

Journal of Research Initiatives

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Community Engagement, Literacy, and
Research in Communities of Color*

Article 1

November 2022

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Recommended Citation

Moore Roberson, Heather (2022) "Critical Civic Engagement: Creating Yards and Building Community at Predominately White Institutions," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol7/iss1/1>

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Critical Civic Engagement: Creating Yards and Building Community at Predominately White Institutions

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Keywords

Black Greek Letter Organizations, Civic Engagement, Higher Education

Cover Page Footnote

n/a



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Abstract

This article details the journey of a Black Greek professor who created yards on a predominately white campus. This piece of scholarship challenges the historical narrative of the civic engagement movement and considers equity and inclusion with existing civic engagement literature. Specifically, this research contends that civic engagement scholarship must consider the historical legacy of historically Black Greek letter organizations, their commitment to service, and undergraduate education. The construction of “yards” is a civic engagement initiative that builds meaningful connections between college campuses and local communities.

Key Words: Black Greek Letter Organizations, Civic Engagement, Higher Education

Introduction

In graduate school, many Ph.D. students dream of their first job after completing their qualifying examinations and submitting their dissertations. While some students envision themselves engaging in the life of the mind and fully committing to academic research, other students may consider what their professional careers would resemble if they worked primarily on their pedagogical practice inside academic classrooms with undergraduate and graduate students. Undoubtedly, a Ph.D.’s future career choice is heavily influenced by the curricular and co-curricular experiences in which a student is immersed inside their graduate programs. After graduate school, I was eager to join a college environment with scholars who were passionate about teaching while simultaneously championing undergraduate students’ holistic development.

During my first week on the tenure track, I was reminded of my unwavering commitment to meaningful community engagement while supporting undergraduate student’s co-curricular interests. At a

luncheon for new students of color and their families, I was introduced to my first community engagement assignment by an academic mentor who pushed me to create institutional partnerships very early on in my professional career. As I greeted a mixed group of undergraduate students and student affairs professionals, I introduced myself as a new faculty member who was recruited to work inside a newly approved academic program that taught students about the power of civic learning. But before I could fully address questions from the group, I was approached by a colleague who stated in a hushed tone, “YOU’RE GREEK?!! I have a project for you to complete. Did you know that there once was a historically Black fraternity here on this campus? We need to revive it for our students, and I believe that you and I can do it.”

Soon thereafter, I decided to pursue the project and worked to develop a “yard” or a community of Black Greek letter organizations on a college campus. This initiative was framed by the goals of critical civic learning. According to Keisha Warren-Gordon and her analysis of critical service learning inside some of her college courses, the term is defined by the desire to “redistribute power, allowing community partners to have a voice; incorporating a social change component; and developing authentic relationships” (Warren-Gordon, 2020, np). I viewed the project as an extension of my commitment to intentional civic engagement that considers student voices as key actors driving various initiatives both on and off campus. Put differently, as a new faculty member in a small college setting, I saw myself as a member of several interconnected communities, all of which could work together to curate meaningful experiences, excursions, and even organizations that may propel students into their futures as community workers and leaders.

In this article, I contend that civic engagement scholarship has failed to cite the ways that historically Black Greek letter organizations have contributed to meaningful civic engagement initiatives on college campuses and communities in the United States. The strides made by professionals of color who hold membership in these exclusive organizations can be classified as a form of “neo-critical community engagement” or examples of service-based initiatives on and off campus which have the power and potential to address inequitable educational structures nationwide. Historically Black Greek service leaders and professionals are civically minded change agents who use their membership in these century old organizations to extend their commitments to social uplift and the pursuit of quality educational opportunities for all. On the

one hand, this article is a reflective account of one faculty member's journey during the tenure track to sustain a community oriented, academic program while simultaneously constructing "yards" on a predominately white college campus. I view the construction of "yards" as a civic engagement initiative that builds meaningful connections between the campus and local communities. On the other hand, my decision to re-activate (or re-establish) and charter (or create a new chapter of) historically Black Greek letter organizations at a teaching intensive institution was an extension of my commitment to service learning inside undergraduate classrooms while prioritizing holistic student development. These curricular and co-curricular experiences helped me to engage with community partners and historically excluded students who transformed from budding student leaders to action-oriented change agents. Community engagement through ~~neo-critical~~ community engagement and intentional "yard" construction showcased my commitment to quality diversity and inclusion activities and organizations both on and off campus.

Existing Literature

Social Organizations and the civic engagement in higher education

(Black) Greek Life on American College Campuses. Honorary, professional, and social organizations on college campuses have a storied history within the United States. The first Greek letter organization, Phi Beta Kappa, established in 1776 is widely recognized as one of the most prestigious and selective honor societies in the United States. Initially, Phi Beta Kappa was a "literary society, sponsoring essay writing, debates and orations" (Torbenson 2005, p. 38). Over time, membership into this professional organization became more exclusive and reserved for students who secured the highest honors within their academic field or discipline at the conclusion of their undergraduate careers. Undoubtedly, this honor society inspired the creation of other collegiate organizations that would recruit members based upon their commitment to academic excellence during their collegiate career and larger interest in social activities that would unify (white male) college students.

To date, the United States boasts several thousand fraternal organizations that trace their origins back to different colleges and universities across the nation. Many of the earliest fraternal organizations reflected the student population of the era; early American college students were young adult children of the country's

elite and ruling classes. In the 18th and 19th centuries, these young white men were tracked into careers in medicine, law, or ministry and created largely homogeneous social organizations at their educational institutions which reflected their group interests. But as the college student population shifted ever-so slightly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the social organizations on campus began to reflect the needs, interests, racial, and cultural backgrounds of new American college students.

By the mid-late 19th and early 20th centuries, the American landscape of colleges and universities began to change. At the conclusion of the Civil War, educational institutes and normal schools for historically excluded groups were created to quench students' thirst for knowledge. The African Institute/Institute for Colored Youth in Cheyney, Pennsylvania is widely regarded as the first post-secondary Black college or university where Black youth and young adults could pique their educational curiosities. Many of these educational spaces eventually became historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) which are widely recognized as leading institutions that produce some of the largest percentages of Black professionals within the United States. And at the dawn of the 20th century, historically white colleges and universities in the United States began to welcome select students of color on their campuses. In addition to determining an academic course of study, Black students at predominately white institutions and HBCUs were eager to develop social organizations that would forge lifelong bonds with other collegians.

Social organizations broadly (and Greek letter organizations specifically) for Black students are historic, cultural entities that share the experiences and foresight of Black (collegians) in American society. Some of the earliest historically Black Greek letter organizations were created by students on predominately white campuses who were eager to build a productive communal space for themselves. Henry Callis, a founding jewel of the earliest Black fraternity stated that his organization, "was born in the shadows of slavery, on the lap of disenfranchisement. We proposed to bring leadership and vision to the social problems of our communities and the nation" (McKenzie, 2005, p. 183). Three historically Black Greek letter organizations were founded at historically white institutions like Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (1906) at Cornell University (Ithaca, New York), Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (1911) at Indiana University (Bloomington, Indiana), and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. (1922) at Butler University (Indianapolis, Indiana). Other

early Black Greek letter organizations were created at HBCUs: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (1908), Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (1911), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (1913), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (1914), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (1920), and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. (1964). These nine organizations are collectively called The Divine Nine or the nine earliest historically Black Greek letter organizations founded in the United States. While these organizations are widely viewed as social in nature, they all share an explicit commitment to academic excellence, social uplift, sustained community engagement, and lifelong membership.

All divine nine organizations participate in service and community engagement initiatives across the globe. There are 2.5 million members across all Divine Nine organizations worldwide who have an active commitment to serving various local communities. While each organization maintains specific partnerships or areas of focus for their service-related activities, across the Divine Nine, there is an explicit commitment to education for youth, health and wellness, and global impact. Specifically, members of historically Black sororities have “participated in social justice movements, lobbied for policy changes, created and sustained community service projects for literacy, education, and civic engagement, and promoted economic development” (Hernandez, 2022, p. 71). Historically Black Greek letter organizations also provide professional development opportunities for historically underserved students inside inclusive spaces (Kimbrough, 1995, p. 1). According to Paula Giddings (1988), a member of the second oldest historically Black Greek organization, “The sorority has always been an important source of leadership training for Black women, whose opportunities to exercise such skills in formal organizations are few” (16). Additionally, in the mid-20th century, Black sororities helped Black women secure employment as the political, economic, and social conditions shifted in the United States (Hernandez & Arnold, 2012, p. 663). Unlike many historically white organizations founded on college campuses, most divine nine organizations maintain their largest memberships among their alumni members or individuals who have attained a baccalaureate degree from a four-year college or university. These individuals are proof of the Divine Nine’s commitment to lifelong membership.

(Critical) Service Learning and Community Engagement on College Campuses. In the mid-to-late 20th century, the civic engagement movement spread throughout college campuses as institutions found ways to connect with communities outside the so-called “ivory tower.” Larger critiques of student service trips discussed the limitations of international service-related mission trips where students operated as “do-gooders” on behalf of a historically marginalized community (Illich, 1968, p. 1). The civic engagement movement “has sought to assert the core democratic purpose of education and to direct its core activities—teaching and learning, and knowledge generation—toward addressing the pressing issues that face society locally, nationally, and globally” (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 34-35). Beginning in the 1980s, there were several different periods and events including the community service movement, the service-learning movement and “more recently as a civic engagement movement encompassing community service and pedagogical practices as well as larger issues of organizational change that operationalize the qualities and values of engagement in relationships between higher education and communities aimed at building a public culture of democracy” (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 35). Many of the critiques of the civic engagement movement suggested that colleges and universities employed a top-down approach to service with community-based organizations and citizens of local communities.

There is a wealth of terminology that is used to describe campus-to-community partnerships within higher education. One of the most common terms that is used within the contemporary civic engagement movement is service learning. According to Wendy Wagner & Patricia Mathison (2015), traditional forms of service learning is “Community service combined with intentionally designed instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Mutually beneficial partnerships give students opportunities to apply academic knowledge and skills in areal context, while addressing local needs” (88). As scholarship on service learning and community engagement in higher education has proliferated, some scholars have critiqued the historic “charity model” of service and volunteerism in favor of a more critical approach to civic engagement both inside and outside of higher education. Author Dan Butin calls for a “justice learning” approach for service that is “cognizant of cultural, political, and systematic issues at both the micro and macro-levels that may perpetuate the oppressive practice of racism, classism, and heterosexual norms” (Welch, 2009,

p. 178). Other scholars in the field of community engagement describe the importance of critical service learning when college faculty and staff create classroom-to-community learning opportunities for students. Author Tania Mitchell (2008) states that, “Critical service-learning programs encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (51). In essence, critical service learning is a necessary addition to civic engagement partnerships that are embedded within a multi-faceted society.

During my review of existing scholarship, I contend that there is limited discussion about the contributions of historically Black Greek letter organizations within the history of the civic engagement movement in higher education. Some scholars have created literature reviews of key social initiatives from each Black Greek letter organization. Specifically, “social action programming by BGLOs led the way to even larger programs and in some instances influenced the very fiber of the black freedom movement” (Harris & Mitchell, 2008, p. 143-144). But scholars should place Black Greek letter organizations and their commitment to sustained community engagement within larger civic engagement movements. Additionally, this gap within existing scholarship is a direct reflection of the lack of scholarship that broadly engages Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs). According to Matthew Hughey and Gregory Parks (2012), “It is rare that one finds a robust or serious treatment of BFOs (Black Fraternal Organizations) in modern courses in anthropology, business, education, history, organizational management, religion, social movements, sociology, psychology or even classes that concentrate on race and ethnicity in a US context” (598). And if there is limited examination of Black fraternal organizations in “traditional” academic fields, then certainly there is limited discussion about Black undergraduates and post-graduates who contribute to various service-related initiatives both inside and outside higher education. Thus, this article contributes to existing academic scholarship on race, education, and civic engagement through a brief account of a Black Greek faculty member who re-activated and chartered two Black Greek letter organizations as part of a neo-civic engagement initiative on a predominately white college campus.

Yards as Community Engagement Initiatives at Predominately White Institutions

A Note on Methodology, The “Site” and Author Positionality. This article is an auto-ethnographic reflection of my experiences bringing historically Black Greek life to a teaching intensive institution in the Northeast. I utilize autoethnography as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts. Autoethnography is both a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes (Spry, 2001, p. 710). As an active member of a Black Greek letter organization and as a full-time member of the faculty at a college, I possessed partial membership inside these spaces where I worked closely with undergraduate students, college alumni, and community members to create a “yard” on a predominately white college campus.

Over the course of four academic years, I assumed both insider and outsider roles in my work to re-activate and charter historically Black Greek letter organizations in a small community. I constantly shifted between my multitude of identities as a full-time member of the faculty at the college, an active member of a historically Black sorority, and as a new resident in a largely rural, low-income community off campus. Admittedly, the rural and college communities possess some similarities. Both communities are largely homogenous in racial composition and had limited to no experience with historically Black Greek life. In other words, many members of the college community had little to no familiarity with Black Greek life and the community residents possessed a similar form of unfamiliarity. Unlike larger metropolitan spaces where Black Greek organizations are an integral part of the area and are deeply engaged with various community initiatives, these spaces needed an introduction to civic engagement as a vital part of Black Greek life.

My identity as a member of Black Greek letter organization allowed me access into and provided me with some knowledge and skills to navigate the exclusive Black Greek terrain. I possess what I call a “pan-Greek” affiliation as a member of the larger Divine Nine, but not as a member of the two historically Black Greek letter organizations that I re-activated or chartered at the small college: Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc. and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. During my first year on the tenure track, I learned that Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity was chartered in the 1980s but was inactive on campus due to lack of student interest. After working alongside current students and Black alumni, this fraternity was re-activated and recognized as a student organization in Fall 2016. At a fraternity event, I was approached by a member of their sister

organization, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and asked to support them as they worked to charter a chapter on our campus. This historically Black sorority was chartered on campus in Fall 2019. Both the fraternity and the sorority are still listed as recognized student organizations and are the first and only chapters of historically Black Greek letter organizations on this small college campus.

In order to build yards using a neo-community engagement approach, I worked alongside students and community members during every facet of the re-activation and chartering process. As the sole faculty member spearheading this process, I actively recruited and re-educated various members of the campus community about the key characteristics of historically Black Greek letter organizations and made direct connections between our college's commitment to sustained engagement with our rural town. My identity as a Black woman, faculty member influenced the creation of yards on our small liberal arts campus. As a faculty member, I worked hard to expose students to communities of color in the rural town where our college is located. For instance, one course titled "Black Lakeland," was a course which uses scholarly exploration and archival research to piece together the vestiges of Black rural life in a predominately white, small town. Through an examination of written text, newspaper articles, and oral history interviews, we learn about Black life that was hidden from local media and culture" (Moore Roberson, 2020, p. 23). This course pushes students to center Black voices in various predominately white spaces on and off campus. Our institution has a strong, expressed commitment to civic engagement with residents in our small town. Many of the students who expressed interest in these Black Greek letter organizations were student leaders who had a deep investment in critical service learning and meaningful community engagement. Some students were members of co-curricular organizations that participated in community engagement throughout the academic year or were even admitted to the College on a service-based scholarship (those students committed to weekly community engagement in our small rural town). As servants to the local community, these students were introduced to historically Black Greek letter organizations broad reaching commitment to lifelong, active membership and service to all communities (especially those outside of higher education).

The following description of several interconnected tasks blended my commitment to critical service learning and holistic undergraduate student support. First, I assessed the campus climate to determine the need

for historically Black Greek letter organizations to add cultural depth to existing student organizations. Upon my arrival at this institution, I learned that the college expressed an interest in growing their domestic population of students of color and that the undergraduate student population desired access to historically Black Greek organizations. According to some scholars, historically Black Greeks letter organizations can complement recruitment and retention efforts especially for domestic students of color who seek to pursue a baccalaureate degree while engaging in groups that may pique their interest (Smith Jr. 2019). In fact, a few years prior to my arrival, a group of students presented a list of demands to the senior administration which included “access” to organizations within the divine nine. Historically, some students joined these organizations on other campuses, but their organization (and their local chapters) were not recognized as an official student organization at the College. At the start of my full-time position, I spent several months studying the history of Greek life on our campus while educating myself on the lengthy processes to become an officially recognized student organization. At the conclusion of my research and review, it was clear that the campus (and its’ student body) was ready to add more organizations to its’ existing Greek community.

Next, I identified on-campus student leaders, some of whom provided recruitment support during the “yard” building process. As a new faculty member, I was a stranger to most students and community members both on and off campus. As I immersed myself in various on campus activities, I developed meaningful relationships with student leaders who provided key insights during every stage of the re-activation and chartering processes. One of my biggest challenges was educating students about the culture of the divine nine. In other words, most students received their informal education about these organizations from social media, rumors, and word of mouth. Throughout the first year on campus, I spent time educating the campus community about the histories, origins, and unifying principles of the divine nine. This education happened through small group sessions with interested students and even campus wide lectures about the history of the divine nine and the future possibilities of chartering chapters on campus. Several community members attended these public presentations as they considered the ways that these organizations could be an asset to the existing campus culture.

Then, I studied key components of the college's institutional memory and pieced together the history of a historically Black fraternity through unofficial interviews and informal conversations with key constituents like active Black alumni. I was intrigued by the history of one group which was the only officially recognized historically Black Greek letter organization on our small college campus. While several community members recalled the existence of a historically Black Greek letter organization, it became difficult to decipher specific histories and even acquire contact information for former alumni who may possess more detailed information about the local chapter. Thus, I reached out to the Black alumni network which had an active membership and was full of individuals who were eager to support faculty and staff in their efforts to diversify the campus. These alumni were an integral part of this process as they provided names and direct contact information about the first members of the local chapter.

In addition, I contacted several local and regional area community members throughout various stages of the process to assess their ability to support this initiative to create yards on this predominately white campus. Throughout the process, it was important to remain connected to various members of different communities. Once the historically Black fraternity was re-activated on our campus, Black alumni groups provided financial support and off-campus mentorship to the local chapter. This support was an integral part of the students' reintroduction to the campus community as student leaders who were now part of a Black Greek letter organization. These relationships also encouraged newly initiated students to seek counsel from individuals off campus while they completed their undergraduate studies. These historically Black Greek letter organizations would have been unsuccessful without the support of external members of the campus community.

Conclusion

Overall, diversity in Greek life at a PWI would expose all students, faculty, staff, and administrators to fraternal life that is committed to service through lifelong membership. While historically white fraternal organizations are popular throughout a student's collegiate days, members of the Divine Nine are expected to be committed to their organization for life. This active investment from community members in areas directly outside of colleges and universities can be crucial and constructive towards more sound campus-community

partnerships and help to slowly erode strained town-gown relationships that are commonplace in higher education. Furthermore, members of the community may be interested in partnering with students in Greek letter organizations (especially students in Divine Nine organizations) because of their close proximity to older members of the community who are not affiliated with said college or university. Since all undergraduate chapters of divine nine organizations are mentored by graduate/alumni members, their service work and their commitment to communal uplift will be informed by senior leaders outside of their undergraduate institutions.

The establishment of a “yard” or collection of historically Black Greek letter organizations at this predominately white institution (PWI) builds community for Black and Brown students in multiple ways. Some scholars discuss the influence of Black Greek letter organizations on recruitment and retention efforts—especially at predominately white institutions. Meaningful campus to fraternal connections can be seen even throughout the membership intake process for these organizations (which typically takes place during the academic year). In a more recent study of historically Black fraternities and PWIs, Black male students described “bonds of brotherhood” that were strengthened during the initiation process which developed bonds which translated to their “academic and social endeavors” at their respective institutions (Smith, Jr., 2016, p. 99-100). These processes may help students at PWIs feel an attachment, membership in a group, or even a sense of belonging on a campus where they are truly underrepresented.

Since the reactivation and chartering of these two Divine Nine organizations, undergraduate student members have participated in a wealth of community activities throughout the local region. Specifically, student members have contributed to highway cleaning initiatives, volunteered at local soup kitchens, and supported green initiatives with our community-based organizations. As students at our predominately white institution become more engaged with Divine Nine organizations, they will certainly see a collective commitment to communal uplift and supporting communities within urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout the United States.

While building Black Greek culture amid a thriving historically white Greek network, I inadvertently taught college students, faculty, and staff about the power of campus to community networks and re-introduced many students to the value of critical community engagement. Neo-critical community engagement

transforms students into critical citizens or individuals who are self-reflective while directly engaging in meaningful service opportunities. Undergraduate students who were initiated into two historically Black Greek letter organizations were given access to an exclusive Black professional network, but they were also taught the power of lifelong learning through meaningful community engagement both on and off campus. Students in these organizations developed cutting edge service projects and established meaningful relationships with community members, especially community members of color. These divine nine organizations even partnered with one another to conduct fundraising initiatives and support larger causes like the March of Dimes. Overall, these two Black Greek letter organizations helped transform the culture of the institution, created new possibilities for undergraduate students at this small college, and pushed students to consider the value of meaningful community engagement.

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