted at underclassman and freshman. Further, participants felt that their membership helped them to carve out a space on their campus while also serving as a portal for integration into the large campus community.

McClure’s findings suggest that African American males make positive meanings of their participation in BGLOs.

In another study by McClure (2006a), the researcher sought to understand the role BGLOs play in construction of what she terms unique masculine identity. Drawing from the same population McClure ascertained that membership in BGLOs emphasized traits of masculinity that different from the mainstream for this group. A primary reason participant’s pursued membership was to represent a counter image to popular depictions of African American males in the media. For many members, joining a BGLO represented a refusal to accept how African American males depict masculinity. Outside of the need to emit positive images of for this group, McClure also notes that the males in her study simultaneously operated between both White and African American conceptions of masculinity. She describes this paradigm in discussing additional motivations of participants to join their fraternity; in one instance, students wanted to join for future connections after their time in college, in another instance, students recognized the importance of feeling a connectedness with other African American males. Although it must be noted that McClure’s two studies do investigate the same group of students in the same Greek community, her findings do help to broaden our general understanding of
Black Greek males in Greek communities because they she focuses specifically in this population.

In another analysis of the intersection of masculinity and BGLO membership Anderson, Buckley, and Tindall (2011) looked at Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Omega Psi Phi as case studies in order to examine what they called the interplay of identity and representation. Using multiple data sources including websites of the fraternities and interviews, Anderson et al. saw distinct differences in the identities that members of BGLOs gained exposure to and the personas they espoused to outside individuals. Anderson et al. also recognized the role that homosexuality played in how fraternity members outwardly acted; in other words, each of the three organizations the researchers observed had distinct ways in which they worked to thwart any notions of homosexuality within their organizations. Beyond shedding light on the different prescribed identities of the three oldest African American Greek Fraternities, Anderson et al.’s work also calls attention to the continuous tension African American males face around their masculinity and the affects (both negative and positive) BGLOs have in this issue.

**Negative influences on African American males.** Harper and Harris III (2006) provided an explanation for the status of BGLOs in mentioning:

The practices of illegal pledging and hazing have created warranted concern. And although academic excellence is a core principal for each of the five African American fraternities, their members’ performance in the classroom has been average at best—especially when compared to chapters in other Greek councils. As a result, the public perception of African American Fraternities has declined steadily, thereby leading potential aspirants to pursue membership in alternative African American males’ social networks (p.128-153).
This passage highlights and draws critical attention to BGLOs in the beginning of the 21st century, although these organizations offer numerous benefits for African American males as evidenced by some literature, they also present critical issues. The factors that plague BGLOs largely separate into operational issues that affect the routine functioning of these organizations, and deficiencies within the culture of BGLOs that scholars in the field assert might ultimately lead to their demise.

Foremost, Hughey and Parks (2011) suggest that the fact that the majority of BGLOs reside on PWIs forces undergraduate chapters into two distinct categories, either invisible or hyper-surveyed, wherein the former causes individuals within the campus community to know that they exist, and the latter in which chapters receive scrutiny. In addition, often times because of the nature of Greek Affairs offices, and historical remnants at PWIs (Hurtado et al., 1998), BGLOs are marginalized in regards to the amount of time advisors spend with them and the spaces they are able to inhabit on campus. These issues are important and address the role institutions of higher play in exacerbating negative issues for BGLOs, cultural issues of hazing, low academic performance, image, and membership numbers represent internal issues that negatively influence African American male experience in BGLOs.

**Hazing.** The vast majority of existing literature finding fault with BGLOs places a great emphasis on hazing including its historical and current role within the culture of BGLOs (DeSousa, Gordon, & Kimbrough, 2004; Jones, 2004; Kimbrough, 1997; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks & Brown, 2005). Kimbrough (1998) put forth that pledging, and many forms of hazing are deeply rooted within the history of BGLOs and seen as a “rites of passage” for the individual being hazed; where common practices differ is in
how current members have moved many practices from symbolic to real often resulting in heinous acts (Jones, 2004). Exploring the historical, social, and political rationale behind hazing in BGLOs, Jones (2004) parallels the behavior of those who haze as sociopathic suggesting a skewed rationale often held by members that hazing breaks down an individual only to build them up stronger. Jones further categorizes the current perceptions held by BGLO members that rationalize hazing as a means to require members to sacrifice for the fraternity, to ensure lifelong commitment, and the making of better men as faulty and misguided. The perceptions that members possess are important because they lead to actions that have become symbols of membership in BGLOs for members.

Examining the rationale behind the large focus on hazing within the BGLO culture, literature and statistics suggest intense focus; dating back to 1989, several dozen large hazing incidents have made national news, and forever influenced the lives of potential members and their families (Kimbrough, 2003). These incidents ranged from temporary pain, to permanent disabilities, and in some cases death. Despite the banning of hazing by all national organizations, insufficient buy-in by undergraduate members and conflicting messages by current members the various organizations have created a culture wherein underground hazing has become the norm. As Harper and Harris III (2006) assert, “MIP\(^2\) has been largely ineffective in curtailing hazing activities in most undergraduate chapters” (p. 143). At this current time, pledging continues to permeate the African American Greek Experience and anecdotally serves as a common thread

\(^2\) MIP Stands for Membership Intake Process. This process for initiating members was adopted by all BGLOs in the late 1990s after hazing and aboveground pledging was made illegal.
when considering the issues these organizations face in relation to academics, membership numbers, and overall image on college campuses and in society.

**Academic performance.** Despite their lofty academic goals and missions, BGLOs are more closely associated with a lack of academic excellence than as organizations that help to foster young scholars. To a certain extent, the inability of African American male BGLO members to maintain high academic standards is a symptom of larger issues affecting all African American males in higher education; what is inconsistent with research are the depths to which members of BGLOs struggle to maintain adequate academic standing, and the consistency with which academic issues affect BGLOs. Though Harper (2008) and McClure (2006) find that participation in BGLOs increase members’ engagement in class and desire to want to excel in the classroom, these perceptions do not translate to strong performances in the classroom (Harper, 2000).

While there is little research that examines the longitudinal relationship between BGLOs (or more specifically BGLOs) membership and academic performance, Harper (2000) explored the academic performances of Greek members from 24 institutions and 119 BGLO chapters. He found that 92 percent of the BGLO chapters had chapter G.P.A.s lower than the all-Greek average in addition, Harper also noticed that the average G.P.A.s for all the BGLOs was a 2.3, significantly lower than other groups. Further, Harper’s work also indicated that only seven percent of BGLO chapters met their campus average G.P.A with the largest discrepancies occurring with BGLOs.

Although involvement is vital to the success of African American males in higher education, Harper’s (2000) findings suggest that “over involvement” can be detrimental
to success. This debilitating affect was a continuous theme that served as a catalyst for
the poor academic performance of participants. Harper’s (2000) findings though several
years old and lacking follow up analyses, aligns with current academic issues for BGLOs
and support that notion that not much has changed in regards to this issue. A scan of the
G.P.As of BGLOs at several institutions including the University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign, Indiana University, University of Missouri, University of South Carolina,
and numerous others all indicate that BGLOs have lower average G.P.A.s than their
Greek communities and the larger campus communities. The consistent lower academic
performance of large portions of members of BGLOs indicate contributes to larger issues
affecting African American males in higher education, instead of working to alleviate this
issue.

Image and membership. Image and brand is another concern that BGLOs
continually meet. Many of the underlining issues that influence how BGLOs portray
themselves connect to ideals of masculinity (Anderson et al., 2011). Images that depict
Alphas as businesslike and homosexual, Kappas as “pretty boys” and tough, and Omegas
as epitomizing masculinity create images in the minds of both members and non-
members and leave some individuals within the organization feeling as though they have
to meet those expectations (Anderson et al.). These depictions are dangerous because
they place fraternity members in roles that may or may-not accurately describe the
individuals within the organization.

Another image associated with BGLOs is the notion of “educated gangs”.
Though oxymoronic in its name, BGLOs have been bestowed this title because of the
belief by many that these organizations behave contradictory (i.e., oxymoronic) to their
mission and goals. Hughey (2008) speculates that although these groups are not gangs, due to their actions, many similarities exist between the two including initiation practices, colors, signs, and the clamming of space. Many links Hughey (2008) makes between gangs and BGLO members connect to hazing and or a perceived notion of African American fraternal life. These perceptions are exasperated in the media with depictions of Black Greek life that largely center on the social aspects of membership including hazing, stepping, and partying. The superficial images that BGLOs give off detract from their intended missions and goals for their organizations.

Images of BGLOs including “educated gangs”, no dedication to academics, and partiers affect membership for these organizations. Many students choose not to affiliate with something that appears contradictory in nature. As Kimbrough (1997) asserts, to African American males in the 21st century, BGLOs are no longer in their “golden age”. Increased diversity in higher education has resulted in students of color having more options of what types of organizations they choose to join, as a result, BGLOs have experiences an influx of non-African American members over the last decade (Ross, 2000). The issues that BGLOs currently face though unique to the subtle nuisances of the 21st century have not largely changed over the last few decades. Hazing and remnants of this behavior, namely lowered membership numbers, fractured image, legal cases that threaten to sever cripple national organizations. These problems fuel the second large contemporary concern affecting this group, the debate among the African American Greek Community over whether undergraduate chapters should continue to exist. What is absent from the literature is specific empirical mention of other issues that BGLOs face outside of hazing the initiation process.
The literature addressing the BLGOs broadly, and Black fraternities specifically is more descriptive than critical. Literature informs that historically, BGLOs emerged from a desire to create support systems that facilitated academic success for members and strived to create better circumstances for Blacks both inside and out of the academy.

There is a plethora of evidence suggesting BGLOs remain true to their original goals and provide a value added experience to its African American male members. Evidence also suggests membership in BGLOs might not be beneficial for all African American males, an observation that runs counter to their original intent of these organizations. Much of the empirical research specifically seeking to understand the lives of African American males BGLO members either broadly attach outcomes of membership to participation or narrowly explore masculinity and its intersection with BGLO life. One approach not readily implored is narrowly placing these organizations within the scope of race-based capital; this study seeks to provide information in this area.

**Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital has its roots in Marx theory and has connections Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of social reproduction of inequality by the privilege in society. Bourdieu noticed society did not function as a meritocracy, and that economic, physical, and material conditions explained the continuation of perpetuation of inequality. Bourdieu also realized that consistencies existed between individuals in similar class standings that offered an alternate opportunity to observe society. These observations lend themselves to Bourdieu’s conceptualization of cultural capital theory, or “culturally based resources that act as a form of “capital” (Winkle-Wagner, p.5). Though Bourdieu began theorizing cultural capital in the 1960s, through continuous revisions and critiques
the definition has evolved from informal to formal academic standards to indicators of
class.

Bourdieu (1986) suggested cultural capital has three forms, the embodied state, the
objectified state, and the institutionalized state. The embodied state assumes cultural
capital is a competence that individuals learn over time. Individuals learn capital through
their parents/guardians, their environments, and peers. The objectified state of cultural
capital accompanies the embodied state and manifests in the form of material objects.
Institutionalized capital reflects in how society subscribes credentials to the capital
individual achieve through formal education—under these auspices, more credentials
equate to greater capital. In addition to the primary forms of capital, cultural capital
theory also includes the concepts of field, habitus, and social capital. The space in which
cultural competence and knowledge receive acknowledgement in society is the field.
Fields are not universal but instead largely stem from socioeconomic status and facade in
the form of school and family. Embedded in the concept of field is the notion that capital
is only useful depending on the field, and that the controlling group in a given field
controls what is useful.

Bourdieu (1986) defines habitus as the character and perceptions individuals
internalize and use throughout their lives—their lifestyle. Habitus relies on the ability of
individuals to unconsciously recognize forms of capital that are useful in different
settings, and assumes they can employ these forms effortlessly. Despite the natural way
in which individuals activate their capital as a byproduct of their habitus, these exchanges
are not “natural”, but reoccur through their social class. Taste, Winkle-Wagner (2010)
describes, is a subset of habitus and is an acquired disposition to differentiate and
appreciate cultural artifacts, behaviors, or styles of speaking (p. 11). The three forms of capital (legitimate, middlebrow, and popular) are apparent in actions, preferences, and judgments and how individuals demonstrate their taste provides insight into their social class. Social capital comprises the third form of capital and applies to the social connections that work as capital in social settings (Bourdieu, 1979). Social capital implies relationships between individuals and is useful in certain settings. Social capital and cultural capital influence each other in that the latter helps cultural capital because it allows for more connections (e.g., access) to potential forms of capital.

Many scholars have utilized all or some components of cultural capital to examine the educational pipeline. Winkle-Wagner (2010) warns that limitations of Bourdieu’s theory have the potential to inhibit work in this area. Foremost, the economic metaphor behind cultural capital is “restrictive”. Cultural capital implies that all individuals strive (or should) to trade their capital for economic gain (i.e., education, knowledge, etc.); this belief does not describe all groups, especially individuals of color who often operate from a community standpoint (Yosso, 2005). Second, Winkle-Wagner asserts cultural capital in its traditional form, underestimating the importance of moral boundaries. Stated differently, this theory does not pay close enough attention to group membership; instead, it is only based on certain types of class. An additional limitation with cultural capital is that it derives from a homogeneous class-based system and this is not the case for American society. In the U.S., there are multiple meanings assigned to capital and its acquisition, often these meanings rest solely on family background and even different regions of this country (see Winkler-Wagner, 2010, p. 75). Cultural Capital lacks any mention of race and/or ethnicity and for this reason: this concept in its original form does
not fit the lives of students of color. Finally, cultural capital operates from a theory of domination wherein it describes the dominant culture, what “they” deem as important, and does little to attempt to change this situation. For these reasons, Winkler-Wagner (2010) cautions that a great deal of research employing cultural capital as a framework is erroneous.

**Cultural capital in higher education.** The use of cultural capital in education falls largely into four categories: highbrow, contextually valued, Bourdieuan framework, and otherized. The first form, highbrow, considers cultural capital as the possession of individuals in high-status or elite backgrounds. Contextually valued cultural capital studies support the belief that everyone possesses cultural capital but that various forms are only useful in certain contexts, while they might not be (and often are not) in other contexts. The third type, Bourdieuan capital defines and/or uses parts of cultural capital that are part of Bourdieu’s larger theory.

Several studies have investigated the role of cultural capital in higher education (Lundberg, 2007; Tierney, 1999; Walpole, 2003). In general, this scholarship spans across the higher education experience focusing on issues around cultural capital and college choice; the experiences of first generation and students of color; and issues concerning the intersection of finance and social capital in higher education. Probing the experiences of first generations students Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) point out that parental education level counts significantly in institutional selection and academic and non-academic outcomes. Further, the researchers find that students’ lack of knowledge concerning higher education resulted in taking less credit hours, participating less in school, and lowered academic marks. Ultimately, the students
in their study had lower overall outcomes compared to second-generation students. These findings suggest that students that lack certain capital (parental involvement/knowledge) do not excel at the same rates as students who possess the valued capital within the context of education.

Walpole’s (2003) exploration of the relationship between socioeconomic status and higher education attendance supports Pascarella at al.’s (2004) findings suggest that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., those who lack cultural capital) experienced more difficulties in higher education. Elaborating on these findings, Walpole mentions students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often missed opportunities to increase their potential for cultural capital acquisition. She provides the example of lower socioeconomic status not communicating with their professors outside of class as great of a level as their high socioeconomic counterparts. Further, Walpole found that largely, these students did not capitalize on other beneficial opportunities including participation in student organizations and peer academic groups. These findings asserts that different forms of capital and habitat have the potential to alter greatly alter the trajectory of the college career for students who lack capital that is beneficial in higher educational setting. Although there is a healthy amount of current literature employing various categories of cultural capital to explore the experiences of students in higher education, research from the perspective of non-dominant frameworks is scant (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Literature does exist that approaches cultural capital from a non-dominant perspective.

Community cultural wealth as an “otherized” theory. Scholarly work using cultural capital largely falls into the categories of highbrow cultural capital, contextually
valued capital, Bourdieuvian capital, and otherized capital. Otherized (or non-dominant) theories of cultural capital contend that many of the traditional interpretations of cultural capital marginalize the experiences of minority students (Carter, 2003; Nunez, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Further, many of these dominant interpretations also operate from the principle that capital is more individualistic than collaborative. Researchers who employ non-dominant frameworks of cultural capital suggest the opposite, that students of color in fact possess capital, and that how they activate these various forms often depends on the situations.

The concept that people of color possess knowledge, skills, and characteristics that they in turn can pass along to the next generation to be successful is not new. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), in studying working class Latina/s families, noticed that these groups possessed certain knowledge that positively contributed to their productivity. The researchers noticed that “funds of knowledge” possessed by families helped to describe the competence embedded in their life experiences and were often exchanged throughout the community. The theoretical lens of funds of knowledge represents one of the earlier efforts by researchers to provide a counter deficit perspective of depictions of low-income families and people of color. Over the last dozen years, scholars have empirically employed this framework in helping to better understand the educational experiences of Latino students. Additionally, other frameworks have also utilized Funds of Knowledge to helping to configure models that utilize non-deficit approaches to understanding students of color in education.

Carter’s (2003) empirical analysis of the interplay between “dominant” and “non-dominant” forms of capital in the lives of low-income African American youth provides a
glimpse into the ways in which various segments of students of color utilize their capital. Collecting data from youths between the ages of 13 and 20, the authors found students used both capitals (dominant and Black) almost seamlessly during their education in order to be successful. Students would utilize dominant forms of communication when beneficial and use more slang around their peers. Carter’s work along with others help to bring to light how students of color use different forms of capital to be successful, where Carter’s work fails to assign names to various forms of capital that students of color use.

The underlying assumptions associated with otherized theories of cultural capital exist in Sedlacek’s (2004) work with non-cognitive variables. The author defines noncognitive variables as “relating to adjustment, motivation, and perceptions”. Sedlacek further states “these variables are particular critical for assessing nontraditional students since standardized tests and prior grades may only afford a limited view of their potential” (p. 36). The other variables that nontraditional students possess Sedlaceck assert must receive attention when considering their potential for success in postsecondary education.

Tara Yosso’ (2005) community cultural wealth utilizes critical race theory (CRT) and concepts from Funds of Knowledge to critique and re-articulate traditional forms of cultural capital in education. Approaching issues of cultural capital from a non-dominant perspective, community cultural wealth challenges the perception that only members of the dominant culture possess forms of capital that aids in the success of students of color in education. Specific, Yosso refutes the implicit messages embedded within cultural capital frameworks that describe the experiences of students of color in education through a deficit model. Through her description of Community Cultural Wealth, Yosso
describes six distinct forms of capital unique to students of color and that serve in response to other forms of capital (e.g., highbrow, contextually valued, etc.) that often gain recognition and rewards within educational settings. The six forms of capital that Yosso describes include aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital.

Yosso (2005) proposes that aspirational capital is the ability of students to possess dreams for the future although they might face real and perceived barriers. Possessing this quality, Yosso allows children to dream possibilities beyond their current circumstances. The second form, linguistic capital, addresses the idea that students of color have multiple ways of communicating with one another. These abilities in turn, positively influence academic and social skills for these individuals. Finally, Yosso contends that linguistic capital involves more than just language and includes visual communication often in the form of art etc. The next form of capital, what Yosso calls familial capital describes capital provided by family and that instills a sense of history within a student. As Yosso further comments, “familial capital is nurtured by our ‘extended family’, which may include immediate family (living or long passed on) as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends who we might consider part of our familial” (p. 79). Through this form of capital, students learn they are not alone in handling issues because they have a community of “family” that has resources available.

Social capital in the community cultural wealth framework is similar to Bourdieus original conception except it places the community at the center of the source of capital. Having the ability to “tap into” social resources in the form of peers and other community resources provide students with the ability to persist toward earning their
postsecondary degrees. Navigational capital explains the ability of students of color to maneuver through social institutions, and more specific, intuitions of higher education that are not designed for these students to excel. Yosso asserts that navigational capital operates less than two scopes, individual agency and social networks. Yosso’s final form or capital, resistance, emphasizes the skills that students of color gain through exemplifying oppositional behavior. Resistance capital relates to community in that students’ through their families and communities learn (and are taught) how to resist obstacles that stand to stymie their progress.

Literature on African Americans in higher education acknowledges that through involvement in activities like students organizations (including Greek Life) and by matriculating in the right environment, these students have to ability to acquire capital through social networks while gaining to confidence they need to be successful in higher education (Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Palmer & Gasman, 2008;). Literature has not focused specifically on BGLOs as potential harvesters and perpetuators of non-dominant capital—this study strives to explore this relationship.

Summary

BGLOs must become open to tools of scholastic inquiry if they are to remain relevant in the day and age of cultural contradictions of race. In this still-racialized milieu, BGLOs ability to fight de facto segregation, to serve as vehicles for the attainment of education and equitable economic recompense, and to challenge the hegemony of the hyper-incarceration of young African American men and women, is crucial (Hugley & Parks, 2011)

As African American males continue to struggle in higher education, research on this population must continue to grow. Generally, literature on African American males confirms that participation, in any form, has the potential to better the overall collegiate
experience of these students. BGLOs have historically and continue to serve as a viable option for participation for African American males. Research speaking specifically to this population is sparse (Harper & Harris III, 2006; McClure, 2006). Moreover, research in this area speaks both to the benefits of and potential hurdles these organizations have the potential to present. Current studies fail to consider various characteristics of students before they enter Greek organizations in understanding their experience within these groups. This study attempts to understand the forms of capital African American males possess before entering BGLOs and its impact in their experience by asking the central questions

- What nexus exists between the capital African American males possess as suggested by Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework and their experience in Black Greek Letter Organizations at a Predominantly White Institution?

Existing literature touching on the African American males in BGLOs frames these organizations as “dignity enhancement symbols” (Dr. Rios, UCSB) helping to provide a positive image to strive toward for these students. Emphasis is on how BGLOs provide a safe space for individuals while simultaneously providing positive images of African American males, and buttressing a deeper level of cultural awareness. Although valuable in helping to advance knowledge in this area, this line of research conceptualizes involvement as a singular relationship wherein these males receive benefits that they might not have had before their experience. Non-dominant cultural capital theory provides a way to re-conceptualize what forms of capital students of color possess that do not necessarily align with traditional forms of capital. Approaching participation of African American males in BGLOs from this lens, this study poses the additional questions:
• In what ways might BGLOs further cultivate or hinder various forms of capital described by community and cultural wealth?
  
  o Do these organizations bolster the aspirational capital that Yosso suggests students of color already bring to their educational experience?
  
  o Does membership ease members’ navigation through their collegiate experience?
  
  o In what ways does affiliation shape the perceived social capital of members?

Discourse on the role of BGLOs in the 21st century yields two alternative images of these organizations. Proponents of BGLOs cite the historical impact of these organizations, the service current members conduct, and the continued hostile climate of PWIs as reasons why BGLOs are positive for current and perspective members. Opponents cite a litany of bad publicity around new member initiation, images on campus, and academic performance as serious issues that BGLOs must address to remain relevant and viable in the future. Taking into account the historical and contemporary roles of these organizations, this study seeks to understand how African American males in BGLOs experience membership in these organizations.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Provided in this chapter is a description of the methodology guiding this research. More specifically, presented in this section is a rationale behind the methodology and a description of the researcher’s position and its impact on the study. The remainder of the chapter divides into the following sections: research methodology, subsequent research design, site, participants, data gathering techniques, confirmability and dependability, and analysis and interpretation.

Qualitative Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research approach in helping to answer the central research question: What nexus exists between the capital African American males possess as suggested by Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework and their experience in Black Greek Letter Organizations at a Predominantly White Institution? Creswell (2009) conveys that qualitative research is “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). There is no singular way or method of qualitative thinking; instead, qualitative research has several methods (e.g., ethnographic, naturalistic, phenomenological, or holistic) that rely on interpretation, situation, and personal experiences of the researcher (Stake, 2010). Merriam (2009) suggests qualitative research has four distinct characteristics: the focus, role of the researcher, inductive process, and the product. The focus suggests that qualitative researchers desire to understand phenomena through the lens of their subjects. The second characteristic establishes the researcher’s role as an instrument in the data collection and interpretation process. The inductive process is the gathering of data to build concepts, hypotheses, or
theories, rather than deductively testing hypotheses (quantitative research). The last characteristic, product, depicts qualitative reports as descriptive, requiring a deep immersion in the lives of the participants.

The difference in the qualitative and quantitative approach rests in how the researcher views the world (Shweder, 1996). The “Quanta” perspective of the world is subjective and “involves illusions that should be rejected” (Shweder, 1996, p. 177). Under this assumption, only after subjectivity is not present can the world become real. Additionally, Quanta assert that only the observable can explain an object, event, or occurrence. A “Qualia” perspective functions under the assumption that “objective conception of the real world is partial or incomplete” (Shweder, 1996, p. 178) and that not everything that is real is what it appears; instead, individuals give meaning to objects. Regardless of the different research perspectives, the most suitable approach used in a study depends upon what the researcher seeks to discover (Creswell, 2009). This study utilizes a qualitative approach because qualitative data has the potential to describe a particular phenomenon and offer rich and detailed insight into the participants’ lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, the dearth of research on African American males in higher education and literature specifically speaking to their fraternal experience establish the qualitative approach as useful in investigating this group (Harper, 2008; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; McClure, 2006, 2006a).

Possessing an in-depth understanding of the African American males join BGLOs and supplying a succinct report of these findings will contribute to the already existing literature addressing the complexity of factors that add to (and detract from) the success
of African American males in college. Moreover, research on African American males in BGLOs is scant; and although pre-existing work does approach this line of inquiry using qualitative methods, such work does not utilize theoretical frameworks to understand this particular phenomenon. This study acknowledges that African American males who pursue membership in BGLOs might possess capital that have allowed them to reach their current status; using qualitative methods allows for an in-depth look into the shift in their habits and habitus after joining a BGLO and how this further shapes their experiences through better understanding their constructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

**Case Study Design**

The diversity in qualitative research entails that no research methodology fits all situations, and that methodologies change in accordance with the questions asked (Maxwell, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This study specifically utilizes a case study approach. Many researchers have defined case study methodology (Yin, 2009; Stake, 1995, 2006). Creswell (2008) describes a case study as "an activity, event, process, or individual based on extensive data collection" (p. 476). Stake (1995) conceptualizes the characteristics of case studies as an “integrated system,” that is often flawed and sometimes dysfunctional. The circumstances that lend themselves to utilizing a case study depend on how the researcher strives to answer the “how” and “why” of a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Although almost all case studies share similar characteristics in how they seek to explore contemporary phenomena through the collection of several sources of data; the decisions the researcher makes concerning how to collect, interpret, analyze, and write up the data varies depending on the philosophical
perspectives they follow. This study approaches the case study method from Stake’s (1995) perspective.

According to Stake (1995), “a case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case” (p. xi). He cautions that case study consideration should follow the criterion that learning is maximal, the case is accessible, and that consideration of the uniqueness and contexts of the alternative selection has occurred. Additionally, Stake describes two distinct types of studies, intrinsic and instrumental. In an intrinsic study, the researcher does not seek to learn about other cases because of the research, but instead only strives to learn about that particular case. Instrumental studies present a general understanding of something beyond the study underhand. Acknowledging the literature and current societal depictions of BGLOs, this study falls in line with an instrumental study in that it seeks to understand the relationship between BGLOs and African American males.

**Institutional Context**

Midwestern State University (MSU) is a large, public, four-year Carnegie classified institution located in the Midwest region of the United States of America. Situated in a midsized city, institution and city lines are in many ways intertwined. The campus resides within the relative proximity of several larger metropolitan cities. Currently, MSU has an enrollment of over 20,000\(^3\) students, including graduate students. At the time of this investigation, men outnumbered women on campus by a substantial number. The institution participates in the highest level of varsity sports boasting a combined 20 teams across men’s and women’s athletics. Demographic information indicate that the undergraduate population consists of over 70

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\(^3\) All statistical data gathered about MSU comes from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) College Navigator http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/.
percent Caucasian, 11 percent non-resident Alien, and 11 percent minority (e.g., Asian, African American, and Latino), two percent of students’ ethnicity is unknown, and one percent of students identify as biracial. MSU’s larger campus size, history, and resources allow varsity sports at the institution to compete at the highest level of competition under the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

MSU opened its doors to students in the second half of the 19th century; the first African American to graduate from the institution would not come until the end of the 20th century. Today, MSU has over 10 colleges and has accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and The Higher Learning Commission along with dozens of specialized accreditations for different programs. The most recent information for the class of 2016 indicate that almost two-thirds of males were admitted while the female number totaled slightly over 70 percent; less than ¼ of all students who applied actually attended the institution. The average first-year incoming student’s high school G.P.A. was better than a 3.2 on a 4.0 scale. Standardized test scores were at or above 1400 and 22 on the S.A.T. and A.C.T., respectively. Almost 40 percent of students finished their secondary education in the top 10 percent of their class. First-year retention rate for full time students over 80 percent. MSU’s overall graduation rate is 68 percent with the four, six, and eight-year graduation rates for students who began in 2004 equaling over 30 percent, 70 percent, and 70 percent respectively. The six-year graduation rate for African American students was 63 percent as recent as the fall of 2011.

MSU boasts a large registered student organization community, which includes fraternities and sororities. The Greek organizations all fall within one of the four
governing councils including Interfraternity Counsel, Panhellenic Council, National Pan-Hellenic Council, and Multi Cultural Greek Council; together, these councils comprise roughly 15 percent of MSU’s student population (Greek Life Report). The most recent data indicate that the one-year retention rate for MSU’s Greek community was 94 percent compared to an overall institutional rate of 89 percent; the Greek community also sports a higher overall G.P.A. than the campus average. Despite the overall size of the Greek community, its African American population is considerably small. For BGLOs as MSU possessing active status has been a cyclical process wherein chapters are removed from campus and return fairly frequently; these groups also have a lower retention rates and cumulative G.P.A.s compared to larger Greek and campus community. At the time of this study, MSU had several active BGLOs. In recent years, across the country, the Black Greek community has experienced low membership numbers, low council (National Pan-Hellenic Council) G.P.A.s, experience a lack of community amongst chapters, and face numerous hazing allegations—these issues occur at MSU.

**Participant Recruitment**

An essential component to completing any qualitative research project is gaining access to the person(s) under investigation (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This study gathered the experiences of African American males fraternity members at MSU for two primary reasons; foremost, large PWIs represent the primary point of access to higher education for African Americans; also, this population also experiences an over-proportionately difficult time persisting to degree completion these institutions (Harper & Harris, 2012). In addition, noting the frequent inactivity of BGLOs, the Greek community at MSU had the desired population this study sought to investigate. Finally,
recognizing assertions within the literature concerning large PWIs, their exclusionary histories, and historically tense relationships with African Americans, this campus has a natural need for organizations specifically geared to uplift African American students. These circumstances have the potential to help shed a better light on why participants choose to enter these organizations and what they gather from their experiences.

The Black Greek fraternities in this study were all members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and reported to the Office of Greek Life at MSU. All member organizations required at least a 2.5 to gain membership, and the NPHC community at their school requires the chapter to maintain at least a 2.5 to remain in good standing at the institution. In recruiting participants for this study, I first contacted an administrator in the Greek Life office at MSU to explain the intent of my research. This process involved explaining my research questions, purpose of the study, its significance, the parameters of my research, and timeline for when I wanted to make visits to campus to speak with students. The administrator shared some of the campus culture with me and agreed to send my IRB approved recruitment email to the list serve for the Black fraternities on campus. This initial round of emailing yielded two participants who were willing to meet. After waiting an additional week, I decided to take a visit to campus to observe the Greek culture and larger community, and to try to make personal contact with potential participants. When I arrived to campus, I went to locations where previous experience and literature informed African American males might be, this included the student union, recreation center, and the African American cultural center. Although I met a few students using this approach, I ultimately recruited the majority of participants
by attending a retreat for MSU’s National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). After recruiting a half dozen fraternity men, I recruited the remainder of participants by snowball sampling wherein students referred me to other members of their fraternity after we had our initial meeting.

**Participants**

I interviewed thirteen full-time, undergraduate self-identifying African American males for this study; their affiliations were Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., and Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc. There were three current chapter presidents, two former presidents, and of the 13 men, 11 had held a leadership position in their chapter at some point during their membership. They ranged from second semester sophomore to fifth year senior status with two sophomores, four juniors, six seniors, and one-fifth year senior. A majority of participants (11 of the 13) were at least second-generation college students with two students claiming third generation status. Three participants were members of varsity sports at MSU; while three more received scholarship offers to play collegiate sports after high school. All participants expressed being moderately involved on campus when they first arrived to MSU often participating in predominantly Black student organizations and activities on campus. The collective diversity of the backgrounds of students via high school experiences, majors, student organization affiliations, and time within the fraternity provided for a rich information gathering. Gathering the experiences of members from different fraternities helped to yield a more robust and diverse pool of participants since the organizational histories, stereotypes, and perceived personalities of each organization differ and sometimes play out individual members of the organizations.
Important to note, Black Greek members are a very specific and special population (Whaley, 2012). Within the larger body of African American males who attend college exists an even smaller group who pursues membership in a Black Greek fraternity. For a plethora of reasons including financial responsibilities, academic success, class standing, and perceptions towards BGLOs before they choose to pursue membership, African American males who join these organizations represent a specific population of student. Current members of BGLOs clam that the individuals they initiate represent some of the best leaders and visible individuals on campus. At MSU, a selective institution, the status of the members who join these organizations is even more pronounced. Because this population functions within the larger community, the experiences of these students have the potential to provide information that is useful for this population at large. Although participants all self-identified as African American males, it is important to reiterate that although they share the same collegiate environment, which influences their experiences; still, as no one African American male is the same, neither are their experiences in college (Harper & Nichols, 2009). Furthermore, how participants’ experienced this community, their chapters, and their experience is what this study sought to capture. Figure 3.1 provides a comprehensive look at the participants in this study. Academic college represents where their major would fall at most universities.
### Figure 3.1 Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Academic College</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Class Standing</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Years as Member</th>
<th>College Generational Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Large City, East</td>
<td>Suburb, Public</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Phi Beta Sigma</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Mid-size, Midwest</td>
<td>Suburb, Public</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Phi Beta Sigma</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar</td>
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<td>Suburb, Large City, Midwest</td>
<td>Suburb, Private Catholic, All Boys</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Phi Beta Sigma</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamar</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Mid-size Midwest</td>
<td>Urban, Public</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Phi Beta Sigma</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Suburb, Large Midwest</td>
<td>Suburb, Private Catholic</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Kappa Alpha Psi</td>
<td>1 ½ years</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Mid-size Midwest</td>
<td>Urban, Public</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Kappa Alpha Psi</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewel</td>
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<td>Suburb, Public</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Kappa Alpha Psi</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Mid-size Midwest</td>
<td>Urban, Public</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Kappa Alpha Psi</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Mid-size South</td>
<td>Urban, Public</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Alpha Phi Alpha</td>
<td>1 ½ years</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Mid-size Midwest</td>
<td>Urban, Private Catholic</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Alpha Phi Alpha</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Large Midwest</td>
<td>Urban, Private Parochial</td>
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<td>2 ½ years</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
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<td>Suburb, Public</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Alpha Phi Alpha</td>
<td>1 ½ years</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Large Midwest</td>
<td>Urban, Public</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;  year</td>
<td>Omega Psi Phi</td>
<td>1 ½ years</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data Collection**

How researchers approach data collection in a case study directly influences the volume and strength of the data collected. Acknowledging this fact, researchers must enter a project equipped to find explanations that provide the most insight into the phenomenon under investigation. This preparation includes asking good questions, serving as an attentive listener, possessing the ability to adapt and be flexible to different situations, and putting forth a firm understanding of the larger issues that involve the primary research question (Yin, 2009). Demonstrating an awareness of these issues can substantially strengthen the data collected process. Data collection for this project took place in the form of face-to-face interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Before entering the field, I researched the history and campus culture at MSU including the culture of the Greek community at large and the smaller Black Greek community. This process involved talking to former and current student affairs administrators at the MSU, conversing with alumni, researching in the university library and archives, visiting the university website, and watching a documentary highlighting African American students’ experience at the institution from the late 19th century to the present. Because of their frequent interactions with students at MSU, administrators provided useful insight into institutional practices (both espoused and enacted) done by the students, as well as common lingo used, places frequented and significant locations on campus. Alumni members of BGLOs and older members in the community provided a broad understanding of the community and culture at MSU. Upon arriving to campus, I also joined a campus tour in order to gain a better understanding of the case under investigation. These tasks allowed me to internalize the environment at MSU as well as gain an uncomplicated understanding of the type of campus participants inhabited.
Two face-to-face interviews served as the primary source of data collection for this study. Stake (2010) contends that interviewing serves three primary purposes. First, it allows the researcher to obtain unique information or interpretation held by the person interviewed. Second, it creates the opportunity for the collection of numerical aggregation of information for many persons; and last, interviewing makes it possible to find out about a “thing” that the researchers were unable to notice themselves. Interviews also provide an uninterrupted focus on the individual(s) under study by creating a deeper level of intimacy with the participant because of its private nature (Ritchie, 2006). Interviews in this study lasted from 30 to 75 minutes and followed a semi-structured that allowed participants to address issues they felt were relevant to their experience (Denzin, 1989).

The intent of the interviews was to follow the established protocol however; participants had the ability to deviate from the intended questions. Fine (1994) put forth that much of qualitative discourse reproduces a “colonizing discourse of the other” (p.130) wherein researchers protect their privilege, secure distance, and laminate contradictions. I attempted to curb this behavior by doing what Fine calls “working the hyphen” in probing my relationship with the environment and participants I tried to address this issue by sharing my own experiences in relation to the topics discussed (Denzin, 1989). The flow of interviews varied depending on the communication style and openness of the participants. Conducting two interviews allowed for the building of rapport and provided additional time for participants to reflect on their experiences between conversations. Locations of the interviews varied. In all cases, I made it a point to meet participants in locations that they felt most comfortable and that were somewhat secluded from their peers. The locations included study rooms in the library and African
American cultural center, quiet spaces in restaurants and the student union, and in a few cases, if invited, the homes of participants.

The first interviews focused on the latter portion of participants’ secondary experience, their transition from high school to college, and their initial collegiate experiences before joining a fraternity. The format of this interview served several purposes; foremost, this interview provided the opportunity to understand the possible forms of capital participants exercised before joining their fraternities, it also allowed for better rapport building and prepped participants for our second conversation. In constructing these questions, I consulted Sedlacek’s (2004) survey assessing noncognitive variables of students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Noncognitive variables “relate to adjustment, motivation, and perceptions and are particularly critical for assessing nontraditional students since standardized tests and prior grades may only afford a limited view of their potential” (p. 36).

Similar to Sedlacek’s proposition, Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework assumes that students of color possess forms of capital that fall beyond the purview of traditional indicators for successful. Sedlacek’s work in this area dictated many of the initial questions posed to participants in the first interview about the latter part of their high school career, transition to college, and initial college experience. In the second interview, focus shifted to why participants choose to enter organizations and further probed into their experiences within the fraternity. During this time, participants received prompting to discuss specific types of experiences they had during membership specifically talking about the fraternity experience and its influence on their time as collegiate. Asking questions like, what was their perception of Black fraternities, why did they choose to join, what types of leadership positions they had held,
and their relationships to alumni in addition to other topics helped to begin to understand the totality of their lives as fraternity men (see appendix for questions).

In addition to interviews, I spent time in the field observing the campus and participants. Discussing the importance of observations Stake (2010) stresses, “The first responsibility of the researcher is to know what is happening, to see it, to hear it, to try to make sense of it; that is more important than getting the perfect note or quote” (p. 56). Employing this method offers several benefits including immersion into the community under observation, which provides the opportunity to gain extra insight into the lives of participants (Wolcott, 2005). Immersion also provides the ability to view and process occurrences, events, and actions without interference from participants (Ritchie, 2006). Observations took place over extended periods on campus and involved visiting key places on campus in order to understand the environment in which the participants lived and functioned. These observations included watching interactions between students, in addition to watching how participants moved through the environment whether it was going to class or hanging out at various buildings in a more social sense. Locations included the student union, African American cultural center, recreational center, and library.

I also had the opportunity to go to a few events and a retreat and meeting where participants attended. These observations provided the opportunity to watch participants interact with other individuals in their community and to understand how Black fraternities at MSU functioned. Further, these observations also provided the chance to better focus possible probing questions for our face-to-face interviews. A final method of observation came in the form of my interactions with the participants. For example, I observed how students acted (e.g., body language, voice tone) during our interactions; in addition, some of the students invited me
to their apartments and unofficial fraternity houses for our interviews. These visits allowed me to gain a better understanding of who these individuals where.

Finally, document analysis occurred in this study. Ritchie (2006) cites Tonkiss’ (2000) in defining document analysis as the construction of texts and verbal accounts to explore 'systems of social meaning. I gathered institutional records from student newspapers (both present and past), data from the office of Greek Life, program flyers, and social media. Chapter G.P.A.s from the previous two semesters in addition to the semester afforded the opportunity to quantify the overall scholastic performance of participants (Merriman, 2010). Additionally, knowing how chapters functioned overall provided the opportunity to cross check information provided by the students and probe deeper if interview information contradicted evidence gathered from documents (Yin, 2009). Articles and information from the school newspaper helped to reiterate some of what the organizations were doing on campus as well as gave insight into what the larger community deemed as “new worthy” for these groups. Archival information afforded a good basis for understanding the history of the Black Fraternities including their rationale behind various programs they do and their relationship with the institution and larger campus community.

**Confirmability and Credibility**

The goal of qualitative research and case studies is not to produce generalizable information (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Qualitative studies instead focus on using conclusions from the study to better help inform theory. This study strives to inform community cultural wealth as a framework. Notwithstanding, researchers can employ certain methods to assure validity of qualitative research, Guba (1981) describes confirmability and dependability as characteristics that help address this area. Confirmability refers to the neutrality or objectivity of
the data collected while credibility is the researcher’s ability to consider possible complexities that present themselves in the study (Gay, et al., 2006). In order to address these two issues, I utilized a number of techniques including triangulation, reflexivity, member checks, and document collection.

Triangulation helps to address confirmability. Creswell (2009) posits that triangulation is the process of collecting data in multiple ways including different samples, times, and from various sources. This method is useful because it allows the researcher to justify better their findings. I addressed triangulation by employing interviews, observations, and document analysis. Utilizing these different collection procedures helped to assure that the weaknesses of one approach is strength in a different approach. The second technique applied to address confirmability was the use of reflexivity. Reflexivity allows the researcher to discuss potential underlying assumptions or biases that they might bring to the research investigation. In addition to establishing the researcher’s stance through reflexivity, I kept a journal throughout the entirety of data collection that I logged quick writes and my initial feelings during observations, interviews, and document analysis. These entries granted time to reflect and pose questions that helped to reach a deeper level of understanding about certain instances.

To address credibility, I used member checking, observations, and peer briefing. Member checking or confirmation from the participant involves four approaches. First, if the description is trivial or beyond question, there is little need to triangulate. Second, if the description is relevant but debatable, there is some need to triangulate. Third, if the data are evidence for a main assertion, there is much need to triangulate. Lastly, if a statement is a person’s interpretation, there is little need to triangulate the validity of the statement (Stake, 2010). This procedure occurred throughout the research process so that students could become
active participants in the research process by having them essentially see what the researcher sees. Throughout the entirety of the data analysis process, I solicited feedback through informal conversations with members at the completion of interviewing. Additionally, after transcribing interviews I emailed each participant their interview to make certain that I captured their thought and feelings correctly.

Several members after reading their transcriptions offered comments and clarifications about their comments during our conversation. Some students also offered ideas for future research in this area. Peer debriefing occurred when I shared information about my study with graduate student and professional colleagues. These conversations served several purposes providing the opportunity to arrive to rival explanations and pose questions that I might otherwise not have thought of by myself. Finally, although I was unable to observe the participants under investigation on a daily basis, I targeted specific events. In addition, while visiting the community I paid close attention to pervasive qualities and atypical characteristics.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The process of data analysis involves organizing and arranging data in a way that one or more findings emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After data analysis, interpretation takes place by developing ideas about the findings and attempting to connect these findings to previous literature, broader concepts, and in some cases experiential knowledge. Depending on the type of investigation, findings can also connect with a previously selected framework or will aide in establishing a model for future analysis. During case study research, Stake (1995) stresses that the process of data collection and interpretation occurs simultaneously beginning once the researcher begins to examine the case, and concluding at the completion of the final report.
Yin (2003) maintains that data analysis is the most difficult aspect of the case study method for novice researchers because fixed formulas do not exist. Further, at no point during case study research is qualitative and quantitative techniques more different than during the analysis phase (Stake, 2010). Aiding in this process, Yin offers four general strategies and five analytic techniques. Having a sound strategy and technique for data analysis Yin argues assures that researchers treat the evidence fairly, produce compelling analytic conclusions, and help to rule out alternative explanations. This project utilized the strategies of relying on theoretical propositions, consideration of rival explanations, and the technique of pattern matching —these three worked together in tangent.

Relying on theoretical explanations assumes that the design of the project derives from propositions that reflect in research questions and the review of literature (Yin, 2003). This strategy allows for the guidance of analysis through the use of theoretical perspectives; in the case of this project, the perspective is the conceptual frame of community cultural wealth and proposition that students of color possess certain forms of capital that allow them to be successful in educational settings. Examining rival explanations takes into account alternative reasons for occurrences within a phenomenon and allows the researcher to consider other influences. For example, a hypothesis from the theoretical proposition for this study is that students obtain forms community cultural wealth from their Black fraternal experience. A rival explanation could be that students possessed this capital before membership and that their affiliation augments forms of capital at best.

Pattern matching through coding is a technique used both within case and across case analysis (Yin, 2003). This process requires the researcher to consistently search for recurring patterns in the data that allow for grouping during the coding process (Stake, 1995). Coding
depends on the description of setting, definition of particular situation, and ways of thinking
toward specific aspects of a situation, implementing the patterned approach searches for
recurrences in the data. These patterns consist of behaviors, phrases, or actions and occur during
all phases of the research process.

Utilizing these strategies and techniques in mind, I first proofread all typed transcriptions.
After completing this process, participants received transcriptions in order to check for
consistency and assure their voice received adequate representation. Following this process, I
reviewed transcriptions in their entirety to become more familiar with the data. After this
process, the researcher conducted a round of open coding wherein I circled and underlined in
order to make meaning; this resulted in over 100 codes. Examples of the open codes/phrases
include initial membership experience, personal values, and pride for the fraternity, and family as
support. Another round of transcriptions review occurred to search for recurring patterns among
the previously established codes; at this time, open codes were grouped together and collapsed
into larger categories that helped to better describe the observed pattern. A fourth read of the
transcriptions took place in order to collapse groups again into larger codes. Finally, I compared
codes to the theoretical framework guiding the study in additional to existing literature in the
field in order to arrive to themes that help to explain the phenomenon under investigation.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in the qualitative approach is largely contingent on their stance
of engagement. Understanding the different stances researchers assume is pivotal to
understanding the role of the researcher in any research project. Differences in stances of
engagement and disengagement address larger implications concerning the epistemologies of
qualitative inquiry, or the question of “how should I interact with the people I am studying?”
This question helps to identify where the researcher believes meaning lies and the level of active participation needed throughout data collection. How a researcher answers this question dictates the levels of engagement between participants, and likewise, the type of information gathered; in this study, I took an engaged stance.

Followers of the engagement stance believe that researchers are active participants in the construction and understanding of meaning through their relationship with participants. An advantage to this approach is that it considers the background and experiences of the researcher (i.e., instrument) in interpreting meaning from the phenomenon. I am aware of the potential limitations that accompany my position in relation to this inquiry. Foremost, as an African American male, Assistant Director in Fraternity and Sorority Affairs, and a member of a Black Greek Letter Fraternity I am fully aware of the subjectivity rooted in my multiple identities.

Further, I also am aware that some might question this study’s contribution to the literature because of my affiliation. I pursue this research under the belief that if not individuals like myself, who will approach this line of research. In addition, previous literature on African American males and their experiences in BGLOs indicate that researchers from “like” backgrounds can productively contribute in these areas. Moreover, to address potential issues around subjectivity, I embraced and sought to manage my subjectivity through consistent reflection.

Limitations

As is the case with all research, this study has limitations. These limitations involve inherent difficulties in researching college students, varying levels of membership among members, awareness of societal perceptions towards BGLOs, and potential conflicts with fraternity membership. Foremost, this study sought to understand how African American males
perceive their experiences in BGLOs. This is difficult to accomplish without acknowledging that the lives of these individuals do not occur within a vacuum. Instead, dozens of factors have the potential to influence the lives of these students that are beyond the scope of this research or un-measurable. Some of these factors include, but are not limited to, family influences (good and bad), personal relationships (including intimate), previous experiences, undisguised background, etc. This study does not generalize to all students and to all situations. Instead, this project provides specific insight into a specific aspect of the lives of participants.

Another limitation of this study is varying status of membership in their organizations. Although having younger and older members of BGLOs has the potential to provide a rich portrait of membership from different scopes, a student’s status in their organization also have the potential to overly impact how they perceive their fraternity. For example, first year members (neophytes) and those who are relatively young in their fraternities might suffer from what I call “new member envy.” This term describes new members who are so happy to be in their organizations that they have difficulty reflecting on their entire experience. At the other end of the spectrum, students that have been members of their organizations for a few years have the potential to provide a more rich perspective of their experience. These students might also be more aware of societal expectations toward BGLOs and this knowledge might have the potential to influence how they choose to respond to this study.

A third limitation of this study might rest in how participants view the researcher’s fraternal affiliation. Certain participants might have felt that any “offbeat” comment about their experience in their fraternity might be an indictment against their particular organization. This had the potential to restrict the depths to which students express their true feelings about their
membership within their organizations. Another limitation that often with qualitative research, but must receive attention, is that all information provided to the researcher via interviews was self-reported information; thus, it is difficult to know truly to what extent the information provided was accurate.

A final limitation was the researcher’s positionality within this study. As experiential knowledge is a core characteristic of qualitative research (Stake, 2010), my positionality and subsequent experiences influenced this study. Although seeking to gather information from a group in which I am intimate and have rapport has the potential to allow me to go deeper into the lives of the participants, my level of involvement also has the potential to serve as a limitation. Participants might not have felt comfortable sharing some information out of fear of compromising their status by their admission of any improprieties; however, I assure them that this would not be the case.

Moreover, it is important to consider that this case takes place on a specific campus, during a finite time, and with a particular group of Black Greek men. Important to consider is that every community is different with diverse nuisances that have the potential to alter significantly the perception of members in organizations. To conclude, although this study faces several different types of potential limitations, the future implications from this study stands to greatly aid college administrators in providing more opportunities for African American males to be successful when they arrive to college. Utilizing community cultural wealth to help understand their experiences augments the literature in a unique way. Regardless of these limitations, exploring the interactions of capital, gender, race, and Greek membership has the potential to yield information that might help to understand better other intersectionalities with this population of students.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This chapter begins with a brief overview of Black Greek Life at MSU. Following this section is a description of the participants in this study focusing specifically on their lives and experiences before becoming members of a fraternity. The third segment discusses observations of participants. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary and succinct overture to the next chapter.

Black Greek Life at MSU

Consistent with the history of higher education, the creation of Black Greek Organizations at MSU intertwines with the African American student experience at the institution. Although the first African American entered and graduated from MSU at the end of the 19th century, through the first score of the 20th century, African Americans represented a diminutive portion of the overall student population at MSU. Under these circumstances, Black Greek life began at MSU in the early 1920s with the founding of a single fraternity. At the conception of Black Greek life at the institution, this organization served the purpose of providing a safe and unifying space for the few African American males on campus—a number that remained drastically low through the beginning of the 1940s. Over the next 80 years, eight additional BGLOs emerged, each possessing slightly different ideals, but all with the overarching goal of promoting success for the Black community at MSU. BGLOS at MSU created systems where African American students could go for support, inspiration, and to get equipped to continually fight the racist environment that ravaged MSU for much of its early history—and today.

Throughout their existence at MSU, Black Greek fraternities have been visible both on campus and within the surrounding community. Over time, these organizations have participated
in community service events that helped to better their surrounding communities. Such events include, cleaning up different areas of the city, participating in toy and clothing drives around the holiday season, helping to feed families during Thanksgiving, and mentoring in area schools through both, structured programs like Big Brothers and Big Sisters and unstructured mentorship initiatives. In addition, the chapters have been active on campus by participating in a number of activities that promote school pride and an inclusive environment. These programs include homecoming, Greek week, and other large-scale university events, as well as developing programs that sought to bring various cultures together. A mainstay for these organizations throughout their existence has been their commitment to the betterment of the Black community at MSU through programming and social justice efforts. Collectively the chapters have also left their historical mark on campus through various avenues such as, having members who participated in the civil rights protests of the 1960s, the first African American student body president, as well as other student leaders and athletes. In recent years, the chapters on campus have attempted to continue the legacy of their alumni members by running for student body government positions, providing large-scale diversity programming for the campus—most notably through exposing the larger community to stepping.

Similar to Black fraternities nationally, chapters at MSU face issues in the areas of membership, finances, academics, and in some ways, overall perception. Over the last several years, chapters have had difficulty maintaining high academic marks; this in turn has affected the focus of the chapters’ as academics are a main pillar for all of these groups. Unity among BGLOs has fluctuated over the years with some organizations fostering “beef” toward one another for a variety of reasons—as one participant explained, “We have individuals in the different chapters that are cool but the chapters might have beef from time to time”. Overall,
BGLOs at MSU and fraternities in particular, have served as a source of pride in the African American community at MSU—helping to create spaces on campus for African American males to strive to achieve while also contributing in a positive way to their community.

**Participant Profiles**

**Louis.** Louis is a fourth year student in the College of Liberal Arts from a large urban city in the Midwest. Growing up, Louis’s mother, an entrepreneur, was his primary guardian. His father was present in his life despite living in a different city. Louis has three older brothers two of whom are in the military, and one younger sister who he described as his motivation to do well in school. He began his high school career at an urban school, but quickly transferred because his mother felt his previous school was not as safe and offered less educational opportunities. The high school Louis graduated from was a private parochial boys school whose current enrollment hovers around 843 students with 27 percent minority students (9 percent African American). Tuition per school is currently $8,650 per academic year; over 50 percent of students receive some financial assistance. Louis described himself as a loner in high school who was not engaged in academic extracurricular activities. Louis did play football and was a member of the track team. Despite a rough transition academically, Louis finished his high school career strong and had the opportunity to speak at his high school graduation due to the drastic improvement he made throughout his career.

Louis credited his mother for pushing him to be academically successful and creating in him the desire to attend college. He chose to attend MSU for several reasons, foremost because his father was always a fan of the athletics program at the institution. Additionally, MSU was equidistance from his mother and his father and no one from his high school expressed interest attending. Ultimately, Louis chose to attend MSU because of the African American students and
administrators he met during his visit, and because he was able to participate in a minority enrichment program the summer before his freshman year designed to ease his transition to the institution.

Overall, Louis’s collegiate experience has not been up and down. When Louis first arrived to MSU Louis had a solid social group but felt as though his academics could have been better. He has largely kept to smaller social circles. In addition to having worked on research with faculty in his field, Louis has also dabbled in a business venture with some friends. His first recollection of Black Greek life occurred through an uncle and cousin who are members of a Black fraternity. He first became aware of Black Greeks at MSU through meeting an older member of Alpha Phi Alpha at a social event—Louis would later become that student’s fraternity brother. Having held two leadership positions during his time as a member, currently Louis is a general member of the chapter.

Nick. The oldest participant in the study, Nick is a fifth year in the College of Liberal Arts from a mid-size urban city in the South. His mother is an educator and his older sister currently enrolled as an undergraduate student in an institution in his home state. With 596 total students, currently enrolled, the school Nick attended has 91 percent minority students (90 percent African American) with 70 percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch; the school also receives Title 1 funding. Despite these circumstances, Nick excelled academically taking math courses through the local community college. Outside of the classroom, Nick excelled on the football field and as the varsity starting quarterback during his last two seasons. Nick had scholarship offers from several smaller schools but decided to try to compete at the highest level of collegiate athletics by choosing to walk-on⁴ at MSU.

⁴ To walk-on to a college football team means to try-out for the team as a non-scholarship athlete.
Nick credited his attending MSU to his hard work, mother’s determination, a chemistry instructor, and having the right friends. Nick chose to attend MSU because the institution has a strong engineering program. After not gaining admission into the college of engineering program, Nick decided to enroll. The summer before entering MSU, Nick participated in a summer enrichment program for African American students in the STEM fields, a decision that he credited with easing his transition to MSU.

Nick was involved from the moment he arrived to MSU. After not making MSU’s football team, he joined a few professional organizations including the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). Nick has worked with a few professors in his program on various research projects, and will be attending graduate school the following year. Although Nick noticed Black Greek organizations when he first arrived to MSU, he did not have a personal relationship with any members and ultimately did not decide to seek membership in Alpha Phi Alpha until his fourth year at MSU. At the time of our conversation, he was the president of his chapter.

Greg. Greg is a fourth year College of Business student from a mid-size city in the Midwest. Because his mother had him during college, Greg split much of early upbringing between his mother, who works in business, and his grandmother. Though never married to his mother, his father played a central role in his life as a child and in his adolescent years—currently he works as a construction worker. Greg attended a private catholic high school that had an enrollment of 510 students and was 80 percent Catholic. The school is very diverse with 43 percent Hispanic, 33 percent White, and 19 percent Black; 17 percent of students receive free and reduced lunch, and 93 percent of all graduates attend a four-year institution. During his high school career, Greg was involved in the National Honor Society, math club, homecoming
committee, and the accounting club—all activities that helped him view school as a vehicle for success. Outside of the classroom, Greg was a member of the varsity football and track team.

According to Greg, going to college was never an option—it was inevitable. Originally, Greg planned to earn a football scholarship and received recruitment letters from two division 1 programs. After careful consideration, he decided that football was not in his future and that he would just be a student. Greg had a high school biology teacher who introduced him to MSU. This teacher introduced him to a program that allowed him to visit the school and sit-in on some classes. Visiting MSU, coupled with football scholarships not coming to fruition, and having the opportunity to attend a summer emersion program for minority students led to Greg choosing to attend MSU over several other institutions.

Greg entered MSU as a member of a group for African American business majors; he was also involved in other organizations for minority students where he took a leadership position. Greg spends a lot of time at the African American cultural center where he would later work. Academically Greg got off to a good start; socially Greg described himself as always part of the “in-crowd”. Greg has worked internships in his field the past two summers and was in the five-year master’s program for his major. Several family members including his mother, aunts, and father who are all members of BGLOs introduced Greg to Black Greek life. His choice to join Alpha Phi Alpha was on his own accord. At the time we spoke Greg was the treasure of his chapter, a position he has also held at the district and state level.

Robert. Robert was born and raised in the suburbs of a large urban city in the Midwest and is a third year student in the College of Engineering. He is the second oldest of seven siblings, and although his mother, clerical worker, and father, real estate worker were never married, they live within a five minute radius of each other. With over 2,180 students currently
enrolled, the high school Robert attended has 88 percent minority students (86 percent African American) with 45 percent free and reduced lunch eligible. While in high school, Robert was on a college prep curriculum his entire career and began taking AP courses as a sophomore. Outside of the classroom, Robert was involved in several activities including the basketball and baseball teams. He graduated with a 4.1 and a class rank of 23/400.

Robert expressed that cost and experience were the primary influencers in his college choice process. Talking about his decision not to attend an HBCU Robert mentioned, “I love my Black people don’t get me wrong, I didn't want to be like exclusively at a Black school, because I feel like you miss a lot of opportunities”. Robert applied to roughly a dozen schools. Robert ultimately chose to attend MSU because of the ranking of their engineering programs and because of a minority-engineering program that provided for him a suitable financial package—he was certain to acknowledge that his high school counselor made him aware of this opportunity.

Robert had a smooth initial transition to MSU. Though he began his career taking engineering courses, he finished his first year will well over a 3.0 G.P.A. Socially Robert also had a good transition having the opportunity to meet many people from different areas and backgrounds. He became a member of his residence hall association where he took a leadership as a representative. Robert has conducted research with professors in his field and has almost completed his major course work. His auntie and father are members of BGLOs; despite this knowledge, he did not seriously consider joining a Black fraternity until he met an older member of Alpha Phi Alpha who would later become his mentor and brother. At the time we spoke, Robert was a co-chair for events for the chapter.
Anthony. Anthony is a third year College of Business student who grew up in the suburbs of a large urban city in the Midwest. He is a third generation college student and has two older sisters in undergrad and graduate school respectively. His mother is an educator and his father is an engineer. Growing up he was a member of select African American organizations geared toward suburban youth. He attended a predominantly White private high school in the suburbs of a large city. The school is currently 25 percent minority and has tuition of $23,350 annually. Approximately 26 percent of students receive financial assistance and 20 percent faculty of color. Academically, Anthony took a rigorous curriculum enrolling in advanced placement courses in all of the core academic areas at the earliest time allowed by his school. Outside of the classroom Anthony played soccer from a youth through his senior year of high school; he was also involved in student government serving as class president his junior year.

Anthony had aspirations of attending an elite Ivy League or Liberal Arts College on the East Coast. These plans changed during his junior after realizing he was not academically qualified for these institutions. He applied to MSU because it was the opposite of his high school experience and he because felt that it would allow him to be immersed around people who were largely unlike him. Anthony also entered a summer program for minority business majors program that gave him scholarship money and allowed him make connections at MSU before his first year.

Attending a summer enrichment program allowed Anthony to acclimate to campus life at MSU and find mentors that would help him throughout his first year. Academically, his career began strong with well over a 3.0 G.P.A—he has maintained high academic marks throughout his academic career. Anthony has been involved in the Black Student Union, a minority
managers’ organization, and an enrichment group for Black men. He has interned the past two summers and had another opportunity set up for the summer following our interview, he is a program specifically designed to mentor African American business majors from across the country. Anthony has several BGLO family members including his mother and grandmother. He first became acquainted with Black Greeks through two older members of Kappa Alpha Psi who became his mentors and brothers. At the time we spoke, Anthony was the president of his chapter.

**Kenny.** Kenny is from a mid-size city in the Midwest and is a third year College of Engineering student raised by his mother but spent a lot of time with his grandmother. With a current enrollment of over 3,000 students, his high school has a 54 percent minority enrollment (54 percent African American), 60 percent receive free and reduced lunch. Kenny played basketball but excelled on the track where his team placed at state three times during his career. Sports helped to keep Kenny out of trouble and away from the wrong crowds. In addition to athletics, Kenny was the president of the Big Brothers and Big Sisters group in his school and was a member of an organization that promoted diversity by having talks about race. Despite a continually shifting home life, Kenny consistently excelled in his academics maintaining over a 3.6 throughout high school while taking honors and advanced placement courses.

Mentorship and his mother were responsible for Kenny ultimately deciding to attend college. From the beginning of his college choice process MSU was a possibility because he had friends who attended the institution. Kenny applied to over two-dozen schools and received acceptances from all of them including athletic scholarships to several. Ultimately, MSU offered Kenny an academic scholarship that combined with outside monies, placed him in a good position financially to attend the institution. After earning admission to MSU, he became aware
of an academic enrichment program for minority students entering engineer programs; he took advantage of the opportunity.

Kenny’s transition into his collegiate experience was seamless. He described himself as not being very social outside of his close friends. He was active in the National Society of Black Engineers attending the national conference. Kenny has worked in internships the last two summers and received a job offer from his internship after graduation. His first recollection of Greek life was through a mentor from high school; his relationship with this individual and research before college allowed Kenny to know that when wanted to pursue membership in Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity upon arrival to MSU. Although having held an executive board position in the chapter previously, at the time we spoke Kenny was a general member of his chapter.

**Jewel.** Jewel is a fourth year College of Engineering student. Growing up he lived in several places and spent the last several years before college in a small town in the Midwest. His mother is an educator and his father is in the military. Church was a large part of his life growing up largely because his father is a pastor. For much of his educational experience Jewel attended home school and did not enter public school until his sophomore year of high school. The high school he graduated from holds a bronze medal award from the U.S News rankings. With almost 2,500 students, the school has an 82 percent minority enrollment (55 percent Africa American) with 25 percent of these students on free and reduced lunch. While in high school, Jewel was a member of the football team, was also a member of the student government, and was a member of a multicultural organization geared towards diversity and trying to break down stereotypes.
Although he had the credentials to attend all the schools he wanted, athletics played heavily in the college choice process for Jewel. His search was regional resulting in him applying to several schools in the Midwest. As a result, Jewel received several football and track and field scholarships from smaller schools. Ultimately, he opted for MSU because of its academic reputation, despite that fact that he did not receive a scholarship.

Being a member of a varsity team has pretty much defined much of Jewel’s experience in college. Fulfilling the responsibilities of a student athlete (study hours, practice schedule, traveling, etc.) has not given Jewel the opportunity to get involved in as many student organizations as his non-athlete teammates. Because of the discipline required to play a sport, he attributes much of his success to his athletic experience. Academically his grades have always been strong and he has been on the undergraduate advising council, conducted research with faculty in his field, and has held internships the last two summers. As a member of a Black Greek fraternity, Jewel’s brother introduced him to the experience and when he arrived to MSU his mentor and fellow track teammate was a member of a fraternity. As a member of Kappa Alpha Psi, Jewel has served the chapter in several capacities; at the time we spoke, he was a general member.

**Bryan.** Bryan is a third year student in the College of Liberal Arts from a mid-size city in the Midwest. He grew up with his mother and father and has one older brother who is in the military. Bryan attended an urban high school with an enrollment of almost 1,000 students. The school is 94 percent minority (60 percent African American) students, and 60 free and reduced lunches. While attending Bryan was a member of the track and basketball teams and competed at the varsity level in both; he also graduated with academic honors. Outside of his high school, he was very involved in the community working with a program the promoted reading for
youths, worked the polls during the 2008 elections, and frequently went to a retirement home to spend time with elderly people.

Although Bryan knew that he wanted to go to college, his search process did not begin until his senior year. After participating in a Black College tour program, he narrowed his choices down to four institutions including three state schools and one HBCU. Because of clerical errors, Bryan only received an acceptance letter to one institution of which he did not want to attend. He ultimately decided to attend MSU after his mentor, who knew some administrators at the institution, reached out to some of his friends to help Bryan work his way through the admissions process.

Bryan’s college career got off to the uneventful and somewhat rocky start. Having to work almost his entire collegiate career has influenced his academic performance often times in a negative way. He has been involved in several activities including an auxiliary group through a Black sorority on campus, the Black Student Union, the Black Cultural Center, and is active at the recreational center. The semester after we spoke Bryan landed a summer internship in his major area. Bryan did not really gain exposure to these organizations until he arrived on campus and through the sorority auxiliary group in which he participated. Since joining Kappa Alpha Psi, Bryan has served as chapter president and community service chair.

Michael. Michael is a fourth year student in the College of Liberal Arts from a large city in the Midwest. He grew up with a single mother who works for the state and has one younger brother who is in middle school. Michael attended an urban high school has an enrollment of just over 2,000 students and is ranked among the top 130 best high schools in the country. The minority population is 71 percent (27 percent African American) and 27 percent are able to receive free and reduced lunch. Michael was involved in several activities while in high school
including a drum line member, basketball team, reporter for the school newspaper, student ambassadors mentor program, and was a member of the national honors society. Although he had to test into the IB program, Michael did not want to enter the program because of its rigor, however he admitted that the IB program got him prepared for college.

Michael’s college choice process originally centered on basketball; first, he had ambitions to play at a large division 1 institution, then he wanted to attend a larger institution with a première team. These plans changed when Michael went on a Black college tour of East coast institutions—after this experience, he decided to attend a prominent Historically Black college on the East coast where he would become a member of the drum line. Although he thoroughly enjoyed his experience, Michael had to leave his first institution due to financial reasons; after considering several in state schools Michael ultimately decided to transfer to MSU because they had the major he wanted to pursue and because he had close friends who were students.

Transferring to MSU gave Michael a newfound focus. His major is very demanding often requiring him to be up very early and got to bed late. Despite his demanding schedule, Michael did maintain a social life largely spending time with his high school friends and fraternity brothers. Before we spoke, Michael had done two summer internships and had accepted a fully funded graduate assistant position in a master’s program in his field. Growing up, Michael gained exposure to his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi through a friend of his mothers’ who he looked up to. Having attended a HBCU further exposed him to the culture of Black Greeks; he arrived to MSU wanting to join a Black fraternity.

**Henry.** Henry is a fourth year student in the College of Engineering from a mid-size city in the Midwest. His father works in public service and his mother is in childcare. With almost
3,500 students, the public high school that Henry attended is 60 percent White, while 20 percent of students receive free and reduced lunch. While in high school Henry was a member of the football and wrestling teams, sang in the choir, and took several advanced placement courses. After recognizing his potential to be more successful, his teachers placed him into the international baccalaureate program for his last two years of school. Overall, Henry had strict teachers and parents who played a large factor into his success in high school and helped him to graduate with over a 3.5 G.P.A.

Growing up in a home with parents that expected their children to attend college, Henry began the college search process his junior year. Although had had several family members and close friends who attended college, Henry decided to not let other individuals make his college decision. After narrowing his selection to a few schools in the Midwest, Henry decided to attend MSU because of their engineering programs. Because Henry was in a minority-engineering program during high school, he was both surprised and alarmed that there were so few people of color, Blacks in particular, in engineering programs at MSU.

Overall, Henry’s transition to college involved learning about him-self. When he first began his collegiate career, Henry performed well academically, however, over the last few semesters his performance has not met his expectations. Coming from a predominantly White high school, adjusting to the demographics at MSU was not an issue. Henry has had to make a more concerted effort to find spaces in the Black community including joining a fraternity, singing in the gospel choir, and joining other culturally based student organizations. Henry has also done internships within his field of study over the summer. Henry first became aware of Black Greek life during his childhood; his father is a member of a Black Fraternity. Despite this fact, he had no desire to join a Black fraternity when he first arrived to MSU but ultimately
became a member of Phi Beta Sigma. During his time in the fraternity Henry has served as president of his chapter, at the time we spoke he was a general member.

**Lamar.** Lamar is a second year College of Management student from a mid-size city in the Midwest. His mother is a nurse and his father is a technician at a hospital. Lamar has three older siblings all of which attended and graduated from college. Lamar’s public urban high school has almost 2,500 students with 100 percent minority students (91 percent African American) and 57 percent on free and reduced lunch. Though attending a predominantly Black high school that did not have good academics, Lamar’s teachers identified him as a gifted student and placed him on the college prep track, which included all the students who “took their academics seriously”. While in high school Lamar played football, wrestled, was on the swim team, and was a member of the National Honor Society.

Lamar gained a great deal of exposure to college early though his siblings attending and later through programs geared at exposing students to college. When he was an underclassman, he took visits to universities as part of his membership in an engineering organization. He was also in another organization that required him to apply to at least four institutions before his senior year of high school. When it was time to make a decision Lamar had to choose between several smaller schools that offered him scholarship money, ultimately he decided to attend MSU without a scholarship offer and after not making the team decided to stop pursuing football. Before entering his first year at MSU, Lamar participated in a summer boot camp for minority students; this program helped him in transitioning to MSU.

Early in his career at MSU Lamar was intentional in getting to know individuals outside of the Black community. He has intentionally placed himself in social settings that were largely white and or diverse. Academically, participating in a bridge program helped him initially and
he continues to carry a suitable G.P.A. His brother is a member of a Black Greek fraternity and exposed Lamar to this aspect of college life before his attending MSU. It was not until he arrived to campus and met members of Phi Beta Sigma that he decided to pursue membership. At the time we spoke, Lamar had not held a leadership position within his chapter.

**Omar.** Omar is a fourth year College of Engineering student from the suburbs of a large city in the Midwest. His mother works in admissions for an institution of higher education and his father has his own IT Company; he also has one stepsister who is pursuing a master’s degree. Omar attended a predominantly White all boys' private catholic high school. His school has roughly 800 students nine percent of which are African American students and tuition per school is approximately $8,000 annually. Academically his school offered a rigorous curriculum and Omar took advantage of these offerings by taking a majority advanced placement courses across the different core subject areas. Outside of academics, Omar participated in football, track and field team, and was a member of the robotics club.

A primary component of the college choice process for Omar was his desire to leave his home state; as a result, he visited several schools across the Midwest, South, and East coast. Omar also wanted to compete in track and field in college and although he only received interest from a few small schools, his decision came down to MSU and another institution that had a strong engineering program. Omar choose MSU because the type of engineering he wanted to pursue was better and because they offered him a better financial package to attend. Before entering his first year, Omar participated in a summer bridge program for minority engineering students, this program, he felt better taught him what to expect in college.

When he first arrived to campus in the fall Omar went out for and made the track and field team. Being a member of the team has helped to shape many of his experiences in college.
by providing him to a family atmosphere, while allowing him to pursue his passion. Because being a student athlete takes so much time Lamar did not do too many activities outside of track and academics early in college. After transitioning from the track team, Omar has become involved in several activities, one of which is a campus wide student programming board where he has held a leadership position. Omar has had summer internships and was conducting research with a professor at the time of our conversation. Not coming from a lineage of Greek family members, Omar first became aware of Black Greek life through a coach/mentor when he arrived to MSU. At the time we spoke, Omar, a member of Phi Beta Sigma was vice president in his chapter.

**Sean.** Sean is a second year student from a large city on the east coast and is in the College of Engineering. Sean grew up with his mother as his primary guardian; he has three older siblings, two of whom went to college. Sean is a second-generation college student with both his mother and father having attended college. Sean attended a suburban high school that has a top 180 high schools in the country, and has a gold medal from the U.S. New Report. The school currently has 17 percent minority students (8 percent African American) with 12 percent of these students on free and reduced lunch. Academically Sean took advantage of the college preparatory track of his school and enrolled in several advance placement courses during his career. Outside of the classroom he was a member of the basketball, football, and track team, in additional to a few other clubs.

Sean began the college search process the summer after his freshman of high school when he participated in a program that took students to several HBCUs. This experience exposed him to college life and made him aware of expectations for going to college. Having to apply to at least eight schools as part of his high school policies, Sean became interested in MSU
after receiving an invitation to visit campus to attend a program geared toward recruiting minority students to science majors. He ultimately decided to attend MSU because he liked their science programs.

Freshman orientation exposed Sean to many different types of diversity within MSU and helped him to know what to expect as a student over his career. To date, many of the decisions Sean has made concerning academics and involvement come from the guidance of his mentors. Most of the organizations he is involved in, including minorities in technology, aim to empower minority students on campus. Sean also had an internship arranged for the summer preceding our meeting. In regards to Black Greek organizations, Sean’s mother was in an auxiliary group of a Black fraternity and his father is a member, he first became aware of Black Greeks through older mentors who were members of several different groups including Phi Beta Sigma, the organization he joined. At the time we spoke, he was the president of his chapter.

**Participant Observations**

With the status of African American males along the education pipeline seemingly in disarray, the participants in this study collectively make up a group that has “defied” the odds in regards to their educational success. Although all reached higher education, and a few on the precipice of earning their undergraduate degrees, their collegiate journeys’, though unwritten, are diverse. Some of this diversity includes their backgrounds, motivation to succeed, and paths they took and individuals whom helped them along the way. At the core of the community cultural framework is the notion that students of color exercise less acknowledged forms of capital in order to facilitate their educational success. The experiences of the men in this study and their present status indicate that have utilized numerous tools in order to be successful. Their decision to become members of BGLOs, for the entire group, represented a way to
increase and build upon the tools they already possessed to be successful. Considering what BGLOs have historically stood for, and what organizations at MSU have strived to accomplish throughout their histories, lends this type of analysis as pertinent.

**Summary**

The information shared by participants in this study helps to link this inquiry with the central questions that guide this study. In order to understand how BGLOs might further cultivate or hinder various forms of community wealth, described in the community cultural wealth framework, we must possess an understanding of the individuals who enter these organizations, including the types of capital they exercise and have access to before membership. The diversity of participants (including their experiences) shared in this chapter serves as a prelude to the assortment of ways in which they shared that membership influenced various aspects of their collegiate experience. The next chapter presents findings and analysis of this study.
Figure 4.1 Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Academic College</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Class Standing</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Years as Member</th>
<th>College Generational Status</th>
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<td>Phi Beta Sigma</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2nd</td>
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<td>Suburb, Public</td>
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<td>Phi Beta Sigma</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
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<td>1 year</td>
<td>2nd</td>
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<td>Suburb, Private</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
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<td>Kappa Alpha Psi</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
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CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American males in Black Greek-Lettered Organizations (BGLOs) using community cultural wealth as an analytic framework. The ensuing chapter presents six major findings identified from the iterative, data analysis process described in chapter three. Major themes that emerged from this study included using multiple resources to navigate the collegiate context, overcoming real barriers, decisions to join a Black Greek letter fraternity, multiple dimensions of brotherhood, impact of involvement, and the value added of the Black fraternal experience.

Conceptually, Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework guided the framing and reporting of these findings. Drawing from various data collection techniques, as outlined in chapter three, analysis of data from participants focused on reoccurrence in words, thoughts, ideas, and experiences around different topics that relate to the central questions that guide this study. Understanding the lives of participants prior to their membership was essential to recognizing how BGLOs might further cultivate or hinder various forms of capital; for this reason, findings are divided into two sections; the experiences of participants prior to joining their fraternity, and after initiating (i.e., during membership) in their organizations. Finally, the findings presented throughout the remainder of this chapter frequently utilize direct quotes from participants in order to capture the essence and significance of each theme.

Staying the Path: Participant Experiences Before Membership

Conveyed in this section are the dominant themes that emerged from the lived experiences of participants before joining their respective fraternities. Consistent with the literature tending to the edification of African American males in higher education, participants in this study were not immune to the obstacles that permeate the education pipeline of Black
males. Like any population of students, these men were diverse in their backgrounds, previous experiences (educationally and otherwise), and approaches to their education. Despite their differences, certain similarities arose among participants’ that transcend their assorted identities.

Keeping in line with the scope of this analysis, this section addresses the most salient themes that surfaced during participants’ initial careers at MSU. The collegiate experiences of participants before joining their fraternities demonstrate three important points, foremost; many students had access to and activated forms of capital before and at the beginning of their collegiate experience. In this sense, forms of capital derived from community cultural wealth helped to buffer what participants were experiencing when they arrived to MSU. Noting this, the first theme, using multiple resources to navigate the collegiate context, describes how participants found ways to navigate their postsecondary experience at MSU. The second theme, overcoming real barriers to progress, explains the mentality of participants to persist through sometimes-difficult circumstances. The final theme, decisions to join a Black Greek letter fraternity, addresses why participants chose to pursue membership in a BGLO. Within each theme, I identify smaller constructs in order to show the complexity within each idea.

**Theme One: Using Multiple Resources to Navigate the Collegiate Context.**

Consistently across all the participants was the belief that they needed to use available resources to assist with their educational progress. For most of these men, this mentality came from family including parents and older siblings, and was something they appeared to utilize subconsciously. The literature addressing African American males in higher education largely finds this population is not involved, or has the tendency to be under-involved on campus (Cuyjet, 1999; Harper & Quaye, 2009). In the case of participants in this study, they adopted the belief that in order to be successful (by their definition) they would have to take advantage of opportunities
presented before them. This idea was most obvious in participants’ transition to college and in their initial experiences when they arrived to MSU.

**Recognizing the need for additional capital.** Although almost all participants earned grades that did not require they participate in summer programs, almost all did because they recognized summer immersion programs as a tool to help in their transition to college, and to build on the academic capital they possessed. Anthony’s comments about his experience in his program help to illuminate what these programs did for participants:

> There’s a great network and guidance to start your college career, because the older people through the program mentor you and they tell you what classes to take, what classes not to take, what professors to get with, which ones not to get with, like which program…and I actually got involved with some of the stuff I’m involved with now because older people encouraged me to apply to them.

Coming from what he acknowledged was a “privileged background”, one of the deciding factors that dictated Anthony’s decision to attend MSU was the opportunity to participate in a summer enrichment program that would provide him with the opportunity to build his network, and become acclimated to campus. Kenny, Greg, Omar, Bryan, Robert, Louis, and Sean all shared similar sentiments. Reflecting on how he became aware of participating in summer enrichment programs Lamar was at first apprehensive sharing, “I was like no, I’m going to enjoy my last summer!” However, after hearing about how the program could aide in his adjustment to MSU Lamar decided to participate.

The thoughts shared by Lamar were consistent for most of the men. At the time they participated in enrichment programs, most knew it would help with college, but they did not understand the far-reaching impact of their decision. For example, three years after his participation Robert shared his perspective on what the experience meant to his academic career at MSU, and his overall experience. While we talked over a late lunch, Robert remained silent.
for several moments before he articulated the importance of participating in a bridge program to his own development:

It was good, it's a month and a couple weeks long program. I met so many good friends that I still have at MSU…my sophomore year roommate was one of my good friends. And I just came back off of Christmas break going to visit his home in Colorado we did snowboarding and skiing and all that. Honestly, it’s not just about the work, it like being here at MSU and getting the pre experience before hand and that just did it for me. The support base that I have is just crazy, we all still just kick it, hang out even after I became Greek and everything.

As we further unpacked his experience, it was apparent in Robert’s instance, and many other participants, the program was the main way to understand better the climate and culture of the university. Omar’s comment reiterates this idea, “When I came in I already got to do college work ahead of time I got to know a few people, so like the first day of school I wasn’t lost, I already knew people and what the school was about.” From the responses of participants, gaining early exposure to college via pre-college programs laid the foundation for their college careers by providing a framework for their success—asking for help and getting involved. The idea of building a group of friends and supporters and network propelled the early collegiate careers of the men in this study.

**Seeking social networks.** Perhaps the strongest message that participants took from their early introductions to MSU was the importance of immersing themselves into the campus community. Though engagement looked different depending on the individual, all participants discussed becoming involved at the onset of their collegiate careers through student organizations, employment on campus, or in their residence halls. As our conversation transitioned from his summer, emersion experience to his first year Kenny took a deep breath and contemplated his journey and the importance of seeking out resources. Reflecting deeper he commented, “There are tons of opportunities to succeed but if you’re not looking for it then
you’re probably not going to get it”. Kenny appeared to “get it” by becoming involved in students organizations. Discussing his participation inside and out of class it became clear that Kenny used student organizations as an academic and social tool; this was evident by his membership in the National Society of Black Engineers:

I was pretty active in NSBE, I actually attended their regional and national conferences and spoke to a lot of companies, and actually got a couple internship offers...coop offer, I think a lot of that was not solely because of academics but because of networking and opportunities I was given by NESBE, I think I stayed pretty involved with that, that was probably the biggest involvement I had freshman and sophomore year because they occupied a lot of time with meetings and study table and then me being involved with minority engineering program I spent a lot of time there as well. Yeah pretty much NSBE.

Kenny’s experience with NSBE elucidates the fact that for many participants, using resources often came in the form of African American or minority organizations. Sean shared his affinity for Black student groups in mentioning, “It was something I wanted to do because I was the only Black person in my classes so I felt like I needed something to pull me back to my roots in a way, to surround myself with people like me”. Similarly, Henry also felt the need to connect to other African Americans and as a result joined the Black chorus on campus. Greg commented on how many of his resources came from outside of the Black community in the form of his White peers. While speaking about his earlier experiences in undergrad, his hands became more animated and his voice consistently grew louder when talking about the many connections he made on campus.

Discussing why he felt some African American students were not successful Greg mentioned, “You know some people just don’t know resources.” As we further discussed this idea, he shared an example from his own life:

I have gotten help from a lot of people. Before I didn’t know this, but, the White frats, they have all the grades and cheat sheets and everything, so like being cool with them, and not like saying use them but, with them being around and they were like, “well I got the answers,” and I was like “how’d you get the answers?”. Well from my frat, and this,
and that, and that,” and I’m like, oh, ok.” And like, they helped me out with their information and everything.

While Greg attended what he described as a diverse international high school, he had difficulty adjusting to MSU, a large PWI. His recognition that White students in particular could potentially aide in his success helped him to view a potential negative situation as an opportunity to grown in ways that would benefit his future professional career.

Finally, participants described the importance of mentorship, acknowledging this component as a valuable resource in their collegiate experience because mentors provided mentees with help and guidance. Almost all of the men mentioned having mentors, however Anthony, Jewel, Sean, Omar, and Henry appeared to situate this relationship more central and thus important to their time at MSU. Although in most cases participants did not have to seek out mentors, they did have to accept their guidance and support. In this context, “accepting,” meant heeding older students’ advice on how navigate through MSU. As Anthony mentioned, “I respect what people been through, like you’ve been through the struggle I’m going through, because if they made it through they have obviously found a way to persevere and I’m trying to find that way”. Jewel echoed these thoughts when talking about his relationship with an upperclassman, describing their interactions he uttered:

“…when I came to campus he seemed like he had it all. He was part of omega psi phi fraternity, he was a conference champion; he was electrical computer engineer with a GPA over a 3.0. Drove a Lexus, had all...had the charisma and wasn’t a nerd, he was cool. Could of played basketball overseas out of high school, he had everything. And the thing that made me… I really feel like the thing that set me on the right track is because he took me under his wing…he took me under his wing and basically set me up for success. Everything that he found was helpful he passed that information down, and I really appreciated that and I took everything to heart and I honestly think that’s why I was pretty successful in college.
Throughout our initial conversation, Jewel continually stressed the importance of accepting and internalizing information given to him from mentors in order to aid in his success. Omar, Henry, and Sean expressed similar thoughts when referring to the mentors they had while at MSU. Approaching these relationships with this mentality opened other doors; for Sean it was better relationships with upperclassmen, and for Henry it was increased access into the Black community.

If we recall, navigational capital highlights the ability of students of color to forge through educational environments not structured in a way conducive to their success. The ways participants navigated their transition into MSU speaks to navigational capital and social capital within the community cultural wealth framework. Palmer and Gasman (2009) used the cliché “It takes a Village” to describe the moving parts and constituents necessary to help African American males matriculate through higher education. Though the authors were attempting to describe the experience for African American males at HBCUs, this cliché holds true for PWIs as relationships with peers, administrators, and faculty often have a direct impact on African American males’ satisfaction with their collegiate experience (Strayhorn, 2008). Although employing different and distinct strategies, all of the participants in this study found ways in which to gain access to and take advantage of various resources at MSU. The choices many of these men made to heed the advice and opinions of older members show a great deal of cognitive ability on their part. They did not listen solely because these students were older, instead this decision was more calculated and involved participants acknowledging they expertise of certain individuals that would aide in their own success.

Also detectable in this theme is the activation of social capital by participants. According to Yosso (2004), social capital is the networks of people and community resources that students
of color utilize to facilitate their success. Activating navigational capital through joining student organizations, making use of peers, and cultivating mentors facilitated for the activation of social capital because these techniques for navigating exposed participants to more individuals on campus while in the process afforded them the ability to draw from the community resources present on MSU’s campus and specifically within the African American community. Despite their pre-college preparation and social networks, participants in this study did not escape real obstacles; these issues receive attention in the next theme.

Contrary to the dominant narrative for African American males, participants in this study found avenues with which to navigate both their transition to MSU and their initial experiences on campus. More specifically, participants appeared to make conscious decisions separate themselves from “every other black male” largely because of male mentors in their lives who did not fit this description, and because participants never viewed themselves as being like every Black man. Important to recognize, in the case of many participants, their race contributed to the social networks they were able to build. For example, several participants felt their introduction to the idea of attending a summer immersion program because older African American students and/or administrators introduced them to this particular opportunity.

Finally, participants’ backgrounds and predispositions to various forms of capital also facilitated their initial ability to utilize forms of capital. Many of men in this study came from families that exposed them to how to be academically successful. Many of these students were second (and some third) generation college students and therefore appeared more keen to listening to the advice of their parents and siblings. The college knowledge they possessed allowed them to recognize and filter out the good advice upperclassmen and mentors provided.
Theme Two: Overcoming Real Barriers. African American males encounter myriad issues during their time in college that influence their ability to matriculate. In addition to having access to supportive networks and other resources, African American males’ ability to overcome hurdles in their postsecondary experience also depends on the individual (Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). For the men in this study utilizing resources was a common theme that traverses their early experiences, however, their time at MSU did present some obstacles. At times, many participants experienced failure, self-doubt, and racism that could have derailed their matriculation. They appeared to repel these hurdles most notably through their aspirations to succeed and their willingness to confront racism and discrimination.

Maintaining aspirations. Despite maintaining healthy networks that aided in their matriculation, participants in this study faced some trials that they had to overcome. For Nick this was the realization that his academic success in high school did not translate directly to academic success at MSU. Sharing the moment when he gained this insight, he commented:

I did not think I was stupid but I knew I was coming to a university where I definitely was not the smartest person, I’m definitely not the top ten anymore and that kind of hit me. So I think my time began with a lot of self-confidence hits and a lot of shots fired at my self-confidence

Anthony also shared an episode from his first year that captures the self-confidence issues that participants faced. Rehashing his first unsuccessful experience trying to secure a summer internship he recounted:

It was a pretty big hit [to my ego] but it was humbling because it made me think about things I may not have been doing. They [other students] can say that after their freshman year I interned with Abbott laboratories and stuff and they were able to get that mentorship and get that experience. I had to respect that, and I used them after my freshman year as resources to ask like what did you guys do, how did you guys' performance as interns distinguish you from the other interns, like I wasn’t bitter or anything, I just knew I had to work harder next time
These two examples describe some of the impediments participants’ faced that could have derailed their collegiate careers. Self-confidence and having to adjust to heightened expectations was an idea that all participants faced when they arrived to MSU. A consistent source of strength participants pulled from to face and overcome issues around self-doubt were their aspirations. Sharing his aspirations while describing what drives him to be successful Robert mentioned: “I gotta do something to make myself successful…It started from a young age, like honestly like knowing what I gotta do to be better”. This response by Robert sums up the frame of mind that participants shared concerning “getting through” MSU.

Discussing the hardships he had endured while at MSU Sean felt they centered on his major and increased workload assigned in his courses. Walking through how he overcame academic barriers Sean mentioned what inspired him to persevere:

When I first came here I would see the Alphas, Sigmas, and a few of the Kappa’s and they all had internships that pulled them towards money. They had this group and I definitely wanted to be a part of that, I definitely saw a job out there in the future for me that I wanted somewhere in the corporate world. I saw people who walked around with shirts and ties all the time and suits and they were real professional and that’s what I wanted. That drove me the most, when I first came here…just the thought of what happens after college I have to get there type of mentality

Further describing his mentality and its relationship with his work ethic, Sean added, “When I’m up late doing homework or studying and I really want to go to bed I want to go chill with this girl I have to think about how I want my future to be”. Throughout our conversation, he constantly referenced the importance of keeping his eyes on his ultimate goal. This was a tool Louis also used to help him persist mentioning, “I always looked toward the finish line, I always looked at it like I know I can’t see myself doing anything else, I can’t work in fast food or anything”. Robert shared some of the difficulties he experienced through his major, “my first year engineering was pretty trashed, I really did not like the course work, it was tedious and
boring but I guess you...it’s like earning your start, you have to get through it”. Discussing how his approach to reaching his goals helped him to overcome the trials that came along with his major:

When I was in like high school I wanted to be an architectural engineer because I wanted to build my own house, but I was like okay, how can I build my own house when I’m gonna do engineering and so I was like, okay maybe I’m gonna look into a different area of engineering. So I started looking through my family and just seeing a lot of the ailments people have and I was like hmm, chemical engineers deals a lot with pharmaceutical and the production of drugs and all that, maybe I could do something to make those better. And chemical engineering just came about like, and then knowing how my grandfather is and how many pills he has to take, I would love to help improve his health

As Robert shared what drove him to be successful, he kept alluding to the fact that he always wanted to be an engineer; although initially he did not know exactly what this type of job entailed. This passion, combined with his desire to better his grandfathers’ health, were Robert’s inspiration to keep going; these feelings represented another layer of determination, one tied to personal and not material benefits.

Confronting and resisting racism. In addition to confronting issues that all students encounter, race, and more specifically, racism, also played a role in participants’ time at MSU. For example, several men shared racial incidents they encountered during their time at MSU. Much of the racial issues appeared to stem from the lack of African American presence at the institution. Michael’s thoughts about the state of diversity at MSU mimicked the sentiments of most of the Black students on campus and provided insight into the perceived values of the institution:

I feel like MSU can make that better if they just open up the dialog on demographics and being diverse. Like they say they’re diverse, take away Black athletes, there is not diversity here at MSU, so, you can say that but then they’ll say but we got diversity and diverse this and diverse that, you know, but it is what it is though
Louis expressed how he felt that the lack of diversity at MSU provided a space for White students to be racist because they significantly outnumbered Black students on campus. He also talked about the covert and less aggressive ways in which White students participated in racist acts against Black students:

Nine times out of ten when somebody says that they’ve been called a nigger, it’s not in your face. It’s somebody driving by in a car, they’re drunk and they’re screaming the word “niggers go home and blah blah blah, and everything,” you know, and trying to be funny and everything with their friends. But that hasn’t affected me like, it’s sad though.

Many participants felt that racist encounters both out and inside of the classroom blemished their experiences at MSU, for Kenny and Greg racism represented a primary issue they had to confront. Kenny, originally a member of the track team at MSU, shared his encounters with racialized stereotypes of by his White peers:

The biggest issue was a lot of the Caucasians would really kinda talk down to me, a lot of them didn’t really think I should be here. I was either here because “oh your an athlete” or because your parents have money, actually its neither of the two, when in actuality my parents don’t have money and I don’t have an athletic scholarship I’m actually on an academic scholarship. So, they would kinda find excuses for the reasons why I shouldn’t be here or talk about loop holes on how I got into the program when in actuality we both applied the exact same way except and you ended up paying for school and I didn’t'.

These subtle and sometimes overt encounters with racism fueled Kenny’s desire to prove his White classmates wrong, pushing him to succeed academically. Commenting on how he worked past some of these issues, he mentioned:

I’m a driven student, I’m focused I don’t tolerate distractions, school is main priority, track is next, I was always focused, I was a really focused student, I kept my eyes on whatever I needed to get done, and I just stayed on that path the entire time.

As our conversation continued, Kenny shared how his mindset changed after a conversation with a mentor:

I thought I was just here for myself I didn’t think I was really here to represent more than myself, I was representing my family, friends, past mentors I’ve had, and all the opportunities I had been presented, thinking where they really gonna stay when I left.
Kenny’s explanation for working through his problems and ultimately choosing to stay in his major and at MSU was more about uplifting his family and community than his own personal gains, although he was aware of economic gains that would accompany completing his degree program. Louis also talked about his dealings with race at MSU:

I got called a Nigger one time and it kind of caught me off guard. I was going to the bars, and he drove by in a car, it wasn’t like he was standing next to me and everything, but he drove in a car and said it and everything.

As Louis shared this incident, the frustration and helplessness was apparent in his voice and body language, as he looked uneasy with sharing this time in his life. Talking further about the racial climate at MSU and its impact, his attitude shifted to a more positive tone. When asked about how he deals with these issues, with a half grin he mentioned, “It is what it is, you have to deal with it and keep moving”. At the time, that we spoke Louis had not lost his energy to speak up against what he felt were racial issues at the institution; he also did not allow the climate at MSU to deter him from reaching his educational goals.

Participants’ ability to overcome obstacles in the form of racial microaggressions (Yosso & Soloranzo, 2003) and stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) before membership in their fraternities speaks to the resistance and aspiration capital they possessed and exercised. Yosso (2005) puts forward that communities of color often exercise resistance capital by cultivating other forms of capital within their communities to offset inequality by the larger society. We see this occur through participants utilizing individuals within their own community to help sustain their aspirations. For example, both Greg and Kenny shared that in addition to their own conviction, other individuals helped them to overcome the racial issues they encountered. In another instance, Robert relied on his desire to better the lives of his family members and most notably his grandfather to get him though times while in college. Robert’s more altruistic
motes for wanting to earn his degree differed from Sean who closely ties his aspirations with possession and status; nonetheless, both utilized other individuals (e.g., family, older students, etc.) to help maintain their aspirations. Further, even as participants faced instances that had the potential to derail their educational goals, the aspirations they possessed before entering MSU helped keep them on track and in many cases these feelings became stronger as their goals became more tangible. Race and racial identity played a definitive role in the lives of almost the entire group. Participants’ resistance help to illustrate how they noticed, worked against, and overcame inequality in order to stay the path to what they felt like was success.

In the biography “Hope in the Unseen” by Ron Suskind, the protagonist Cedric, despite rising out of a crime infested neighborhood and dismal educational circumstances to enroll in an Ivy League institution still finds himself facing issues that challenge his conviction to succeed. Instead of succumbing to his circumstances, Cedric finds (and maintains) his drive to continually strive for success. Similar to Cedric, the participants in this study upon arriving to MSU encountered real obstacles. Like Cedric, participants relied heavily on their will to succeed to move them beyond their present situations at MSU. How these students faced early obstacles in their collegiate careers signify the activation and use of resistance capital as well as aspiration capital. Resistance capital or the ability of peoples of color to exhibit oppositional behavior in response to inequality is visible in the acknowledgement of racism and inequality at MSU by participants, and equally their intentional responses to combat these issues at MSU. This was especially noticeable in the experiences of Kenny and Greg who confronted issues of racism and inequality and made a conscious effort to rise above these issues.

**Theme Three: Decisions to Join a Black Greek Letter Fraternity.** With the exception of two participants, the men in this study largely expressed feeling that they had solidified
themselves both socially and academically on campus before they made the decision to pursue membership in a fraternity. For this reason, their choices to join a fraternity, though including a sense of belonging aspect, was multifaceted and can be understood as their perceptions of what membership would provide, and what they could bring to their respective groups. In many instances, these two perspectives blended as participants came to understand that the fraternity is comprised of its members.

**BGLOs as a site for capital attainment.** Whether it came from friends, media, or observations on campus, a reoccurring motive that participants provided for seeking membership in a Black fraternity was the personal benefits. These benefits ranged from basic (e.g., women, increased access to parties, etc.) to more profound (e.g., increased business networks, wanting to make a difference in the community). Dwayne showed a great deal of self-awareness in sharing what originally drew him to seeking membership in his fraternity. Rehashing his first few interactions with Black fraternity men on campus, he raved about how they portrayed a positive image of Black males and prompted him to begin researching various groups. When asked about why he ultimately sought membership Dwayne pointed out:

> I thought they could make me better because, for example one of my frat brothers has like a 3.9 and he's like always in the library studying, before I was in the frat I used to always see him studying, I couldn't really believe, I mean you don’t really associate somebody heavily involved in a frat with like being studious. Seeing how studious he inspired me, I’m not even studious like that and I’m not even in the frat. So I was like maybe he can help me get motivated and make me better in the process.

The idea that membership would make someone “better” resonated with many of the participants but did not come from deficit thinking on the part of the individual; instead, for many, membership represented an extension of what they already possessed. This was apparent when John talked about his decision-making around pursuing membership. Deciding to join as an upperclassman, John had already held leadership positions in different registered student
organizations; his desire to join a fraternity came from an admiration he held toward members in his fraternity:

Well they were very prominent on campus out of the other fraternities when I arrived on campus. Out of the guys that were here you could see how they were penetrating different areas on campus like they were Alphas but they were also running other student organizations. So they were elsewhere on campus rather than just Alphas they were very I don’t want to say seen either but in a sense they were and I wasn’t even at the parties and I still saw them that’s what I mean

The impression of fraternities being comprised of its members was also core component that played into the rational for membership for participants. In addition to assumptions that individuals held around how they might benefit from membership, everyone appeared to embrace the notion that whatever they took from their experience would largely depend on the individual as members in the chapter. Kenny’s process in pursuing membership highlights the importance of personal connections:

They [fraternity men] pretty much helped me stay driven, a lot of them aren’t all partiers or just a socialite, they were all actually really driven, all of them had internships lined up and that inspired me to do the same thing. After talking to him [fraternity man], for so long I ended up pursing a co-op and he pretty much walked me through it

For Kenny, the fact that memberships reached out to him before membership and as older students began the process of investing capital into him, this motivated Kenny to seek out membership in his organization. These examples highlight the role of perceived benefits in decision for participants to pursue membership. Participants also felt they brought a great deal to their organizations—this idea receives attention below.

**Contributing capital to BGLOs.** Though much of the discourse around why they joined a BGLO centered on the benefits they could amass, participants were also aware of, and able to articulate what talents they brought to their organizations. They were also attentive to how their different talents could not only benefit their chapters, but individual brothers. This concept that
new members to BGLOs bring tangible benefits to the fraternity stems from the nature of the expectations that BGLOs place upon aspiring members of their organizations. For example, in many cases aspiring members must have achieved a certain grade point average, participated in community service, and shown themselves to be a leader (or at least involved) on campus.

Robert provided one of the more in depth descriptions of what he felt he brought to his fraternity. As he discussed what he felt active members saw in him that facilitated for his selection Robert’s response blended his personal characteristics and upbringing with the values of the fraternity:

My biggest thing was when I was younger my dad was always grooming me to be a leader and not a follower. I always, I was always being groomed to have the voice for people that did not have a voice and I saw Alpha as being Dr. Martin Luther King. Members like him as being the voice for the community, the voice advocacy, like being that person that step up when nobody else will step up and Alpha correlated to my life in that and so that’s the reason that I feel like they chose me

In Adam’s case, the belief that members of Black fraternities possessed certain intrinsic qualities that made fraternal membership inevitable resonated from his response and many others. As he further talked about what he looked for in potential new members, two important themes reverberated, membership should be viewed from the perspective of “what can I do for the fraternity”, and not “what can the fraternity for me”, and everyone has to bring something to better the organization.

Whether concise or long winded when discussing their initial contributions to the fraternity, all men felt that had something. For Henry, his qualities lied more in who he was as an individual and his upbringing. As he attempted to articulate what made him stick out Henry mentioned “I came from a decent family and I try to live up leadership above all else…I was community service oriented, had good religion, and I guess they saw that I never would give up on anything”. Several others shared similar responses with Henry including Kenny who stated “
I bring a lot of initiative and leadership to the table because I’ve had held multiple leadership positions in high school and in college before I became a member”, and Greg who commented:

They [active members] saw that I could bring something to the chapter. I believe they felt I was a leader, that I was determined. I brought change into the chapter from the old ways that they were trying to get things done; they were trying to go into the new direction. I believe they thought, and believe, that I could help them assist in that new direction that they were going in.

Whereas many participants cited personal qualities that they brought into the fraternity, they also shared more tangible forms of capital they possessed. Unpacking how he could help his fraternity go in a “new direction”, Greg talked about how his major and social reputation on campus could provide more opportunities for the organization to have a larger reach on campus.

Anthony also shared what he brought to his chapter:

I had an image on campus. Like it was pretty well known that I was a hard worker, I had good grades, I was treasurer of the Black student union fall semester of my sophomore year. I carried myself well on campus, they could tell I was professional and coming in they [active members] all expected me to be professional. Like they knew I was interested in finance because at the beginning of the semester I was interviewing with different banks so I was always traveling for that and they recognized the fact that I was trying to do big things...

For Anthony, the idea of bring capital to membership was critical. As a third generation college student member of a Black Greek lettered organization, he was well aware of what membership provided for members and entered his collegiate career aware of what it took to become a member. Jewel, also a third generation college student had a specific viewpoint of what fraternity membership meant.

We [brothers] all help each other out. A lot of my fraternity brothers come into the bond [brotherhood] not as privileged as me so they didn’t really know some things. So, I mean automatically everybody, I would say everyone in my fraternity now is professional but like from the inception or from when I first joined it wasn’t always like that. We had to help each other to be more professional, like this is how you tie a tie and a bow tie, this is what you wear to a job interview and stuff like that. So, that’s one of the biggest things that I really took out of it. I’m kinda thankful for it, kinda like really looking at a snapshot
of where we are as African American males...in a whole so, I can...that’s one of the biggest things.

Jewel’s perspective of what he brought into “the fold”, and what membership provides members spanned beyond the fraternal experience into the obligations that educated Black males owed to each other. His comments also serve as a good summarization of what participants’ largely felt they contributed to their fraternal experience. Important to note, implicit in their responses was the message that BGLOs although providing benefits, were not the venues to acquire all the skills to be successful. Instead, the relationship appeared reciprocal where members gave and received.

The compound roles of social, navigational, and aspirational capital emerge in the rationale behind why participants decided to join their respective organizations. For many individuals, the benefits were obvious, joining a fraternity had the potential to increased their academic and social networks on campus (social capital), allow them to be aligned with positive Black male images (social and resistance capital), and could inspire and help them to be a better student (aspiration and navigational capital). In many instances, these potential benefits represented an alignment between how participants already viewed themselves, and the actual trajectory of their collegiate careers. They all shared a belief that in order to gain membership one had to possess a trait of benefit to the organization. Most if not all of the forms of capital participants expected to gain from membership they also expressed possessing as well; drive and determination (aspirational capital and resistance capital), knowledge of what it took to be successful in college and life (navigational capital) and notoriety on campus (social capital). These thoughts shared by participants indicate that membership in many instance appeared to represent a regeneration of shared beliefs, vales, and expectations.
The overarching importance of masculinity is central in the experiences of the males in this study. Despite growing up in a society in which Black males are over-proportionately criminalized and victimized (Alexander, 2012) to such a degree that they often wear cool masks to cover their frustration (Majors & Billison, 1992) the men in this study, though in this environment were not “of” this environment. All men through their comments and actions vehemently denied popular depictions of the Black males and aligned their actions (and aspirations) with how they felt Black males should carry themselves. Possessing different definitions of how Black male college students (a) carry themselves, (b) approach their studies, and (c) serve the larger Black community were primary reasons why they chose membership in Black fraternities and concur with how literature finds high achieving Black males perceive their masculinity (Harper, 2004).

The collegiate experiences of participants before joining their fraternities indicate they had access to and activated various forms of capital before and at the beginning of their collegiate careers. Important to note, how and under what circumstance forms of capital surfaced depend on the individuals. The shared experiences of participants at MSU often called for them to draw upon the same forms of capital. Second, these forms of capital did not occur individually, instead, they were blended depending on the situation participants encountered during their early careers at MSU. Finally, how participants navigated through MSU before membership and the fact that they did possess capital appeared to heavily influence their decisions to join a fraternity—in many instances membership represented values alignment. Acknowledged in the literature, numerous factors contribute to the overall success of African American males in higher education (Dancy, 2012; Harper, 2012)—this appeared to be the case for the males in this study before joining their fraternity. The next section addresses the role that
membership played in relation to participants’ further acquisition and activation of forms of capital.

It is What You Make It: Participant Experiences Within the Fraternity

Set, ship, rock, LB, Neo, name, crossing chapter, crossing year. Where you cross?

Achievement in every human endeavor, servants for all, friendship is essential to the soul, building a tradition and not living on one, service for humanity. These words, questions, and phrases do more than speak to the commonality in language among Black fraternities; they represent a link between these historic organizations. Despite differing rhetoric in regards to their missions, mottos, and goals; at their core, the purpose of all Black Greek fraternities is to provide brotherhood for members while in the process creating an atmosphere that promotes success. With this in mind, the ensuing section draws attention to the experiences of participants within their respective fraternities while sharing why they chose to join a fraternity, participants felt membership had tangible benefits primarily in the form of acquiring brotherhood, building a larger professional and social network, and to assist in their development.

Many of the participants in this study associated membership with joining other ambitious, proud, driven, social, and good individuals—adjectives they used to either directly or indirectly described themselves. The first theme that emerged from participants’ collective experience in fraternities was multiple dimensions of brotherhood, which highlights the diverse purposes of brotherhood within the fraternity. The second theme, impact of involvement, explains the multiple ways in which involvement influenced participants. The final theme, value added of the Black fraternal experience addresses what participants felt that took away from membership.
Theme One: Multiple Dimensions of Brotherhood. The multiple dimensions of brotherhood speak to the dual roles that this component of fraternal membership played in the lives of participants. Broadly, brotherhood appeared to represent a deeper relationship that participants shared with members of their fraternity. A more decisive analysis of this theme indicates that members utilized brotherhood in different ways and for a variety of reasons. In the case of these men, brotherhood appeared to serve the role of an extended family and support system, and a network for development. In many instances, these ideas intermingled as participants’ new networks doubled as their families.

Brotherhood as an extension of family. For many participants attending MSU meant leaving their family and friends at home in order to enter an atmosphere that was largely void of Black people. For some including Ronald, Robert, Greg, and Kenny, race appeared more salient to their initial experience at MSU, therefore immersing themselves around Black men meant a great deal to their satisfaction with their experience. Others like Henry and Jordan who had more exposure to White students growing up liked the homogeneity of Black fraternities. During our second interview while sitting in one of the libraries on campus, Robert paused for several moments before the shared the importance of brotherhood to his matriculation:

Honestly just having people to kick it with, especially being out here at a PWI in the country is important. Having people that you can call and hang out with that look like you that speak socially like you, that’s ok. We’re going to go play basketball- that’s cool, that’s something that I needed.

Having attended a predominantly Black high school and living in a mixed neighborhood, Robert had to adjust to functioning in a predominantly White environment at MSU. As we spoke, Robert further discussed how he had been intentional in joining organizations that had individuals who “looked like him”. Anthony was also aware of the importance of Black male
groups to the success of members, as he was involved in a few organizations geared toward this population. Talking about the importance of brotherhood in his life he shared:

It [brotherhood] is unconditional love for somebody. It’s a bond that’s always going to be there regardless of whether or not you disagree about something because at the end of the day you’re still apart of the same bond and you have to respect that and acknowledge that and you can’t take stuff personally. Like if brothers fought all the time, but it’s out of love.

For Anthony, having a group of men who he could relate to was essential to his experience because of the lack of diversity in his major. Acknowledging that he could (and would) have excelled without the fraternal experience, Anthony did feel that membership made his time in college more enjoyable because of the bond he developed with his brothers. As we probed deeper into Anthony’s feelings towards brotherhood, he mentioned that possessing a strong family system, other networks, and his previous internship experiences he felt as though his future was bright. For this reason, brotherhood was even more salient to his membership because it was something that he chose and a characteristic he could not get through other organizations in which he was involved.

Also explicit in the responses by participants was the importance of the sprawling nature of brotherhood. Brotherhood was not just contained at their institution; instead, it involved a web that reached across the state—and country. Many lasting memories participants shared involved “road trips” where they would travel to other institutions to hang with their brothers from other chapters. Michael’s comments emphasize the far-reaching nature of brotherhood:

No matter where you go, there's going to be somebody in a [my] fraternity. Unless you go to like Idaho or Wyoming, you might find one bro riding around horse back, but other than that, no matter where you go in the world you might come across an individual who looks a certain way and talks a certain way where it’s like man, I think this guy might be a bro. You go up and introduce yourself and get to talking in a certain manner and get the response you like and it’s like yeah this guy is a bro. You link up and then instantly form that point on you gained another friend.
In this passage, Michael illustrates what many participants felt—brotherhood and fostering family like relationships with brothers was a core component of the fraternal experience. Although participants mentioned that they did not always see eye-to-eye with their brothers, much as is the case with real families, brotherhood served the ultimate peacemaker in any disputes.

**Network of brotherhood.** Also included under the large umbrella of the family and friend aspect of brotherhood was the idea of business. The business of brotherhood involved helping one another one to be successful in the work world. This dimension of brotherhood was equally as important as brotherhood as family because the extent to which Black fraternities promote success lifelong achievement.

As I spoke with more participants, it became apparent that the idea of brotherhood, although couched under similar meanings for all (e.g., community, family, support, etc.), manifested in different ways in the lives of the men. In the cases of Nick, Sean, Jewel, Michael, and Henry, they all mentioned that brotherhood assisted with their professional development. Processing his thoughts about what affiliation meant in regards to his personal and professional life Nick conveyed:

> As soon as they [an employer] hear that you’re a brother its not you have 30 seconds because I have a lot of people to talk to, its where did you cross and that type of thing. So it’s kind of like if I see you and there are people around you it just shuts the window and it’s like something has gotten my mind off of all that stuff. It can create the one on one conversation and you can sense it too so it helps your confidence

Nick was aware of the network he gained access to, but equally cognizant these privileges did not come automatically through membership. Expounding further on his opinion, he was very rigid about seizing mentoring opportunities, “You’re only going to be successful if
you take initiative and take advantage of them”. He continually uttered this mantra through the
duration of our conversation.

If seeking opportunities was pivotal to activating the advantages of the brotherhood, Sean
accomplished this task. He credited his brothers with bettering his overall experience, serving as
a family away from home and contributing to his professionalism. Sean offered the following
example to transmit this idea:

My pledge dean works for a company in California and he is trying to get me out there so
he sends me so many recommendations and I get all these emails saying to apply to this
job because you have been referred by [name]. I still talk to [name] that I met and he is
still sending recommendations to other managers for me so I can get in, it’s just that
networking a big thing here.

As our conversation ensured, Sean share additional ways in which he outwardly felt
brotherhood. He also was very aware of the subtle ways in which his brothers influenced him
including never feeling as though he was alone, and always having someone to depend upon in
times of need. Henry also admitted that the brotherhood had been an extra source of the support
and capital that provided benefits. Sharing an example from his experience:

One of the older brothers gave me an internship this past year, which was really great.
Well indirectly gave it to me, because he worked for the company I just interned with this
summer. They didn’t really like him, but they like me a little more. I kind of got the job
just because he introduced me to them, he’s still kind of salty about it, but nothing like a
rivalry or anything like that, it’s all good fun, he has a good job so he’s not complaining.

The vast majority of participants talked about the idea of brotherhood in regards to
support from one another or the idea of utilizing brothers to gain additional opportunities.

Reflecting on brotherhood Bryan mentioned the importance of peer mentorship:

My first interview was last semester with Amazon, I didn’t get the internship, but it was
my first interview ever and I wasn’t going to go to the career fair but one of my frat
brothers at the time asked me what are you doing? Like why aren’t you out here? I was
like because I’m not an engineering major. He's like it doesn’t matter you should be out
here just practicing. He was like pull out your resume and you know after that I went
home and came back the next day and he was right, like I mean I ended up having fun. I
got an interview because of peer mentorship. I learned the meaning of that since being in a frat

This idea of helping one another surfaced in some form by several students but appeared to be somewhat glossed over in discussion. This appeared to be the case because receiving peer mentorship through the fraternity was so standard that it was not recognized or acknowledged. Bryan expressed how in addition to the social and professional networks that brotherhood offered; it was the responsibility of everyone to share their knowledge. Jewel processed this idea further:

Yeah, my ace, he came from the [city], he is a really good kid, nice, but, I mean he came from the hood so I mean coming to college he was like I’m the first person in my family to ever go to college. So, I mean he just told me yesterday, like (name) you talk different, like when you’re in the White environment you talk differently than when you’re in this environment, I’m like yeah, well you got to be able to do that, like you have to be able to adapt to your environment. I don’t always have to talk proper but when I need to, I can.

The brotherhood theme in both its facets speaks to familial, social, and to a great extent navigational capital. It is important for African American students to have spaces on PWI campuses where they can be around other students like them (Baber, 2010). African American males in particular have the opportunity to benefit tremendously by having spaces where they can be around other men in a positive atmosphere. The ways in which the participants talked about brotherhood illuminates the importance of the relationships that they build as members in their organizations. These relationships helped to challenge largely accepted norms around masculinity because what they describe is in opposition to mainstream depictions of masculinity for this population. For example, participants expressed a genuine love for their fraternity brothers, which in some circles could be seen as homoerotic, however within the context of the Black fraternal experience is normalized. Participants’ comments also illustrate the fluidity of brotherhood in how the bonds were reciprocal. For instance, participants received obvious
benefits from their affiliation. At the same time, there was an exchange interdependent between members as shown in Jewel’s comments. Through the bonds participants’ developed, it appeared as though they were able to activate familial, social, and to a great extent navigational capital.

Although familial capital addresses the cultural knowledge nurtured within the family, the definition also allows for the expansion of family to the broader term of kinship. In the case of the participants, we see familial capital in how they use their fraternities as a family. All of the men were aware of the lack of diversity in regards to the African American student population at MSU. For this reason, many sought out the fraternity as a way to build family away home. Further, within their fraternity “family” structures members were provided further cultural lesson concerning issues like how to African Americans “survive” on the campus of MSU, or where the places are they can go on campus when they need help.

Social capital emerged through the theme of brotherhood, as one of the mail pillars of most fraternities is their social component. The uniqueness in these forms of social capital is that they are rooted in race and gender. The men in this study chose to join Black fraternities because they facilitated meeting and be around African American men and not just men. Noting this fact, the social capital they further acquired was largely rooted within the Black male experience at MSU and elsewhere. Moreover, we see that the family structure of the brotherhood that helps to create additional social capital for participants also extended their ability to navigate through MSU because of the increased network that extended on the tools they could use to be successful.

**Theme Two: Impact of Involvement.** When it came to the “daily grind” of functioning as a member of a Black Greek Letter fraternity, all participants agreed that membership was
good, but not what they expected. For example, Louis described his expectations of gaining membership, “I don’t know, I thought I was gonna have super powers or something like that, I mean it’s been cool but I did not gain any super powers”. Louis’ thoughts about how membership would change his life an though farfetched, his sentiments provide insight into how participants thought their lives would be changed. Nevertheless, fraternal involvement did present real changes in the lives of participants, primarily through expanding their social networks, and increasing their workload with fraternal obligations.

*Expanding social networks.* Nonchalantly talking about the social impact of his membership in a fraternity Sean said, “socially I guess it really did make me more well-known on campus but that’s not what I really wanted from it, but it definitely changed me, changed my status on campus”. This response describes the social aspect of fraternal membership for the participants in this study. Despite all but one student asserting that he chose to become a member of Black Greek life for the “right” reasons, no one could deny the social implications behind their decision. Judging from participants’ responses, these implications were enormous and played a different role in how participants shaped their fraternal experience, and their time as a student at MSU. Kenny related his social life as a fraternity man to becoming an overnight celebrity. Although not uttered quite the same way by men insinuated this same idea. Unpacking the celebrity persona Kenny said:

> At first, it was kind of overwhelming because as soon as you come out [become an active member on campus], you kind of become a celebrity type and I guess I wasn’t really ready for that. Because that wasn’t the reason I joined, it was more of, I got a label in a way. A lot of people knew me but not a lot of people really knew who I was or actually knew me as a person. I would say it was pretty good but it was just overwhelming because I wasn’t really expecting to be labeled that hard. It was always Kenny the Kappa. Oh this and that, it’s always attached so that wasn’t my goal when I came out, I just wanted to be Kenny he’s doing this he’s doing that and he's a kappa but it’s like okay Kenny the kappa does this
I had the opportunity to witness Kenny’s “celebrity status” firsthand after an event held on campus. While we spoke, he was approached by several students, when asked if he knew these students his reply was no. As we talked about the celebrity status of Black Greeks, Kenny commented on the power and responsibility associated with the increased “celebrity”, and increased social circles associated with their membership. Jewel already experienced the “limelight” through his identity as a varsity athlete. Still, he talked about how assuming another identity as a fraternity man altered his already public persona on campus. Sharing these thoughts, he mentioned “being an athlete you automatically have more attention, being Greek you get more eyes on you, people watching what you do even more intently”. Sean and Greg also felt as though they were on a pedestal with the added pressure of having to appease multiple groups on campus. The added pressure of having their every action scrutinized because they were better known was stressful; still, the social benefits outweighed the drawbacks.

Through our conversations and watching him interact with students, it became apparent that Greg had a lot of social influence on campus. As he talked about his life at MSU before becoming a member of his fraternity and did not hesitate to assert he had always been part of the “in crowd”. Nevertheless, despite feeling as though he brought a good level of connections into the fraternity, he also felt the difference in becoming a member. Talking about these differences, Greg shared:

My network has gotten bigger, a lot of more people know me, and I became more popular. When I say my network got bigger I mean with students on campus both White and Black as well as administrators and stuff. The thing that kills me the most is that I was one of the people that wants people to know me for me, but when I became an Alpha, people referred to me as “Greg the Alpha, or, you know, “Greg, he’s an Alpha.” Not like “Greg, that dude, he’s an Alpha,” or “He’s in the business college, and this and that and that,” “Greg the Alpha.” So it took me a while to get used to that ‘cause I know I’m an Alpha and everything but I’m me before I became Alpha, you know.
Greg’s comments open up a new conversation on how membership extended social life and networks. Before he joined his fraternity, he felt fairly well plugged into the Black community on campus as a student worker in the Black Cultural Center and member of several Black student organizations on campus. He also talked about his gaining access to diverse social circles allowed him to leave his comfort zone:

It also helped me out to have gotten to know more people outside of the Black community, which I appreciate. ‘Cause I feel like if I wasn’t Greek, I wouldn’t have met people in multi-culture council and IFC and also other sororities. It’s the icebreaker, you know. I see your letters, “oh hey, what’s your fraternity?” I mean, I know what it is, I can read your letters right there though but I’m still going to ask anyway. They’d be like, “oh, I’m in this, and that, and that.”

Building these new networks, Greg commented how it helped him to see the larger picture of what being Greek meant and increased the amount of people he could use as resources on campus. Henry and Omar also utilized their improved status on campus to step outside of their comfort zones. Both expressed that they were not heavily involved in the Black community before joining a fraternity, this changed after membership. Commenting on their experiences Henry mentioned:

Socially I mean I pretty much know the entire Black community. Before I joined, I knew Black people but now everywhere I go I know black people and this can be good sometimes, especially at a campus like this. I mean that of course has increased. I wouldn’t have known probably any Black people if I hadn’t joined a fraternity, besides the people in the gospel choir.

Henry had a diverse circle but realized the importance of having a connection with the Black community; his membership allowed him to keep his preexisting friends and gather more. Talking about his exposure to other Black Greeks and students on campus Omar explained:

I actually met a lot more Black Greeks. I didn’t know sororities, I didn’t know who was who at all, so I got to actually tie people to their sororities, and their fraternities, which was pretty cool as far as Black wise. And you know, going to the [NPHC] meetings and actually seeing that it’s a council and that they actually have meetings and things that run like this that was pretty cool. It was also cool just making connections and realizing that I
had other organizations that I could go to help; NPHC is like a family for the Black Greeks on campus. But I just felt like I was a lot more social after coming up to, after becoming a member.

These examples from Henry and Omar help illustrate how in regards to increased social standing on campus; participants took what they needed in order to help better their overall time as a member. Finally, and not to be dismissed was the prevalence of comments around increased access to women on campus. Explaining his newly inherited female predicament with a half smirk Bryan shared, “the women come like crazy, guys know you, all of a sudden everybody started knowing your name and wanting to say what’s up”. Largely, participants welcomed the heightened social status that membership afforded them; additionally consistent with literature addressing Black male masculinity in college, they also viewed fraternal membership as additional badge of manhood on campus (Harper, 2004). As the talked about other commitments associated with involvement in a Black fraternity many appeared to experience some level of dissonance associated with what they were getting, and what they might be giving up.

Fraternal obligations. Outside of the increased social networks, parties, step shows, and letter wearing around campus, the participants in this study agreed that being a fraternity man had obligations they had not intended. All of the men were full time students and most worked jobs in addition to their academic commitments in order to the supplement their income. Joining a fraternity placed an added stress on their lives because of the time commitment required by their organizations. In many cases, these time commitments included having to do community service and educational programming to remain in good standing with their national headquarters. In addition, participants also talked about responsibilities they had to uphold by the institution and more specific the Greek life office that also took more time out of their schedule. Finally, and seemingly most pressing to participants was their chapters’ reputation on
campus, which often revolved around which organizations had the best programs and were most visible (by way of parties and other social gatherings) on campus.

For many, the added work was not a total surprise, but the amount of extra work was the issue. Talking very candidly about his work life balance prior to and after joining his fraternity Greg mentioned, “Greek life came into play…it was another like 18 credit hours onto my schedule”. This appeared the intonation for all of the men, and so was the impact of the work for the fraternity on their academic lives. Anthony talked about the intersection of work and fraternal relationships:

Yeah, you don’t really realize it until you are part of it, it’s just as much work as you feel the responsibility or you feel the pressure to take on because you could just sit there and not do anything, but at the same time if you were to do that you would not have that respect from your brothers. It’s also about being true to yourself and the organization, we all know the history of Kappa, we have had successful members, it’s about wanting to continue the legacy, to be successful not only academically but in life overall

The majority of the participants felt compelled to give back to the fraternity to show that they were appreciative and deserving of the brotherhood, but sometimes it appeared as if they perhaps had to sacrifice too much. As a previous chapter President, Henry provided his perspective of work and the role that it played in his experience.

It just makes you tired getting like 30 emails a day from MSU all these restrictions and this thing you have to meet. Requirements for your chapter just to stay relevant and not seem like you’re slacking off, and then you’re accountable for your members, so if they do something stupid then it comes right back on you and then parties come back on you, any citations, academic probation, all grades. What you can do in a year and then if you can’t have events then you’re no longer relevant enough to get more members and your chapter dies. So it’s a lot of requirements, you have to fill and then if you’re the only one on top of that then you have to make sure you stay on top of that. That takes times that take away from your schoolwork, which takes away from your grades.

Anthony (current chapter president) and Henry’s (former chapter president) comments touched on two ideas that arose as patterns with participants—who works, and the cost of involvement. Robert and Kenny both members of different organizations offered somewhat
competing reasons why there was so much work. Kenny’s experience largely centered on chapter size, “I knew it would be work but I guess with our numbers it was a lot more work than I assumed it would have been”. For his chapter, Kenny felt the lack of membership size made more work for the brothers. On the other hand, Robert felt the issue primarily rested with not enough members doing work as he suggests of his own chapter “You have a lot of work that only a few people do. I know that for sure to be true in my chapter”.

Despite how participants described the role of work in their fraternal lives, one consistency was the dissonance they felt between the resources they gained from membership, and the toll that work took on their academic careers. Kenny shared his perspective on the relationship between benefits and costs:

I say it benefited me as well as hindered me. It benefited me because we had study tables there were always people pushing me to get my work done and because we had older guys they would tell us what classes to take and what classes to avoid and stuff like that. But in a sense also had so much other work to do outside of classes that it started to wear me out because I trying to focus on all my classes as well as focus on the other tasks that I had to do like heading committees. It kind of hurt me for a while but once I able to balance and figure it out.

While Henry talked about the role of work in his experience, he was very critical, reflective, and open to sharing his perspective:

Academically it kind of lowered it a little bit, because you have more stress for other events you’re trying to promote and work towards and work on. I guess I feel like if I hadn’t been for [fraternity] I’d have a 4.0. So it’s kind of taken a toll but also it’s given me a lot more resources. I have brothers in the chapter who are willing to help, as well as alumni and other people on campus who want to see us be successful; but I don’t know if I would have had to use them if I had more time on my hands.

Continuously throughout conversations with participants, the idea of fraternal obligations had significant meaning. They all spoke with high regard about the amount of community service hours their chapters had accounted for, boasted about programming efforts on campus and how many students from the larger community they could draw to their events, and relished
in the families and other individuals they had touched through their philanthropic efforts. They all tied this work back to the ideals of their fraternities, or as Robert said, “ask not what the fraternity can do for you, but what you can do for the fraternity”. Contrarily, they were all aware of the toll that work took on other areas of their lives, and so for many participants membership was a constant balance between costs and benefits, and work and play.

The dissonance felt by participants around their involvement is something to note. For many, gaining additional social connections was a benefit. The obligations associated with membership presented other issues that many had not anticipated. The social theme ties to social capital as well as navigational capital. Research addressing sense of belonging posits that when individuals view themselves as socially connected and/or important to others it can lead to positive outcomes in the areas of motivation, satisfaction, retention, persistence and achievement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Myer & Turner, 2002; Strayhorn, 2012). For this reason, social capital as well as navigational capital is helpful in understanding the social impact of membership on participants in this study. The increased social circles for the participants in this study served dual purposes. Initially, receiving the role of an “overnight celebrity” gave them access into different groups and in the process appeared to better participants’ satisfaction with their collegiate experience. Becoming members of Black Greek organizations strengthened the networks of people and resources for participants.

Gaining access to additional forms of social capital on campus presented students with the opportunity to meet additional people on campus as well as build relationships with administrators on campus. Participants utilized these relationships in order to increase their navigational capital. For example, Greg mentioned that having letters on his shirt gave him an instant connection with Greek members outside of the Black community. He in turn used these
relationships to learn more about how White Greeks function and learn about how they help their brothers and sisters to be academically successful. Additionally the heightened social capital that participants observed had an irrefutable effect on their relationships with administrators and other Greeks on campus; this in turn added to their ability to navigate because they had more of a network to consult for programming, social events, etc. Several students talked about how being a member of the Greek community provided access into to larger Greek circles and opened conversations about the academic and social life at MSU. Second, because students had larger circles it helped to mitigate the fact that they were the minority students on campus, in this way they felt like they belonged in the spaces they occupied; this was especially evident in the cases of Henry and Omar. The notion that membership provided access to people outside of the Black community is important when considering social dynamics on college campuses. The notion that students self-segregate along racial lines has empirical backing (Tatum, 2003). However, the experiences of the participants from this study encourage continued dialogue about the potential of predominantly Black student organizations at PWIs to serve as a space for identity and leadership development, venues to promote the Black community, and mechanisms to help break down the balkanization commonly seen on PWI campuses.

Obligations associated with membership has underlying connections to aspiration, navigational, and social capital. Guffrida (2003) postulates that African American students use Black student organizations to alleviate their experiences at PWIs. A caveat to this approach is that over involvement in these types of organizations can be detrimental to the student experience; and this is specifically the case for students in BGLOs (Harper, 2000). In the case of participants in this study, working for the fraternity provided additional ways to strengthen their skill set and gain navigational tools. For example, in planning large-scale events participants
gained skills that gave them confidence in other areas of their lives. Additionally, working with other students and administrators on signature programs yielded more resources for their navigation because they were in position to hear about jobs on campus, internships, etc. Membership also offered social capital that comes at a cost to the individual. As a result, the theme of work equally exposes the less beneficial components of the capital participants acquired through membership. For participants in this study, “putting in work” had ties to not wanting brothers and outside individuals to view them as a “letter wearer”, or individual who only joined for the social benefits.

During their discussion of the role of fraternal work in their lives participants shared that the root of work had underlying connections to possessing a desire to project themselves as the best fraternal member. Several students felt that the benefits they acquired through membership, they had to “work” for the fraternity. The social capital they possessed that allowed them to maneuver through different social circles served myriad beneficial purposes, conversely, in some cases presented a barrier to reaching their educational goals because of too much exposure. The social capital they acquired from membership made participants popular; but to maintain the fraternities’ popularity (and their own), they had to attend events and hold program—sometimes to the detriment of other areas of their lives.

How Henry articulates the cyclical relationship of cost and benefit of the fraternal experience is directly linked to the theme of work. The topic of work was sensitive to participants because it required reflecting on the cost and benefit of membership. Almost all the participants expressed feeling as though they could have earned higher grades had they had more time to focus on their academics, conjointly they were to follow these admissions with a first assertion that it [membership] was worth the added stress that was unfathomable to non-
members. In the idea of involvement, we see the positive attributes associated with involvement for students.

**Theme Three: The Value Added of the Black Fraternal Experience.** Although their levels of membership varied, and with many years in the fraternity ahead of them, participants in this study felt that lessons learned through membership changed them—in most cases for the better. Across the Greek system there is an ongoing conversation about the “value added” to joining Greek organizations. These conversations do not exclude BGLOs and in many instances resonate more heavily with these organizations. As participants reflected on their time in the fraternity, they all identified their membership as having a profound impact on who they were, and their self-perception. Much of this metamorphous connected to maturity, embracing positive images of their organization, and the treatment they received from individuals in the campus community and elsewhere. Within the large ethos of value added Participants also identified having increased expectations placed upon them and improving self-confidence.

**Increased expectations.** Despite the expectation that participants exemplify exceptional work ethic and portfolio before gaining membership, once initiated, expectation levels heightened. More than professing one-liners about scholarship from their fraternity’s motto and aims, participants shared explicit examples of the intersection of fraternity and academics. As one of very few African Americans in his major, Robert discussed how membership influenced his academics, “most of the brothers were engineers and that was good because they could help me with my work. Just seeing guys who were further along and were willing to answer my questions about engineering stuff was good.” As I further questioned how his brothers assisted him, he verbalized:

> Just even as my classes get harder- it has been brothers that have already been though these classes, being able to help me, that’s perfect. That’s how we’ve been sustaining for
this long, just having the team help you. Having people that can give you advice on how
to do better in this class, what teachers to go see, what internships to seek out and what
other opportunities to pursue

Robert felt like his brothers had stake in his success because it was something they
always talked about from the time he expressed interest in joining, to the time of our
conversation. One of the main reasons he decided to become a member was because he believed
that members were serious about their academics and would help him to reach his goals in this
area. Kenny also felt that becoming a member of a fraternity assisted his academics. Because of
the trials that he overcame at MSU, Robert did not lack confidence and was proud of the fact that
he is a very driven person. He did not hesitate to the share the extra academic boost he received:

I always had people around me who were willing and they really tried to make sure I
stayed focused. As far as make sure your works getting done, they were like how are you
doing with this?, Are you studying for this, okay? (name) set time aside for this, don’t
worry about this we'll take care of it, but pretty much a lot of people, were more on my
team than before. More people were willing to help when I needed it, since I was so
young. A lot of them that were in my major or engineering knew a lot more people in
engineering that could help me, so it opened up a broader network of engineers that I
could get help form.

Kenny mentioned several times how academics were something he took pride in
maintaining, and an area that since beginning his career at MSU had been private. He did
mention that after becoming a member of his fraternity he also wanted to do better because his
grades represented the chapter in addition to himself.

Henry admitted that in regards to his academic career, he experienced difficulties. When
he was an aspiring member of the fraternity, he had exceptional grades. At the time of our
conversation, he just experienced a tough semester but remained optimistic about the rest of his
college career. Despite his inconsistent academic career as of late, Henry felt that his fraternity
helped. Sharing an episode with a brother:

He’s [alumni member] willing to give you any help you need. I had a homework
assignment to do; I had to interview a superintendent. I completely forgot so I just called
him and said I need an interview real fast, there’s a report due tomorrow. He said just hit
me up and the two hour interview I got done with just one phone call. I was supposed to
meet up with the person and everything, but didn’t have the time so I just called him up
and he filled in all the blanks. They also sent all their old homework and stuff to us and
passed down a lot of stuff to us that really helped

Beyond visiting for the occasional party and asking about members’ grades, most
participants did not mention alumni as playing a central role in this part of their membership.

Like Henry, Greg shared how one particular alumni member not only kept track of his progress
but also his brothers:

You know we all had [bombing] GPAs and everything, so he was always on our backs
for grades right and stuff like that. I appreciate him being on my backburner ‘because you
know, in college, you can get real lackadaisical. With your parents not here, you can do
what you want. But having that discretion, that respect for him when he calls me and my
grades ain’t right, and he’s the type of person that I can be honest with about my grades.
Like, you know, “I ain’t doing too well; this is what’s going on.” And he’d be like, “well,
this is what you gotta do, and if you don’t do it, then that’s your fault.”

Greg also mentioned how membership in a Black fraternity opened access to other
fraternities and even more academic resources:

Even with the IFC and the Caucasian fraternities and everything, just ‘cause I’m Greek
they want to help me with the homework sometimes, or give me the answers for me
sometimes. They’re like, “here you go, and do you have the answers? Last semester, here
you go.” And I’m like, “oh, ok, well thank you.” You know, so they can help me out.

A final pattern for this theme that participants shared was the notion of building a culture
around academics. On a basic level, all of the chapters appeared to have somewhat of a culture
around promoting academic success. Robert, Jewel and Sean articulated this culture more
specifically in their discourse. Robert mentioned “Alpha is academic achievement so that
brought the academic importance home, okay that’s important to them they respect that which is
what I need”; Jewel went further into this idea:

And that’s another thing about the Kappas here on campus, there were highly really
competitive, like over everything, like “my GPA is a 3.4 last semester, what you got?”
like always in the library, like 24/7. Just that competitiveness, and the amount of time you
have to devote to your organization that would force them to become more strict with
their schedule because no one wants to be known as the brother who is not handling his business academically.

Although for Sean’s chapter academics were not a competition, it was important and something that they took pride in. Sharing their “academic image” around campus Sean stated:

When we walk into classrooms me and my fraternity brothers don’t sit in the back like those cool kids who don’t pay attention or sleep. Like you see us being different sitting in the front, or when you go to the library and you see Greeks studying together it’s definitely something different. A lot of these kids come to the library just to joke of, you see this library is very empty this morning…I don’t know man, it’s just something different, we want to carry ourselves better and are willing to do what we have to do to be successful including help each other.

This idea was interesting because Sean was the only participant to articulate a culture centered around academics although his chapter’s collective G.P.A. was no impressive. Addressing the discrepancy between promoted and enacted values around academics in his chapter Sean acknowledged that some men were not upholding this portion of brotherhood as much as they could. Jewel also shared similar sentiments when I asked him about the chapter G.P.A. mentioning, “Yeah, we push each other to be the best that we can be, I’m not saying that anyone is perfect but we do push each other”. Increased expectations appeared to benefit not only participants academically; it also permeated into other facet of their lives including their confidence.

Growing confidence. Confidence growth through increased skill acquisition and expectations also resonated with participants. All felt they benefited the legacies of their chapters by becoming members and saw themselves as different since becoming members. Some changes were less profound like Henry’s assertion, “[I’m] more outgoing, I was kind of an introvert. I didn’t really talk to people unless I knew them, but now I see myself at the bar or whatever, taking the first step”; or more reflective like Nick who mentioned, “I have become more aware of my responsibilities and how I carry myself”. Overall, these differences were diverse, from
their relationships with others (work and professional), to how they approached their
schoolwork, and in some cases, their overall philosophies about life. When I spoke with Greg
about the thought of membership changing people, he shared these thoughts, “the whole process
is for you to change, it’s for you to become a better person”. Sharing his thoughts further, Greg
felt the pledge process and membership in general creates the atmosphere for change. In many
cases, this came from a consciousness that they were now part of something larger than one
individual, or as Robert asserted, “Dr. Martin Luther King and other greats set up this fraternity.
Who am I just to sit in here chilling- like what’s up girl…how you doing? Why would I disgrace
the name of those people”? Greg provided a deeper explanation of the changes he had been
through:

I feel like my eyes have opened to a lot. I feel like I’ve grown, I feel like I have changed
in that I have become more resourceful. I have grown to communicate better with bros; I
have grown better to operate within an organization and everything. Like I said, getting
leadership roles I have learned to be able to just sit back and observe more than just being
the first person to talk and everything.

Greg felt many of his changes positively translated into other areas of his life including
his participation in other student organizations and his ability to communicate more effectively
to diverse groups of people. Lamar shared similar changes to Greg in how he learned to be more
resourceful, talking about this new outlook he inherited Lamar asserted:

I think differently on many things. I look at problems in a different way now, I think
more out the box than just like the normal approach, but in a way, I’ve always been like
that. Like I’ll think out of the box, but now I’ll notice little things that I didn’t notice
before, ‘cause, well, going through the process, you pay attention to small details, more
than you would just normal. So being trained to do that, now I pick out those things that
most people wouldn’t normally catch. And it’s like, when I see that, it causes me to think
outside of the box even more differently. Usually I’ll find that my friends who aren’t
Greek I’m usually three steps ahead of them in processing certain things. They’ll be
looking at a problem, and I’ll already know how to solve it, and they’re still trying to
figure out where to even begin. And a lot of times, people don’t even see how that
happens but when you’re done, you just think of stuff differently, you just have a
different mindset.
Lamar felt like membership had put him ahead of his peers in regards to his problem solving ability. When asked to provide an example for thinking outside of the box, Lamar talked about how he looks at getting through his program in a different way, how he seeks out internships, and how he gets work accomplished for the fraternity and otherwise. His comments as well as Greg’s, in a roundabout way addressed the added confidence that participants felt from being members of their fraternities. Omar’s comments about how he approaches involvement in one of his student organization illustrate this point:

The biggest thing for me is probably just being more of a leader now. Like I mentioned, I carry myself differently but because I am part of something bigger I feel like more of a leader. My voice is heard a lot more just ‘cause I assert myself a lot more in our meetings, this was something that I took away from being a [fraternity man] you know. But then I have the chance to listen to everybody else and I just try to put insight into that whether it is trying to make an idea better or ask questions if I think something cannot work. But it’s just like, just me, just being the leader, getting involved in that. That’s probably the big thing.

Before sharing these thoughts, Omar talked about how as a member of the student programming board he often felt other students silenced him when making decisions about inclusive program options. Omar’s changes since joining the organization were prominent and included possessing more confidence and an awareness about how to assert his voice.

Jewel and Anthony reflected the most about the man they had become after join their fraternities. Perhaps it was because these two seemingly brought the most to their fraternal experience in regards to academic standing and matriculation through college. They witnessed changes in themselves. Anthony, seemingly very confident student felt the fraternity supplemented this piece of his identity stating:

Maybe I have become more confident, maybe I do not know if it is from the fraternity or not. The part of me that says that the fraternity did have some influence comes from the fact that we do have members who have done big things. Although I have always been driven, knowing that I am member of such an old and prestigious organization on some
levels gives me more confidence that help me to know that I can be successful in whatever I do after I graduate.

Jewel shared that he became more aware and prideful of his African American culture since he became a member of his fraternity. Having lived in the country growing up, also not spending a lot of time with large groups of African Americans before college, the fraternity made him even more aware of this piece of his identity. Jewel also mentioned, “I do see things differently” when talking about how he approaches people and different obstacles in his life.

The value added theme speaks to aspirational capital, social capital and navigational capital. The academic experiences of participants in this study connect with navigational and aspiration capital. Though college preparation perhaps plays the largest role in the academic success of African American males, having supportive networks that promote high performance is also essential. All of the participants shared opinions about their educational philosophies that indicate they were highly driven academically. For example, almost all students choose to participate in a summer enrichment program before their freshmen year although it was not a requirement of their respective colleges. Nothing their desires to achieve academically, what they appeared to receive from the fraternal experience was increased navigational skills in regards to their academics. All members expressed that the fraternity stressed academics not only during their process of becoming a member, but after their initiation into the fraternity. The expectation of their national organizations that all chapter and members maintain a certain G.P.A pushed the aspirations of participants because they no longer wanted to obtain high grades for themselves, but also for their brothers. Feeling as though they were being depended upon to represent the chapter well academically in turn increased their aspirations to be successful by making them work much harder on their academics than before they became members; essentially no one willingly wanted to not meet the goal of their fraternity academically.
Gaining increased navigational skills came in the form of how the chapter held participants accountable for their academics. Not only did participants express that they felt it was an expectation to achieve well academically, they also mentioned that older brothers where often willing to help them navigate their path to success. For example, many participants mentioned having older brothers in the chapter as well as alum who were their same major, having older brothers who had already forged the path in many cases made their navigation smoother because they knew what courses to take, and how to best get through their programs.

A commonality among all Black Greek fraternities is their shared belief that they facilitate for the “better making of men”. The formula for this process includes introducing men to the distinguished histories of Black fraternities while providing them with the tools and knowledge to be useful members of the organization, and then challenging members to create their own histories either through business, politics, education, law, medicine, or community activism. In this way, the messages that Black Greek fraternities attempt to perpetuate are in direct contrast to messages many Black males receive through their enculturation and educational experience in this society. In essence, the BGLOs appeared to be a response to dominant notions of Black masculinity. The participants in this study felt that that becoming a fraternity man made them better capable individuals through the various tools they had acquired.

Hearing participants talk about their experience it was evident they felt more confident in their abilities because of the increased skills they acquired from membership that they could use to handle the normal stressors of college life. Gaining these sources of confidence and perseverance afforded participants the opportunity to better activate aspirational capital. Many participants possessed and/or activated aspirational capital at various junctures in their lives; membership changed participants in that it increased their capital in this area by providing
another source of motivation for members to want to be successful. Another way that membership altered participants was through their increased social capital; several students shared that they had become more social after becoming members, and this included contacting different groups of students and administrators that they might not have before membership. The fact that participants changed and therefore felt more comfortable increasing their network helped with their navigational capital and in particular their belief that “I will find a way to get it done”, a sentiment echoed by several participants in this study. Participants felt possessing this mentality allowed them to consider available resources at times throughout their collegiate career.

As the daily activities of Black fraternal life seamlessly overlap in a series of events, meetings, service, and social gatherings, the themes that emerged from the experiences of participants’ elucidate the coalesce of forms of capital in their lives. Through listening to how participants interpreted their lives as fraternity men, and observing their actions in various spaces on campus it is apparent that the themes mentioned in this chapter, though all important in the experiences of these men, defer in their saliency. Brotherhood and impact of involvement appeared to be the most salient themes frequently cutting across all other themes. Whether participants talked about academics, their enhanced social lives, or work, the notion of brotherhood permeated these areas of their lives. For example, brotherhood was a driving force behind why participants wanted to get good grades, and much of their social lives often included a large dose of interactions with their brothers.

Involvement’s saliency was overarching because gaining membership in a fraternity facilitated for their penetration in all facets of the institution including various student groups and faculty and administrators. Conversely, the themes of academics, social, and value added though
essential in the lives of participants appeared more compartmentalized in the lives of participants but influenced each other. Participants knew when it was time to be academic and when they had to be social, and although these might overlap at times (e.g., holding an educational program etc.), the two themes rarely traversed. Finally, the theme valued added of membership was less of a visible characteristic and more so about a mindset. The degree to which participants felt they had changed was not consistent and often depended upon their conceptions of self before membership.

Summary

The emergent themes highlighted in this chapter communicate African American males’ experiences within Black Greek Letter Organizations. Observing participants’ prior to joining their fraternities and throughout their fraternal membership through a community cultural wealth lens suggests that BGLOs in many ways augment the forms of capital, and perhaps allowed students to access other forms of capital. Through discussing aspects of their fraternal experience, participants described ways in which either they accessed capital, or their membership facilitated for capital transaction. Before membership, participants were routinely the receivers of capital and though largely unaware of these transactions verbalized through their experiences of roles of various forms of capital in their lives. This was a marked difference from participants once they became members of their fraternity they made the transition from outsiders of the forms of capital that fraternities offer, and transitioned to insiders and potentially transmitters of capital. The ways in which African American males in Black fraternities specifically interact with forms of capital described by Yosso (2005) is absent from the literature and thus lends itself to the formation of a conceptual model to describe this situation. The next chapter will attempt to describe a conceptual model for understanding the lives African
American males in BGLOs while directly addressing the questions that undergird this study.
The balance of the chapter includes the implications for practice and theory, and provides recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of African American males in BGLOs at a Predominantly White Institution. The first chapter presented the problem statement, context, research questions guiding this analysis, and discussed the significance of this line of research. The second chapter referenced relevant literature to this study specifically addressing the experiences of African American males at PWIs and within Black Greek fraternities; chapter two concluded with a discussion of cultural capital the specific framework for this study—community cultural wealth. The methodological approach for conducting research was the focus of chapter three and included information about participant recruitment, site of this investigation, data collection and analysis, and techniques for assuring reliability and credibility. The fourth chapter included a brief historical description of the Black Greek community at MSU and participant profiles. Finally, chapter five shared the findings from participants’ experiences and included an analysis using community cultural wealth.

Provided in this chapter is a response to the questions guiding this study based on data collection and analysis. In doing so, I juxtapose findings with previous literature on African American males at PWIs and in Black fraternal organizations. Preceding this section is a conceptual map that explains how participants interact with forms of capital before and after their membership in their fraternities. Addressed in the next section is a discussion of this research’s contributions to the framework. The balance of the chapter concludes by discussing implications for practice, policy, and theory, in addition to recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Research question one. This section addresses the primary question for this study: What nexus exists between the capital African American males possess as suggested by Yosso’s
community cultural wealth framework and their experience in Black Greek Letter Organizations at a predominantly White institution? Discussions concerning the relevancy of BGLOs in the lives of African American males, and existing literature asserting that students of color possess capital that facilitates educational success spurred the primary research question for this inquiry. Utilizing community cultural wealth as a framework, findings from this study imply that BGLOs have the potential to provide and/or further expand forms of capital for African American men. Important to distinguish, possessing forms of community cultural wealth appeared to influence the experiences of African American males in BGLOs.

Remarks from participants about their high school experience and beginning of their careers at MSU indicated that most exercised forms of cultural wealth. What they possessed, and how much they benefited from each varied, and so did their sources of capital, which included family, friends, mentors, and teachers. Before they became fraternity men, participants’ experiences alluded to the salient nature of possessing a healthy racial and masculine identity. Participants’ healthy racial identity in many ways facilitated access to navigational and social capital because despite experiencing constant bombardment of racial micro-aggressions, participants’ viewed their race as an asset and not deterrent to their success. Fostering these feelings facilitated the connection with programs, groups, and other students that eventually became a social and support network. The idea that these men fostered healthy racial identity at the onset of their collegiate careers deviates from the first stages of Cross’ (1991) racial identity model which suggests Black students experience negative episodes which prompt racial salience in their lives. Instead, participants in this study experienced positive episodes (e.g., mentorship, family, bridge programs) that gave them racial pride that permeated other facets of their lives and served as a catalyst for the initial success at MSU. Further, possessing healthy forms of
masculinity also heavily influenced participants at the onset and throughout the duration of their careers. Instead of succumbing to the self-fulfilled prophesy of “cool” pose (Majors & Billison, 1992), or falling into the legal system like many other African American males (Alexander, 2012), these men shucked all traditional notions of Black male masculinity in order to assure their success. Scholars have discussed the role of masculinity in the lives of collegiate African American males (Harper, 2004; Harris II & Martin, 2006). In line with this work, participants had positive Black male images in their lives, and as a result fostered high expectations for themselves in the areas of academics and involvement at MSU.

Before pursuing membership in their fraternities’, participants were aware of the potential benefits, they were also conscious of what strengths they brought to the organization that would benefit both the organization and individual. These feelings show that possessing forms of capital was paramount for the further acquisition of forms of capital. Participants felt their fraternal membership had the potential to improve their experience in several ways; they agreed that members of these groups first needed to have the attitude that they would take advantage of their membership; otherwise, the benefits of membership could not fully come to fruition. Some participants readily shared that they had not maximized their membership to its full potential because they only focused on certain components of the experience often to the detriment of other areas of the fraternal experience. In contrast, the men who felt as though they took full advantage of their membership were often the individuals that realized all the benefits of membership (e.g., business connections, mentorship, etc.). The fact that participants in this study appeared to activate forms of capital that they brought into their membership suggests some participants might have viewed BGLOs an avenue for the further formation of capital. Notwithstanding, it is also important to mention that a majority of these men were second-
generation college students and subsequently came from backgrounds that were more conducive for success. This fact is important and needs consideration when interrupting findings because backgrounds influence the degree to which students’ exercised capital before membership, and what the fraternity gave them in this area.

Although analyzing the experiences of students of color through a traditional cultural capital lens is problematic (Winkle-Wagner, 2010), there is paucity in the literature addressing the diverse ways in which Africa American males use capital in their collegiate experiences. Utilizing community cultural wealth to gather the experiences of participants before joining BGLOs yields findings that affirm previous scholar’s work that posits that African American males utilize multiple means to persist through postsecondary (Dancy, & Brown, 2008; Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). Further, findings from this study also dove tail with empirical research highlighting characteristics that aide in success for African American males in college (Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2013). For students in this study, forms of capital assisted with their matriculation at MSU. Their experiences validate the overarching importance of possessing the aspirations to succeed, and the role of aspiration in activating other forms of capital. For example, by possessing the aspirations to be successful in college, participants had the ability to exercise other forms of capital that in concert with one another aided in their navigation through MSU. Possessing the ability to activate capital is something that might not be the case with all African American males but rang true for these students and ultimately played a fundamental role in their experience within their fraternities, particularly in regards to building social and navigational capital.

Interestingly, the participants who could better verbalize the role of capital in their lives appeared more critical of their experience and felt they maximized their time the most. These
students could clearly articulate what they noticed as a discrepancy between the espoused and enacted values of their respective organizations. This might have been the case because these students were most aware of additional resources they had outside of their fraternity, and searched for these same resources within their fraternal experience. Class standing and experience in the fraternity also linked the students’ experiences together, the older the member, the more critical he was of the fraternal experience; additionally, second generation college students were overall more critical of all their experiences. This idea is evident by the dissonance Anthony and Henry expressed when discussing their time as fraternity men. In one instance, both men laud their fraternity (both at the chapter and national level) for the benefits they have received as members. While in another instance, they were able to provide numerous examples of how their organizations might sometimes play to the stereotypes of Black fraternities (e.g., partying too much, hazing, etc.). Noticing this fact, these two blended their double consciousness as Black men and Black fraternity men so that whatever they felt was not present through the fraternity they could supplement elsewhere, and vice versa. The notion of supplementing experiences resonated with most participants, as they were aware of the sources of capital they had access to before membership.

**Research question two.** This section addresses the second research question in this study: In what ways might BGLOs further cultivate or hinder various forms of capital described by community and cultural wealth? Community cultural wealth framework directly challenges the dualistic nature of social reproduction that suggests certain groups possess an advantage (in society) solely because they possess the “right” type of capital. Instead, community cultural wealth suggests people of color possess sources of capital that they harvest within their communities that serve in place of traditional forms of capital. BGLOs through their missions
serve as smaller communities within the larger ethos of college campuses, especially at PWIs. Their purpose is to provide forms of capital for their members. Findings from this study imply that to an extent, BGLOs accomplish this task. Evidence also hints at the fact that these organizations serve more than one singular role in the lives of African American males.

Information participants provided in this study suggest that overall, BGLOs aide in the accumulation and cultivation of forms of capital described in the community cultural wealth framework. This process appeared to happen in different ways and arguably influenced not only the males in this study but the larger MSU community. For the males, they received more confidence that they could be leaders not only in their chapters, but also in other student organizations. In this capacity, it appears that BGLOs might serve as a catalyst for the pursuit of larger leadership roles on campus, something especially to note at a PWI. The fact that leadership roles and social interactions occurred outside of the Black community opens a larger discussion concerning the role of BGLOs in deterring the balkanization among racial groups at PWIs.

These findings support existing literature that posits that BGLOs present a valuable means of involvement for African Americans and in particular males (Harper et al., 2005; Harper & Wolley, 2002; Heim, & Nishimura, 1992; Patton & Bonner II, 2001; Schuh, Triponey, Heim, & Nishimura, 1992). Harper, Byars, and Jelke (2005) postulate, “BGLOs have been integral providers of social and cultural integration and are therefore able to positively influence African American students’ adjustment to college” (p. 413). While Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) attest that in the case of African American men, BGLO membership results in greater self-esteem and racial self-concept than nonaffiliated African American male students. Participants’ experiences in this study mimicked many of these sentiments. For
example, Omar and Henry both shared how their fraternal membership helped them to immerse into the Black community at MSU. Membership also helped Sean to earn a summer internship because a brother contacted potential employers for Sean.

Nonetheless, participants were also critical of their time as fraternity members and shared feelings that contradicted capital acquisition and activation. These findings confirm literature finding that BGLOs have the potential to be detrimental to members (Jones, 2004; Kimbrough, 2003). More precisely, the literature exposing the possibility that BGLOs might stifle African American males’ experiences in college resonated to some extent in the language of several participants (e.g., my grades suffered but it was my fault, I struggled the first semester after I pledged). Although overall participants were content with their experience, some individuals expressed frustrations around different aspects of their time as fraternity men. Still, in many cases, these annoyances came as a caveat to a more positive experience. For example, becoming a member of their fraternity increased their status on campus but in doing decreased their time to focus on their studies. Alternatively, fraternal membership allowed them to gain access to overall Greek community, but they had to commit a lot of time stay relevant as an organization; these continual contradictions in findings aide in explaining the multiple dimensions of the Black fraternal experience.

Do these organizations bolster the aspirational capital that Yosso suggests students of color already bring to their educational experience? Many African American males who are able to matriculate through PWIs often possess the drive and determination to accomplish this feat. Whether it came from their parents, mentors, or internally, all the participants in this study appeared to possess some level of aspirational capital; however, what was interesting is how this form of capital differed across participants. For example, the two first generation college
students appeared to develop strategies to be successful much later than students whose parents and siblings went to college; yet, both groups showed a belief to excel despite not always have a clear path to their goals.

For many participants who already appeared to possess a certain level of aspirational capital, fraternal membership expanded this form of capital. Existing literature addressing the importance of student organizations for African American males, though not exclusively speaking to Greek organizations, support the notion that African American males can be the benefactors of campus involvement (Harper, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2009). For participants this occurred by gaining exposure to a wider network of people who could aide in their aspirations by challenging them to dream bigger, and by providing more clarity on how they could reach their academic and career goals. One of the primary ways that dissemination of aspirational capital occurred was through interacting with older members in their organizations albeit at the chapter, local, regional, or national level. In these interactions participants felt their brothers challenged to them to do better than they might have imagined.

Policies and practices that dictate new member selection for BGLOs increase the potential for homogeneity among initiates and have the potential to create selection bias among new initiates. This could have been the case for the participants in this study. Despite almost everyone feeling as though they were assets to their organizations largely because of their desires to be successful, they also mentioned that their aspirations reached greater heights after becoming members. Underlying participants’ aspirations in many cases was a heightened level of self-confidence and feeling that they could accomplish difficult and complex tasks. In no other instance was this more relevant than when participants discussed how they changed during membership. Often times this change joined the belief they had to carry themselves differently
and included awareness that they possessed additional tools that enabled them to be successful. The faith that they were different, in turn appeared to influence heavily their aspirational capital and belief in their ability to be successful.

_Does membership ease members’ navigation through their collegiate experience?_ This question derives from the acknowledgement that a fundamental idea underlying the fraternal experience is that older members help younger members to be more successful. At the point of initiation, most if not all participants appeared to have exercised navigation capital to some extent. How this looked varied along several lines including preexisting ability to navigate college and grade level. Nevertheless, all participants expressed that membership did help ease their matriculation through college, even if impact was minimal. Participants whose parents, guardians, and siblings went to college and were able to share their experiences, the fraternal membership appeared minimal. These students largely knew what campus resources were available and where to look for help. Possessing knowledge of how to navigate through college did not offset campus climate issues as well as how to network for summer internships and other opportunities; participants gathered many of these navigational tools from membership.

Class standing also played a factor in participants’ navigational capital acquisition. BGLOs frequently initiate members after their first year of college; this increases the likelihood that members who join will have already had to exercise some navigational abilities to place themselves in position to pursue membership. In the case of the participants, those who joined sooner (within their first three semesters) attributed more of their navigational skills to membership. This makes sense because these students were younger when they joined; they looked to their older brothers for more guidance and were more prone to stay within their fraternal bonds. This contrasted with participants who joined as upperclassman. In most cases,
these students already possessed higher levels of self-efficacy and therefore became instant disseminators of knowledge.

Overall, observations of participants in this study in relation to navigational capital revealed that membership eased the navigation of participants in some form. The level in which membership eased navigation largely depended on participants’ ability to navigate before they became members and when they chose to join their organizations. Those who activated high levels of navigational capital or were older when they became members did not express fraternal membership as heavily influencing their navigation; conversely, younger students, and those who perhaps did not have access to navigational capital, credited their fraternity with easing their navigation. Nevertheless, joining a group that mitigated the effects of campus climate and provided a social outline eased navigation for all members. These findings support the literature suggesting that participation facilitates matriculation for African American male college students (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Harper, 2005).

**In what ways does affiliation shape the perceived social capital of members?** The final subsidiary question attends to a common theme in the literature addressing BGLOs—the perceived social benefits that African Americans (in this case males) receive because of earning membership into these organizations. Although Black fraternities have a rich history of providing advocacy and helping to produce members who become change agents, at the undergraduate level, a closely aligned with their organizational history are the alumni who wear these letters. Realistically, many students pursue membership in order to access the social benefits. This issue leads to nicknames like “tee-shirt wearers” within the Black Greek community that denote members who joined for unauthentic reasons. Participants in this study
were aware of the potential benefits of the membership before joining, and their comments indicate that membership in Black fraternities influenced their social capital.

One commonality among participants was the increase in social capital they experienced after becoming members of their fraternity. Whether they were relatively unknown on campus or social butterflies as non-affiliated students, membership increased their level of capital. This change appeared most pronounced in the Black community where students like Omar and Henry went from largely functioning on the fringes of the Black community, to feeling embraced by their same race peers. For students like Kenny and Nick who had healthy social reputations, affiliation took their capital to a higher level. Important to mention, social capital for these students involved more than increasing their social networks for the purpose of having fun. Instead, social capital provided the ability to gain exposure to other groups (largely other fraternities and sorority outside of the Black community), administrators, and older brothers in their own organizations once again decreasing the balkanization on campus. Through these additional relationships, participants became more aware of all the resources MSU had to offer and gained a greater familiarity of professional development opportunities.

These findings support the literature that affirms the importance of African American male involvement in college. This research provides several reasons why involvement is important, some of which include sense of belonging, more welcoming environment, increased cultural awareness, and development opportunities. Through their membership and the social networks in which they gained exposure, participants were able to feel like a more essential part of the campus and acquire additional insight into how they could be more successful. Additionally, these findings coincide with the literature on BGLOs that finds that these organizations facilitate success and development along several lines (Harper et al., 2005; Harper
& Wolley, 2002; Kimbrough & Hutchinson, 1998). Moreover, the social capital that participants expressed they obtained through their membership added another layer of confidence and navigation skills to their collegiate experience.

**Moving From Receivers to Owners of Capital**

Acknowledging the ways in which participants in this study interacted with and utilized various forms of capital aides in expanding how scholars can conceptualize community cultural wealth. Specifically, findings from this study suggest that certain interactions might better facilitate transmission and usage of cultural wealth. This idea calls for a reconceptualization of how we assume students can utilize cultural wealth. For participants in this study it was apparent that they possessed capital both within and outside of the mainstream discourse, and that obtaining membership in BGLOs largely expanded how they could utilize their capital as a student at MSU. Analysis of their collegiate careers both before and after membership indicates their interaction with various forms of capital shift from operating as receivers of forms of capital to owners of capital.

When participants first arrived to MSU, many possessed forms of capital that they received from an assortment of sources including family, mentors, friends, and other individuals in their community. Possessing forms of capital accounted for their ability to transcend societal expectations placed upon African American males, and facilitated for a smoother transition into MSU. When they began their collegiate careers, forms of capital allowed participants to overcome racial micro aggressions and less than ideal campus climate in order to matriculate through MSU. In the later portion of participants’ secondary careers, and as they began college we see participants as receives of capital. They are receivers because, in many cases, they are unaware of the capital they possess, and therefore unable to readily activate the forms to
facilitate their success—what receive depends on what others provide. This is evident in how participants reflect on many of their early educational experiences as a series of fortunate events wherein they stumbled upon the “right situation”. They do express feeling as though they were masters of the direction of their educational careers, but instead passengers. In their responses, they show an inability to recognize that what they have inside and around them as facilitators for whatever success they encounter. Further, participants’ conscious choices to listen to individuals (e.g., siblings, older members in the Black community, and fraternity brothers) who they viewed as knowledgeable, and their ability to transmit those lessons to other situations indicate these students exercised a great deal of cognitive ability both before, and especially during membership.

After participants gained membership in their respective organizations, we begin to see a shift in their interactions with various forms of capital as they move from receivers to owners of capital. During this transformation, participants acquire the ability to articulate the role of capital in their experiences post initiation, and more important, they are able to manipulate their capital. For example, while talking about their collegiate careers after membership, participants expressed concrete ways in which their lives changed, and provided examples of how they utilized membership to enhance their time as a student at MSU. The decisions they made around how to apply membership (capital) was intentional and ranged from obtaining internships, to acquiring full-time positions. These examples exhibit how participants felt an additional level of confidence after becoming a member of their respective fraternities, as evidenced by their awareness that membership provided an opportunity to gain access to additional forms of capital that could help facilitate their success as students at MSU and post-graduation.
Figure 6.1 illustrates this relationship. In the conceptual model, we see that participants entered MSU and experienced racial micro-aggressions, stereotypes, and other issues but possessing forms of capital eased their transition. Though this capital mitigates the obstacles participants encounter, they (forms of capital) remain largely external, or something participants more so receive. Once participants enter a smaller sphere (BGLOs) within the larger context of MSU, they encounter the same and potentially additional form of capital that they then can intentionally use outside of their sphere (e.g., jobs, internships, networks, etc.). The obstacles outside of the BGLO sphere but within the larger MSU context can penetrate the BGLO sphere. When they do, members are there to support one another in order to overcome these issues.

**Figure 6.1**

**Contributions to the Framework**

Community cultural wealth as an “otherized” theory of cultural capital advances dialogue on the role of capital in the lives of students of color by approaching this topic from a place of empowerment instead of a deficit. The forms of capital described by Yosso (2005) provide an innovative way for scholars to further theorize how students of color achieve success despite societal indicators that might suggest otherwise. Acknowledging the strengths and existing
contributions of community cultural wealth to the cultural capital discourse, findings from this current study provide additional contributions to Yosso’s framework. Foremost, community cultural wealth is largely abstract. Although Yosso provides examples for each form of capital through previous literature, they lack a concrete existence. This investigation advances this framework from abstract and places it within the real life experiences of collegiate students, in this case African American males in Black fraternities. This process helps to strengthen how we understand the activation of forms of capital in the lives of students by providing tangible context in which capital acquisition and activation might occur.

Additionally, community cultural wealth heavily focuses on the relationship between race and capital; as a result, the topic of gender receives little attention. Although not a primary focus of this investigation, the role of masculinity in the experiences of participants helps to advance discourse on how masculinity might influence the activation of forms of capital, and add credence to the possibility that different combinations of race and gender might change how scholars can apply this framework. Lastly, applying this framework to a specific context (e.g., Black Greek community) extends discussion around what constitutes a source of capital and how might students of color access these sources in order to augment the capital they already have; or gain forms of capital they might not possess. This slight shift in approach extends how we might use this framework and allows for the possibility of capital attainment outside of what literature suggests.

Implications for Scholarship, Practice, and Policy

The intent of this study was to gain a better understanding of the impact of Black Greek Fraternal membership on the collegiate experiences of African American males. Though focusing specifically on one form of involvement, findings from this investigation contributes
broadly to the current discourse concerning factors that aide in the success and matriculation of Black males in college, policy implementation in higher education, and practice for student affairs professionals. Based on the findings from this study this section offers implications for scholarship, practice, and policy that require serious consideration. These recommendations arrive with the assumption that Black fraternities at their best can be beneficial for their members, and thus need preservation. Implications are reliant on each other and blend to produce a synergy that enhances Black fraternities as well as the experiences of African American students at PWIs.

**Scholarship.** Findings from this research help to advance scholarship both generally, and more specifically, research conducted on African American males in college. As researchers create more nuanced frameworks to help understand the ever-increasing diversity entering postsecondary education, it is essential for the academy continue to challenge existing frames in order to strengthen their applicability to various groups of students.

**Theory in general.** How this study utilizes community cultural wealth in order to understand a specific group (Black men) with a specific experience (fraternity membership) opens dialogue around researchers using this strategy in future works. Since no framework captures the essence of all groups, researchers conducting empirical studies in this area should look “outside of the box” when considering what frames to use in their research projects. For example, the framework used in this study did not heavily attend to practical implications of the forms of capital, nor did it address how capital acquisition might look across gender and class lines. Nonetheless, community cultural wealth helped to advance knowledge in this area because of its different perspective on the role of capital in the lives of students of color. Though not necessarily intentional to this study, scholars can consider how they can contribute to
frameworks when selecting which to use for their investigations. Taking this approach might represent a shift in paradigm in how researchers approach selecting frameworks; however, it also creates more flexibility with more freedom on how researchers utilize frameworks.

The usefulness of community cultural wealth in helping to advance knowledge on Black males in higher education also substantiates the need for more frames to be developed that are rooted in the experiences of students of colors and approach this population from perspectives that celebrate their uniqueness instead of attempting to fit them into predesigned frames. Realizing that within subgroups there exists a great deal of diversity, frameworks should not try to explain the entirety of any one groups’ experience; instead, they should leave room to be applied to different individuals across different situations.

*Research on black males.* Earlier alluded to, the plight of African American males in higher education make it essential that scholars seek out (or create) different frames to examine the experiences of these students. This study utilizes a counter narrative framework in order to investigate the experiences of African American males; still, this framework does not speak specifically to this population (i.e., race and gender). For this reason, scholars who examine various components of the Black male experience should take the liberty to begin to conceptualize how might we makeover current frameworks (or completely revamp) so that they speak more to the African American male population in colleges. After their design, researchers should apply them in various ways in order to test their rigor and ability to more accurately help explain the Black male experience in college. The stronger these frameworks, the more accurately scholars, administrators, and other stakeholders can assist this population matriculate through college to degree completion.
Over the last several years, scholarship on Black males in higher education has grown considerably. There still exist facets of the Black male experience in college that need addressing. This study examines one type of involvement for Black males in college but in order to understand the totality of the Black males’ experience, scholars should seek to understand additional components of these students’ lives. In addition, this study also exposes the range in diversity of Black males that previous scholarship already suggests exist. Scholars should seek to unpack the experiences of the wide array of individuals encapsulated within the larger sphere of Black males.

**Practice.** Regardless of the soundness of scholarship on African American males, if practitioners do not utilize the theory to help guide practice this research will never be fully effective. The following implications for practice seek unite theory and practice for the betterment of the African American male experience in college.

**Administration.** An important observation from this study was that men who had access to forms of capital before membership appeared to represent a large portion of those who sought membership in Black fraternities, and thus benefited from this affiliation. To help increase the diversity in membership in these organizations, and increase the types of African American males who can benefit from BGLOs, Greek life offices can assist with helping to advertise these groups to students who might not be aware of the history and value of BGLOs. This process can occur by reaching out to families during summer welcome visits, learning communities, summer bridge programs, or multicultural student affairs programs. Fraternity and Sorority affairs offices can also offer a course wherein African American males who want to pursue membership in BGLOs could attend. This class can help to alleviate the stress aspirants of these organizations experience, and allow Greek life offices to assure students do not pursue membership with these
organizations blindly. Also important to the diversity equation is the financial cost of Black fraternities. Acknowledging that finance also presents a barrier to membership, administrative offices might consider ear-marking funds every year so that they can sponsor students who want to pursue membership in these groups. Finally, institutions can seek to offer their organizations housing options on campus in the form of fraternity houses (or any private certified on housing) in anticipation these practices can attract members to these organizations.

Theory to practice” is cliché in student affairs often with little to no backing. In order for Black fraternities to reach their full potential, those individuals who work directly with these groups must seek to obtain a healthy theoretical knowledge of these groups. Although there is a dearth in empirical research on Black fraternities, practitioners should be aware of what research has found concerning these organizations because it can assist in how Greek life and/or student activities professionals interact with chapters and individual members. Equally, advisors should be aware of the cognitive and non-cognitive value that members accrue during their fraternal membership. Knowledge of the research that exists in this area can also help in the direction of future research. For example, a sizeable amount of research on this topic does not come from practitioners in the field. If practitioners who are on the “front lines” in working with students receive an invitation to the research table more consistently, they can better assist scholars in the field with their work.

An advising model that effectively prepares Greek life professionals to work with Black Greek Letter Fraternities can be developed from the findings in this study. This model would take into consideration masculinity, realization of the diversity of males who enter these organizations, acknowledgment of capital attainment of entering members, and knowledge of how the fraternal experience can augment the capital of members. By establishing the
expectation that these organizations can (and should) enhance the capital of new and continuing members, Greek Life professionals are able to able to communicate the purpose of the fraternal movement broadly, and to NPHC organizations specifically. This approach makes it more likely that organizations will have a better alignment with the values of their organizations, and this will play out in their actions both on campus and within the larger campus community.

Moreover, Black fraternities have the potential to serve as a retention tool for African American males. How these organizations operate, the values they profess, rituals they conduct, and missions that pledge to live by remain largely unexamined through empirical analysis. Scholars who holistically examine African American males within the collegiate context can assist in this area by focusing more research on this line of inquiry. Noting the importance of offices of Greek life and student activities to the Black fraternal experience, scholars can seek to conduct research alongside practitioners in the field; this approach’s benefits are twofold. First, Greek and student activities advisors are often the primary gatekeepers to this community and have the ability to integrate swiftly scholars into the community. In addition, the combination of practitioner and researchers have the potential to provide a deeper analysis that unites experiential knowledge with theoretical. This research should seek to utilize unique frameworks that help to understand gender, sex, race, ability, and religion when examining this group.

**Student Organizations.** How student organizations operate, and the role they serve on campus varies across institutions. However, despite this diversity, one consistent purpose that these groups share is the desire to provide an outlet for students to build community. Common practices for how older members interact with and help younger members navigate through the undergraduate environment can be pondered based on the findings from this study. Many
students organizations maintain traditions around various aspects of the experience (e.g., initiation, events, etc.). Student activity administrators and other individuals working with student organizations have the opportunity to encourage groups to first consider what capital (i.e., value added) do members take away from membership and how can this be enhanced through employing new traditions centered around providing new members with tangible tools to aide in their success throughout college. This idea is especially important to culturally based student organizations at PWIs due to the campus climate in these environments. In these instances, faculty and advisors who work with these groups should be intentional in facilitating discussions centered on students recognizing what capital they possess, and providing them with tools to acquire additional forms of capital.

**Policy.** Discussing the role of professionalism, scholarly practice, and professional development in student affairs work Carpenter and Stinson (2007) posit that policies and practices in students affairs need strong scholarly consideration. Similar to this assertion, bettering the experiences (and subsequently the matriculation) of African American males in college includes policy adjustment thoughts.

**Higher Education Policy.** The decisive manner in which participants from MSU described the role of fraternal membership in their collegiate careers highlights the continued need for PWIs to support these organizations. Currently across many PWI campuses, Black fraternities largely operate on the margins of their respective Greek communities. This is partially because of the secrecy of these organizations, and largely due to institutional policies and practices both old and new that marginalize these groups. To change this predicament, institutions can provide Greek life offices with more resources with which to help BGLOs, especially fraternities. Within this context, increased resources can come in several
ways. Foremost, institutions can provide Greek life and student activities offices with increased funding so they can allocate additional funds toward BGLOs. This additional money can be used for the purpose of programming as well as attending leadership conferences (regional and national) and workshops. This will strengthen these organizations while in the process allowing them to serve their members both now and in the future. Second, institutions can encourage Greek life administrators to pursue (and provided with the financial means) professional development opportunities that teach them cultural competency as this is sometimes lacking from Black Greek advisors. Finally, as all fraternal organizations are membership driven, institutions should attempt to better market their Black fraternities during summer registration periods as through large-scale university publications (i.e., welcome week items). This increased publicity can raise awareness for the community and aide with recruitment.

**Black Greek Letter Organizations Nationally.** Foremost, a key finding from this study was that members who pursued membership earlier in their collegiate careers felt they received more capital from their experience. For this reason, BGLOs at the national should heavily consider revamping their official and actual qualifications for membership. Currently, all organizations require that perspective members have earned 24 credit hours of college level work. Theoretically this means that most (if not all) chapters of Black fraternities most likely cannot initiate new members until the first semester of their second year of college. In reality, most organizations do not initiate members until they are upperclassman (juniors and seniors) thus missing valuable time to make a larger impact on the careers of students. Noting that these groups have the potential to foster and enhance forms of capital for members, national headquarters of these groups should encourage chapters to initiate members earlier in their collegiate careers. Although this represents a shift in the philosophy of these groups, adopting
this practice has the potential to benefit more Black males in college, especially those attending PWIs.

Despite all the benefits that participants took away from their time as fraternal members, many expressed some level of dissonance about membership. In order to address this issue, national organizations should assess what extra tools they can provide for members at the undergraduate level. For example, during most intake process, aspiring members learn the rituals of their organizations in addition to the local and national structure, and history. Though this information is important, new membership programs can also incorporate more conversations about how to function as a Black fraternal member instead of offering abstract lessons about the organization (i.e., mission and values) that is good to know but has little practical use. These lessons can poses scenarios that members will inevitably have to face so that they are equipped with the knowledge to work through potential issues when they arise. Moreover, most if not all organizations provide members with leadership conferences. Often times these programs are expensive and as such prevent members from attending in higher volumes. These programs can occur more frequently and at a lower cost so that members can attend. These suggestions allow Black fraternities to operate as better sources of capital for members.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this research provides additional insight into the lives of African American males within the context of Black fraternal membership at a PWI, this research could address several areas more in depth. Foremost, the choice to examine this phenomenon at one institution provided the opportunity to understand better the culture of MSU and various institutional practices that influence the lives of participants under investigation. Additionally, visiting one
institution better facilitated rapport building among administrators because time allocation to other locations was a non-factor. MSU’s institutional characteristics including location, mission, and institutional history also have the potential to influence participants’ experiences. For this reason, future research can seek to investigate this phenomenon within different institutional contexts or across different institutions including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, regional institutions, and urban and private schools. Seeking different institutional types can help to provide a more rich expansive understanding of the role of capital in the lives of members of Black fraternities.

A consistent question naturally raised by the primary research questions of this study is the need of a comparison group of African American males. The choice to focus solely on the experiences of African American males who chose to join Black fraternities derived from the belief that the insight of their experiences is valuable and contributes to the discourse in this area without a comparison group. Notwithstanding, future research could garner the experiences the African American males who chose to not pursue membership in a Black fraternity. Information from this type of analysis has the potential to strengthen how scholars understand this population acquires throughout the duration of their collegiate experience.

Although generational status (in college) and socioeconomic status were outside of the scope of this investigation, its impact on the lives of participants was apparent. Community cultural wealth attempts to explain the forms of capital that students of color possess that might not be a result of socio-economic status. In this study, although all participants possessed different forms of capital, those who came from modest backgrounds, or were first generation college students, did not appear to have the depth of capital when compared to their counterparts. For this reason, future analysis can utilize generational status and socioeconomic
as units of analysis in order to gain a more precise understanding of the role these characteristics play in the lives of participants.

The level to which the current study takes into account the role that membership in Black fraternities’ impact forms of capital comes primarily from self-reported data. Though valuable, relying heavily on the experiences of participants to some extent constrains the potential of what scholars can understand on this topic. One way to address this issue is to solicit the perspectives of stakeholders who work closely with this population (e.g., chapter advisors, Greek life advisors, etc.). Taking this approach provides the opportunity to gain an additional unbiased viewpoint on role of fraternal membership in the lives of participants.

A final approach to this type of research is the use of a longitudinal data collection method. As stated earlier, the approach Black fraternities adopt in selecting members renders a majority of individuals to enter their respective organizations as upperclassman. In this study, membership selection procedure for organizations resulted in participants not having a lot of time as fraternal members. This results in limited examples of fraternal experience to share. A longitudinal study that follows participants from the time of initiation, through the remainder of their collegiate career, and until a year or two after school can strengthen how participants understand and reflect upon their membership in Greek organizations.

Conclusion

In order to better the staggering circumstances for African American males in postsecondary education, scholars have sought to analyze, criticize, and scrutinize all dimensions of this populations experience within this context (Dancy, 2011; Harris, Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012; Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). This study recognizes existing research and attempts to expand knowledge in this area by exploring how a very specific component of the African
American male experience, membership in Black fraternal organizations, intersects with the acquisition and activation of various forms of race-based capital.

Overall, findings from this research support previous work that suggests fraternal membership (in Black fraternities) enhances the overall collegiate experience for African American males. The comments shared by participants illuminate the continued need for these organizations at PWIs, and strengthens the notion that Black fraternities have the potential to serve as sources of support for their members, especially African American males. Further, the process of members coming to understand how to leverage membership for their betterment and the progression of their chapters is important to note. Though the majority of participants’ impressions of fraternal membership indicate this particular type of involvement offers unique benefits in the form of race based capital; despite their laud of membership, participants were also able to articulate how membership restricted some aspects of their collegiate careers.

Although empirical research on African American male’s experience in Black fraternities does exist, utilizing an otherized theory of cultural capital to study this phenomenon is unique and opens the door for the application of other less utilized frameworks in this area. At times, it was difficult to ascertain the extent to which fraternal membership provided sources of capital for participants. Taking the time to gather the experiences of participants prior to membership helped to understand how their identity as a fraternity man either augmented or lessened this part of their lives. Noting what forms of capital participants possessed, were able to activate before, and after membership illuminates the fact that for a majority of students in this investigation, fraternal membership brought increased recognition and ability to activate capital.

This study diverges from current lines of inquiry on BGLOs by attempting to understand the lives of participants before membership in helping to inform evidence gathered from their time
spent as members. Approaching this study from this perspective reveals that many participants had access to and activated forms of capital during their secondary education and into the beginning of their careers at MSU. For many participants, gaining membership into a Black fraternity did augmented what capital they already possessed and in many cases influenced how they fostered the capital they possessed in order to aid in their success. Several factors could account for participants’ capital attainment before membership including institutional type and the likelihood of less advantaged African American students to attend the school. Additionally the qualifications and financial commitment needed to join these types of organizations makes the pool of applicants more homogenous and perhaps affects self-selection bias.

This study contributes to existing literature positing that cultural capital for people of color forms and operates differently from that of the dominant culture. Theories like funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and otherized capital (Carter, 2003; Nunez, 2009; Yosso, 2005) elucidate the fact that observing individuals of color through a dominant cultural lens only captures a fragment of their narrative. Although these students were diverse in their backgrounds, family structures, and exposure to mainstream cultural capital, their shared experiences highlight the role of race specific capital in their educational careers. This was especially evident for the students whose backgrounds did not fully explain their educational status and accomplishments. Further, the notion of Black fraternities serving as possible sources of race based capital opens dialogue around other culturally based student organizations accomplishing the same feat for their members.

In conclusion, this study provides an in-depth portrait of the lives of thirteen Black fraternity men at Midwestern State University. The captured experiences of participants represent a glimpse into the 21st century status of Black Greek Letter fraternities; the expressions
shared in this project also signify that the missions and values that BGLOs rest upon, including serving as a counter narrative to norms of Black groups, remain relevant over 100 years after the founding of the first Black Greek organization. In recent years (and to some extent throughout the entirety of their existence) and largely due to their actions conversations continue to stir around the relevancy of BGLOs. Insight from participants in this study in partnership with existing literature provide a compelling argument that discussions need to shift from—are these organizations necessary to how can institutions provide these groups with the appropriate resources they need to be better resources for their members? As is the case with all research, this study raises additional questions that future scholars need pursue.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

EXAMPLE RECRUITMENT LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Attention

African American Male Black Greek Letter Fraternity Members

Greetings!

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African American males in Black Greek Letter Fraternities. Participants will receive a $10 gift certificate to a local restaurant for their involvement.

Brandon Common, doctoral student, will conduct this study under the direction of Dr. Lorenzo Baber, Assistant Professor in the Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

If you are an African American male, a member of a Black Greek Letter Fraternity at Purdue University, and at least 18 years of age, you are eligible to participate in this study. I would like to conduct one individual interview with you, with the potential for a follow up interview if necessary. If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have any questions that may help clarify your decision, please contact me, Brandon Common at common1@illinois.edu.

Thank You,

Brandon Common

** Please be mindful that your participation is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any point. Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the entirety of your participation.
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African American male members of Black Greek Letter Fraternities. Specifically, I would like to hear about your triumphs and pitfalls, and your perceptions of what membership has meant to your collegiate career. By attempting to gain a better understanding of the lives of African American males currently in fraternities at the undergraduate level, it is my anticipation that I will be better able to provide information that pertains to what these organizations offer their participants—and what they do not. This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of my doctoral work in the Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign under the direction of Dr. Lorenzo Baber. I would appreciate your participation in this study and will provide you with a $10 gift certificate in gratitude for sharing your time with me.

Your participation will include two in-person interviews. Interviews will last approximately 60-90 minutes; I anticipate that follow up interviews should last no longer than 30-45 minutes. The interview locations will be selected at your convenience. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about your Greek experience including how you became interested in Black Greek Life, what compelled you to join your particular organization, and what has your collegiate career been like since joining your fraternity. The interviews will be audio taped with your approval; however if you refuse, you will not be eligible to participate in this study. All audiotapes will be kept in a secure location wherein I will be the only person who has access. Your confidentiality is of the utmost importance and will be maintained throughout the entirety of this study. Your name will not be used in any writings that will ensue from this data; instead, pseudonyms will used when discussing your experiences. In addition, all notes and transcriptions will be coded with pseudonyms that will also be used in the final research report and any future presentations. After you interviews are transcribed, they will be shared with you to make certain that the essence of your experience is captured.

As in all research dealing with human subjects, this study does have potential risks. Foremost, reflecting on your experiences might conjure negative/emotionally scaring events that happened at different points along your membership process. Additionally some questions I ask might cause you to question you membership in your fraternity, which could trigger emotional trauma. In order to limit these risks, I want to impress upon you the fact that your participation in this interview is voluntary. If at any point during our conversation, if you want to withdraw your involvement you may do so at no penalty. Additionally, you can choose to answer or abstain from answering any question that you feel causes you any emotional distress. If you feel emotional distress at any point during our conversation, I can provide you with information about the counseling office on campus pre your request.

I hope that this document has provided you with enough information to make an informed decision as to your participation in this study, however, if you have any additional questions,
please contact me, Brandon Common via email at bhcm94@gmail.com. Dr. Lorenzo Baber, Assistant Professor in the Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership Department, can be reached at ldbaber@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

By signing below you acknowledge that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

*Please note, you must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

Name________________________________________  Date________________

Signature________________________________________
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

*All questions may not be addressed due to possible time constraints

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study, which explores the experiences of African American males in Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs). Your participation in this study is important because understanding how African American males experience their fraternity experiences helps to add to an overall understanding of how this population navigates through college. With that said, I am interested in your experiences in your fraternity and more specifically how you feel membership has impacted (either positively or negatively) your time in college; I would also like to know how you feel these organizations in general have the potential to serve as positives or negatives for African American males. Your responses will be confidential and your real name will not appear anywhere within the final write-up of the data I collect. This interview should last roughly 60 minutes however, it could finish earlier or later depending on your responses and possible time constraints.

Do you have any questions?

With your permission is it okay if we begin the interview?

First Interview- High School Questions

- Could you tell me about your high school experience?
  - What was the racial demographic of your school?
  - What was your level of involvement in regards to extracurricular activities?
  - Did your school have a college prep curriculum?
  - Was attending college heavily pushed by the administration?
- Did you take advanced placement courses?
  - Why or why not?
  - How was your experience in those courses?
- What factors played into your decision to attend college?
  - Do you have a parent or guardian who attended college?
  - Did your the individuals you hung around most in high school attend college?
- Could you walk me through your college choice and selection process?
  - What factors played into your final decision of where to attend school?
  - How would you rate the college search and admissions process?
  - Was this institution your first choice? And why did you ultimately come to this institution?

First Interview- Initial College Experience

- Could you talk about your initial college transition experience?
  - Was it easy to adjust to college in terms of your social life?
  - What courses did you take and how was the workload?
How would you describe your interactions with other first year students?

Did you enter college having already declared your major?
- What factors let to you deciding this major?

Did you get involved in extracurricular activities in your first semester/academic year?
- What organizations were you involved in?
- How did you select what types of organizations in which you wanted to participate?
- How did you know to get involved?

How would you describe your social life during your first few semester or college?
- Do you have a group of friends who you spend a majority of your time with?
- How would you describe your core group of friends?

Did you face any obstacles during your first year?
- What helped you overcome these issue?
- Why do you think you had such a seamless transition?

In your opinion, what most helped you navigate through your first two years of college?
- Family, friends, mentor, administrators, professors?

Second Interview - Initial Fraternity Questions

What were your first perceptions of Black Greek Life?
- How did you first become aware of fraternities?
- Were you aware of these groups prior to entering college?
- Did you know members of the Greek community when you arrived to school?
- Do you have any family members that are members of a Black Fraternity or sorority?

What attracted you to Black Greek Life?
- Did you have any perceived benefits of membership?
- What attracted you to your fraternity?
- How would you describe the men in your before you entered?
- Did you feel that you were similar to these men?

Black Greek Letter Organizations have the tendency to be selective in their membership selection process, what qualities do you feel you had that made you desirable to your fraternity?

Do you have any topics that you would like to discuss that I have not covered?

Second Interview - Fraternity Experience Questions

Think back to how you pictured Black Greek Life before you became a member, how did you feel about these groups as a collective whole immediately after you became a member?
- Did what you picture match the actual experience?

How would describe your level of involvement in your chapter and fraternity?
- Do you or have you held an executive board position in your chapter?
- Have you attended a district, regional, or national conference?

Do you feel that membership in your organization has altered your experience in college?
o What types of time obligations do you give to the fraternity?
  o Have your relationships with non-members of Black Fraternities and Sororities been different?
  o Has your social life in the campus community changed?
- Can you think of an impactful experience you have had in your fraternity?
  o Conversation you had had with an older member?
  o Instance where your membership either positively or negatively impacted you?
- What lessons, if any, have you learned from your experience as a member of a Black Greek Fraternity?
  o Lessons that are beneficial to school or life in general?
- What does brotherhood mean to you?
  o What “practices” does the fraternity do that lends itself to brotherhood?
- Do you have any relationships with older members of the fraternity?
  o Would you identify anyone as a mentor? Could you talk about this relationship?
- Is there anything that you wish that membership provided for you that you have not received?
- What does being a member of a Black Greek Letter Fraternity and your fraternity specifically mean to you?
- Do you have any topics that you would like to discuss that I have not covered?