

# Black Greek-Lettered Organizations: How Schools Like ETSU Benefit from Their Presence

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When I first arrived at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) freshman orientation in the middle of June 2012, I was anxious and alone. I was surrounded by close to 500 other freshman who would have rather been at home like myself, and I was on my own for a majority of the day while my mother attended some of the parents-only events.

Near the end of the day, when I went with my group to the Culp Ballroom to view the campus organizations, the first groups I saw were the sororities and fraternities. They were all handing out flyers, pens, and candy, wearing matching outfits, and the sorority girls were encouraging me to “rush”. I politely took the candy and fled to the other booths. However, one thing that stuck out to me was that each of these groups had their own booths, while a group of black students wearing different colored Greek letters on their shirts, jackets, or keychains had only one booth – for four different organizations.

Over that first fall semester, I found out that these four organizations – Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. – were the only active minority Greek academic groups on campus at the time. The only occasions you saw the members on campus outside of class was for community service projects or during Homecoming Week. However, you’d see the non-minority Greeks everywhere all the time, even chalking the sidewalks all over campus with their events, and their Greek letters displayed on dorm buildings and houses close to campus.

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Nestled in the mountains of northeast Tennessee, ETSU is an institution filled with rich history and students who get overly ecstatic over the army of squirrels who call the beautiful trees on campus home. ETSU is located in the scenic and friendly community of Johnson City, TN, a thirty-minute drive from my hometown of Greeneville, TN. Founded in 1911 as East Tennessee State Normal School, the school would transition to a university over the course of fifty-three years, officially becoming East Tennessee State University in 1963. As of 2017, ETSU is home to over 14,500 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students.

As beautiful as this school is, and as cool as it was to get away from home, my sisters and I still couldn't escape that feeling of being the only black person in a classroom at ETSU. In the fall of 2012 when I started my first semester, there were 15,406 students. Of those students, 12,334 (84.85%) were white, and 890 (6.12%) were black, or African American. Compared to Greeneville's population, it felt as if we barely left home.

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I had never heard of "black Greeks", or formed an opinion about them until I went to college. I grew up in a rural town with a population of 15,035. Greeneville, TN is mostly known for being the birthplace of 17<sup>th</sup> U.S. President Andrew Johnson and American folk hero Davy Crockett. To paint a picture, there is no shopping mall, but we do have a Wal-Mart, a skate park, an over-priced movie theatre, and five McDonald's. My grandmother and my parents live across the street from a field of cows, which is silly when you think about it – imagine a group of black people watching cows for fun from the front porch when everyone's home for the holidays.

According to the U.S. Census, the black population in Greeneville is only 5.4%, where the white population is 85.9%. Confederate rebel flags hang everywhere: on the back of pickup trucks,

off back and front porches, and even hanging up on childhood friends' bedroom walls. Growing up in Greeneville was often bleak and boring, because every school year since first grade I'd find myself as the only black minority in multiple classes, recreational sports teams, and clubs.

The black community in Greeneville has always been very small, very related, and very close-knit. Black people who graduated Greeneville High School (my alma mater) went to college in a different town or state and usually never came back, because there is nothing in Greeneville for most of us to come back to, except family. I knew of only one black Greek – my church pianist's daughter, Dawana Gudger-Richardson, who escaped Greeneville after graduating in 1984, went to Middle Tennessee State University and became a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Thirty-one years later, I joined Zeta Phi Beta at ETSU.

### **Stereotypes and Media Influence**

Popular culture and Hollywood contribute to fraternity and sorority stereotypes in many television shows and movies that I've seen, such as *Animal House* (1978), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), *Legally Blonde* (2001), and most recently, Seth Rogen's *Neighbors* (2014) and *Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising* (2016). Black Greeks have been featured in movies also, director Spike Lee's comedy *School Daze* (1988) being one of the most popular, and Sylvain White's 2005 drama *Stomp the Yard* being the most accurate.

Television shows such as *A Different World*, which was centered around a group of black college students, featured two main characters who tried to join a make-believe fraternity in one episode's storyline. Popular 90's television series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, starring actor Will Smith, featured a black fraternity in an episode where characters Will and Carlton try to pledge the same fraternity. Because of the hazing, pledging, and partying image that Hollywood has

created to associate with black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLOs), the news media usually focuses on ‘pledging’, hazing, and stepping (a form of African dance) when discussing black Greeks nationally (Mitchell 27).

It never occurred to me that the main reason why these organizations, that only seem to party and step in movies, exist is a historical one. While many college fraternities and sororities flourished between 1776 and 1908, students were often excluded based on race and ethnicity (Torbenson 37). The lack of coverage and knowledge of the organizations’ histories and backgrounds has led to ignorance on why they were founded and what purpose they serve to university campuses and communities. As a result, most black ETSU students respond positively to them after being exposed to them in pop culture. However, most students have only a vague idea of who they are, due to media coverage. Donald Mitchell, Jr., a member of black historical fraternity Kappa Alpha Psi, Inc., explored this phenomenon in 2012 of how BGLOs came to be,

**The Divine Nine**

**Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.**

Founded: Dec. 4, 1906 – Cornell University

**Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.**

Founded: Jan. 15, 1908 – Howard University

**Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.**

Founded: Jan. 5, 1911 – Indiana University

**Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.**

Founded: Nov. 17, 1911 – Howard University

**Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.**

Founded: Jan. 13, 1913 – Howard University

**Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.**

Founded: Jan. 9, 1914 – Howard University

**Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.**

Founded: Jan. 16, 1920 – Howard University

**Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.**

Founded: Nov. 12, 1922 – Butler University

**Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.**

Founded: Sept. 19, 1963 – Morgan State University

and their influence on campus life at predominantly white institutions (PWIIs), such as ETSU. In his dissertation while studying at University of Minnesota, he brought these serious issues to light.

**A Brief History of Black Greek-Lettered Organizations**

The first recognized Black Greek-Lettered Organization was Sigma Pi Phi, founded in 1904 by Henry M. Minton in Philadelphia, PA (Mitchell 19). Over the course of sixty years, many other organizations were founded during early times of racial inequality in the 1900s, such as Jim Crow segregation, and during the 1960s Civil Rights era. As a

result, these organizations made “service” a core principle, as their founders made it a priority to serve other people during this period.

Only nine of these organizations are intercollegiate, and have many chapters at different U.S. colleges and universities, some now have chapters overseas. These organizations came to be known as “The Divine Nine”, under an umbrella organization called the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) which was organized on May 10, 1930 at Howard University in Washington, D.C. (Mitchell 20).

The NPHC currently consists of five fraternities and four sororities. Each organization has their own founders, principles, and philanthropy goals. Each one was founded by undergraduates on the campuses of colleges and universities; five of them started at Howard University. While each of them share these qualities, each of them are unique. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, and his wife, Coretta Scott King, was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha. Sigma Gamma Rho was the first African-American sorority founded at Butler University, a PWI in Indiana (Ross 22). Zeta Phi Beta was founded to combat sorority elitism in midst of racial hostility and to provide aid to families in 1920 during The Great Depression (Mitchell 22). The histories behind each organization are too rich to not be known.

### **So, What’s the Deal with Greek Life at ETSU?**

ETSU’s BGLOs have come into problems with university support when it comes to funding, events, and community exposure. For example, ETSU NPHC organizations have had to defend ourselves when requesting money from BucFund, sometimes in the \$1200 range, for educational trips to state and regional conferences.



ETSU's Alpha Phi Alpha chapter performing at the 2014 Homecoming Step Show.

However, other Greek organizations have been allocated money (sometimes over \$10,000) without pause. Other Greeks get to have “Rush Weeks” and can host formal events on campus; NPHC gets limited funding and limited money from fundraising activities, so we do not host that many events. In 2016, a few dorm buildings in Buc Ridge Apartments were assigned to certain sororities. Two fraternities have fraternity houses near campus. None of the NPHC BGLOs have official dorms or houses, despite requesting such a luxury for many years.

Institutions such as Howard, Baylor, and Morehouse have NPHC plots that signify and display the history of their campus BGLOs. At ETSU, we had wooden benches that each organization painted and decorated, with small plaques in front of them giving brief information on NPHC. During the summer of 2015, a large tree near Gilbreath Hall fell near where the benches were located after a nasty storm, and while ETSU Maintenance cleaned up the debris from the tree, the benches were moved into storage. We didn't get our benches back on display on campus grounds until the spring of 2017, almost two years later, and after a lengthy fight with school administration on a new location for the benches.

These things lead many students to believe that NPHC doesn't put in enough effort to be seen and do things, when a lack of university and financial support is the case.

## **A Lack of Campus Engagement at ETSU**

Many studies have been conducted to find out to why black students are less involved on predominantly white campuses. In a 2001 study on African American student involvement on college and university campuses, it was found that it is within minority student organizations where African American students actively search to get involved (Sutton, Kimbrough 35).

At ETSU, we have Quest Leadership for Success, Black Affairs Association, Diversity Educators, Shades of Africa, and NPHC as the only aimed at black students. Both Quest and Diversity Educators require formal membership, training, and GPA requirements. Shades of Africa is targeted mostly at foreign transfer students who transferred here *from* Africa, which then leaves Black Affairs to be open to all students. Then, there's the umbrella of NPHC, which has six of The Divine Nine organizations currently chartered at ETSU underneath it. According to the ETSU Student Organization Outreach Center (SORC), those are five out of 225 organizations specifically targeted to black and minority students of African descent. This leads to an issue of black students not joining or only getting involved in one or two clubs on campus. From a personal standpoint, when you grow up seeing non-minorities as the representation or the majority for any club or organization, it makes you wonder where the other minorities are, and why they're not joining those groups.

According to various studies, African Americans at PWIs such as ETSU experience feelings of alienation, exclusion from campus activities, and feel left out of educational curricula compared to those who attend historically black colleges and universities (Mitchell 7). This can also affect the retention rate for universities. In a 1998 study, it was found that for white students "family support was more important for retention; however, for African American students, campus support was more important for increased retention." (Mallinckrodt 62).

However, in a 2011 study at University of Michigan by Mitchell, he found that African American students reported that they had become much more satisfied with campus life after joining a BGLO. In the study, the students said that the social networking formed in BGLOs allows a link to be made between African American culture and history, and being a member allowed black Greeks opportunities to provide entertainment and programming for black students (Mitchell 75). An example of this entertainment is the ETSU Homecoming Step Show that NPHC puts together every year. The students Mitchell studied also reported that BGLOs have a beneficial impact by providing social support, leadership skills, community service, and a higher academic responsibility which leads to a persistence for graduation and higher learning (Mitchell 74).

### **BGLOs' Effect on Academics and Leadership**

In 1984, Jacqueline Fleming published *Blacks in College*, a study that analyzed the experiences of black students in institutions across the United States. In her findings, Fleming found that African Americans on PWIs face psychological struggles that led to gaining life skills such as coping, survival skills, self-assertiveness, and leadership skills; but these skills were found to be detrimental to intellectual functioning (Mitchell 8).

It is no secret that white students make up the largest percentage of college students overall, and students studying at PWIs. The alienation and lack of social support addressed in the previous section comes into play, as black students find it difficult to adjust to their academic surroundings (Mitchell 10). Fleming's study is not the only one on this issue. In a 1999 study by Nagasawa and Song, they found that [minority social] networks are essential; they provide students support academically and socially, and integrate them into the campus community (Mitchell 16).

The social support and networking of BGLOs has played an impact on black students' academic and campus experience. Students involved in BGLOs held more elected leadership

positions than non-Greeks at a significant level, and had more self-reported higher leadership potential (Mitchell 25). In Nan Lin’s 1999 Network Theory of Social Capital, he hypothesized that social capital is embedded in resources in social networks. These resources that are found in BGLOs, are:

- Relationships and connections
- Increased social lives
- Community service and Administrative experiences
- Academic monitoring
- Leadership development (Mitchell 107)

Each of these resources were requirements that I was interviewed for before joining Zeta Phi Beta on April 25, 2015. Community service, GPA, and leadership roles both on and off campus are highly reviewed and questioned during the membership process, and monitored by an appointed advisor after joining.

“Reasons Why They Join BGLOs”	
<b>Family</b>	Previous family members may have legacy membership, or relatives could be members of an organization.
<b>History</b>	Many view BGLOs as a part of United States African American history and culture.
<b>Members</b>	Many see the members of BGLOs as influential, especially the services and programming they provide to communities.

*Information provided by Donald Mitchell, Jr., 2012*

**Conclusion**

When you attend any Greek Life-sponsored event on ETSU’s campus where all organizations are present, you will see the glaring difference between a group of organizations

who are supposed to represent “unity”. You’ll even see the differences during football season, when all of them are tailgating. There will be a bunch of fraternities and sororities with elaborately decorated tables, banners, and flags. All of them will have their own table for their own organization. You will also see a small group of black students wearing Greek letters, standing around one single table. There will be a collage of different Greek paraphernalia surrounding a poster board, currently overcrowded with *six* different organizations on it after Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. were re-chartered in 2015.

No white students will stop at their table, only the occasional one or two curious black freshmen. The other Greeks ask us what our letters stand for and what our sorority is called, despite being Greek themselves, and our picture and name on the poster board behind us. This is the experience I have had the past two years while volunteering at freshman orientations and at the Greek Life Expo every fall.

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When looking back at my own orientation, I am happy with the choice I made. Since that orientation in 2012, my sister and I helped re-activate the charter of ETSU’s Zeta Phi Beta chapter. We’ve raised money and awareness for March of Dimes, participated annually in Relay for Life, fed the homeless in Johnson City, and donated water and money to the water crisis in Flint, MI. It is frustrating at times with the lack of support from the university and the ignorance from others that comes with being in a lesser known sorority. However, I can benefit from now knowing that our organizations are making an impact on ETSU students’ social capital, leadership skills, academic progress, and college life satisfaction.

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