



 COMMENTARY EDUCATION

## Pledging a Diverse College Experience

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It's that time of the year again—as college admissions roll in, a few of our country's teens receive their golden ticket to the elite universities of their choice, while others enroll in schools that better fit their price range and interests. Parents will sit down with their kids and discuss their best options and help them choose where to go.

One thing that probably won't be talked about is whether or not their son or daughter should pledge Greek life.

Despite increasingly bad press over the past few years, Greek life membership has been steadily on the rise. The North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) states that fraternity membership has grown by 45 percent since 2005, with 372,090 current undergraduate members. The National Panhellenic Council (NPC) has seen a similar rise, with 353,345 current undergraduate members. These two organizations comprise what have come to be known as white Greek life organizations (WGLOs)—usually the dominant strand of Greek life on campus.

Aside from numerous incidents involving hazing, sexual assault, and alcohol abuse, the rise in membership at WGLOs is alarming due to the fact that these institutions promote campus segregation. Increasing membership in these powerful and exclusive organizations will only exacerbate this situation since they often command an outsized slice of the resources and attention of their universities compared to much smaller minority counterparts, such as Asian, Latino, LGBT, and black Greek-life organizations.

## Hidden Segregation, Evident Racism

While most colleges tout diversity and inclusion as core values in their admissions policy, there is little said about the reshuffling that happens once students get past the campus gates. Unlike university admissions, there is no national data on Greek life demographics, making it impossible to hold institutions accountable or to track progress. However, there are a few independent examples that can give us a glimpse as to how white Greek-life organizations stratify campus by class and color.

In 2009, the undergraduate student government at Princeton conducted a demographic poll of Greek life, which, while not officially recognized by the university, enrolls an estimated 15 percent of the student body. They found that 70 percent of members had family incomes of more than \$150,000, and 30 percent had family incomes of more than \$500,000. This may

possibly reflect the composition of the student body, but when it comes to race, more than 70 percent of members were white, while less than half of the campus was. While it's eating clubs—not fraternities—that dominate Princeton's social scene, Greek life is often a pipeline into these selective organizations.

In a survey of eight different Greek institutions at three colleges on the East Coast, Matthew Hughey, sociology professor at University of Connecticut, found that the average proportion of minorities was 3.8 percent. While these studies are small, their findings help to explain why WGLOs continually have problems with diversity and tolerance, revealed by such things as the recent video that surfaced of Sigma Alpha Epsilon's racist chant at University of Oklahoma, or University of Alabama's record of only admitting one black student into a white sorority until forced to in 2013.

Predominantly white Greek organizations don't explicitly bar minorities and poor students from joining—that would be illegal—but there's a difference between allowing disadvantaged groups to apply and actively creating an environment that welcomes them. High cost of dues, racist party themes, and chanting the line, “there will never be a nigger at SAE” do not necessarily lay out the welcome mat.

These events are extreme occurrences. For every negative news story about a racist fraternity or sorority incident, there is probably a positive one that gets untold. But until WGLOs are more forthcoming with their diversity numbers and openly demonstrate their activity in promoting tolerance, the sensational stories will be what holds the public's attention.

## Helping Students, or Creaming Them?

Proponents of Greek life often argue for the benefits of membership, citing overall higher graduation rates of 20 percent over non-members. (While I couldn't find the source of this claim, many individual colleges have data that show similar numbers.) The NIC also published a Gallup poll revealing that Greek alumni report higher engagement at their jobs and sense of overall well-being than non-Greek alumni.

Of course, since these reports don't control for race and income, Greek success could simply be dependent on these factors. Put simply, Greek members are richer and whiter than non-Greeks, which means they are likely to have stronger support systems already in place that

help them graduate and get good jobs. Selecting members from a privileged cohort—known as “creaming” in the education world—goes a long way in guaranteeing high performance by graduates of your organization.

This protectionist method of affiliation doesn’t have just social implications. It’s estimated that half of all workers in the United States find their jobs through personal connections. By separating those with the most opportunities on campus from those with the least, many low-income and minority students are locked out of the extensive alumni networking that white Greek life offers.

But even the simple social aspects of these trends are disturbing. Three-quarters of whites have entirely white social networks, according to a Public Religion Research Institute [poll](#). The social network of an average white American is 91 percent white. Higher education should be a place that leads the charge in breaking these barriers rather than enforcing them.

Many students are not purposefully choosing to discriminate when they pledge a WGLO. But that doesn’t make the resulting segregation okay. “One of the most effective adaptations of racism over time is that we can think of it only as something that individuals either are or are not ‘doing,’” says Robin DiAngelo, professor of multicultural education at Westfield State University, in an [interview](#) with my colleague, Sam Adler-Bell. By participating in—and therefore condoning—a national system that separates students by race and wealth, members are implicit in what Hughey [terms](#), “a form of American apartheid.

## So What Can Universities Do?

Some fraternities and sororities are starting to act on the problem. For example, after holding an insensitive “[Jail N’ Bail](#)” party at Northwestern, in which sisters at Kappa Kappa Gamma dressed up in orange prison jumpsuits in a misguided attempt to raise money for underserved children, the sorority decided to appoint a diversity and inclusion chair to help address the issue. While a positive step, one chair will not change a whole national system.

When asked about what universities should do to combat Greek segregation, Hughey said “diversity is not the goal, but rather the outcome of an equal and just system.” And in his opinion, much of the problem boils down to housing.

While WGLOs usually own and maintain houses on campus land—which, in the case of public universities, is subsidized by public tax dollars—minority organizations often have no such campus presence. As a result, WGLOs hold enormous clout in that they dominate the on-campus residential and social scene.

To make the Greek system more equitable, Hughey believes that colleges should build and subsidize houses for minority Greek organizations, which often don't have the financial means to do so. By supporting minority Greek life, colleges could see an increase in more diverse applicants who would be attracted by options outside of exclusively white and rich houses.

In his personal experience, Hughey also finds that minority houses are more financially inclusive—dues are typically lower and members don't assume that their brothers and sisters come from wealthy backgrounds. Minority houses can offer a more viable option for those who cannot afford to pledge WGLOs.

On the flip side, there should be no hesitation to revoke funding from or even disband those houses that violate campus diversity policies. Of course, this is easier for universities to do in blatant cases, such as the racist video at University of Oklahoma, but harder when discrimination flies under the radar. Colleges should require fraternities and sororities to publish their demographics and a breakdown of their membership costs. Without this transparency, most organizations are not held accountable and will have little push to change their policies.

Students have a role as well. The truth is, white Greek life and its divisive culture will persist as it is as long as there are those willing to join and pay dues in exchange for the privileges received. However, incoming freshman can also vote with their feet and their wallets by pledging houses that are truly inclusive, or not pledge at all. They can create the campus experience they wish to have—not only for themselves, but for their entire class.