Abstract

Most academic research on Greek Lettered Communities and Organizations (GLCOs), such as fraternities and sororities, fail to address the presence or significance of multiculturalism as a guiding principle. In non-Greek lettered organizations, however, multiculturalism is becoming increasingly important and centralized. Academic literature often explores the benefits and challenges of embracing multiculturalism in non-Greek lettered organizations and rarely addresses it with GLCOs. Employing qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, this study explores the impressions of the benefits and limitations of embedding multiculturalism as a foundational organizational value for the members of one Northern California sorority.

Introduction

Greek Lettered Communities and Organizations (or GLCOs) are commonly found on many American college campuses. In this study, a GLCO is an all-inclusive term for sororities and fraternities that function as participants in the overall Greek community and as independent organizations for their members. Each GLCO represents an opportunity for college students to develop their leadership skills, cultural understanding, and relationships (Boschini and Thompson 1998); additionally, “most [members] graduate with valuable experiences in the burdens and bonds of tradition, responsibility, and especially camaraderie. Not such bad things to take away from an undergraduate education and into society” (O’Donnell 2009, A76). GLCOs can be considered a great opportunity for the personal development of many students on college campuses (O’Donnell 2009).

All of the attention given to GLCOs has not been positive, however. Many studies (Barry 2007; Cokley et al. 2001; Foubert, Garner, and Thaxter 2006; Reitman 2012) focus on the reports of hazing, sexual assault, binge drinking and other allegedly inappropriate behavior that takes place on college campuses. Reitman (2012) and Hoover (2012) report incidents of binge drinking and
mayhem, and even death, resulting from hazing. These unfortunate stories of negativity in GLCOs have overshadowed some of the benefits that GLCOs may bring to college campuses and students, but it is not the goal of this study to argue the virtues and drawbacks of GLCOs. Instead, this study accepts GLCOs for what they are (good or bad) and aims to explore cultural heterogeneity or multiculturalism in GLCOs.

A thorough examination of the historical cultivation of GLCOs reveals that homogeneity was a norm established from the very beginning of many of these organizations (James 2000; McCabe 2011; Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). Torbenson and Parks (2009) describe the establishment of GLCOs in three waves. The first wave began with White Christian male fraternities, as they were the only demographic with the privilege of attending a college education at the time (James 2000). The first GLCO to begin this trend was Phi Beta Kappa fraternity in 1776 at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia (Torbenson and Parks 2009). The second wave, 1885-1929, included the creation of GLCOs that were non-traditional; these groups catered to Jews, African-Americans, nonsectarian groups, religious groups, and women (Torbenson and Parks 2009). The third wave, 1975-1999, included GLCOs comprised of Asian-American men and women, LGBT individuals, and Latinos; Multicultural GLCOs were also created during this third wave (Torbenson and Parks 2009). These groups formed in part due to their demographic being excluded from the existing GLCO community as it stood (Torbenson and Parks 2009).

Over the course of these three waves, even during the times at which different kinds of people were being represented within GLCOs, many different factors reinforced the norm of homogeny and racial/ethnic exclusivity within these organizations. For example, when the National InterFraternity Conference (NIC) was established in 1910, its purpose was to create an alliance between the White Christian fraternities (James 2000), further solidifying the norm of homogeneity in the GLCO system; soon after the NIC was formed came the founding of many other homogenous Greek councils and alliances (James 2000). Also, some of the Black and White GLCOs had exclusion clauses in their national constitutions that prohibited any persons of a different race/ethnicity from joining (James 2000). However, after a large movement to lift the exclusionary clauses, many organizations, even the ethnic-interest groups, gained members from outside of the ethnicity of focus (Hughey 2007; James 2000). While the ethnic-interest GLCOs can be considered inclusive because they exist for the purpose of supporting and serving ethnic minorities, they cannot be considered Multicultural because they were not specifically created under the philosophy of multiculturalism. The researcher decided to capitalize “Multicultural” when used as a racial/ethnic identifier toward GLCOs (i.e., historically White, Black, and Latina GLCOs). The high value placed upon cultural homogeneity (as opposed to multiculturalism) in the GLCO system is a key factor in understanding the significance of Multicultural organizations in the GLCO system.

In the third wave, Multicultural organizations began challenging the homogeneity of GLCOs. Multicultural GLCOs are different from homogenous GLCOs because of the high value placed upon all cultures working together, rather than just one. There is little research that explores Multicultural GLCOs and for that reason the present research addresses this need. Historical information about the founding of Multicultural GLCOs is rare; academic studies on the topic are virtually nonexistent. Additionally, multiple definitions of multiculturalism exist, so it is often difficult to cover all aspects of the concept. For example, some definitions of multiculturalism allow the term to describe an organization or group that has members of different cultural backgrounds due to integration (Allen 1995; Ashcraft and Allen 2003; Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008; Witherspoon and Wohlert 1996). The present study does not use this definition, and instead recognizes the difference between multiculturalism achieved through integration (referred to hereafter as implemented multiculturalism) and multiculturalism achieved by founding the organization upon the philosophy and using it as a teaching mechanism (referred to hereafter as embedded multiculturalism). The first definition of multiculturalism (implemented multiculturalism) applies to many if not most GLCOs. The latter definition of multiculturalism (embedded multiculturalism) applies only to organizations or groups that included multiculturalism among their founding principles. This latter definition creates a separate category of GLCOs: Multicultural Greek Lettered Organizations (MGLOs).

This study argues that many GLCOs (including MGLOs) function like organizations, such as businesses. Like businesses, most GLCOs have organizational elements such as a defined culture, values, mission, and hierarchie (McCabe 2011; Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). Both types of organizations have similar hierarchies (i.e., CEOs and presidents) (Adams and Kiem 2000; Giddings 1998). Thus, ideas and theories that apply to organizations in general can surely be applied to GLCOs. Many studies (Allen 1995; Ashcraft and Allen 2003; Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008; Witherspoon and Wohlert 1996) have focused on the importance of multiculturalism in businesses and organizations, and some studies (Boschini and Thompson 1998; Hughey 2007) have examined the existence and effects of multiculturalism in homogenous GLCOs, but none have focused on the importance or effects of multiculturalism in Multicultural sororities. The present research attempts to fill this void in the space where organizational communication and GLCO literature meet. The researcher interviewed members of a Multicultural sorority in an attempt to discover the members’ perceptions of the benefits and limitations of membership in an organization (specifically, a GLCO) that was founded upon the principle of multiculturalism.
Literature Review

Researchers with interest in GLCOs have examined both Multicultural sororities (Boschini and Thompson 1998; McCabe 2011; Wells and Dolan 2009) and homogenous sororities in the African American (or Black) community (Hughey 2007; Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011), the Latina community (Heidenreich 2006; Helem 2004; Mejia 1994; Press 2005), and the European American (or White) community (James 2000; Torbenson and Parks 2009).

Research on other culturally specific GLCOs (those that serve the Asian American or Pacific Islander communities, for example) is limited and will not be included in the present study, due to its scarcity.

The existing research on culture and GLCOs focuses on various topics, from the inter-fraternal councils of both homogenous (Heidenreich 2006; James 2000; Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011) and Multicultural organizations (McCabe 2011), to the integration of the historically White fraternities and sororities and the rise of heterogeneity and diversity in these organizations (Hughey 2007; James 2000), to the creation of Multicultural GLCOs (Torbenson and Parks 2009). Research on culture and MGLOs has been more historical and descriptive in nature, and has not fully explored the perceived benefits and possible limitations of embracing multiculturalism as a guiding philosophy (Wells and Dolan 2009). Research on MGLOs has considered how these organizations fit into the larger campus and curricular structure (Wells and Dolan 2009), but it has not considered the concept of GLCOs/MGLOs and organizational communication from the opposite direction. That is, scholars have yet to study how MGLOs operate as organizations, or how MGLOs share the same benefits and challenges of multiculturalism as faced by non-GLCOs.

There is no lack of research on multiculturalism and organizational communication. Grimes and Richard (2003) studied the impact of cultural diversity in the workplace, and organizational communication scholars such as Ashcraft and Allen (2003) have changed the face of work on organizations by suggesting that organizations are fundamentally gender- and race-based entities. However, researchers have thus far failed to examine sororities, especially Multicultural sororities, using an organizational communication lens. The following review of the literature demonstrates the need for a study that combines the previous work conducted on Multicultural sororities and multiculturalism in the organization.

Racial Exclusivity through Inter-Fraternity Councils

The National Panhellenic Council (NPC) recognizes 26 historically White sororities. The council was originally founded as a way to bring the sororities together in the spirit of getting along with each other, especially when they were at odds with those who sought to block such organizations for women (NPC Foundation). The NPC is responsible for maintaining the values and ethics of women’s fraternities while challenging members to be active leaders within their organizations (NPC Foundation). The NPC is the oldest inter-fraternal council for women, but it is not the only group of its kind. Other councils include the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), which is a coordinating body for the first nine African American fraternities and sororities, the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), and the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC), which is an umbrella organization of 12 Multicultural and Multietnic fraternities and sororities. These GLCO Councils are important to understand because their existence demonstrates a basic example of continued racial exclusivity within GLCOs. To better understand racial/ethnic exclusivity, it is also essential to understand the history of GLCOs within these councils.

Sororities and the Black Greeks

At the time of the founding of the earliest fraternities, most women were not allowed to receive a college education; those women who did attend college were excluded from the existing fraternal organizations (Torbenson and Parks 2009). As a result, many women across the country formed their own fraternal organizations. The oldest collegiate sororities include Alpha Delta Pi (originally called the Adelphean Society), which was founded in 1851, Pi Beta Phi (created in 1867), Gamma Phi Beta (founded in 1874), and Kappa Alpha Theta, established in 1870 (Torbenson and Parks 2009). As African Americans gained access to education, they also, like women, found themselves banned from joining the existing GLCOs; African Americans started forming their own Greek-lettered organizations in 1906 (James 2000). More popularly, the first nine African American fraternities and sororities are members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, or NPHC; of the nine, four (Alpha Kappa Alpha, 1908, Delta Sigma Theta, 1913, Zeta Phi Beta, 1920, and Sigma Gamma Rho, 1922) are sororities (Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). In an academic climate that was not welcoming of women, especially women of color, these organizations were founded to support the women surviving in hostile environments.

While some might argue that, due to their own struggles with overcoming prejudice and bias, college women of this time should have been inclined toward inclusivity, research shows that the earliest White sororities were resistant to the idea of integrating other races/ethnicities into their sisterhoods (Boschini and Thompson 1998; Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). As a result of the cultural demographics at colleges, segregation, and expectations of homogeneity, some Black college women founded their own sororities (rather than fight for inclusion in the historically White organizations) (Torbenson and Parks 2009). Each of the early Black sororities included the importance of community engagement and societal equality in their founding principles (Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). Researchers agree that while there are individual notions that separate one organization from another, all of the Black...
sororities focus heavily on uplifting and overcoming social oppression in the Black community (Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). Historically White sororities also typically have philanthropic objectives, but they are not specifically focused on the advancement of one race or ethnic group.

These Black GLCOs also have members who do not identify as Black or African American (Hughey 2007). Many of these organizations had racial exclusivity clauses in their original constitutions, but as laws changed to protect against such actions, the organizations were forced to change (Hughey 2007). Hughey (2007) argues that non-Blacks in Black GLCOs did not receive much backlash from their Black brothers/sisters in the fraternity/sorority, but they did receive negative attention from people within their own racial/ethnic community. Thus, even in these organizations that were created to address ethnic/racial organizational exclusion, the Black GLCOs “both enable and constrain the ability of people actively seeking to cross the color lines” (Hughey 2007, 70). Hughey (2007) provides additional evidence of the homogenous system that created a necessity for organizations founded on heterogeneity.

**Chicanisma and Latina Sororities**

Latina sororities have elements of both Black and White sororities in their foundations. Heidenreich (2006) studied the origins of Latina GLCOs and argues that, like the Black sororities, they were formed due to a need for inclusion in the American education system at all levels. The first Latina sorority, Lambda Theta Alpha Sorority, Inc., was founded in 1975 at Kean University in New Jersey (Torbenson and Parks 2009). According to Stuart (2008), some Latinas seek out Latina GLCOs for cultural identity. Helem (2004), Mejia (1994), and Stuart (2008) each support this idea with different accounts from Latinas in GLCOs. Many of the accounts address the difficulty of being a first generation Latina student in college; these students have parents who are often unfamiliar with the U.S. college system and they often have differing cultural values than mainstream U.S. traditions (Valdes 1996).

Heidenreich (2006) also says that, like the White sororities, these Latina organizations were formed to embrace capitalism and enterprise, even “at the expense of activism and critical social awareness” (128). Heidenreich (2006) compares modern Latina sororities to Latino Student Organizations such as United Farm Workers (UFW) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), both of which were formed during the Chicana/o civil rights movement. Both of these organizations specifically address the needs of the middle class and those who aspire to be there. However, Heidenreich (2006) argues that Latina sororities more closely resemble White sororities than Chicana/o student organizations, as they are marked by an absence of activism and a heavier emphasis on community service. The presence of Latina sororities made the collegiate landscape more diverse, but the environment continued to be one filled with different homogenous organizations. Heterogeneity as a desirable and foundational principle in GLCOs did not appear on campus until the arrival of Multicultural fraternities and sororities.

**The Rise of Multicultural Sororities and Heterogeneity**

Multicultural sororities began to flourish on campuses in the early 1980s (Torbenson and Parks 2009). The first Multicultural sorority was Mu Sigma Upsilon, which originated in 1981 at Rutgers University. Shortly after, in 1986, Lambda Sigma Gamma was the first MGLO to be established in the West and the second Multicultural sorority ever established. Zeta Sigma Chi (1991) was the first Multicultural sorority to be founded in the Midwest at Northern Illinois University. Seven years later, in 1998, Theta Nu Xi was first MGLO to be founded in the South at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (Torbenson and Parks 2009). Between 1981 and 2003, many other Multicultural GLCOs were established all across the nation; by 2009, there were 22 sororities and 12 fraternities (Torbenson and Parks 2009).

The most significant difference between GLCOs with Multicultural memberships and MGLOs is that MGLOs are founded upon the principle of multiculturalism. MGLOs have multiculturalism embedded in their organizations, while traditional GLCOs might choose to adopt multiculturalism as a way to stay current, or perhaps politically correct. McCabe (2011) argues that the act of initiating members of color into traditionally homogenous GLCOs amounts to an affirmation of a “colorblind ideology” that can “reproduce other inequality-legitimating ideologies” (521). McCabe (2011) also argues that practicing or doing multiculturalism is different than just being multicultural. To McCabe (2011), doing multiculturalism is about challenging the homogeneity of the campus Greek system. Doing multiculturalism is accomplished by valuing differences to teach others and build relationships (McCabe 2011, 521). According to Hughey (2007), GLCOs are multicultural when they have members of diverse cultures; GLCOs practice multiculturalism when they are actively recruiting and maintaining an ethnically diverse membership and publicly declaring themselves ready to learn about different cultures.

Boschini and Thompson (1998) add that the diversity embraced by MGLOs should be emulated by other GLCOs, especially since traditional aged White students will become the minority on college and university campuses in the near future, and ideas about multiculturalism and majority status will certainly be changing. Multiculturalism is not just a principle demonstrated by MGLOs, culturally specific GLCOs can also exhibit multiculturalism (Hughey 2007). Therefore, it is important to define the difference between embedded and implemented multiculturalism in the organization.
Multiculturalism in the Organization

Organizations can be identified as corporations, groups, and/or systems that are maintained through the service of members who share passion for the organization’s goals, values, and purpose (Torbenson and Parks 2009). Organizations have cultural characteristics that are defined and maintained by the organization’s members (Monge and Poole 2008; Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey 2011). This study argues that the organizational cultural characteristics found in businesses, churches, and educational institutions are also present in GLCOs.

Ashcraft and Allen (2003) have studied the effects and the importance of multiculturalism being present among an organization’s goals, values, and purposes. However, this study focuses on an approach that reflects accommodating differences and implementing an environment that appreciates diversity. People of color are a growing demographic that is rapidly diversifying the American workforce, causing a need to understand multiculturalism more than ever before (Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008). The growth of people of color in the workplace has also contributed to the vast growth of academic studies discussing implemented multiculturalism; there have been more than 450 articles on the topic of diversity in the workplace just since 2000 (Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008). Allen (1995) agrees that multiculturalism is becoming increasingly important, as it plays an important factor in the communication processes between individuals in the workplace and addresses cultural differences that may create different communication climates. Multiculturalism’s presence in the organization is influential, and thus deserves continued academic attention.

Researchers are not just identifying the significance of multiculturalism in the organization, but they are also proposing different ways for businesses to approach the concept. Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks (2008) claim that organizations typically address racial and ethnic diversity with one of two approaches: the colorblind approach or the multicultural approach. The colorblind approach focuses on an individual’s accomplishments instead of that person’s racial/ethnic background, and fosters an environment of unity and equality; essentially, under the colorblind approach, everyone is seen as the same (Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008). The multicultural approach addresses the diversity of the workplace (instead of ignoring or avoiding it) to provide an inclusive work climate for all to feel comfortable. Both of these approaches are popular in corporate America (Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008), but they are both examples of implemented rather than embedded multicultural values. Many researchers (Allen 1995; Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008; Witherspoon and Wohlert 1996) have discussed methods of implementing multicultural and diversity principles into organizations, but none have explored the idea of embedding principles of multiculturalism in the organization from its founding.

This study defines embedded and implemented principles of multiculturalism as separate approaches for all organizations. Embedded multiculturalism is used as a teaching mechanism for members/employees and for the community (McCabe 2011; Witherspoon and Wohlert 1996). Embedded multiculturalism is explicitly stated and utilized by the organization as a guiding principle; it has been embraced, demonstrated, and appreciated since the organization’s founding. Implemented multiculturalism is multiculturalism that has been adopted by an organization over the course of time; in such a case, multiculturalism is appreciated, but it is not the guiding principle of the organization. An organization with implemented multiculturalism has a mission and purpose centered around something other than multiculturalism, but it still functions with an appreciation, acceptance, and/or welcoming of differences.

While many organizations continue to implement multiculturalism, new businesses have the opportunity to embed multicultural principles in the foundation of their organization. While some businesses may not have the purpose or mission of educating others on multiculturalism (Ashcraft and Allen 2003), they can still use it as a guiding principle to establish an inclusive organization for their customers/clients and members/employees (McCabe 2008). The present study focuses on the members of one MGLO in an attempt to discover the members’ perceptions of the benefits (and limitations) of embedded multiculturalism within their organization. The results of this study may be used as a framework to guide future organizational communication research, as well as the formation of future businesses, organizations, and GLCOs.

Method

This study will use in-depth interviews as a way to explore the meanings and interpretations of the benefits and challenges associated with MGLOs created by members of those organizations. The same list of questions was used in each interview; however, interviewees were allowed to skip or come back to questions at any time, and the conversation sometimes led to topics not covered by the original question list. While other methods of analysis could have revealed insight about the strengths and weaknesses of embedded multiculturalism, no other approach offers the combination of personalization, heavy details that might not be revealed in a basic survey or questionnaire, and perspective (focus on the member instead of on the organization as a whole) presented with in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to explore the sensitive topic of multiculturalism with the attention to detail and honest exploration necessary for meaningful results.

The current study does not attempt to answer the question of whether Multicultural sororities are effective, nor does it attempt to argue that people should or should not join MGLOs. This study does not attempt to answer the
question of how embedded multiculturalism benefits the sorority/organization (although that question is relevant, valid, and important, and will be asked and answered in future research). Rather, this study attempts to discover what the members of the organization believe are the benefits (and challenges) of belonging to an organization guided by embedded multiculturalism. What have these members experienced through their membership in an organization with embedded multiculturalism? Through answering this question, the study will then identify the beneficial and negative experiences of the members. Groups attempting to form into organizations can use this information to see how their employees or members would feel about being a part of an organization with embedded multiculturalism, and the organizers can then make better decisions about their future choices and directions.

The diverse membership of one Multicultural sorority at a large, comprehensive university in Northern California provided the pool of prospective interviewees (see Figure 1). Using convenience sampling, the researcher contacted potential interviewees through word-of-mouth conversations with peers and colleagues. Posts to social networking websites were also used to locate participants. The goal was to interview 10 to 12 members of a Multicultural sorority. The researcher ultimately interviewed eight women (see Appendix A) ranging in age between 18 and 25 years. Each woman was assigned a pseudonym (the name that appears in association with each woman’s responses is her pseudonym).

**Figure 1**
Racial/Ethnic demographics of active members at the Northern Californian Multicultural sorority as of 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic/Racial Group</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American/Black</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipina</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican-American/Latina/Chicana/Hispanic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-ethnic/racial</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL MEMBERS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher asked members questions about the benefits and limitations of membership, and the idea of embedded versus implemented multicultural principles in Multicultural sororities (see Appendix B). While the interviewer did ask questions from the same standard list, the interviews were largely unstructured and open ended, meaning that the interviewer did not pose exactly the same questions to every respondent, because the goal of this type of interview is not to create a generalized group response (Gorden 1980).

The researcher must recognize that s/he should not expect universal answers while conducting in-depth interviews, because the results only address how one group or one community or even one individual responds to the situation being investigated (Ang 1989). The results of such a study are not generalizable, nor is generalizability a desired effect from this study. Instead, this study aims to provide depth of understanding, an equally desirable outcome.

The researcher identified various themes in the responses by using analytical tools such as key-words-in-context (KWIC), word repetition, and pawing. KWIC is a method that identifies key words or phrases, with high frequency, used in the same context, whereas word repetition or word counting is a strategy for considering words that occur with high frequency even outside of the same context; pawing is a term for highlighting and marking up responses that correlate (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The researcher then categorized the themes and patterns that emerged; the discussion of these categories follows the interview responses listed below.

**Results**

After conducting the interviews, the researcher compiled a list of six themes extracted from the content of the interviews. The six key themes and ideas focused on multiculturalism and heterogeneity, and they include the following: 1. defining multiculturalism, 2. understanding multiculturalism as an embedded principle, 3. uniqueness of heterogeneity, 4. high exposure to multiculturalism, 5. the benefit of learning about others, and 6. the limitation of clashing personalities. Below is a more detailed explanation of the identified key themes.

**Defining Multiculturalism**

In questions one and two (see Appendix B) respondents were asked to define both multiculturalism and Multicultural sororities. When asked question one, each respondent described multiculturalism as a value that is both tangible and intangible. Multiculturalism was defined as the acceptance of the different or similar phenotypic qualities and backgrounds that construct an individual or a group.

> Multiculturalism to me is the coming together of different backgrounds and cultures, races, religions; anything that makes you different. (Erika)

> I think multiculturalism is the act of encompassing people and ideals from different parts of the world and cultures...culture doesn’t define just race and ethnicity; it’s not just defined by that. There’s different pieces of culture, whether it’s the type of music that you listen to, whether it’s if you are “able-bodied”; if you have physical or a cognitive disability. There’s so much that goes into multiculturalism so it’s really just being accepting and inclusive of all those cultures. (Kelly)
A Multicultural sorority was defined as a group of women who exhibit an appreciation for multiculturalism, as defined above, and use it as a teaching mechanism for its members and community.

I would say a Multicultural sorority is a sorority that provides an opportunity to its members to retain their own cultures, also providing them with a learning experience by exposing them to other cultures that are different to them. (Janet)

In terms of Multicultural sororities in general, just being really open minded to different cultures and everything. Just coming together in friendship. (Ava)

If they are genuinely multicultural, they strive to make sure that there are more differences among them than similarities, so they can continue to strive to accept those differences and use them as a way to grow as an individual and as a group. (Kendra)

While these definitions represent only the perspectives of the respondents, they provide the context for any future mentions of multiculturalism in this study. The respondents’ understanding and appreciation of multiculturalism further allowed the researcher to better understand the uniqueness of heterogeneity in GLCOs.

Uniqueness of Heterogeneity

Many members expressed that they received confused or surprised reactions when they told others that they were in a Multicultural sorority (questions 10 and 11, see Appendix B). Respondents explained that many people reacted in complete confusion in regards to what a Multicultural sorority is because others would assume that MGLOs were just the same as a stereotypical homogenous sorority. These reactions, in addition to understanding the history of homogeny in GLCOs, suggest that heterogeneity is unique to GLCOs; whereas it is the norm for MGLOs.

I think it is more of a surprised reaction because you don’t see it a lot. I personally have never seen an organization like [it] on campus before. I haven’t seen it in my friends' campuses where there is an organization that legitimately is multicultural. You see girls from every single race within this organization and it’s beautiful, but because it’s underrepresented, the concept of multiculturalism, there is an element of surprise. (Kelly)

But mostly when everyone finds out they are like, “Is it a Black sorority?” and when they find out it’s a Multicultural sorority they are like, “Oh how does that work?” Like any other sorority! (Erika)

They would jump to the typical conclusions about sororities, like they party and blah blah blah. So all the reactions were negative and it did bother me, [but] it did make me proud too because actually letting them know what I do, [they would then be like] “Oh cool. I never thought about it that way.” (Ayah)

Both Erika and Ayah experienced confused responses, as their friends and family assumed that a Multicultural sorority was the same as their stereotypical concept of sororities. Perhaps the perpetuation of this stereotype plays a role in the general lack of understanding of the differences between culturally homogenous and heterogeneous (Multicultural) sororities. Future research could explore the creation and perpetuation of sorority stereotypes.

Multiculturalism as an Embedded Principle

Based on the definitions of embedded and implemented multiculturalism, when asked question 13 (see Appendix B), all eight respondents agreed that the principle of multiculturalism is embedded in their organization as opposed to implemented.

I feel that they are embedded because since I learned about this organization multiculturalism had been a part of every presentation and informational. I am well aware about social justice, diversity and multiculturalism and I could see that the women in this organization also were aware. I feel that our organization encourages and supports our sisters to educate ourselves and each other about our cultures. (Janet)

I would have to say that for the most part it is embedded into the organization. The [national founders] set out to bring women from every walk of life and background together. I think with the growth of the organization, with each new line that crosses, that is demonstrated. [Our sorority] embraces and encourages the differences of each sister. All these differences can be used as teaching tools within the organization as well as the broader community. (Erika)

Our definition of multiculturalism is a very broad one that includes not only race and ethnicity. We think of multiculturalism on a broader spectrum that includes but is not limited to background, socioeconomic status, language, cultural norms, etcetera. It’s hard to explain why I feel this way without giving out confidential information about our sorority, but from the testimonials I’ve heard from our beloved [national founders], I believe they intended to form an organization where every woman felt at home and connected to her sister, regardless of the various multicultural worlds they came from. (Kyla)

As previously mentioned, some definitions of multiculturalism can even be applied to homogenous sororities, some of which may exhibit characteristics of implemented
multiculturalism as they recruit women of all backgrounds. However, these examples of implemented multiculturalism do not include using multiculturalism as a teaching and guiding principle (James 2000). All eight respondents expressed appreciation for this kind of multiculturalism. Future research could explore a possible connection between this appreciation and a high level of prior exposure to multiculturalism experienced by members prior to their membership.

High Exposure to Multiculturalism
When asked question 15 (see Appendix B), all eight of the respondents expressed that they embraced, appreciated, and/or demonstrated multiculturalism prior to becoming a member. Four of the eight respondents explained that most of their friends were diverse during their childhood and while growing up.

Yeah I think I did [appreciate multiculturalism] because of what I was exposed to in the workplace and in other extracurricular activities so I’d already had that mentality. (Janet)

I think I did just because I grew up around a lot of cultures but I think I appreciate it more now that I am constantly surrounded by different cultures like all the time. Every sister you talk to, you learn something different. (Michaela)

My friends back home are diverse and I like that we each bring something different to the table and so that was definitely something that made me go, “This might be for me”. It was more of an extension of what I am used to at home. (Ava)

I did consider myself to embrace, demonstrate, and appreciate multicultural values, maybe not as much as I do now but I always had a diverse group of friends growing up. You know, I was always exposed to people different from myself. I think just because the area I was raised in was very diverse, but I do feel like joining [our sorority] made those values stronger. I see the bigger picture, why it’s important to our society, and it’s made me advocate for multiculturalism a lot more than I did before. (Kendra)

High exposure to multiculturalism prior to membership is evidently common among members (as per the responses). Early exposure to multiculturalism may lessen the need to educate members about multicultural philosophies. This aspect of education is important to note because, as stated earlier in this study, the workforce of the future will predominantly be made up of people of color (Witherspoon and Wohliert 1996). However, this possible correlation is beyond the scope of the present study. Future research should address this idea in an effort to better understand the significance of employees/members who have experienced high exposure to multiculturalism in organizations that exhibit embedded multiculturalism.

Inclusivity
Another major theme in the responses was the demonstration of high levels of inclusion by individual members and the organizations. Interviewees shared that they joined the organization largely because they felt accepted, despite their differences. They also considered themselves to be inclusive (accepting of others). Particularly, members of the sorority who identified as bi-racial or multiethnic said that they did not feel right choosing an organization that constricted their racial/ethnic identity.

Joining an organization that would have just been focused on one culture wouldn’t have felt right to me personally…[I] just wasn’t feeling it. (Michaela)

When people typically think of a Multicultural sorority, they think it is a predominantly white organization. And when I approached [a White sorority] I was actually turned away because of my size and not fitting in with the stereotypical image and from that I said I would never join a sorority and then I ended up meeting girls from [our sorority] and they made me feel welcome so I decided to go that route instead. (Kelly)

While ethnicity/race is only one aspect of an individual’s identity, it is important to note that multi-ethnic/bi-racial individuals are forced to pick one aspect of their identity in homogeneous organizations; in a heterogeneous sorority, they can identify with both or all of the cultures/ethnicities they represent. Organizations could benefit from improved understanding of the importance of not assuming the race/ethnic identity of employees, members, and customers. Being inclusive to all differences, including those outside of race and ethnicity fosters an environment for learning (Boschini and Thompson 1998; McCabe 2011).

Learning about Others
The interview responses suggest that understanding differences is important when trying to preserve embedded multiculturalism; members should be exposed to and learn from their differences on a regular basis. Six of the eight interviewees experienced the benefit of learning about others and/or the ability to challenge one’s comfort zones and become more informed, supporting the researcher’s claim that embedded multiculturalism is used as a teaching mechanism. This result causes the researcher to question if the other two respondents did not think of learning about others as a benefit or if they merely failed to mention it.

I’ve learned a lot about different cultures, how to be respectful of those cultures, and not just that but how to be sensitive to culture on a larger aspect in regards to the language I use on a daily basis, things that I say that can affect other people, the way I act and how it affects other people. I guess,
the most positive thing I am trying to say is how much I learned about myself and about others [by being in a Multicultural sorority]. (Kendra)

[The most positive aspect of being in a Multicultural sorority is] just having girls or women who support you and push you to do better and who want to benefit the community and just being open to new ideas for the most part. (Ava)

The [most] positive thing, at least to me, is an opportunity to step outside of my comfort zone. (Janet)

Many of the respondents expressed that learning about others was one of the aspects they enjoyed most about their organization as it created an environment that challenged their views and truly taught them how to work with others. Most of the respondents mentioned that multiculturalism’s largest gift is the opportunity to learn about differences among people and to learn about themselves through those differences. This theme is possibly one of the most important of the six as embedded Multicultural organizations are based upon this idea. However, the respondents also mentioned that this opportunity also presents the possibility of tension and clashing amongst individuals.

Clashing of personalities

Many of the respondents recognized that learning is not always a comfortable process, and that cultural differences often lead to tension amongst members. In fact, this theme emerged as a potential limitation of embedded multiculturalism.

I wouldn’t necessarily say [the clashing of personalities] is negative, but it’s hard because of the opinions we have to deal with. It’s like something you have to prepare yourself for now, especially since we are 31 deep. You gotta realize that there are just going to be situations where we just don’t agree, and you just gotta learn to cope with that. (Ayah)

You know, it’s hard to be in an organization with so many different women who are extremely different from yourself and trying to function as a group trying to get business handled. You bump heads a lot with people who are different from yourself emotionally and on a business level. (Kendra)

If the clashing of personalities can actually be considered a limitation, then it should only be seen as a minor limitation or a risk worth taking, as growth often results from conflict and conflict is a common occurrence in the organization (Al-Ajmi 2007; Pace 2008; Schwenk 1990). Even through conflict, the responses suggest that the members of the organization believe they are still learning and the original objectives of embedded multiculturalism are still being met.

Discussion

When exploring the perceived benefits and limitations of embedded multiculturalism in a Multicultural Sorority, three of the six themes provide indirect but relevant information. Each of these three themes (defining multiculturalism, understanding embedded multiculturalism, and high exposure to multiculturalism) provides a framework for future studies that could examine the significance of embedded multiculturalism. Such studies would need to begin by operationalizing multiculturalism. These studies should use the separate definitions for embedded and implemented multiculturalism established here, as the difference between the two appears to be a meaningful one.

The other three themes (learning about others, inclusivity, and clashing personalities) more directly answered the research question. Members expressed great appreciation for the educational experience of being in an organization practicing embedded multiculturalism, and they credited high exposure to multiculturalism with making them receptive to the experiences they would soon encounter. The clashing of personalities was mentioned as a possible limitation, but because this clashing is experienced by many organizations (Al-Ajmi 2007; Pace 2008; Schwenk 1990), the researcher questions if it can be attributed to the normal outcomes of working in groups or organizations. Is there a difference between typical organizational tension and tension created due to cultural differences? Future research could attempt to answer this question.

Limitations of the Research

One limitation of the present study is that the researcher is a member of the same Multicultural sorority as the respondents; therefore, the researcher’s personal experiences may have influenced the scope of this study. However, as Marshall (2008) argues, a researcher with a deep and personal understanding of a topic is not necessarily a disadvantage, because that personal understanding often results in a richer explanation of the results. Also, the researcher is a member of the same organization as the respondents; both parties are surely motivated to protect the reputation of the organization, therefore limiting the respondents’ openness to discuss potentially damaging information and limiting the researcher’s openness to include such information in the results of the study. However, the researcher addressed this limitation by creating pseudonyms for respondents, leaving the sorority’s name anonymous, and asking the same open-ended interview questions of each respondent. As a result there would be no need for the researcher to demonstrate a bias in the study as there would be no personal or organizational gain for the researcher or the sorority. Finally, a larger limitation exists in the research design. As previously mentioned, the study cannot address how embedded multiculturalism actually benefits an organization; it can only address
how these members perceived the benefits or challenges. Thus, this study can only take one step toward the ultimate goal of providing a blueprint that can be used in the creation of new organizations.

Conclusion

The course of this study provided a new perspective on the influence and significance of multiculturalism in the organization and in GLCOs. As the research on organizational communication grows, it is imperative that multiculturalism continues to be explored as well. This study explored multiculturalism in terms of race and ethnicity from the perspective of members of a Multicultural sorority; the same questions asked of members of homogenous sororities could reveal interesting results. Do members of homogenous organizations believe in the virtues of embedded multiculturalism? Would they recognize a difference between embedded and implemented multiculturalism? A comparison of the two groups (Multicultural organizations versus homogenous organizations) could validate the distinction made here between embedded and implemented multiculturalism, or it could reveal similar benefits without the necessity of the distinction. Furthermore, while this study focused only on race and ethnicity, multiculturalism is not limited to those characteristics of an individual's identity. Other GLCOs and non-Greek organizations have members of different religions, abilities, genders, or sexual orientations, and studies focusing on those aspects could have important results.

Future research could move away from GLCOs and focus on non-Greek organizations. Studies could compare organizations with embedded and implemented multiculturalism to further explore the possible benefits of the embedded version. This study is arguably only a small part of a much larger topic with a significant value in better understanding the many complexities of the organization.

References


Mejia, Alex. 1994. “Hispanics Go Greek.” *Hispanic* 7(9): 34.


Appendix A

Respondent Demographics
The following chart depicts basic demographics of the respondents at the time of their interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Self-Identified Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Categorized Ethnicity/Race from Figure 1</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Mexican-American and White</td>
<td>Multi-ethnic/racial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayah</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>Punjabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
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<td>African American/Black</td>
</tr>
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<td>Janet</td>
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<td>Chicana</td>
<td>Mexican American/Latina/Chicana/Hispanic</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kendra</td>
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<td>Greek and African-American</td>
<td>Multi-ethnic/racial</td>
</tr>
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<td>African-American/Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaela</td>
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<td>Greek and African-American</td>
<td>Multi-ethnic/racial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Defining Multicultural sororities
1. What is multiculturalism to you?
2. What defines a Multicultural sorority?

Sorority as an organization:
3. What has been positive in regards to joining this organization?
4. What has been negative in regards to joining this organization?

Multiculturalism and the Organization:
5. How does your organization approach the philosophy of multiculturalism?
6. Please discuss your impression of how multiculturalism (in the organization, on campus, or elsewhere) has affected your organization's success.
7. How does your organization demonstrate accommodation for your culture?

Benefits and Limitations and Expectations
8. What factors led to your decision to join this organization?
9. Are Greek Lettered Organizations/Communities prevalent within your ethnic community? Family? Friends?
10. What are the typical reactions you receive from people within your ethnic community after sharing that you are in a Multicultural sorority?
11. What are the typical reactions you receive from people outside of your ethnic community after sharing that you are in a Multicultural sorority?
12. What did you expect to experience prior to becoming an official member of your sorority? How did those expectations compare to your experience after becoming an official member?
13. How does your organization demonstrate acceptance/understanding of your culture?
14. Given the provided definitions, are the principles of multiculturalism embedded or implemented in your organization?
15. Did you consider yourself to demonstrate, embrace, and/or appreciate multicultural values prior to becoming a member?