

Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities

By *Walter M. Kimbrough*

Published by Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp. 2003, 240 Pages

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Fraternities and sororities have been firmly planted on the landscape of higher education for over a century. The roles these organizations play in the lives of their members and the campus environment frequently have been debated. Shrouded in secrecy, these organizations oftentimes function without the university or the college professionals responsible for them being fully aware of their operations. Developing as opposition to exclusionary practices of existing Greek-lettered organizations, historically African American fraternities and sororities also have become a fixture within higher education.

Seeking to illuminate the history, traditions, and culture of African American fraternities and sororities, Kimbrough provides basic information for any reader with limited knowledge of these organizations. Over the course of six chapters, readers gain a broad sense of how these organizations developed, as well as an understanding of current problems being faced by the membership.

The initial chapter provides information on the founding of the fraternity currently recognized as the first Black Greek-letter organization. Beyond that organization, the author brings attention to several organizations that served as precursors to the African American fraternity and sorority movement. The importance of the precursor organizations and how they either evolved into or led to the development of the modern day organizations provide a strong historical context. Supporting pictures further contextualize the organizational development.

Chapter 2 centers on the pledge period of the membership process leading to initiation as a full member. Pledging, as the author examines it, has been an integral part of the membership process coinciding with the evolution of the organizations. One section of the chapter highlights the development of hazing in higher education and the fraternity and sorority movement. Despite students challenging practices such as freshman hazing, which led to many other actions becoming unacceptable on campuses, the traditions became part of Greek life. Images from campus yearbooks provide context for how quickly the pledge process took hold in the organizations. This chapter also includes information on the initial pledge clubs of present day organizations and their impact on the membership process. The author also highlights how organizations began to transition from negative aspects of the pledge process to more positive ones. These changes are also accompanied by transitions in the cultural context of society, such as the

civil rights movement. The traditions of the organizations during this period are also discussed.

The next chapter chronicles the dissolution of the pledge process to the formation of “membership intake.” The membership intake movement is said to be in response to a call from the national leadership of the respective organizations and a reaction to harmful actions suffered by members during the pledge process. The transition from open-pledge processes to secretive, underground pledging is discussed, as well as how the swift transition to membership intake may not have effectively addressed all concerns. The chapter concludes with discussion of research supporting the assertion that the transition to membership intake may not have addressed. “Unlearned lessons” from the transition provide the reader with salient points on membership intake.

Chapter 4 briefly examines the establishment of organizations in response to the African American Greek movement. The discussion includes the introduction of a ninth African American Greek-lettered organization and the myriad of organizations that began to develop around the 1960s. The text divides these additional organizations into three distinct eras: 1) Black Power—Blaxploitation Era; 2) Individualist/Multiculturalism Era; and 3) the Afrocentric Era. Kimbrough addresses how the organizations founded in each of these eras have impacted African American student life and the Greek-letter movement.

The fifth chapter illuminates the customs, practices, and traditions of African American fraternities and sororities. Through photographs and detailed accounts, the chapter provides information that assists readers in understanding how some current practices have evolved. The specific attention to the outward expressions highlighted in this chapter allow for broader understanding of the membership.

The final chapter focuses on the future of Black Greek life. The author provides insight on how existing issues should be addressed to ensure future viability. This includes examining pledging and the process of how individuals become members, securing appropriate advisers, identifying subcultures of minorities existing within the membership, and discussing the recent development of organizations of other races and ethnicities. The text concludes with a chronological review of hazing incidents since the inception of membership intake, and provides a glossary of pertinent terms.

Both informative and insightful, the author gives readers a synopsis of African American Greek life. There were some areas of the text where additional explanation would have been more helpful for those readers who may not have the necessary background. Campus administrators can find useful information here that may be extremely beneficial when working with these organizations. Students interested in membership can obtain a broader sense of the development and historical importance of these organizations. Photos from various campuses across the country provide a strong visual representation of the history of the organizations as well. The text also includes detailed chronological information on the development and expansion of the organizations. This allows the reader to have a geographic representation and magnitude of the number of campuses the organizations have impacted. Succinct length and supplemental resources and appendices also make this text an enjoyable reading experience.