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BLACK GREEKS AND UNDERGROUND PLEDGING: PUBLIC DEBATES AND COMMUNAL CONCERNS

Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) have long played an important role in collegiate black student life. The communal impact of the social events they plan and the cultural practices they engage is substantial, but yet to receive substantial scholarly attention. This article addresses the communal impact of "underground pledging," which is the controversial practice of initiating prospective members through secret and forbidden ritual practices. Pledging facilitates bonds between incoming members, and between incoming members and their organizations, but has also led to hazing, which involves the ritual torment and abuse of prospective members. This article addresses public debates around what constitutes hazing, as well as the commitment among many individual BGLO members to activities that some call pledging, others call hazing, but all acknowledge as against campus policies, state and federal laws, and the policies of the organizations' national headquarters. This article also discusses the implications of pledging as an open secret in black student communities. The discussion covers the silencing dynamics that allow the secret, the contrast between national rhetoric and local practices, and the individual and communal impacts of maintaining the secret.

KEYWORDS: *pledging, hazing, fraternities, sororities, black Greeks, BGLOs, education, African American students, student affairs, colleges, black community, black students, student life*

It is rare that one finds a venue to advance balanced, yet critical debate over Black Greek Letter Organizations, or BGLOs. BGLO members, on average, seem unwilling to seriously raise and discuss issues like hazing, non-Black

membership or class-elitism, and non-members seem largely indifferent or overly critical. (Hughey and Parks 2007:21)

Quite frankly, one of the worst kept secrets in the history of American higher education is the underground pledging of African American fraternities and sororities. (DeSousa et al. 2004: 107)

PART I

Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) have played an important role in black college student life since the early 1900s, when eight of the "Divine Nine" organizations were founded on college campuses across the nation (Ross 2000). Three of these organizations were founded on the campuses of predominantly white universities, and on such campuses in particular, the BGLOs have had a great impact upon the extracurricular life of many if not most black students—BGLO members and non-members alike (Harper et al. 2005; Kimbrough and Hutchinson 1998). Despite their broad impact and one hundred-year history, however, there have been relatively few studies of BGLOs. While this problem is being addressed by a number of scholars who are also BGLO members, additional research is needed. This article adds to the available literature, bringing additional perspective to an issue that has begun to draw important scholarly and practitioner attention. Specifically, this article looks at the debates and communal concerns surrounding hazing among BGLOs.

Part I of this article includes the present preliminary material as well as comments on author subjectivity and methodology. Part II offers a précis on the history of black fraternal organizations in the United States up to and including the existence of contemporary BGLOs. Part III explores the semantics and lack of consensus around what constitutes hazing, as well as the widespread commitment among individual BGLO members to activities that some call pledging, others call hazing, but all acknowledge as outside the bounds of the BGLOs'

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national policies. This discussion covers the ongoing debate that has been engaged in scholarly literature, in periodicals like *Black Issues in Higher Education* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and on campuses across the nation. Part IV discusses pledging as an open secret in the black community. The discussion covers the contrast between national rhetoric and local practices regarding pledging and hazing, and the silencing dynamics that allow the secret.

The emerging discussion is informed by the growing body of BGLO scholarly literature—especially key works by Kimbrough (2003) and Jones (2004a), several of the works collected in a volume edited by Brown et al. (2005), and ongoing hazing research conducted by Nuwer and others (1999, 2004). It is also informed by a wide range of direct relationships I have had with black students and within black student communities over the last twenty years. Roles I have played in the lives of other black students include that of tutor, mentor, advisor, teacher, researcher, and years ago, fellow participant in the informal but undeniably present black student community of my undergraduate campus.

Note on subjectivity

As an ethnographic researcher working with support from the Spencer Foundation, my initial research (1999–2001) explored the development, existence, and status norms of a black student community on a predominantly white university campus, especially as they informed the academic motivation, practices, and success of black students. As my academic life has developed, it has become clear that it is impossible to fully understand and appreciate the contours of black student communities without also seriously considering the network of BGLOs whose existence so powerfully impacts black student life. Thus, an important segment of my work has increasingly engaged BGLOs, as they impact black student communities, and as they help shape the norms and values of black student communities as complex sub-communities. Surprisingly, BGLO engagement in pledging and hazing activities turns out to be one of the areas where BGLO activities impact both “Greek” (BGLO affiliated) and “non-Greek” (non-BGLO affiliated) black students, as well as the black student community as a whole.

At the same time that portions of my research have moved toward the impact of BGLO life upon black student community life, other scholars have called for additional voices to conduct research, write and otherwise engage dialog about the hazing problem facing BGLOs. In their article on pledging

and hazing, DeSousa et al. issue a “call to the national academic community to engage in dialog to form solutions to stop hazing.” They offer that

Neither international presidents nor their membership bodies alone can provide solutions to the undesirable student-culture activities. The academic community, especially student-affairs professionals, needs to come together. (2005:109)

Likewise, Hughey and Parks offer that

It is rare that one finds a venue to advance balanced, yet critical debate over Black Greek Letter Organizations, or BGLOs. BGLO members, on average, seem unwilling to seriously raise and discuss issues like hazing, non-Black membership or class-elitism, and non-members seem largely indifferent or overly critical. (Hughey and Parks 2007:21)

This article (along with *Transforming Anthropology*, the academic journal that chose to publish this article) heeds and attempts to honor the call of such concerned scholars as Brown, DeSousa, Hughey, Kimbrough, Jones, Parks, and other reform-minded Greek-affiliated scholars who call for more discussion (and purposeful, well-conceived action) related to the issue of BGLO pledging and hazing—both as it exists and as it exists in the black popular imagination. The basis for analysis and discussion includes scholarly literature, popular and professional print media, and ethnographic data. It is offered from a perspective heretofore absent from the growing conversation. While the overwhelming majority of available BGLO research has been conducted by BGLO-affiliated scholars, I approach this article as a non-Greek discussing the impacts of BGLO pledging and hazing upon black student communities, including both those members who are BGLO affiliated and those who are not. To be clear, the secretive and internal aspects of the pledging process (to which no researcher has full access, as no one is a member of all of the BGLOs) are not the focus of this article. Rather, my focus is on the public debates and dimensions of a process that is conducted within organizations but has ramifications beyond.

As a note of clarity, my concern is not to praise or condemn BGLOs or their members, but to consider a specific issue facing the community as a whole. My respect for historically rooted BGLOs runs deep enough to forthrightly engage observation, analysis, and discussion. The act is risky and easily misinterpreted—but it is an act of love and

concern, not of ill will. My hope is that *as writers and scholars* we acknowledge our subject position, so that our readers have as much information as possible about the factors that inform our analyses, and that *as readers and scholars* we take such information not as an opportunity to prematurely dismiss or embrace work, but rather as intended—as additional information that may inform the overall analysis. Acknowledgement of positioning is especially important in the case of our work on BGLOs. In a worst-case scenario, non-BGLOs members will prematurely dismiss the work of BGLO-affiliated scholars as inherently biased, BGLO members will prematurely dismiss the work of non-affiliated scholars as automatically beyond the realm of the writers' comprehension, and in either case, important opportunities for pushing study (and our communities) forward will be lost. Rather than obscure the status of referenced authors as Greek or non-Greek, however, this article follows the Weberian approach to objectivity, where bias is seen as inherent to our reality as humans and where disclosure of subject positioning is viewed as informing and adding credibility to analysis (Weber 1963). This approach accords greatest respect to the reader, who enjoys more information and a greater opportunity to come to informed conclusions.

Notes on method

As ethnographic fieldwork was one source of data for the latter portion of this article, it is worth offering some notes about the campus upon which I primarily worked, as well as about the nature of my interactions with black students there. The campus upon which I conducted formal ethnographic research has up to eight active and university-recognized BGLOs in any given semester, with “recognized” here referring to their status as registered student organizations operating under the guidelines and policies of the Dean of Students Office. The number of recognized BGLOs fluctuates from semester to semester, as different organizations are occasionally suspended or even cancelled for violations of university policies. (In all cases for which I could secure information, suspensions or cancellations were due to hazing violations.) Nonetheless, BGLOs have been active on the campus for close to thirty of the forty years that black students have been permitted to attend the university.

The campus has roughly 1,200 black students in an undergraduate student body of 35,000. My research included participant observation with the larger black student community, open-ended interviews with students, staff and faculty, and the use of

data provided by the Dean of Students Office. Because my work grew from an initial project that included all students who considered themselves to be in community with other black students, my work included extended engagement with both Greek and non-Greek students. In addition to attending events that took place in a wide variety of spaces on campus (depending upon room availability and the needs associated with the particular meeting, lecture, workshop or other event), much of my time was spent at locations on campus that could be considered “black spaces,” which is to say that they were spaces that for several hours on most days were occupied by African Americans and where the dominant communal norms, and cultural and linguistic styles were shaped by the black students who were present.

Among several such spaces on campus, I spent several hours each week in two in particular—the “AACC room” in the Student Union and the “Malcolm X lounge.” The AACC room (with AACC as student shorthand for African American Culture Committee) was open to all students and student organizations, and was the meeting room of choice for predominantly black registered student organizations. The Malcolm X lounge was so dubbed by the students. It is a less-formal space than the AACC room, and more often a site for dominoes, music, conversations, as well as the meetings of some of the black registered student organizations whose projects are deemed more political and/or nationalist in nature—this includes groups like the Black Student Alliance, the Student African American Brotherhood and Umoja (a non-sorority organization of black women oriented toward the development of black women). The Malcolm X lounge has a bulletin board for the postings of events, plaques on the wall representing the BGLOs on campus, a stereo, study carols, sofas, and tables. Because I had occupied a wide range of roles at the university (including student), and had spent much of my time involved in the life of the black community, my presence in such spaces as the AACC room or the Malcolm X lounge was not particularly noteworthy to others.

In terms of the quality of interactions with students, sometimes I was a silent observer in the black spaces on campus, sometimes I engaged whatever conversations were going on while I was present, sometimes I was pointed in asking questions related to my interests. Fruitful conversations reflected what was happening in the space at the time, reflected events that sparked relevant conversation or were sometimes initiated by me. In many cases, conversations would start with one person but expand to

include others as others present sought to correct, confirm, or add to what was being offered.

Often, the rich conversations I had *with* students and the rich observations *of* students (non-Greek and Greek alike) were made possible by shared experiences—for instance, having attended and been involved in the same extracurricular activities. The most profound limit to my work, of course, was my access to the more secretive aspects of Greek life, including closed meetings, and of course, pledging. On the other hand, while such access would have provided interesting background for my analysis, understanding the specifics of the secretive practices of the BGLOs was not the aim of my work. To wit, such a lack of access should not diminish the quality of insights I was able to derive about the public dimensions of the open secret of pledging.

PART II. A HISTORY OF RACIAL SERVICE AND RELEVANCE

Before discussing contemporary realities, it is worth taking note of the legacy and historical reality from which BGLOs emerged. Although the most widely known black fraternal organizations are those Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) that were started on college campuses in the early twentieth century and that continue to exist today, vibrant fraternal associations existed in black America well before then. A special issue of *Social Science History* (2004) documents the eighteenth and nineteenth century manifestations of black fraternal associations, providing valuable information about these civic organizations that were not student organizations, but were nonetheless a precursor to today's network of BGLOs. Among the many largely forgotten organizations (a few of which are still active) are the Prince Hall Masons, the Grand United Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria, and the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. The organization with the highest level of mystique, secrecy, and elitism is most likely Sigma

Pi Phi, also known as the Boulé (Butler 2005; Camp and Kent 2004; Harris 2005; Skopal and Oser 2004).

Despite that several of these organizations have been largely forgotten, it is hard to overstate their past social, civic, cultural, and economic significance. At their pinnacle, several of these organizations had hundreds of thousands of members. The Knights of Tabor and Daughters of the Tabernacle had more than 100,000 members (Camp and Kent 2004), while the all male Odd Fellows had 300,000 to 400,000 members, along with close to 50,000 in the House of Ruth, their female auxiliary

(Butler 2005). Frazier (1997[1957]) reports that in their heyday, the Order of the Elks had 500,000 members nationwide and \$55,000,000 in war bonds, lodges, and other property. In a society that took black inferiority as a given and black humanity as debatable, these associations acted in a counter-hegemonic manner. In thought and action, they pushed beyond the common sense of the day to act upon their sense of natural rights and inherent worth that the burgeoning nation would on the one hand seek to deny them, but on the other hand hold up as necessarily available to all in an ideal republic (Harris 2005; Skopal and Oser 2004).

Contemporary scholars document the civic mindedness of the organizations, their tangible promotion of racial uplift and mutual support, and their inherent resistance to the racism that ruled the day. Writing in the 1930s through the 1950s, however, Howard University sociologist Frazier offered a less-positive assessment. In *Black Bourgeoisie* (1997[1957]), his scathing analysis of the black middle class, Frazier described black fraternities as vapid assemblages of persons who “played” at leadership, but in actuality did little more than socialize and engage in snobbish behavior designed to (1) distance themselves from the poor and uneducated who made up the majority of black America, and (2) make up for the sting of exclusion from white society. Regardless of whether they were shining beacons of racial uplift or pathological maladjustments to systemic racism, these associations—along with various academic societies—are important precursors to the contemporary BGLOs.

According to Butler (2005), the early non-collegiate, fraternal organizations provided a template for the collegiate BGLOs' ritual activities and general sense of purpose. If this is so, then the bridge between the earlier fraternal associations and the college BGLOs may be Sigma Pi Phi, which is often referred to as the Boulé. Frazier places the origins of this organization at 1904, as does Kimbrough. Meanwhile Graham, in *Our Kind of People* (2000)—a celebratory text that offers an alternative perspective to Frazier's stinging indictments in *Black Bourgeoisie*—places the origin of the Boulé as 1906 in one section of the text, but as 1904 in another (Graham 2000:15,129). But the presumption of accuracy has to reside in the work of Harris (2005), the organization's “grand historian.” His detailed and interesting account of the development of the Grand Boulé, which includes illuminating accounts of arguments over such issues as the direction and use of NAACP funds (and thus demonstrates some of the organization's interests and involvements), places its

inception at 1904. While the Boulé has included many influential African American men over the years, it has also been criticized by some of those same members, most notably W.E.B. Du Bois. In 1948, Du Bois offered words of criticism that were similar in sentiment and bite to those that would be offered by Frazier less than ten years later (Du Bois 1996; Kimbrough 2003).

Overlapping the existence of the black organizations thus far mentioned, BGLOs have operated on college campuses from the early 1900s to the present. BGLOs have routinely had a tremendous impact upon the lives of black college students and upon the black student communities of which they have been a part (Harper et al. 2005). Several of the BGLOs were founded by African American students on the campuses of predominantly white universities. There, founders experienced a desire to come together in mutual support in order to survive racially hostile environments and to promote black racial uplift. BGLOs founded on predominantly white campuses include Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity (Cornell, 1906), Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (Indiana University, 1911), and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority (Butler University, 1922). Several BGLOs arose around the same time on the predominantly black university campus of Howard University as well. These include Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (1908), Omega Psi Phi Fraternity (1911), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (1913), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity (1914) and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority (1920). More recently (1963), Iota Phi Theta Fraternity was founded on the historically black Morgan State University.

The broad impact of BGLOs among members and non-members alike has grown over the years as BGLOs have developed into an important extracurricular force on campuses. As BGLOs strive for status within black student communities, they have developed signature events and activities that cater to other black students. On campuses across the nation, BGLOs thus provide a foundation for black student community—planning many if not most of the extracurricular events black students attend in a given semester. This role is especially pronounced on predominantly white campuses, where student organizations and university-organized events are less likely to cater to the specific interests and desires of students who were raised or otherwise especially comfortable in milieus of black heritage, history, and popular culture. As they plan events, BGLOs do so with other black students firmly in mind, students who are potential members, and students whose collective appreciation of one organization or an-

other is an indicator of the organizations' relative status within the black student community.

BGLO members' ongoing and coordinated efforts to be recognized—not just through their activities, but also through the wearing of paraphernalia associated with their respective organizations—place them—in a case similar to that of black student athletes—as an identifiable status group whose *perceived* behaviors (let alone their actual and visible practices) draw reactions from black “non-Greeks,” both those who are impressed and aspire to be like them, and others whose perception of them is negative (Foster 2003). All of this contributes to the impact of BGLOs upon black students and black student community—for the most part in ways that have not yet been explored by scholars. Given such impacts, an adequate exploration will require ongoing work. This article, which now moves into its narrow look at the public debates and perceptions surrounding the open secret of underground pledging, is a start.

PART III. PLEDGING VERSE HAZING

Pledging is a ritual process for taking a non-member of an organization and bringing him into membership. It does not officially exist among BGLOs, but from an outsider perspective, it is arguably the centerpiece of their existence. While many Greek-affiliated scholars ably point to the influential leaders who have held or hold membership in one of the BGLOs (Harper et al. 2005; Ross 2000) or offer frank, detailed, and inspiring histories (most notably, Giddings' 1988 history of Delta Sigma Theta), several also fear that their organizations' venerable legacies are being overshadowed by hazing. Accordingly, BGLO-affiliated scholars Parks and Brown (2005:437) note with concern that “stepping and pledging” are what BGLOs are primarily known for today. (“Stepping” and step shows are the BGLOs' most well-known performance tradition; they involve the public performance of stylized, rhythmic, and coordinated “steps” and chants, along with call and response engagements with one another and/or an audience [Fine 1991]).

As a ritual process, pledging involves a period of time during which an initiate goes through prescribed symbolic, affective, and informative activities that lead them toward eventual acceptance as members. From the standpoint of an adherent, however, it is a process in a sense that is even more profound. For the member of a pledging organization, there is a distinct line between members and non-members—a line that in multiple ways is continually (re)created and conceived as being difficult

to cross. The pledge process enacts a dramatic identity transformation—in the words of anthropologists Schwartz and Merton, it “mobilize[s] the initiate’s deepest emotional interest, his self-esteem, in ways that endow dramatic performances with an aura of social reality” (1968:1130). In addition, the pledge process includes an important communal dimension, as individuals are transformed into a collective, becoming part of something larger than themselves. To wit, in classic BGLO parlance and understanding, a group of individuals pledging together constitute a “line,” where each member’s primary identity is as a number in that line, and where fellow pledges are “line sisters” or “line brothers.”

In the words of BGLO-affiliated scholar Ricky Jones (2004a), the pledge process is a period of liminality that leads to the non-member crossing an imagined line and being transformed into a member. Greek-affiliated scholar Hank Nuwer points to his research and that of others to describe pledging as a process that includes three stages: separation, liminality, and reincorporation (2004:55). During separation, pledges are reminded of the differences between themselves and the members and informed of the tests of endurance and worthiness to come. The stage where they are put to those tests is that of liminality, during which time pledges experience insecurity, confusion, stress, and uncertainty. Short of quitting (or “dropping line” as some BGLO members refer to it) they have come too far to go back, but do not know how much more they can endure or will have to endure. Finally, pledges are reincorporated—“exhausted, battered pledges” are welcomed into their new organization as members (Nuwer 1999:55). Through this process, pledges adopt a new sense of self and identity that is in some ways perceived as “better, higher, nobler” than that which they previously held (Schwartz and Merton 1968:1118).

With this understanding, the process is rightly understood as being of immense importance in the life and character of each organization and its members. BGLO participants believe, and outside research has documented, that pledging rituals facilitate bonds within groups of initiates, induce loyalty to the pledged organization and creates the basis for each pledge to be respected by other members (Giddings 1988; Nuwer 1999; Schwartz and Merton 1968; Sweet 2004). BGLO members’ recognition of the formative importance of pledging is captured in their language—especially where they speak of their emergence from the pledge process as the day on which they were “made” (Jones 2004a; Kimbrough 2003; Parks and Brown 2005).

Humbling verse humiliation

Given the aura surrounding pledging, it is not surprising that it involves elements that are secret, ritualized and taken very seriously by members and initiates. BGLO members explain that the pledge process often includes heavy emotional demands placed upon pledges, the expectation that pledges will endure specific trials, and the expectation that pledges will be humbled (although given the range of human perception and the range of psychological response to catalysts, the line between being *humbled* and being *humiliated* is impossible to determine satisfactorily). Pledging typically involves isolating pledges as a group and placing them under stressful circumstances that force them to rely upon one another. Through such isolation and trials, the pledging organization achieves the critical goal of having the pledges forge strong bonds of friendship and loyalty, as they learn to rely upon and support one another (Arnold 2004). At the same time as pledging facilitates bonds between pledges, it also facilitates pledges’ connections with and devotion to the organization (Sweet 2004). In the military and among male BGLOs in particular, harsh initiation practices are believed to toughen pledges into model members and prepare them for whatever difficulties they may face in the future (Ruffins 1997). Furthermore, the humbling of pledges goes along with the adage that recruits/initiates need to be figuratively “torn down” in order to be rebuilt in the model of their organization.

The ideas of having a demanding, humbling process, and of putting pledges through taxing trials make it difficult to distinguish hazing from pledging. Further complicating matters, there is no consensus (scholarly or otherwise) as to what constitutes hazing. While most (but, as we shall see, not all) agree that physical assaults constitute hazing, there is considerable ambiguity around when and whether humbling pledges is hazing. In his edited volume on hazing, Nuwer offers a broad definition. For Nuwer, hazing includes “any action required by full-status members of low-status probationary members that in some way humbles the newcomers who lack the power or wit to resist” (2004:xvi). His definition covers “silly, degrading, or potentially risky tasks required for acceptance of a group of full-fledged members” (2004:xiv). Likewise, in their work on hazing in sports, Crow and Rosner rely upon a definition of hazing as “any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate” (Hoover and Pollard 1999, quoted in Crow and Rosner 2005). Meanwhile,

in addition to providing a list of nine hazing activities (as recognized by the university where they conducted a hazing study), Campo et al. define hazing as

any activity, required implicitly or explicitly as a condition of initiation or continued membership in an organization, that may negatively impact the physical or psychological well-being of the individual or may cause damage to others, or to public or private property. (2005:137)

Initiation activities that their university associates with hazing include the following: participating in drinking contests; being deprived of sleep; being kidnapped or transported and abandoned; acting as a personal servant; destroying or stealing property; being tied up, taped or confined; engaging in or simulating sexual acts; being hit, kicked or physically assaulted in some form; and making body alterations, such as branding, tattooing or piercing (2005:140).

Other activities that sometimes occur in the course of initiation, but in Campo et al. are not considered hazing, include activities that could certainly result in humiliation: being yelled, cursed, or sworn at; being pressured to eat something you did not want; being required to remain silent; or having food thrown at you (ibid). That these activities are not hazing is confusing, as they certainly fit the definition of activities that can “negatively impact the physical or psychological well-being of the individual.”

Finally, in the context of proposing a meaningful, non-hazing pledge process for BGLOs, Parks and Brown call for a process that excludes hazing, but does involve “humility-inducing experiences.” Their work is invaluable, but even as they work toward reform, difficult questions immediately arise. The unresolved question here is, “what is the difference between *inducing humility*, which many BGLO members believe to be valuable, and *humiliating* a pledge, which universities and state legislatures define as hazing?” Delta Sigma Theta member Paula Giddings offers her perspective in her history of Delta Sigma Theta (1988). She offers that “[t]he stripping away of individuality is achieved through activities that are designed to ‘humble’ a pledgee, (some would, accurately, characterize it as humiliation)” (1988:284). Giddings’ parenthetical assessment, however, has not swayed the debate away from such practices.

Of course, if campus codes of conduct and state and federal law were adhered to, there would be little room for the humbling verse humiliation debate as

almost all pledging activities based in humbling or humiliation have been banned. In the state where my subject campus is located, the Education Code outlaws hazing, which is defined as including

A) any type of physical brutality, such as whipping, beating, striking, branding, electronic shocking, placing of a harmful substance on the body, or similar activity; (B) any type of physical activity, such as sleep deprivation, exposure to the elements, confinement in a small space, calisthenics, or other activity that subjects the student to an unreasonable risk of harm or that adversely affects the mental or physical health or safety of the student; (C) any activity involving consumption of a food, liquid, alcoholic beverage, liquor, drug, or other substance that subjects the student to an unreasonable risk of harm or that adversely affects the mental or physical health or safety of the student; (D) any activity that intimidates or threatens the student with ostracism, that subjects the student to extreme mental stress, shame, or humiliation, that adversely affects the mental health or dignity of the student or discourages the student from entering or remaining registered in an educational institution, or that may reasonably be expected to cause a student to leave the organization or the institution rather than submit to acts described in this subdivision. ([State] Education Code, Section 37.151)

Similar to the problem of underage drinking, the presence of such detailed laws that forbid hazing has by no means translated to the elimination of those activities.

“good wood” as “good practice”

Despite clear and detailed hazing definitions by researchers, state legislatures and handbooks for campus conduct, there is no consensus among BGLO affiliates as to what constitutes hazing. The lack of consensus even includes a debate over the use of physical violence. An anonymous piece from a 1997 issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education* is telling. Therein, a member of one of the black fraternities offers a dramatization of what he argues is appropriate and historically rooted pledging technique. For Anonymous, the difference between pledging and hazing is not in whether or not physical violence is used, but rather what goals the violence serves. Violence to instill values is described as a venerable activity and integral to pledging, while violence that is inflicted for pleasure constitutes

hazing. Here is how Anonymous speaks of what he calls pledging, but what others call hazing:

I swing my paddle a few times, testing the air in this cramped basement. To the boy bent over in front of me, this place is a dungeon. I check his position, buttocks out, eyes forward, fist straight, trembling. Perfect. I ready my swing—up the paddle goes, hovers in the air, gathering power as it slices down, striking his butt. The air cracks. A shock passes up my arm and I know I gave a good stroke. The pledge winces as the pain spreads, needles of pain, nerves shrieking, raised and trembling, on fire. I send him back to his place in line, where he stands at attention with his eight brother pledges or line brothers. . . . As a unit, they tell us the history. One of them stumbles, but the group tries to go on, hoping we didn't catch it. "Three get out here," The Dean says. When Three, blinking nervously, veins standing out in his neck, stands before him, The Dean commands him to recite the information by himself. He starts well enough, but at the names of all our undergraduate chapters, he stumbles. "There we go," The Dean says. "Now, Seven, come out. Assume the position." Once Seven is in position, The Dean says, "now look at each other. Three if you don't get this right, I'm going to stroke Seven. Now you don't want to let your line-brother down do you?" "No," Three says. "Good then don't." But of course he does, and Seven gets a stroke, and gets another one as Three fumbles again. Five strokes later, Three can't meet Seven's glare. "Enough," The Dean says. "You boys need to straighten this out. Go in the bathroom, fix Three. If you don't, all of you will pay."

The boys go in the bathroom. Ear pressed to the door, I hear their violent whispers. They won't quit now, and they won't let Three fail—their hardships have made them brothers, a clan united against us, their makers. We are the obstacles they must overcome.

It is an old story, this pledging; something ancient, this ritual of passage through pain and hardship. All secret societies and warrior castes have their rituals, whether they are Oglala Sioux or royal marines. But because boys have been hazed under the guise of pledging—and hazing is the doling out of pain for pleasure as opposed to pledging, the use of ritual discipline to instill values—pledging has been outlawed by the old men who run our frat, because pledging

sometimes degenerates into hazing. And hazing kills.

The commentary by Anonymous is provocative and important. It captures the "why" of pledging and hazing from a reflective member's perspective and shows how violence can be idealized and even romantically and self-righteously carried out by those who tell themselves that inflicting pain is noble—part of the process of creating a new and better man or woman.

Injuries associated with hazing

The passage above provides a picture of how members can inflict dangerous violence with little sense that they are putting others at serious risk of permanent harm, much less that they are doing something that is "wrong." And lest their be doubt, what is portrayed by Anonymous is definitely dangerous, definitely against the policies of most if not all universities across the country, and in most states, expressly illegal. In several reported cases, fraternity beatings like those romanticized above have permanently damaged pledges, and led to news reports like this one, which appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

A University of Pittsburgh junior had to be placed on a kidney-dialysis machine last week after he was beaten severely in what city police said was a fraternity hazing incident. The student, Santana Kenner-Henderson, was taking part in an initiation ceremony with the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity when the incident occurred. . . . According to the police, fraternity members told Mr. Kenner-Henderson and another student to bend over and grab their ankles. The two were then beaten with a wooden paddle and a cane. Mr. Kenner-Henderson is listed in serious condition with "severe kidney damage," Detective Wilbur said. The other student was briefly hospitalized, but was released. (Geraghty 1996)

Other cases where similar beatings administered to pledges resulted in kidney or other body damage occurred in 1989 where a fraternity pledge at Clark Atlanta University was hospitalized with severe kidney damage, in 1993 at the University of Georgia where a pledge's wounds on his buttocks became severely infected and required surgery, in 1996 at the University of Louisville where a pledge ended up on kidney dialysis, in 1998 at Kansas State where a pledge ended up on kidney dialysis, in 2001 at Louisiana State where paddling led to blood seeping through jeans, and wounds seven inches around and

one inch deep which required two surgeries, including a skin graft (Kimbrough 2003). Sadly, these are not one-tenth of the reported or discovered injuries from pledging/hazing, nor are they the most severe. Broken ear drums, internal bleeding, chest injuries, torn skin, broken jaws, fractured ankles, liver damage, abdominal injury—these are among the types of physical damage that members of BGLOs have inflicted upon pledges (Kimbrough 2003). Even this list is incomplete, as it does not consider the psychological damage that has also been wrought.

Unfortunately, injuries are not the extent of the tragedies associated with pledging. There are also many deaths, among BGLO pledges as well as of pledges of other fraternities and sororities. Of course, neither the injuries nor the deaths associated with pledging are limited to BGLOs. Nationwide, most reported hazing cases involve predominantly and historically white organizations. On my subject campus, many groups have been involved in hazing (two to three punished incidents of hazing or alcohol-related offenses per year), including six incidents that resulted in the deaths of the pledges. A possible seventh hazing death has come to light since I began this article and is currently under investigation. Six of the seven reported deaths (1928, 1986, 1988, 1995, 1998, 2005, and 2006) involved predominantly and historically white fraternities (Nuwer 2004). The one confirmed hazing death not associated with a predominantly white organization occurred in 2005. This particular death involved the nation's only predominantly Asian American Greek Letter Organization. That no deaths have occurred among the BGLOs on my subject campus is fortunate. But as there have been serious injuries and many punished hazing infractions, this is by no means an indication that hazing is not an important issue for the BGLOs as well.

Cases where hazing results in injury or death to pledges occur with enough frequency to have generated responses by medical researchers and practitioners (Leslie et al. 1985). As Finkel from the Harvard Medical School writes

Hazing practices are so hazardous and increasingly prevalent that emergency physicians are now obliged to educate themselves about these activities so victims may be treated with adequate medical and psychiatric care. (2002:232)

Finally, and to return to the passage by Anonymous that opened this discussion of violence associated with pledging, alongside the injuries and deaths, there is also the problem of the situational ethics that the existence of the process teaches those

involved. The passage by Anonymous presents an important irony that accompanies the pledges' and members' development. While the author argues that the pledge process teaches "respecting his elders," he refers derisively to his organization's leaders as the "old men who run the frat" and later speaks of what he sees as their hypocritical attitudes and actions (Anonymous 1997:27). Irony also emerges in that with all that pledging is supposed to teach, either it does not teach honesty or the lessons do not stick, because in the first paragraph of the article we learn that the author's reason for withholding his name and writing as "Anonymous" is to avoid punishment for going against his word that he would not pledge or be pledged. According to the article,

The author signed a document promising not to be involved in pledging activities. To avoid sanctions, he asked that his name not be given. (Anonymous 1997:1)

On the one hand, issues of coercion and peer pressure make it difficult to claim that pledged members intentionally lie when they sign documents saying that they will not be pledged. On the other hand, no such ambiguity exists in the case of those who pledge others. In the current legislative and fraternal governance climate—where pledging and hazing are against rules and illegal and where members must agree not to pledge others—lying, rule breaking, and criminal behavior is part and parcel of pledging others. The lies are solidified by the reality that pledging members have signed university or fraternity paperwork whereby they agreed not to pledge or haze potential members.

The passage by Anonymous, his belief that the physical and emotional violence he endorses is not hazing, and the trail of injuries and deaths associated with pledging should make clear that pledging is a slippery slope—from pledging to violence, from violence to serious bodily harm and from serious bodily harm to death. When the "big brother" gives a "good stroke" and the sting from delivering the blow travels up his arm, is that enough to cause permanent damage to the pledge? Is he qualified to know? When "The Dean" delivers seven blows to another pledge, how close does he come to permanently damaging or inflicting life-threatening injuries upon the pledge he views himself as responsible for? Could he ever know? How could any student or advisor without medical training know before it is too late?

Given all this, and as we will see in relationships with non-Greeks as well, the gentle way to talk about

pledging is that it teaches situational ethics. A harsher reading would be that in the context of college campuses—where students live by but are also in the process of developing personal and communal codes of ethics and conduct (Harris 1916), and where they are taught those ethics in large part through role modeling (Larson and Martin 2005)—BGLOs that pledge simultaneously and unavoidably also teach students to lie and to do so with a sense of righteousness that recasts purposeful deception as the brave defense of traditional values. Which of these interpretations is more apt is, of course, up to the reader to decide.

The ban

In 1990, the question of which pledging activities constituted hazing was rendered moot. In this year, the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), which has been the governing council of BGLOs since their creation in 1930, outlawed pledging. The hazing problem had become so acute as to constitute a crisis, and because they believed that pledging and hazing had become inseparably linked, they opted to formally outlaw both. Today, the NPHC and its nine-member organizations declare themselves to be non-hazing, non-pledging organizations. In 2003, the NPHC (2003) offered a joint position statement that reaffirmed their 1990 ban on pledging and their commitment to, in their words, “eradicate the scourge of hazing,” which they defined as including

[A]ny action that results in excessive mutual or physical discomfort, embarrassment or harassment; that such activities include, but are not limited to, paddling, creation of excessive fatigue, physical or psychological shock, morally degrading or humiliating activities, late work sessions that interfere with scholastic activities and any other activities inconsistent with fraternal law and regulations and policies of the affiliated educational institution and federal, state or local law. (www.nphcq.org/docs/NPHCJointPositionStatementAgainstHazing2003.pdf)

The comprehensive and strongly worded statement notwithstanding, evidence indicates, and the folklore within black student communities accepts, that pledging remains a defining aspect of black Greek life today.

PART IV. UNDERGROUND PLEDGING—THE OPEN SECRET

As they have been publicly denounced and formally outlawed, pledging and hazing should not be of concern to black student communities. However, the

reality is that pledging continues among several BGLO chapters across the nation. The injuries and deaths that have been suffered among pledges in the years since the ban was initiated attest to this fact. This fact is also attested to by current BGLO members, many of whom value pledging—that which provides the basis for developing new members and that which they endured (Anonymous 1997; Jones 2004a; Kimbrough 2003; Parks and Brown 2005; Ruffins 1997).

Even the idea that the pledge process that does go on is a “secret” process needs to be carefully stated—distinguishing the actual secrets from the secrets that, in a figurative sense, everyone seems to be in on. What is secret are the specifics of whatever rituals members and pledges engage. Practices may be so dramatic and violent as to find their way to the public eye, but they conceivably may be non-punitive and include late-night study sessions, anonymous community service, dressing alike, dressing in professional attire or requiring pledges to room together during their pledge period.

What is anything but secret among black college students is that pledging still goes on. Additionally, the activity is often framed as black cultural tradition, thereby silencing opposition from within the black student community while at the same time reinforcing racist associations between blackness and deviant behavior. On my subject campus, a graduate student and former R.A. spoke of the difficulty he had reporting his suspicions of BGLO hazing activities, offering that “it kind of puts you in a tight spot. You see what’s happening, but it’s like you are betraying the race or something [if you report it].”

Because pledging (1) has been officially banned by the NPHC national headquarters, (2) often includes activities that are against campus policies, (3) often involves illegal activity, and (4) sometimes results in injuries and deaths, its ongoing existence as an open secret in black student communities has implications for those communities and for the ethical development of those of the communities’ participants who are in one way or another in on the secret. This includes members, and also friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, study partners, roommates, mentors, tutors, resident assistants, or any others who can tell when people with whom they often relate are “on-line,” which is to say they are being pledged.

In its broad deployment, pledging, and the hazing that often accompanies it, has been an important aspect of fraternal and organizational life since antiquity (Leslie et al. 1985). In the United States, pledging and hazing have likewise long been aspects of fraternal life, both on and off of college campuses

(Kimbrough 2003; Nuwer 2004; Parks and Brown 2005). In recent years, despite the 1990 ban, BGLO pledging has become increasingly violent, contributing to countless physical injuries, lawsuits against organizations and, in some cases, deaths. Some argue that the increasing excesses are actually *because of* the ban. Starting with an oft-cited 1992 doctoral dissertation by Williams, several scholars have reported that the BGLOs memberships did not buy-in to the 1990 pledging ban. Instead, pledging has taken a more insidious turn, continuing in secret and with even less supervision than before. With only the veil of secrecy to prevent full documentation of the situation, the likelihood is that on college campuses across the United States the pledging of initiates is the norm and not the exception among BGLOs. The further likelihood that mental and physical *hazing* is only slightly less rampant than BGLO members' documented commitment to *pledging* should alarm any individuals who are stewards for students' health and well-being.

Local practices verse national denials

Strongly worded national prohibitions notwithstanding, several Greek-affiliated researchers have forthrightly discussed and addressed pledging, as have the courts when they have found both local members and national bodies liable for injuries inflicted during pledging (Jones 2004b; Kimbrough 2003; Parks and Brown 2005; Ross 2000; Williams 1992). On paper, BGLOs have replaced pledging with an "intake process" of a few days. Still, over years of interaction, I have been hard pressed to find non-Greek black students who do not assume the existence of the underground pledge process, or current members who would state that the process did not exist. Survey data collected by Williams (1992) and followed up by Kimbrough (2003) indicate that even after pledging was formally eliminated, most black Greeks nonetheless acknowledged having gone through a pledge process. Comments from a 2005 conversation with the Greek life advisor on my subject campus are telling:

Interviewer: How many [of the BGLOs on campus] are straight up and adhere to the member intake process?

Greek life advisor: Personally, I don't think any. But the process is so discrete that we can't catch it. 2001 was our last NPHC hazing complaint.

Interviewer: What happened to them?

Greek life advisor: They were cancelled for four years. Their headquarters lead on that.

Interviewer: Will that end it?

Greek life advisor: No. When [the University's Vice President of Student Affairs] interviewed them about it they all said they did it because it was done to them. Even when we cancel them for four years, there are always some who are around who have been pledged and their thing is, 'it was done to me so I am going to do it to the next ones'.

Other conceptions and attitudes reinforce the illegal process, including *local chapters*—whose members are committed to the pledge process and highly value the bonding, earned respected and belonging that the process facilitates—and *national bodies* that publicly treat instances and evidence of pledging as isolated and anomalous. Even with the guidelines that outlaw physical, verbal or mental abuse, sleep deprivation, and other hazing techniques, there remains a sense among many black Greeks that those who have not been subject to these techniques have not pledged "hard," and are not "true sorors" or "true frat." As no fraternity or sorority member wants a chapter made up of such "weak links," in many places, the process not only continues, but may be all the more dangerous.

While organization headquarters deliver harsh sentences when circumstances come to light, because the process does not formally exist, they do not monitor the pledging as it occurs. Only when chapters are caught do the national headquarters step in a meaningful way. One view is that while draconian penalties coming down from national headquarters promote the appearance of zero tolerance, their real purpose is not to eliminate pledging and hazing but to insulate the organizations from financial and criminal liability for hazing incidents. Anonymous offers that

[A]lthough the old men [who run the fraternity on the national level] make the fraternity hopefuls sign papers saying they won't pledge, and make my brothers and me sign papers saying we won't conduct pledging activities, those old men do not respect anyone who doesn't pledge. So they wink at us as we go underground. If we are caught, all of us—the pledges as well as the brothers—will lose our membership and our charter. (Anonymous 1997:2)

Even if one did not accept this view of the decision-making of BGLO's national leaderships, criticisms remain. Quoted in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, one psychotherapist offers that

I believe it is really a matter of what we saw in *Lord of the Flies*, when a group of very middle

class boys became violent when unsupervised. By unilaterally withdrawing from a pledging process that still goes on because there is a psychological need for it, the national fraternities have abdicated their parental responsibilities and left pledging in the hands of adolescents—with predictable results. (Stephen Ruffins, quoted in Ruffins, Paul 1997:14)

Silently knowing

During the course of my interactions with the local black student community, there have been several specific occasions where from observation I could not escape knowing that a number of students were on-line and being subjected to underground pledging. This “sense of knowing” was the result of years of interaction with students in a wide variety of roles, including my experience as an undergraduate student watching others go on-line and emerge as members of fraternities or sororities. On my home campus, signs that when taken together indicated that a group of students was on-line included encountering and noticing a number of sophomores and juniors of the same gender consistently looking very tired, if not sleep deprived, and seeing these same several students suddenly sullen and uncommunicative, both with peers with whom they had formally associated and within the context of the larger black student community. Where they were once active and gregarious, they would suddenly no longer be so. In addition, several popular students’ normal patterns of behavior would be noticeably disrupted such that those who were regular attendees of certain campus functions, active in certain organizations or in certain spaces would suddenly “be ghost,” which is to say they would no longer be present and visible in the black student community. In rare cases, indicators of pledging included seeing some of these students limping or bruised, yet unable to offer plausible explanations for their injuries.

At different times during the academic year, different BGLOs would be rumored to have pledges on-line. Rumors and whispers would circulate in the black student community about which organization had pledges on-line, and who those pledges were. The secret would eventually be revealed at a probate show, which is a special step show expressly for the purpose of introducing new members to the black student community. At probate step shows, new members would be revealed to the community in any of a number of dramatic ways—perhaps by having the probates wear ski masks as they perform and then pulling them all off at once, perhaps by coming

onto stage in the dark and having identities revealed as the lights were turned on, or perhaps by some other creative means (Fine 1991).

Whatever the details of the performance, at the several shows I attended, what I found most noteworthy was the joy and exuberance of the new members. At the show and thereafter, initiates would celebrate and proclaim their new status, show off their paraphernalia (commodities, such as t-shirts, jackets, handbags, or key chains, which feature a respective organization’s signature colors and symbols and identify them as members of their sorority or fraternity) and, in general, bask in the glow of the new status and attention that they had worked so hard to attain.

In terms of the duration of the underground pledge process, sometimes pledges would be on-line for a month, sometimes more. Given that the process does not officially exist and that it is shrouded in secrecy, it is impossible to know with full assurance how long a given group of pledges have secretly been on-line, or even if they have been on-line at all. In the cases of the underground process, the length of time on-line is said to reflect the preparedness of the individuals. BGLO members (students as well as current BGLO-affiliated scholars) report a sense of what constitutes preparedness. Preparedness reflects such concerns as pledges’ knowledge of history (of, for instance, their chapter, their organization, influential members, their organization’s guiding principles and secrets about their impending brotherhood or sisterhood), as well as their level of bonding to their line brothers or sisters and to their organization. Once they have (to the satisfaction of the established members) satisfied whatever requirements have been put before them, they “go over,” becoming neophytes in their respective fraternity or sorority.

The impact of pledging upon the broader community

Unfortunately, a full discussion of the impact of pledging upon individual black students extends beyond the pledges, and beyond the world that the black Greeks create for themselves. Along with the impact upon pledges, the ritual torment also affects those participants in the black student community who become aware of the pledge process as it unfolds. Such students are drawn in as they can clearly see that something is going on, but follow an unwritten code that requires them to pretend not to notice the pledging, even when they see that people they know and care about are in physical and/or emotional pain, if not danger.

In many cases, this code is explicitly communicated by the pledges themselves, who do not want

other students to interfere with their pledging. Often, pledges have accepted their own abuse as something necessary for building bonds with their line brothers or sisters. In other cases, they fear reprisals if it were to appear that they had allowed word to get out about their being on-line. Some scholars draw comparisons between the responses of pledges to hazing and the responses of domestic abuse victims to their circumstances. For instance, medical researcher Michelle Finkel (2002) urges administrators, parents, friends and the medical community to view those who are hazed in the same way they would view victims of other assaults, including sexual assault. For participants in black student communities to do so, however, may require that they cut against the norms and wishes of the BGLOs and their members and pledges, which makes such intervention difficult. This was the case with the dorm resident quoted earlier as well as others.

Testimony about the ambivalences associated with silently witnessing the impacts of pledging and hazing comes from R.A.s, friends, romantic partners, and others. In such a highly charged area, I will offer one of my experiences as an undergraduate as an example. In the 1980s, as an active participant in the black student community on my campus, there were several times when I was well aware of underground pledge lines. Back then, pledging was “above ground,” often brutal, and in some cases preceded with an underground pledge process. In one instance, I became particularly concerned about the health and safety of a teammate who was being “pre-pledged,” which meant that he was being pledged underground before officially going on-line as a potential member of the organization. I was a starting athlete on my NCAA sports team and he was my immediate backup. According to the norms and values of my team sport, this meant that I had a responsibility to act as a mentor to him. He had not shared what was going on and I had not brought it up, but I had been around campus long enough to have known for some time that he was on-line. One day after practice I saw him in the locker room. He was naked after getting out of the shower, and had bruises on his buttocks that ran down the back of his thighs. This was enough for me to finally speak up. After everyone else left I confronted him and he broke down, saying he did not know if he could take anymore. He refused to go into details, but spoke with characteristic indirect language that I to this day hear and recognize among fraternity and sorority members who wish to communicate information about their organization without being explicit. When I asked him point blank, he refused to explic-

itly say that he had been beaten, but instead offered that if all he suffered were beatings that he could handle it, and, likewise, that the beatings were not the worst part.

As an upperclassman talking to a first semester sophomore about abuse at the hands of other upperclassmen, I found myself in a difficult position. From my admittedly biased view, and with my only knowledge of what was going on being the sorry mental and physical state of the pledge who limped into practice each day and had become worthless to his athletic team, the student who was his “Dean of Pledges” and his other “big brothers” were dangerous sadists abusing people in secret, without checks on their behavior, and with little concern for the negative consequences of the damage they inflicted upon their pledges. Of course, this may have been a poor assessment of what actually was going on, but it reflected what was visible and apparent to me at the time.

My position was difficult because my teammate begged me not to go to his big brothers or anyone else, because doing so, he said (and I fully agreed), would result in even more severe hazing than he had already experienced. At this point, our team was already dealing with another teammate who had lost a best friend to “hell-night” hazing at the collegiate military academy about two hundred miles down the road. The “rat” (as all freshman at the academy were called) had fallen to his death from a building ledge in the middle of the night. So for me and for my teammate who was pledging, the matter of his pledging was deadly serious. And yet, as my teammate was determined to see the process through, it had to be handled carefully.

In the end, I never reported the situation to campus authorities (a thought that probably never even occurred to me at the time) and I never confronted his big brothers. I watched over my teammate as best I could, secretly tried to support him and regularly advised him to keep his wits about him and to protect himself in whatever ways he could.

After some number of weeks underground, the more public dimensions of the pledge process began. Some time after that he was publicly introduced as a member. He basked in the glow of his fraternal life and from what I could see, enjoyed the rest of his college career immensely. But while I can say that “all is well that ends well,” I knew then, and I know now, that if my teammate had suffered any long-term physical or emotional damage, or worse yet, was killed, I, even as just another student in the black student community, would have been somewhat

culpable. In this way, without my choosing, the realities of black Greek life during my undergraduate years produced formative moments that helped shape who I am today. This remains the case for participants in black student communities, and may even be more so the case as the pledge process is now entirely underground. It certainly is the case for the current generation of underground-pledged BGLO members—those who must reconcile their written word with their actions that contradict that word.

In what are most likely countless cases that will never come to light, participants in the black student community face moral quandaries as they weigh their peers' choices to be abused against their concerns for those same peers' safety. The hegemony of the black student community sides with keeping the open secret of pledging, and is maintained by common sense notions about individual freedom whereby the response to hazing is to uphold the right of individuals to make decisions for themselves. One student explained that

My attitude is that if anyone is stupid enough to allow other people to do that stuff to them, that is their business. I don't want to have anything to do with it. I am not getting involved.

In addition to the logic of individualism over community, there is another piece of common sense rhetoric that curbs dissent and silences critics. That is the oft-stated notion that if you have not pledged or are not Greek, you cannot understand the value of pledging and thus have no thorough basis to understand its value or criticize it. Such rhetoric does not defend pledging, but simply shuts down discussion. Compounding this silencer is the reality that pledges themselves are also routinely committed to quashing criticism and complaint about the pledge process—both in cases where their illegal pledging is (presumably) carefully conceived and carried out, and in the hundreds of cases where the pledging digresses into felony assault or homicide. One judgment of these circumstances would be that as black students choose to keep the secret of pledging, we build and reinforce communities comprising individuals who, though ready to stand up against injustice imposed from the outside, refuse to stand up for one another when the challenges and problems stem from the inside and involve how we treat one another.

From the perspective above, the physical and mental harm to the individual pledge is but one of the harms associated with hazing and with outlawed pledging. Another is the moral debasement of the Greek Letter Organization members who haze and

are hazed. A final harm can befall community members who are not Greek affiliated, but are pulled into BGLOs' moral quagmire and forced to choose between supporting their friends and peers' dangerous and illegal choices or lose those same friends, as well as status in the broader community, when they refuse to engage in complicity through silence. To the extent that the hegemony of the black student community dictates that secrets be maintained, the entire community is debased.

Violent hazing may or may not be normative to the secret rituals, but events that find their way to the public or communal eye indicate that it is nonetheless too often present. Regardless, in terms of the broader impact of pledging upon black student community, it is unquestioningly and widely *assumed* to be an aspect of the pledging process, which is all that is necessary for it to have a communal impact.

CONCLUSION—WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Today, BGLO members are struggling between two worthy goals. One goal is to eliminate hazing, which has become a deeply rooted part of BGLO culture. The other goal is to create a meaningful pledge process that transforms non-members into brothers and sisters, not just on "paper" but in a profound sense where values are shared and where a sense of loyalty to one another and to their organizations is part of the proverbial air the members breathe. Several Greek-affiliated scholars who are committed to reform argue that there are important benefits to well-designed and carefully carried out pledging processes when they are carried out with expert elder guidance, and with the utmost attention to the safety of the pledges and to the stated purposes of the process.

Several reform-minded Greek-affiliated scholars argue convincingly that the desire for a meaningful ritual pledge process is deeply rooted among BGLO members and that any solution to the hazing crisis will have to acknowledge and account for that reality (Jones 2004a; Kimbrough 2003; Parks and Brown 2005; Ruffins 1997). Any successful reform will have to be organically rooted to the realities of black Greeks self-conceptions', norms and values, respectful of their histories and tied to the stated goals traditionally associated with pledging. A process that is (1) well conceived and carried out over time, (2) requires that new members have a deep knowledge of their organizational history and of their place in African American history generally, (3) demands deep respect for those same histories, and (4) facilitates bonds between those who enter the organization at the same time ("line brothers" or "line

sisters” in outlawed terminology), would hold much promise, *but only if* the process also (5) shuns humbling *and* humiliation as means to achieve those ends. Requiring “pledges” (again using the outlawed language) to spend their free time together, to study together, to hold one another accountable for academic progress, and to attend and fully commit themselves to specially designed classes and activities related to organizational and African American history are also strategies worthy of consideration. Further requiring that all members of an incoming group achieve the same high standard of knowledge before *any* become members is a strategy that will facilitate the teamwork and bonding.

Of course, no ideas are perfect. As there is no consensus about what constitutes hazing, some anti-hazing reform plans include what others consider hazing. My sense is that to avoid hazing, a sea-change in thinking is required such that while heavy demands for excellence and group alliance are placed upon pledges, the negative approaches—shaming, humbling, humiliating, degrading, or physically or mentally assaulting or in any way—are specifically recognized as unnecessarily risky and dangerous, and are eschewed. But even if reform-minded Greek-affiliated scholars or others were to come up with reforms that are widely acknowledged as anti-hazing yet responsive to students’ desire for a rigorous process of accepting members, it would remain to be seen as to whether their voices would be heard and heeded by the members of the various chapters on the ground.

To date, the efforts to eliminate hazing have been ineffective. The first major move was the 1990 ban, which was reaffirmed in 2003. However, the problem remains. The goal of this article was to (1) draw attention to the semantic issues (e.g. pledging *verse* hazing, what constitutes hazing, humbling *verse* humiliation) that undermine conversations and make reform even more difficult, and to (2) show that pledging and hazing is not just a problem facing BGLOs; it does not just affect those who engage the illegal behavior or those who are subjected to it. Rather, it impacts individual black students (both Greek and non-Greek) and the black student community as a whole.

As the issues faced by the sub-community spill over to affect the larger community, it is time for more non-Greeks to join committed BGLO-affiliated scholars in the conversation about what to do about hazing. While to do so is to risk criticism as an outsider minding other people’s business, our responsibilities of stewardship and guidance demand our engagement. In short, anyone who is interested

in the lives and development of black students needs to enter the conversation.

Some will welcome the expansion of the problem-solving process to include the voices of those of us who care for all of our students but are not Greek, others will not. The engagement, however, is necessary. I sincerely hope that even at its most critical, this manuscript is received as it is offered—not as a bashing of BGLOs but as a renewed call for increasingly nuanced analyses and problem-solving efforts, and as a call for all who care for students and their sub-communities to engage this aspect of our ongoing discussions about the life of our black student communities.

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