Racial minority students and multicultural chapters

Racial Minority Students in Multicultural Greek Chapters:
Blending Color into a Sea of White
Paul Dorres, Kaying Lo, & Shelley Yonemura
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As the number of racial minority students on our college campuses continues to grow, an increasing number of non-white students are showing interest in Greek life. Whether a black student is pledged into a predominately white chapter or a group of Southeast Asian students charter their own, these students face unique challenges as members of a subculture of racial minority students involved in Greek life. Student affairs practitioners – utilizing contemporary student development theories – can assist racial minority students with their development and help to ensure that they succeed in their endeavors. This paper addresses the subculture through the lenses of multiple student development models, including (but not limited to): Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering versus marginality, Astin's (1984) theory of involvement, Tinto's (1993) theory of individual departure, and Schlossberg's (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) transition theory.

Historical Perspective

The earliest non-white fraternity official recognized on a college campus was founded in 1911. During the same period numerous other black fraternities started forming on college campuses around the country. While most of these chapters were devoted to inclusiveness, they served as a haven for black students who wanted to experience Greek life. There were already numerous other fraternities on college campuses across the country in the early 1900’s. However, the vast majority were made up of white Protestants and as late as 1953 there were still chapters who would only pledge white, Christian males (Plotkin, 1993).

In 1931 two of the first Latino fraternities merged to create Phi Iota Alpha (Miranda, 1999). Just as the black fraternities had formed to create a welcoming chapter for people of their
shared background, Latino fraternities were forming to promote Latino culture and serve the needs of Latino students on campus and in the community. Although predating Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Schlossberg's (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) transition theory by over fifty years, the concept of involving students of racial minorities in co-curricular activities in order to help them succeed and achieve a positive transition into college had already been born in the creation of these early racial minority chapters.

Individual Perspectives

Minority Student and Professional

Dante Holloway, in a personal interview, on November 1, 2006, shared his experience being an African American student, and then professional, working with Greek Life. During his undergraduate program at Willamette University Dante was not interested in fraternities because of the negative stereotypes that he had learned about through popular culture. However, after being persistently recruited by the chapter that pledged all of his comrades on the football team, he finally gave in and decided that he wanted the opportunity to experience Greek life with hopes that he could change the negative social stigma of the fraternity. Dante had never heard of Astin's (1984) theory of involvement at that time in his life. However, he had intentionally become involved in co-curricular activities as a result of joining the fraternity. Astin would argue that Dante's personal development and successful completion of a bachelor's degree was a result of his active and positive involvement in Greek life.

The fraternity that Dante joined was made up of predominantly white students. Dante stated that he never felt fully committed to the chapter and never really felt at home. In fact, he received invitations from all six of the fraternities at Willamette. However, he felt that this was because he was black and the chapters were just struggling to promote their commitment to
diversity. So, when he decided upon the football fraternity, he made a conscious decision to make a difference. As an incoming freshman, Dante was encountering what Tinto (1993) calls separation, transition, and incorporation in his theory of individual departure. The decision to join the fraternity marked his separation from his prior community. His transition into the new community was accomplished through his efforts to redefine the negatively viewed football fraternity. Finally, in order to become incorporated into the community, Dante reinforced the importance of developing congruence between the chapter’s values and the behavior of his brothers.

Today Dante works in Greek Life as an advisor to the many chapters at Oregon State University (OSU). As a racial minority student and professional working in Greek Life, Dante is able to bring a unique perspective to his work. He would like to see a Unified Greek Council at OSU that is a voice of the multicultural chapters. However, he perceives a lack of energy from the black chapters and a negative history in the Greek organization that needs to be overcome. Dante is now in a position to encourage positive involvement by students in the Greek community. Astin (1984) states that the effectiveness of practice is measured by its capacity to increase involvement. Therefore, Dante needs to become an active instigator of positive campus involvement by physically arriving on fraternity and sorority doorsteps and helping chapter leaders create community action plans. This type of grassroots approach to involvement is necessary when there is a crisis of public reputation threatening the overall integrity of the Greek community.

Fortunately, there are already a group of chapters that are focused heavily on service to the campus and surrounding community. According to Dante, the multicultural Greek chapters of OSU, while primarily there to serve the needs of the representative cultures, are much more
involved in service than other chapters on campus. By engaging in community service, tutoring students, and being involved in numerous other positive activities, racial minority students and their advocates are changing the face of Greek life.

*Student in a multicultural chapter*

A student at Oregon State University was interviewed in order to gain perspective on her views of identity as an Asian American studying at a public four-year state school. As a senior, in her final year of academia, she had not been involved in any on-campus activities until she initiated starting a new Greek chapter and became the president of Delta Phi Omega.

Schlossberg (1989) points to the concept of marginality and mattering. The student had feelings of not fitting in as a member of a multicultural minority group. She did not identify with any of the clubs and lacked interest in attending events sponsored by the university. The student focused only on the academics which narrowed her school year to classes and studying. She came to the university as an undergraduate who had grown up mattering to her family and friends but felt disconnected with her peers. When she broached the subject of joining a sorority, her parents did not understand why she wanted to do so. They perceived Greek life as a negative concept and did not want her to participate. Even though she did not think she fit into the traditional Greek life model, the student wanted to identify with a group and feel that she mattered.

Thus began her research into a Greek sorority that the student could bring to OSU. The newest sorority, Delta Phi Omega, was admitted to Greek life in May of 2006 “to foster unity among South Asian women, build community awareness, and gain a greater understanding of oneself and others” (Delta Phi Omega sorority, Inc., 1998). As the president of the sorority the student recruited four other Asian American students to be a part of the founding mothers and a
core team of leaders were given responsibilities as vice president, secretary, treasurer, and historian.

Using the Asian American Identity Development (AAID) model (Kim, 2001), the student is in stage four of Jean Kim’s theory because she is focused on being Asian American. The student has gained racial pride and a positive self-concept as an Asian American. She is proud of who she is and has a sense of belonging. The student is learning to share her culture with others by being a part of Delta Phi Omega. Additionally, she is no longer marginalized because she is fully immersed in social activities with her sorority. The student has found an organization where she can matter by feeling that her efforts are appreciated by others (Schlossberg, 1989).

Administrator in Greek life

Robert Kerr, director of Greek Life at OSU, explains that multicultural chapters are usually formed for “cultural identity” and “enhancing cultural awareness”. White chapters, typically known as “common chapters,” are based on social activities (R. Kerr, personal communication, November 9, 2006). Many multicultural students on predominantly white campuses rely on each other in their mutual struggle to assimilate into the student population. Students bond by finding similarities within the many classifications that separate them. Schlossberg (1989) stated that acts of involvement help to create connections between students and allow for personal worth. This seems to be the purpose for multicultural chapters.

Students of color have unique backgrounds with varying cultural and ethnic practices. Their family values may include particular beliefs and rituals that are foreign on predominantly white campuses. Some students of color have experienced a lifetime of marginality for their non-traditional practices. Schlossberg (1989) shares that marginality can be a permanent condition – a way of life. This marginality is an additional burden for multicultural students from
disadvantaged backgrounds. Such students may already be struggling with immigration, assimilation, language, socioeconomic, and racial barriers. Many of these characteristics contribute to a lifetime of marginality. These burdens are compounded with barriers in college such as: isolation from other students, racial tension, and academic difficulty. Schlossberg (1989) states the following:

Every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises. The larger the difference between the former role and the new role the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no norms for the new role. (p.7)

Students of color who have greater differences from mainstream white culture may have more difficulties in adapting to college. These students are forced to find connection and meaning in an unfamiliar environment that may not embrace them. The task of entering a new campus with resistance from white peers can leave multicultural students feeling extremely marginalized. Thus, since Schlossberg points out that social action can alleviate marginality, they seek validation through meaningful connections.

Many students of color typically identify with each other based on shared characteristics. R. Kerr (personal communication, November 9, 2006) explains that multicultural students face challenges of being accepted into the [white] Greek community. Schlossberg (1989) commented that marginality elicits feelings about mattering. Therefore, many multicultural students have formed their own chapters for acceptance and for more leadership opportunities.

Students of color who seek validation in Greek life are motivated to create significance with each other. Rosenberg stated that mattering is the “direct reciprocal of significance” (as cited in Schlossberg, 1989). Multicultural chapters allow students to form solidarity and
mattering within the context of Greek life. R. Kerr (personal communication, November 9, 2006) shared that the focus of multicultural chapters is to build identity and promote cultural awareness. For example, white chapters will do “a lot” of [community service] social activities whereas multicultural chapters may only do a few. Thus, white and non-white chapters have very different purposes and organizational goals.

R. Kerr (personal communication, November 9, 2006) stated that he’s been encouraging traditional [white] Greek chapters to consider incorporating multicultural students as he believes this is a reflection of real life demographics. The traditions of white chapters are challenged as students of color form new chapters and promote diversity. College administrators are also rallying for cultural sensitivity and more integration in Greek chapters. Schlossberg (1989) explained that institutions which focus on mattering and student involvement will have more success in creating campuses with motivated students, greater retention, and institutional loyalty.

Recommendations and Review

In efforts to create change, staff should be knowledgeable about the existing traditions in Greek life and the challenges of integrating multicultural diversity. Staff and faculty should actively attend conferences, subscribe to current publications, and network with different campuses. These efforts will ensure professional development and keep staff current on new trends. Advisors and staff must have understanding of the past, present, and future of Greek life practices. This will better prepare them to address the implications of present and future changes regarding multicultural integration and policy amendments.

It is important that staff also be current with student needs as they evaluate rules and policies pertaining to Greek life. Greek leaders need to regularly assess the mission and goals of
Greek life so they can provide appropriate services to the student population. The invitation for multicultural students needs to be consistent in practice and policy, not just in rhetoric.

Additionally, staff needs to consistently encourage multicultural students to explore opportunities in Greek life. Involvement can provide students with many valuable experiences in leadership roles, community service projects, and professional networking. As more students of color become involved, this will break down stereotypes and barriers in the Greek community.

Students of color must overcome numerous challenges to find acceptance in the Greek community. Their desire to be involved with Greek life serves many purposes: transition into college, ethnic identity development, validation with peers, and promotion of cultural sensitivity. Our interviews with an administrator, a graduate advisor, and an undergraduate student help to shed light on the complexities of integrating diversity into a traditionally white Greek community. We learned that college campuses, multicultural students, and the Greek community can benefit each other if they work together. Students, advisors, and staff all have significant roles in promoting positive changes and breaking down barriers in Greek life.
References


