

FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES ARTICLE

You are planning to attend college to study, learn, and prepare for a career, but a balanced college life includes more than academics. At any college, you will find an array of organizations that cater to different student interests, including sports clubs, professional associations, and fraternities and sororities. The last two are commonly referred to as “Greek life.”

What are they?

Fraternities and sororities are social groups organized by individuals who believed in the same core values and wanted to stay close and support each other through their college experience (Brown et al., 2012). The word “**fraternity**” comes from the Old Latin *fraternus* (brother). Beginning with Phi Beta Kappa in 1776, each brotherhood was named using two or three Greek letters. Greek was widely studied then, and the letters spelled out values the members believed in.

Greek letter organizations evolved through exclusion, first by gender then by race. Women were not allowed to join fraternities, so they founded the first **sorority** (from the Medieval Latin *soror*, “sister”) in 1851–52. Many sororities continue to advance women’s rights and equality. Today many Greek letter organizations are co-ed. **Chapters** (branches) of fraternities and sororities expanded across colleges from 1900 to 1930. Soon, **HBCUs** (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) took up the mantle.

How are they structured?

Prospective freshmen members visit chapter houses and interview with current members during **rush week**, at the beginning of the school year. Some are then invited to join with a “**bid**.” If they accept, they are known as “**pledges**” or new members and can participate in society life but cannot yet hold office. That comes after “**crossing**,” or initiation to full membership. **Initiation rituals** are kept secret and include **hand signs** and passwords. Members address and refer to each other as “**brother**” or “**sister**” and can display their society’s heraldry and motto on badges, pins, and clothing. Criticisms of Greek life have led to improvements such as the prohibition of **hazing**, which often involved the humiliation and even harm of new members. Members can only belong to one organization at a time. Members can live in a “**lodge**” or a “**chapter house**” on campus, or simply meet in a clubhouse on or off campus.

What is the National Pan-Hellenic Council?

BGLOs (Black Greek letter organizations) began with the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity at Cornell University in 1906. Members supported each other, both in their studies and against racism, segregation, and discrimination. In 1908, the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority was the first of six BGLOs founded at Howard University, one of the oldest HBCUs.

In 1930, five African American fraternities and four African American sororities joined to create the National Pan-Hellenic Council (**NPHC**), or the **Divine Nine**. Today, the NPHC works to continue the tradition of empowerment, leadership, and working toward social change through community awareness and “action through educational, economic, and cultural service activities” (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2023).

They also make room for fun with such cultural traditions as **stepping** and **strolling**. These are syncopated movement shows with African roots. They incorporate “**calls**” (unique vocal expressions) and are often performed to popular Black music of the day.

What is the National Multicultural Greek Council?

In the last twenty to thirty years, students have begun to organize by identity, beliefs, values, and culture, not by race or religion. This enlargement of focus eventually led to the formation of the National Multicultural Greek Council in 1998, a body of 19 Greek organizations made up of nine fraternities and ten sororities. The first Multicultural Greek Letter Organization (**MGLO**) was Mu Sigma Upsilon at Rutgers University in 1981 (Brown, et. al., 2012; Hunter, 2010). Many members see multiculturalism as an acceptance of and learning about other cultures, as well as promoting and including them. The commitment to diversity by MGLOs helps students who might otherwise find it difficult to locate a group on campus where they feel comfortable (Chaumont, 2015).

How can these groups affect my life?

As a freshman college student, you will be in the throes of forming your **social identity**, asking the question, “Who am I?” The answer comes partly from the social groups with which you find **belonging**, including family, work, and school groups. For minority students, groups that focus on, support, and empower them create uplift that can last for a lifetime.

In the broader **community**, Black and multicultural Greek letter organizations give back by focusing on **service** as well as scholarship. They help with voter education through registration drives, and help alleviate poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness by collecting and distributing supplies and organizing fundraisers to support charities. In addition, “each D9 organization has a specific national initiative that local chapters host to address community and international concerns” (Graham, 2023).

References:

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