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**Black Panhellenic Sorority Member Experience at the University of San Diego:
Finding a Sense of Belonging & Support**

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Action Research

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August 10, 2022

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Abstract

The purpose of this Action Research project was to learn more about the experiences of Black current and alumni members of Panhellenic sororities. My study explored their experiences within Fraternity & Sorority Life (FSL) as a whole, as well as how they have navigated being in predominantly white spaces at the University of San Diego. One of the main problems discussed was how some chapters do not know what support looks like for Black identified members. Members completed a brief survey and participated in an individual interview and discussed their sorority experience at USD. During this project, I learned from these members' experiences possible approaches that I hope the chapters and the (FSL) community at USD can learn to implement to best support this group of leaders.

Keywords: Panhellenic, Sorority, Belonging, Black Women, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI)

Introduction & Social Location

I grew up in Oceanside and I spent a majority of my life here, and I never really lived anywhere else. My dad was in the military, which is why we are in Oceanside and my family stayed there when he got out. In Oceanside, I grew up around different groups of people, from jobs, education, ethnic backgrounds, etc. Growing up around people with different backgrounds made me aware of diverse communities at such a young age; however, there were still times where I would be one of the only Black people in a room.

Another part about growing up in Oceanside was centered on where most people decided to go to college. If people were not going to college in either San Diego, Los Angeles, or somewhere out of the area, they were going to go to Mira Costa Community College, Palomar Community College, or California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM). I decided to go to CSUSM. At first, I was not excited about CSUSM because it was the university most people in my area would go to if they were not able to go anywhere else, and you will most likely see everyone from high school. I am a person who believes everything happens for a reason, and the universe will always work in your favor; if I never had gone to CSUSM, I would not have found my route of going into higher education.

During my undergraduate career at CSUSM, I was a traditional commuter student because I only lived about 20 minutes away from campus. I never experienced living on campus, which was another reason I was not too happy about CSUSM as I was not getting the full on college freshman experience. I felt I was basically repeating high school, and my first semester I found it hard to make friends. However, my second semester I decided to get involved on campus to make friends and try to feel connected to campus. I applied to become an orientation leader. Being an

orientation leader helped me be connected on campus. It helped me make friends, and I found more ways to become involved on campus because others were involved on campus.

The following semester I joined the sorority Alpha Omicron Pi, got an on-campus job, and had other involvement opportunities. Alpha Omicron Pi is a Traditionally White Sorority. The reason why I decided to join a sorority was because even though I got involved on campus, I still felt that I did not have a stable group of friends I could always go to on campus. Even though I never saw myself being a sorority girl, I felt this was a good opportunity to meet women who are similar and different from me. I participated in the informal recruitment process for Alpha Omicron Pi, and I really enjoyed meeting the women, plus what really stood out to me about the chapter was the diversity. The chapter had women of different races, ethnicities, shapes and sizes. At the time when I joined my sorority, Historically Black Sororities had not been established on campus, and even if they were established at that time; I don't think I would join due to the fact I dealt with microaggressions from other Black people and I wanted to avoid that pain.

During my three years in the chapter I took upon the leadership role of Greek Leadership Council delegate on the executive board. This leadership role gave me the opportunity to travel to our chapter's headquarters in Brentwood Tennessee, and connect with other women in other chapters across the country. From taking on that position, I then took leadership roles outside of the chapter within the greek council on campus, and I got out of my comfort zone, with taking the most of my greek life experience as much as possible while I was an active member.

As for my social location, how I show up in a space as a researcher is I may not always have dealt with certain forms of racism as others. In my area, I grew up with more microaggressions than anything else. I would hear comments like "you're an Oreo," "you don't talk like a Black person," or "white washed." For the longest time I really began questioning who

I was as a Black person. Then it got to the point where other Black people would view me as not Black enough (a main source of harm for me); I was not enough for non-Black folks and was not enough for the Black folks. This made it hard for me to be my authentic self in spaces. When I joined my sorority, I would tell other Black people what sorority I was a part of. I would get nothing but disappointment from them because I chose to be a member of a White sorority.

Literature Review

The purpose of my literature review is to focus on research on the experience of Black students in PWIs, including sense of belonging and success, racial microaggressions on college campuses specifically at PWIs, participation of non-White students in traditionally White organizations, and leadership in Panhellenic chapters. I reviewed various articles, previous action research projects, and a dissertation on these topics. This literature review will focus on the need to support this group of students, hearing from students from other campuses share their truth, how they felt, and hearing from former students as what they would have needed during their time at the university.

Racial Microaggressions

The article *Racial Microaggressions and Sense of Belonging at Historically White University* (Lewis et al., 2019) used critical race theory (CRT) to explore and understand the experience of students of color (i.e., African American, Asian American, multiracial students, etc.) at a Historically White University and how the students' sense of belonging was influenced. According to this study, African American/Black students had significantly higher experiences of racial microaggression than any other group of students of color. "An unsupportive campus climate can negatively influence the academic performance and psychological well-being of students of color" (Smith et al., 2007; Worthington et al., 2008). Students of color are more likely

to not have a great experience at a PWI due to the environments being caused by their White counterparts. This is especially true at USD with the Black student population feeling like they do not belong inside or outside of the education setting.

Very similar to the previous article, *The Effect of Microaggressions, Predominantly White Institutions, and Support Service on the Academic Success of Minority Students* (Parsons, 2017) examined more how microaggressions impacted academic success of students of color more so at a PWI. With providing support services for students who are holding certain marginalized identities with the right resources to help them in their academic success. Many students of color have reported having feelings of internal conflict after hearing or being treated with microaggressive behaviors from others on their campus, which ends up resulting in confronting or avoiding the issues at hand. Commonly, students tended to avoid the situation to not make the conflict worse than it already was, as some fear things such as grades or status could potentially be put in jeopardy. This is more likely if they have to confront a faculty or staff member about it (Parsons, 2017).

Ultimately, this leads to this group of students feeling unsupported by the university, as anxieties have increased in students of color, and they have low participation in classes, which does affect academic performance. Issues like these are part of the reason this group of students are not performing as well as their White counterparts since they do not feel support with racial issues on campus, and they do not even feel the support with their academics. Making their college experience tough since that support is lacking, and hard to find those places of support with the feeling that institution is against them and does not want to see them succeed.

Reiter and Reiter (2020) also used critical race theory, and they studied how racial microaggressions have been overlooked in the past years as a form of racism at PWIs. Students

from this study reported being affected socially, academically, and emotionally by racial microaggressions. Black and Brown students do not feel very supported by their institutions, but this covers more aspects besides just academics and how to navigate the so-called “White spaces” as Black and Brown identified students. Many students of color at USD mentioned it is hard to navigate the spaces on campus and find support in what they need to be successful in their undergraduate career.

Origin of Sororities and National Panhellenic Conference

Sororities, originally called women’s fraternities, officially began in 1851 with the establishment of the Adelphean society also known as Alpha Delta Pi; however, fraternity-type organizations for women did not take form until the following organizations were founded: Pi Beta Phi in 1867 and Kappa Alpha Theta in 1870. The term *sorority* comes from the Latin *soror*, which means sister. Organizations did not use the term sorority at first; the first chapter to use the term sorority was Gamma Phi Beta, which was founded in 1874. The National Panhellenic Council (NPC) is the umbrella organization that oversees all 26 sororities in the United States and Canada, and it was established in 1902. NPC is one of the oldest and largest women’s membership organizations with over 4 million members at over 600 campuses.

Non-White Members in Traditionally White Sororities

Hughey (2010) discussed the participation of non-White members in traditionally White sororities. Hughey (2010) discussed how the non-White members of the organization navigated finding a sense of belonging and identified with understanding how some of these non-White members have faced criticism and prejudice even from their own racial group, including some terms non-White members have been called words such as “sell out” (Hughey, 2010). Hearing words like this have people of color begin questioning their identity, and eventually they view

themselves as not enough, and even though other members of traditionally White sororities still fully accept them who they are, they still face much criticism from their own racial group. The study was conducted interviewing non-White members in White Greek letter organizations on three different universities on the East Coast (Hughey, 2010).

In Smith's 2018 dissertation, *Black Like Me: Understanding Racial Identity Development through the Experiences of Black Women in White Sororities at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's)* mentioned more about the experiences of solely Black women who are apart of traditionally White sororities at PWIs. The purpose of the study was to provide a better understanding of the role of racial identity in Black women who choose not to participate in the so-called traditional "Black student activities" at PWIs. Also, Smith (2018) discussed Black students who are treated as less than or not enough from their other Black identified peers at PWIs because they are not following the norm, taking full participation in certain organizations such as Black Student Union, or participating in events specially targeted for Black identified students.

Leadership Development in Panhellenic Organizations

Panhellenic sorority chapters provide many opportunities in leadership for their members to take advantage of. These multiple leadership opportunities that each chapter offers can not only enhance the individual skills but also help bring change to the chapter. In an action research project, Reynolds (2020) discussed the many chances that members who are on the executive board have the individual willpower to provide change within the chapter if they would like something to be done in a different manner. Also, with the power of having an executive leadership position within their organization, they can properly execute that change.

Aiello-Coppola (2018) discussed developing meaningful relationships for chapters new members at USD more specifically within the different student group types, especially with all the

organizations on campus showing their organizational and USD values when it comes to membership. Some challenges that were faced with new members not feeling super connected to some of the active members at first.

Context

When I came to USD I was asked if I would like to volunteer as a Chapter Development Advisor (CDA) for one of the Panhellenic chapters on campus. In Spring 2021, I was asked to help plan the Black in Panhellenic Space, this was to serve as a support of women who identify as Black who are in Panhellenic chapters as a space where they can uplift each other. Hearing from these women I saw the needs of some of the Black identified women in Panhellenic before and after the events of 2020. Therefore, I wanted to look more into the experience of Black women who are in, and find out what they not only need from their chapter but the Fraternity & Sorority Life community as a whole at the University of San Diego.

With the events of 2020 of racial injustice towards Black People, Panhellenic Chapters as well as the Fraternity & Sorority life community at the University of San Diego was striving for more Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. With that they wanted to become more educated and be aware about the issues that affect the Black community as well other marginalized groups. Also, they aimed to support their members' identity within those communities.

Project Rationale

My methodology reflects my epistemological stance because I am a member of a Traditionally White Sorority Alpha Omicron Pi, and I identify as a Black woman, and I was able to find a sense of belonging in this community despite knowing this organization was not originally made for women like myself. I still was determined to find a community in my

organization and make the most out of my college experience. I understand women who identify themselves as women of color can join these organizations as well since some of these organizations are slowly but surely being deconstructed of the so-called “sorority look” and are making attempts to make their organizations inclusive for members of all backgrounds.

I see myself as a passionate participant and advocate/activist. The reason why I consider myself in both these categories is because as I previously mentioned I was a member of Alpha Omicron Pi during my college years. I enjoyed being a part of this organization so much as well as the experience and wish to anyone who joins the Greek community to enjoy this experience as well. As an advocate and activist, I am hearing the needs of many current members of these organizations who want to see change. I understand what is currently going on with many racial justice movements, they are making statements on making changes; however, it is important to still hold them accountable to what they are currently preaching and hold them to the standards they are making for themselves. This accountability is important, as well as really listening to the needs of their members who have marginalized identities.

Research Design

I conducted a qualitative study method for my research because I wanted to ask open-ended questions, which could lead to more detailed answers. I conducted the interviews over Zoom and I transcribed the interviews. I had the interviews on Zoom because it was the most effective way to transcribe the interviews. Also just in case we needed to go back to fully remote and no longer be permitted on campus unless for essential purposes due to COVID-19. I also interviewed one alumni member who was not in San Diego since their graduation date.

I interviewed current Panhellenic members and an alumni member with a pre-interview questionnaire that included informed consent. The reason why I chose this method is because with

just a survey my data would be very minimal, and it might not have enough information that I needed, and questions or even answers may have to be further clarified for the participants. When my participants completed the pre-interview questionnaire, then I proceeded with the interview if they felt comfortable doing the interview portion. I went over the informed consent again with my participants to help them understand the terms and conditions of the study and to allow them to ask any last-minute questions. The survey asked demographic questions such as age, race/ethnicity, years active in chapter, leadership positions etc. The purpose of these responses supported me in gaining deeper insights and ensured the participants met the study criteria.

The way I recruited participants for this study is to reach out to the women who participated in the Black in Panhellenic space during Spring 2021, to ask if they would be willing to be a part of the project. I let the participants know I will keep their identity confidential to avoid them feeling uncomfortable during the process. I understand there have been incidents at USD where Black voices have been shut down by peers, faculty, and staff, then later they have been attacked for simply speaking their truth. This process kept their identities private.

Another way I was able to get participants, was I reached out to the directors of FSL at USD and asked if they had any recommendations for participants, especially if they had alumni members in mind. In this study and for their perspective on supporting Black women in traditionally White sororities. I did also ask alumni of USD who are Black women; received a couple of recommendations of alumni members who could provide great insight and perspective on their time as an active member. However, I only received a response from one of them.

Participant Engagement and Ethical Considerations

As mentioned above, I contacted the FSL directors at USD. My research would be very beneficial for them to know about because with the current climate with the racial inequities, the

FSL community on campus are striving to create change involving diversity and inclusion actions. For many in this community it is a lot of learning and debunking of what people already know and assume about certain identities since the student population is predominantly White. With that being said, sometimes they might not always be the best way to support the members who are a part of the community. As the FSL community is not only at USD, other campuses are also striving to make diversity and inclusion a priority, so it is best to use all the tools and resources that can be helpful for them.

Data Collection

My current relationship with FSL at USD is positive. I currently serve in a volunteer position as a Chapter Development Advisor for the Panhellenic chapter Pi Beta Phi. I provide support and communication as needed, increase awareness of resources provided on campus, communicate important information from the FSL office, attend biweekly meetings, and create/improve positive recognition for the chapter. Being in the role for a whole semester helped me learn the basics of how FSL operates at USD because FSL operates differently at each campus. Also, in this role I am updated on any issues that are going on at the chapter and council level.

Protecting the Identity of Participants

The process I used to protect the identity of my participants required a number of steps. The first step was securing the data. I was the only person with access to the data from this research. I had all the information stored and downloaded in Qualtrics. My Qualtrics account is password protected, with all data and information kept in my account. The only way others will be able to access my data is if I voluntarily share it with them, which I am not doing for this project.

Next, I chose identifiers by referring them to Current Member #1(CM), and Alumni Member #1 (AM#). Additionally in the informed consent, I included a section about the interviews being recorded so all participants were aware the interviews are going to be recorded. All videos were stored in a private folder that I only have access to, and will not be shared with anyone else. Further, I informed the participants that I am the only one that is watching the video so I can go back and refer to our conversation for this project. Also, before the interview began I reviewed with them the informed consent. Those participants who wished not to be video recorded, had permission to turn their camera off, and just have the audio recorded. Lastly, in order to ensure that no one had access to video interviews, I deleted the videos after completing the data analysis.

Cycles

I used Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. This cycle consists of the following steps: active experimentation (planning/trying what you've learned), concrete experience (having/doing an experience), reflective observation (reviewing/reflecting on the experience), and abstract conceptualization (concluding/learning from the experience). The reason why I chose this cycle as my method is because of its process of experimenting with something for the first time potentially, then going back on how this experience was either helpful or not, and how to make improvement going forward, to be more effective in the future.

Figure 1**Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle**

Some assumptions I had going into this project is assuming all the Black identified members know about the support being offered for them because their chapter is communicating this resource that is provided specifically for them; however, chapter leaders might not share or even forget to share this information with the students who need it. They are most likely the women who joined a traditionally White sorority because historically Black sororities are not available to them at USD, but they wish to be a part of Greek life, or they were like myself not feeling “Black enough,” so they chose this direction. The chapter is not practicing what they preach when it comes to providing more diversity with their respective chapters saying they have a Diversity Equity and Inclusion chair or members of color. That is only doing so much, as I have seen this happen a lot in the Greek community saying they want a certain incentive, but never follow through with it.

Results & Findings

Cycle 1: Survey

Table 1

Student	Current or Alumni Member	Age	Position in Chapter or Panhellenic Council
CM #1	Current	21	No
CM #2	Current	22	Yes
CM #3	Current	19	Yes
CM #4	Current	20	Yes
AM#1	Alumni	22	Yes

As mentioned previously for my first cycle, I conducted a quick demographic survey of my participants. The intended outcome of this survey was to get a general sense of who my participants were before going in deeper with the interview on how they have navigated their identity within spaces. I asked thirteen questions (*See Appendix C for full survey*).

From the demographics survey, finding out if they have held a leadership position within their chapter or not could help me get an idea on how much they feel like they belong. Having these leadership positions can impact their sense of belonging within this community. Also it was important to know how long they have been in their organization because their sense of belonging may have changed as I saw with two of my participants in this research. 4 out of 5 of the participants currently have or had a position within their organizations or on the panhellenic council. This made me curious why some of them had stepped up to these leadership positions, and wanted to dive deeper into their time in those positions and what impact it had on them. My participants were between the ages of 19-22, years active within between 2.5-4 years. Most of

them have been apart for at least a year or more, four out of the five are currently active within their organizations, and one is alumni of their organization.

Cycle 2: Interviews

Also mentioned previously, on my second cycle I conducted one on one interviews with each of my participants. The purpose of the interview was to learn more about their sorority experience with their identity as Black women. All questions were open-ended with the option of the participants to refuse to answer if they felt uncomfortable in the moment. I held these interviews virtually on Zoom. I chose this virtual interview option because I decided to interview alumni members, and was unsure if the alumni participants would still be located in San Diego as well. I wanted to be prepared just in case we needed to go back to being remote due to COVID-19, and not permitted to be in person on campus unless for essential reasons. Since the interviews were virtual I decided to record/orally transcribe the interviews because this made it easier to review and analyze my data. I informed my participants prior to the interview stated in the informed consent that I was going to be recording them, as well I would be the only one who would have access to the videos.

The first set of questions of the interview were centered around navigating the sorority experience, learning about themselves as a college student, the reason why they joined a sorority, and what was the process of going through sorority recruitment like for them. The second set of questions were centered around their traditionally white sorority, navigating a predominantly white institution, how they felt supported following the death of George Floyd, and how the chapter practiced DEI. This was important because I needed an understanding of their experiences inside and outside of the sorority, and how their sense of belonging has been impacted from being in these spaces.

Common Themes/Findings from Interviews

Joining A Sorority

With all five of my participants, they all never saw themselves being a part of a sorority when first deciding to attend USD. However, they wanted to be part of a group on campus, create friendships, new experiences but overall wanted to be in a space where they felt like they belonged. AM #1 stated that “ I was really longing for like a sisterhood, and just more people to connect with I feel like coming into college is really scary thing away from home.” CM #3 stated “So I really wanted to join a space that was full of you know girls that are both like alike and different from me in different ways.” To summarize, all my participants were looking for a community to be a part of, when coming to college it is a whole different environment with most likely coming into this setting knowing no one, dealing with homesickness, living with people you never lived with before etc. It is all scary and new no one wants to go through something like this alone because then it will feel lonely.

Being a part of a community where others shared common interests as them, and being in a space where they could be with different people, and learn from each other: that’s what CM#3 was really looking for when joining sorority plus they liked how the particular chapter had women from many different types of backgrounds from race, ethnicity, majors, and more. They felt they were able to learn from the women in the chapter because of how diverse they are, this was also what stood out to them when going through the recruitment process.

Recruitment

Between all five participants each of them went through a different process of recruitment. AM #1 and CM #3 went through informal recruitment whereas CM #1, #2 and #4 went through

the formal spring recruitment process, but CM#4 experiences was on zoom due to COVID-19. CM#1 stated recruitment was going to be stressful due to “feeling like you're in competition with the others who are also in the recruitment process, plus worrying how hair and makeup will be, and outfits for each day.” They also mentioned about during the process of having this idea of expression of oneself but still felt being the realm of USD, and that level of fashion of what you should be wearing. So when getting ready for recruitment, CM#1 got outfits that still represented who they were, however, at the same time getting clothes at the same level the other girls who were going through recruitment were getting.

CM#1 also said when it came to one of the first chapters she met during recruitment, that chapter would see her as the “Token Black girl” as she was the only Black girl, and the whole chapter was White. When hearing this from CM#1 It made me wonder if other Black identified women going through the recruitment process felt the same way knowing they would most likely be the only Black girl entering that sorority during that round.

The two participants that went through the informal recruitment process described it as not being stressful and more laid back. CM#3 mentioned being a little hesitant at first because they never considered themselves to be a “sorority girl” since it’s something that normally would not or consider doing as well being their crowd of people. However, they decided to just take the chance and go through the process. They stated during the informal recruitment they felt everyone in the chapter was genuinely interested in getting to know them both as a person and student. AM#1 mentioned similar things about the informal recruitment process and how it was less stressful than formal recruitment.

CM#4 knew going into recruitment that they would most likely be the only Black woman in the space when going through the process. But during the process, they made it clear when

they went into each chapter to talk about their identity because they wanted to make it known to the chapters that their identity was very important to them. CM#4 wanted all the chapters in the recruitment process to know “this is not something that is going away, it’s who they are, and they deserve to be in a space where their identity is valued by everyone they share the space with.”

Chapters Support Following Racial Injustices

After the events following the death of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement, and many other acts of racial injustices in 2020, many panhellenic chapters said they would uplift and support members of the Black community; not only folks outside of the USD, but also their chapter members who identify as Black. When I asked the question “After the events with Black Lives Matter, and all the racial injustices, How has your chapter supported you (if at all)?” CM# 4 immediate response was “So that’s part of it is really disappointing. Because they don’t bring awareness to it enough when they said they were going to.”

It’s sad hearing that not enough awareness is brought up in their chapter because they said they were going to help support this group of people however, the work is not being done. CM#4 also mentioned it bothers them a lot as it is not talked about all the time in their organization. For some my other participants they felt the same way as if they are trying to put a band-aid over things, and why is no one taking it as seriously as it should be, as well as many the members on the leadership saying it’s important but at the same time it is still very performative. CM #1 said their chapter tried to an extent, “...the thing was the chapter as a whole didn’t really care.” CM#1 also mentioned their chapter would hold multiple opportunities for discussion groups to talk about anti-racism, microaggressions and many other topics but no one would show up to those meetings. They say it’s important at the same time many members of the chapter are not seeing it

as important to them and sometimes the leadership board of the chapter would stress the importance of coming to these discussions.

It is completely understandable that change does not happen quickly, with learning about anti-racism practices it's lots to debunk, but if their chapter is saying they are going to support continuously throughout the year on these issues, these women felt the disappointment because the organization said it was going to become a main priority for them to be there for these members but it ended becoming not what they wanted. It's like the support is there but is also not there at the same time for some of these women. CM #2 mentioned getting support from women but they said "They would support me on the down low."

Chapters Practices on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

When it comes to panhellenic chapters' efforts to support Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI), I found varying responses from my participants depending on their affiliated chapter. Some of my participants felt their chapters practices on DEI were very performative, and doing something to check off a box. The members were like, "You are doing something but where is it?" Many of the Panhellenic chapters made statements following the events of the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery that they were going to support the Black community by taking time as a chapter to be more aware, educate themselves, and take more initiatives on DEI efforts/practices to be allies for the Black and other marginalized communities.

"I know it was very much just being the face for anything having to do with social justice. People, believing that I had all the answers because I was Black." This is what CM #2 stated in regards to issues around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The feeling of being the only Black person in the room with everyone assuming they had all the answers. CM #2 also mentioned during their interview that they felt they had to carry all the weight on their shoulders when it

came to anything related to social justice. CM #2 mentioned with the weight being carried so much on their shoulders, they decided to simply walk away because they just exhausted themselves.

CM#1 mentioned that their organization would have these meetings about diversity and other topics to help chapter members become more educated about these things, but they were not required to come. The executive board told the members you are more than welcome to attend these meetings, and if you do not come you will not be penalized for not doing so. CM #4 said their organization would have mandatory online courses however, it was hard to tell who actually did those courses, and if they did they did not know who actually took the time to absorb the information that was talked about during those courses. CM #4 also said they really do not have a whole lot of conversations about race.

CM#2 mentioned that when they were VP of Social Justice for the panhellenic council “a lot of girls, and you could tell our hearts were in the right place, but again, it was very much in theory, versus in practice, like what we wanted to happen versus what would actually work.” They would sit down and work with all the chapters DEI’s chairs on presentations, information sheets, and other educational tools for them to bring back to their chapters, but it was hard to know if the information provided was relayed to the chapter. Additionally when it came to some social media posts, they would ask chapters to post it on their social media pages and they would not do it. “It was like pulling teeth,” they said.

AM#1 wanted to start a social justice committee prior to the events of 2020 however, the initiative never fully came through until the events of 2020 with the Black Lives Matter protests. After those events, their chapter made it a priority to get that committee up and running for the

upcoming semester by making sure they have a diversity chair, and other members to be a part of the chapter's social justice committee.

Being in/Navigating Predominantly White Spaces

For my participants, being in predominantly white spaces was not something they were unfamiliar with experiencing. All their high schools/hometown's were predominantly white therefore they were aware of some of the challenges that would be dealt with in coming to a predominantly white university such as USD. Some challenges that they faced were connecting with peers. "Coming from my high school, being in a predominantly white space I was still not comfortable, but It wasn't an uncommon thing for me."

One participant discussed a challenge even with Black peers on campus depending on what they are involved in. CM #2 said "And so, having all eyes on you like I remember there's some people from the Black Student Union, when I had joined the sorority, were not very happy with the fact that I had joined a sorority."

AM#1 said there were times it was a heavy weight to carry because you feel like you are expected to speak for your entire community. They mentioned the hard times when navigating their last year on campus when it was the sudden shift in 2020, and people on campus all of sudden decided to care and take social justice issues seriously. AM#1 was like many people of color on campus who were vocal about these issues that were happening, people who are being affected need our help. But no one wanted to listen or do anything until 2020 came about; however, the help was needed the whole time.

CM #4 mentioned "growing up in a predominantly white area has helped me in a lot of ways, because it has been very similar and when you look around there's not many people of color here so um that hasn't been like super new to me." In a way having that prior experience growing

up in a mostly white environment helped her know how to best navigate those challenges, but at the same time, it was still challenging.

Cycle 3: Self Reflection

When choosing to do this topic for my Action Research, I had no idea what to expect going into this process. Being a Black woman in a Traditional White Sorority, my experience was going to be most likely a bit different since my undergraduate institution and sorority were a lot more diverse. I did not have to worry about being the only Black girl in the chapter, and some of my sisters were open to learning about other experiences that were different from their own. I was afraid with this project, I would not have a lot in common with my participants due to our experiences. However that was far from true.

CM#1 brought up during the interview about not doing the so-called Black student experience, and feeling like they did not really fit in with some of the Black student organizations. CM#2 had other Black students questioned why they wanted to be a part of a Traditional White Sorority, and was kind of excluded a little from other Black students on campus. When these two participants mentioned these experiences, I understood how they were feeling. As I mentioned in my Introduction/Social Location, there were times when people in the community would put me down, and make me feel uncomfortable as well. I wasn't "Black enough" since I chose to not do what I am "supposed to do" as a Black person. This made me ask these recurring questions of why do we keep doing this to each other? Devaluing each other? We are still going through the same hurdles and yes, some experiences might look different. But at the end of the day we are still Black people and we need to support each other.

For me, this is an area of harm that the Black community does not want to mention. I feel this issue needs to be talked about because Black people should not have to go into spaces with

the feeling of being judged by those who look like them. I can only speak for myself saying that there were times I did not feel the most comfortable around those who identified as Black like me because of so much harm that was done to me from being judged by the way I do my hair, who I hang out with, and other factors. As some of my participants talked about, I did not want to go any further because it is already hard enough to talk about, and I commend them for feeling brave enough to share these vulnerable parts of themselves. Knowing this harm firsthand, I did not want to reopen any wounds during my project.

Something else that also stood out to me during this process was when my participants were mentioning the events of 2020 after the death of George Floyd. All of them mentioned how their chapters wanted to do better in supporting Black and other marginalized communities, as well as their members who held those identities. It started off with social media statements, starting a social justice/DEI committee and some other things. It was definitely interesting to see the dynamics of individual chapters and how they approached it. I found it interesting when AM#1 said they wanted to start a social justice committee prior to the events of 2020. However it did not happen until those events of 2020 which made me ask “why was this idea not moved forward until those events?”

As mentioned before by my other participants, some of them found actions after the events of 2020 to be disappointing and performative. They would have workshops, online courses, and other opportunities for members to attend to learn more about certain topics, however, they were not required to go or were not tracked well. They even added a diversity chair to the executive board. Yes, having these leadership development offerings within the organization is good, but it is just the bare minimum if these tough conversations are not had or other actions are not being

followed through. The actions of not following through with their words is why these members are feeling disappointed with their organizations.

Limitations

The first of my limitations in my research was finding participants. I was expecting to get at least eight participants (4 current, and 4 alumni), however with USD being a predominantly white institution, there would be very few Black identified women in panhellenic sororities on campus. Most of the chapters have 1-2 Black women at most in their organizations which made recruiting for this research difficult, as I was unsure if I was to get much response from chapters if they had women who fit the criteria to be a part of this study. Also for this study, I wanted alumni of panhellenic chapters to be part of the process. However, I was only able to get one alumni member to participate. This low turnout was because the only way to communicate with alumni members was via USD email, and with them being graduates and most likely not checking their campus emails as frequently since they are no longer students at USD.

The second limitation was Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval delayed my process. I had the intention of recruiting students and conducting interviews during the end of September 2021 early October 2021 however, IRB made some changes to its requirements in Summer 2021, as well giving many mixed messages on how the submission process was going to go this time around. I got rejected multiple times by IRB, even with corrections from my reviewer it still was not getting approved, without approval I could start my research. I was not approved until the end of November 2021 by that time students were getting prepared for finals, and the sororities were prepping for spring recruitment. With both of those factors, I knew it would be hard to get participants at very high peak times so I had to wait until both events concluded.

The third limitation was my mental health. As many people have experienced impacts with their mental health the past year, my anxiety was at its peak which made it hard to complete assignments for my classes, stay engaged, and much more. It got to the point where my anxiety was so bad I found myself taking breaks in order to keep myself afloat. When I was finally back on my feet, and felt ready to tap back in, I was able to reach my goals with my timeline, and actually got a bit ahead of myself. But then I received unfortunate news that one of my sorority sisters and close friend Sydney unexpectedly passed away in March 2022. I had to take a pause on this project, school and my assistantship position in order to honor my grief. From this it took me some time to get back into a good headspace in order to produce quality work; therefore I needed to postpone my graduation date to August 2022, since there was no way I was able to make the May deadline without causing more anxiety and stress for myself.

Recommendations

My major findings in this research included: Joining a Sorority, Recruitment, Support following Racial Injustices, DEI Practices, and Navigating a PWI/White Spaces. There are still gaps that need to be filled within these organizations despite the events after 2020, there has been done or needs to be improved. I have three recommendations based on these findings: Black in Panhellenic Space, Partnership with the Black Student Resource Center, and Partnership with Black faculty and staff. With these recommendations I feel this will help Panhellenic chapters in the right direction to continue to support their members and the Black community.

Black in Panhellenic Space

Having the Black in Panhellenic Space will help Black Panhellenic members be in community to support and uplift each other. As one of my participants said in her advice she would give to others was to connect with Black women in other chapters to lean on them for

support as well. With all the unrest of social injustices on marginalized communities, these women have a space where they can connect with each other on how these issues impact them as a sorority member, student, and other salient identities they might hold. They will be able to share common struggles together, and help each other get through with these healing spaces for the women or a sister circle.

Partnership with Black Faculty & Staff at USD

Partnership with Black faculty and staff because they have more knowledge on the student side and more often witness first hand of some issues Black students go through on a daily basis. Some of the struggles my participants mentioned is connecting with peers at USD, which is not uncommon for Black students. One of my participants mentioned when talking about issues with homeless, LGBTQIA+, and other issues the students in the classroom are so vocal about it, but when it comes to Black issues the students are silent. It makes Black students feel that their issues are not valid enough. Also some of the Black students feel more comfortable going to them because they understand their struggle. Hearing from these staff and faculty members will help Panhellenic chapters support their members in the academic realm.

Partnership with the Black Student Resource Center

A partnership with the Black Student Resource Center could help Panhellenic chapters learn more about the Black student experience at the University of San Diego, and some of the present issues that come up within the Black community. Having collaborative events such as community circles, dialogues, and other types of engagement activities can help the Panhellenic chapters really understand the depth on what these issues are, and how as non-Black people they can be good allies to members of the Black community. As I mentioned before, some Black students have a hard time connecting with peers on campus. With a collaboration with the Black

Student Resource Center, they can gain support from their Black identified peers, shielding them from a lack of connection. Hearing firsthand experiences can help bridge that gap and find ways to create genuine connections with their peers. If Panhellenic chapters intend to support not only their Black identified members, but also the other Black students at USD, this partnership could help build that community with those students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, doing this Action Research project made me realize so much about Black women who are in Traditionally White Sororities, looking to find a sense of community within their institutions. Learning from these women's experiences there were good times, and there were not so good times, but all experiences where many lessons were learned, worth realized, and much more. Even before and after the social injustices events of 2020, these Black women really needed support from their chapters. If there is anything that we have taken away from 2020 (and even prior to) is that racial injustices continue to occur, and the people who are impacted by these injustices matter. Another thing I took away from this research is actions speak louder than words, as some chapters had mentioned more efforts in being allies to the Black community. These actions should not be performative, pure intentions are needed behind them otherwise Black members will continue to feel unsupported and disappointed.

Something I want to do moving forward from this project is to serve in some capacity to assist Black students at Predominantly White Institutions in learning about their experiences and help them find their community and support at the university. With that being said, bringing up these factors and commonalities in spaces where Black students' sense of belonging/retention is focused on now because of the events of 2020, is important. It is important to not only know but learn as departments in higher education in areas where we can do better to support and uplift

these communities. It needs more than just words because as many of my participants stated, there was so much talk and not much action and if there were actions, they came across as very performative.

Certain initiatives really need to be followed through so these students do not find them disappointing or performative. They need to be consistent throughout the years because inside and outside of the university setting Black women are going through a lot with having to wear so many hats, and having so much unrest. Black women need resources and spaces where they feel supported, uplifted, but more importantly, seen. As my participants have expressed in this research, it's disheartening when those around them, especially in their organizations or classes, seem not to take these issues seriously or choose to take them seriously at certain points.

Overall this project has the potential to enhance so much as future higher education professionals. My hope is that this project will help enhance the University of San Diego's Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) community in their efforts to support the Black community, and their members who identify as Black. Knowing these are the experiences of current and past members are important because as long as they are making initiatives to support this community it's important to know what the experiences of their members and what that they have and are currently experiencing.

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APPENDIX A
Informed Consent

For the study entitled:

Black Panhellenic Sorority Member Experience at the University of San Diego: Finding a Sense of Belonging and Support

I. Purpose of the study

Kayla Wilkins is a candidate in the Master of Arts in Higher Education program in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to learn about the experience of Black identified students in panhellenic sororities and how the FSL community can better support them.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

-Pre-Interview Survey

-Participant in a 30 minute-60 minute interview. **Note: Interview will be held over Zoom and recorded if you wish to not be video recorded, you may turn off your screen, and just be audio recorded. Please know that the video will be blurred to keep your identity private.**

Your participation in this study will take a total of 1 hour and 5 minutes

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:

San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

The counselor-on call can be reached by calling 619-260-4655 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). Please contact the Department of Public Safety to access emergency services (x2222 on any campus telephone, otherwise call 619-260-2222).

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you have increased the understanding of the experiences of Black identified sorority members at University of San Diego, and how the Fraternity and Sorority Life community can better support their Black members.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected laptop in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and **may not** be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Kayla Wilkins

USD Email:kwilkins@sandiego.edu

2) Kecia Brown

USD Email:keciabrown@sandiego.edu

Zoom Video Recording: Additional Consent

A video recording will be made of you during your participation in this study. The video recordings will only be used for data collection purposes and transcript analysis. Records will not be shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project. You also have the option to turn off your video camera and only use your audio function.

In addition to consenting to participate in the research study, you may choose to sign or NOT sign the statement below.

I hereby give permission to the Zoom video recording for this research study to be used only for data collection purposes. I understand that this Zoom video recording will not be publicly released or shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX B

Letter: Request to Use Instrument and Response

Dear Dr. Anderson:

My name is Kayla Wilkins and I am earning a Master of Arts degree in Higher Education from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. I am currently working on my capstone Action Research project in partial fulfillment of my degree requirement. As I was reviewing the literature, I learned about your instrument that you used in your dissertation *A CLOSET FULL OF DRESSES: INTERSECTIONS OF FEMININITY AND SEXUALITY AMONG QUEER WOMEN IN PANHELLENIC SORORITIES*. This instrument is aligned with my research and I would like to request your permission to use it for my study.

My research is titled: *BLACK PANHELLENIC SORORITY MEMBERS EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO: FINDING A SENSE OF BELONGING & SUPPORT*. This action research project will explore the experiences of Black identified women who are involved in Panhellenic sororities in order to learn about how they navigated traditional white sororities. I am excited about this deeply personal work given my experience as a Black woman who's a part of a Panhellenic sorority.

I am requesting your permission to distribute the interview protocols using the online survey software on Qualtrics. If you will allow me to use your instrument, I will cite your work and name according to APA 7 standards and, if you would like, share my findings with you.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Kayla Wilkins

M.A. Candidate, Higher Education Leadership

Department of Leadership Studies

Phone number: 760-331-9230

Email address: kwilkins@sandiego.edu

Hi Kayla!

Thank you for your interest in the interview protocol. You have my permission to use the protocol in your online survey. I would love to read your final research project as well—there is a lot of work that needs to be done in this area!

If you have any questions along the way, please feel free to reach out.

Best-

Brianna

Brianna L. Anderson, Ph.D.

Postdoctoral Program Evaluator

School of Education | Saint Louis University

033 Fitzgerald Hall | 3500 Lindell Blvd | St. Louis, MO 63103

APPENDIX C
Interview Questions

Script

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. My name is Kayla Wilkins and I am a Masters student in the Higher Education Leadership at the University of San Diego. The purpose of this study is to learn more about your experiences with your Black Identity in sorority life. These questions are going to be open-ended and I encourage you to just tell me about your experiences. There is no right or wrong answer and you can refuse to answer any question. Sorority members report a wide range of experiences and thoughts and I just want to learn about yours. I will be video recording this interview or if you would like to turn your camera off and with that we can do an audio recording instead if I continue to record the interview? At this time, I want to review the Informed Consent form that I sent to you previously. This document states that your information will remain confidential, your participation is voluntary and you can stop at any time.

Navigating The Sorority Experience

Tell me about yourself?

Where did you grow up?

Tell me about yourself as a college student

Tell me about your sorority experience?

What was recruitment like for you(formal or informal)

Why did you decide to join a sorority?

Navigating a PWI/ Traditional White White Sorority

How have you been navigating USD, and being in predominantly white spaces?

After the events with Black Lives Matter, and all the racial injustices? How has your chapter supported you?

How does your chapter practice Diversity inclusion and equity in your chapter?

APPENDIX D
Participant Demographic Survey

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this project is: to learn about the experiences of Black identified women in panhellenic sororities, and the Fraternity & Sorority Life community at the University of San Diego to provide more support for them learning from these experiences, your identity will be protected, and only the researcher Kayla Wilkins will have access all responses.

Full Name:

Are you a current or alumni member?

Sorority Affiliation:

Please state your years active:

Primary email address:

Pronouns (she, he, they, zie, etc.):

Age:

Gender identity:

Race:

Ethnicity:

Program of study (Major):

Do you currently or have you held a leadership position within your chapter or on Panhellenic Council? :

Yes

No

If Yes please mention your position and briefly describe it:

What is your general availability for a 30-60 minute zoom interview?

Anything else you would like to share at this time?

APPENDIX E

Recruitment Email to Participants

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Kayla Wilkins and I am a masters candidate and researcher in the Higher Education Leadership Program at the University of San Diego. I am conducting a study under the supervision of Dr. Kecia Brown in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences. I am currently starting my Action Research on Black sorority members' experiences within the panhellenic chapters at University of San Diego.

Through the research, I hope to understand the experiences of Black sorority members in panhellenic sororities and how they navigate their salient identities in their sororities that are mostly predominately white spaces. I am emailing in hopes to find participants to participate in my study.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

-Pre-Interview Survey

-Participant in a 30 minute-60 minute interview. Note: Interview will be held over Zoom and recorded if you wish to not be video recorded, you may turn off your screen, and just be audio recorded. Please know that the video will be blurred to keep your identity private.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 1 hour and 5 minutes.

Please note: This project is voluntary. You may opt out of the process at any point without penalty or retaliation. Please be aware that this project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at University of San Diego.

Please see the information below on participant qualifications and how to contact the researchers to set up an interview if you know of any of your students who are interested in participating in this study.

Qualifications to Participate:

- Currently an active or alumni of a panhellenic chapter at USD
- Self-identify as Black or African American
- Have access to internet

If you are interested in participating in the study, please email me at kwilkins@sandiego.edu to set up an interview as well review and sign the informed consent and fill out the questionnaire attached below.

Best,
Kayla Wilkins

kwilkins@sandiego.edu
MA Higher Education Leadership Candidate
University of San Diego