

**Black Greek Letter Organizations: Attitudes and  
Perceptions about Membership**

**Brian E. Anderson, Ph.D.**  
**Associate Professor of Social Work**  
**Jackson State University**

**Steven Smith, Ph.D.**  
**Director of Development for Athletics**  
**Jackson State University**

Black Greek Letter Organizations have existed for many years and remains very popular today. To become members of these organizations, each respective group has its specific requirements, regulations, policies and usually includes a ritualistic process prior to membership. As prospective members, many question and/or have their own attitudes and beliefs about the membership process. This study consisted of students who are involved in or interested in becoming involved in BGLOs. Interestingly, a few of the interesting findings in this study revealed that 56% of the participants indicated within the last 5 years, there were incidents of hazing on campus and conversely, 28% of black greek letter organization membership versus 18% on non-membership thought that physical and/or mental activities are viewed as a necessary component of the membership intake process.

Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) were founded at Howard University in 1930. The premise of these fraternities and sororities was public service during a time of racial strife and intolerance and when a societal view of academic education for African Americans seemed impractical. Racial isolation on predominantly White campuses and social barriers of class on all campuses created a need for African Americans to align themselves with others who share common goals and ideals (Newsome, 2009).

The original BGLOs formed the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) as a collaborative organization. NPHC promotes interaction through forums, meetings, and other media for exchange of information and engages in cooperative programming and initiatives through various activities and functions (Newsome, 2009). The charter members of the NPHC were Omega Psi Phi and Kappa Alpha Psi fraternities and Delta Sigma Theta, Alpha Kappa Alpha, and Zeta Phi Beta sororities.

Pledging is a pivotal process in the BGLO. The overall perception of pledging is that it gives young men and women a sense of success in completing a difficult program and achieving goals that many fail to accomplish. Although the pledging process has not received official sanctions from any NPHC organizations, members of these organizations have traditionally considered hazing activities to be a necessary and traditional part of the process of becoming a member.

According to Kimbrough (1997), hazing has is a traditional part of the pledging process for all fraternities and sororities but the activities in Black groups was developed separately from those in White fraternities and sororities. For example, pledges of historically Black fraternities and sororities were made to stand in lines, dress alike, and march in a group around campus.

Hazing has persisted as a national problem for years, despite regulations prohibiting acts of violence and intimidation. Although hazing is a criminal offense, many students participate in these acts, either as victims or as abusers. Students are generally offered a choice of two ways to join a sorority or fraternity: *paper* or *pledge*. To *pledge* means to endure mental, physical, and emotional abuse to gain respect, privileges, and benefits of membership. To enter the organization through *paper* is permissible but labels the prospective member as “cat,” not as a true member of the organization.

The purpose of this study was to investigate and analyze the attitudes of students at selected Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in Mississippi relating to hazing rituals as entrance requirements into BGLOs. The study examined the factors that contribute to acts of hazing and to determine whether there is a difference in the attitudes of students regarding participation in hazing activities despite laws and regulations that prohibit acts of violence.

### **Review of the Literature**

Nuwer (1999) defined hazing as “an activity that a high-status member orders other members to engage in or suggests that they engage in that in some way humbles a newcomer who lacks the power to resist, because he or she wants to gain admission into a group” (p. 20). Boucher (2003) said that hazing, in reality, encompasses an extensive range of behavior and activities, ranging from seemingly innocuous activities, such as blindfolding and scavenger hunts, to dangerous and extreme physical punishments, including sleep deprivation and excessive exercise.

According to Nuwer (1990), hazing can be considered a societal problem found in every area of life. However, Josefowitz and Gadon (1989) did not acknowledge hazing as a social concern, they acknowledged that hazing can generate not only feelings of pride, accomplishment, and acceptance, but also feelings of hurt, embarrassment, frustration, and outrage.

Hazing is a time-honored custom or “rite of passage” that is said to foster a bond between the established members of an organization and its newcomers. These rites usually amount to a formal introduction into some position or club and they signify that the beginner has been given some new knowledge. Initiation rites and ordeals are a part of every culture, even as there are those who dispute any type of benefits to hazing (Olmert, 1983).

Butler (1990) stated that these rites of passages occur as rituals associated with the movement of people from one position in the social structure to another position. Hoover and Pollard (2000) stated that it is important for existing members of groups to initiate new members, noting that, when they are done correctly, initiation rites meet the initiate’s need for a sense of belonging and the group’s needs for upholding standards or values. The organization considers it important for initiates to understand the history and culture of the group and to build

relationships with members. However, DeAngelis (2002) challenged this view, claiming that hazing destroys self-esteem and self-worth and forces alienation rather than fostering unity.

Campo, Poulos, and Sipple (2005) equated hazing to a “health issue,” noting that hazing has led to a significant number of injuries, both psychological and physical (p. 137). Josefowitz and Gadon (1989) attributed the duration of hazing or membership transition to the cohesiveness of the group, or the individual’s fit in the group. The more difficult it is for new members to be accepted, the higher the value and cohesiveness of the group. Hence, the tighter the group (more structure), the more difficult for new members to be accepted; the looser the group (less structure), the less resistance (hazing).

Manley (2003) reported that in a recent 6-year period, law books recorded 10 reported cases of hazing that were complete and featured a formal written legal opinion. In 1999, Kendrick Morrison sued Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. and Louisiana Tech University as a result of injuries sustained during hazing activities (Manley, 2003). The court held the local undergraduate chapter president, the national fraternity, and the university equally responsible for Morrison’s injuries.

Today, hazing continues as a practice for many of the BGLOs 20 years after the leadership of the NPHC took drastic steps to make changes to the pledge process. According to Kimbrough (2003), a *Washington Post* article declared that, on college campuses, Black fraternities have a reputation for distinctively violent hazing. Other accounts have indicated that major Black fraternities and sororities have developed a reputation for permitting pledge practices to become peculiarly abusive, crossing a line into what is commonly referred to as hazing.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The research design for this study involved descriptive and survey research used to identify preference attitudes and practices of students who are involved in or interested in becoming involved in BGLOs.

### Research Questions

1. What are students’ attitudes and perceptions related to entering a BGLO as a “paper” Greek member or a “pledge” Greek member?
2. What are the differences in member and nonmember students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding entering a BGLO as a “paper” Greek member or a “pledge” Greek member?

### Setting, Participants, and Procedure

The population for this study consisted of 116 students who attended three historically Black institutions in Mississippi: (a) the state’s first private HBCU, located in central Mississippi; (b) the state’s largest HBCU, located in Jackson; and (c) the state’s first land grant institution, located in southwest Mississippi. Students age 18 and above, including members and nonmembers of BGLOs, were asked to share their views on hazing. IRB approval was secured from JSU and consent forms were signed by each participant prior to participation in the study. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and all information would be secured and kept confidential.

### Instrument

The researcher received permission to use or modify an instrument to address the research questions.

The questions focused on the presence of physical and/or mental activities in the organization/chapter; the role these activities play in the membership intake process; and whether the survey participant would make someone engage in physical and/or mental activities during the membership intake process. There were also questions that focused on how individuals are perceived based on whether they participated in these activities during their membership intake process.

The instrument consisted of Likert-type scale questions with response choices *1 = Strongly agree*, *2 = Agree*, *3 = Neutral*, *4 = Disagree*, and *5 = Strongly disagree*. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected via this instrument.

### Data Collection

Student Affairs Administrators who worked at the selected college and universities assisted in getting the survey instrument to students on their respective campuses. The researcher read the survey instructions to participating students. Four demographic questions were asked: size of the college/university attended, gender, membership status in a BGLO, and whether there had been hazing incidents on their current college campuses.

### Data Analysis

A quantitative method was used to analyze the data regarding student attitudes. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 18.0. Descriptive statistics, specifically frequency distribution and percentages, were used to address the research questions. According to Trochim (2006), frequency distribution is one of the most common ways to describe a single variable.

### Description of the Sample

A total of 150 surveys were mailed to Student Affairs Professionals at the selected Mississippi colleges and universities; 116 were returned, for 78% return rate. The HBCUs were not identified by name, to ensure anonymity; instead, the researcher asked participants to select the size of the college or university they attended. Of the 116 instruments returned 64 (55%) represented a Mississippi HBCU with less than 1,000 students, 30 (26%) represented a Mississippi HBCU with more than 5,001 students, and 21 (18%) represented a Mississippi HBCU with 1,001 to 5,000 students. The college or university with no more than 1,000 students produced the highest number of responses (Table 1).

Table 1: *Responses to the Question, What Is the Size of College or University You Currently Attend?*

Number of students	<i>f</i>	%
Less than 1000	64	55
1,001 to 5,000	21	18
More than 5,000	30	27

### Demographic Information

The sample consisted of 116 participants. There were 70 (60%) females and 45 (39%) males. Of all participants 76 (66%) were nonmembers of BGLOs that are traditionally associated with hazing and 40 (34%) were members of BGLOs that are traditionally associated with hazing.

Participants were asked whether there had been hazing incidents on their campus in past years. Of all participants, 65 (56%) reported hazing incidents on the campus during their tenure as a student on the campus (in the past 5 years), and 51 (53%) reported no such incidents in that time period (Table 2).

Table 2: *Participant Demographic Information and Reports of Hazing on Campus*

Variable and category	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Female	70	60.3
Male	46	39.7
Organization affiliation		
Member	40	34.5
Nonmember	76	65.5
Hazing incident in past 5 years		
Yes	65	56.0
No	51	44.0

#### **Attitudes and Perceptions About BGLO as “Paper” Versus “Pledge” Member**

Of the respondents who were BGLO members, 5 (13%) *strongly agreed* with the item “I enjoy or will enjoy the control I have over the potential members during the membership intake process,” 6 (15%) *agreed*, 9 (23%) responded *neutral*, 3 (10%) *disagreed*, and 17 (43%) *strongly disagreed* (Table 3). Of the respondents who were not members of BGLOs, 20 (26%) *strongly agreed* with the item, 12 (16%) *agreed*, 21 (28%) were *neutral*, 8 (11%) *disagreed*, and 15 (20%) *strongly disagreed* (Table 3).

Table 3: Responses to Item “I Enjoy or Will Enjoy the Control I Have Over the Potential Members During the Membership Intake Process”

Response	Members		Nonmembers	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Strongly Agree	5	13	20	26
Agree	6	15	12	16
Neutral	9	23	21	28
Disagree	3	8	8	11
Strongly Disagree	17	43	15	20

Of the respondents who were BGLO members, 5 (13%) *strongly agreed* with the item, “Physical and/or mental activities are viewed as necessary component of membership intake process,” 11 (28%) *agreed*, 3 (8%) were *neutral*, 5 (13%) *disagreed*, and 16 (40%) *strongly disagreed*. Of the respondents who were not BGLO members, 13 (17%) *strongly agreed*, 14 (18%) *agreed*, 18 (24%) were *neutral*, 12 (16%) *disagreed*, and 19 (25%) *strongly disagreed* with the item (Table 4).

Of the respondents who were BGLO members, 11 (24%) *strongly agreed* with the item, “I experienced or am willing to experience physical or mental activities during my membership intake process,” 4 (10%) *agreed*, 4 (10%) were *neutral*, 3 (8%) *disagreed*, and 18 (45%) *strongly disagreed*. Of the respondents who were not BGLO members, 12 (16%) *strongly agreed* with the item, 15 (20%) *agreed*, 14 (18%) were *neutral*, 14 (18%) *disagreed*, and 21 (28%) *strongly disagreed* (Table 5).

Table 4: Responses to Item “Physical and/or Mental Activities Are Viewed as a Necessary Component of the Membership Intake Process”

Response	Members		Nonmembers	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Strongly Agree	5	13	13	17
Agree	11	28	14	18
Neutral	3	8	18	24
Disagree	5	13	12	16
Strongly Disagree	16	40	19	25

Table 5: Responses to Item “I Experienced or Am Willing to Experience Physical and/or Mental Activities During my Membership Intake Program”

Response	Members		Nonmembers	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Strongly Agree	11	28	12	16
Agree	4	10	15	20
Neutral	4	10	14	18
Disagree	3	8	14	18
Strongly Disagree	18	45	21	28

#### Differences in Attitudes and Perceptions of BGLO “Paper” or “Pledge” Membership by Membership Status

Several items prompted participants to think about their attitudes and perceptions of physical and mental activities related to the membership intake program. The majority of the participants disagreed that these activities are a necessary component of entering a BGLO either as a “paper” member or “pledge” member.

Item 1 stated, “I am or will be more likely to have someone participate in physical and/or mental activities during membership intake process because it happened to me.” The highest percentage of members’ responses was 27% *strongly disagree* and the highest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 41% *strongly disagree*. The lowest percentage of members’ responses was 5% *strongly agree* and the lowest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 12% *strongly agree*.

Item 2 stated, “Hazing is a necessary practice to build unity.” The highest percentage of members’ responses was 55% *strongly disagree* and the highest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 43%. The lowest percentage of members’ responses was 8% *strongly agree* and the lowest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 11% *strongly agree*.

Item 3 stated, “Hazing as a tradition is so strong in student organizations that it will always be a part of the pledge/intake process.” The highest percentage of members’ responses was 30% *strongly agree* and the highest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 29% *agree*. The lowest percentage of members’ responses was 13% *disagree* and the lowest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 9% *disagree*.

Item 4 stated, “It is important for new members to participate in hazing activities to gain respect by older member.” The highest percentage of members’ responses was 55% *strongly agree* and the highest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 30% *agree*. The lowest percentage of members’ responses was 8% *disagree* and the lowest percentage of nonmembers’ responses was 13% *disagree*. Responses to all four items are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Responses to Survey Items 1 Through 4

Response	Item 1		Item 2		Item 3		Item 4	
	Member	Non	Member	Non	Member	Non	Member	Non
Strongly Agree	5	12	8	11	30	16	10	15
Agree	10	15	13	17	10	29	8	17
Neutral	8	22	10	11	28	22	15	13
Disagree	10	11	15	18	13	9	13	25
Strongly Disagree	27	41	55	43	20	24	55	30

*Note.* Item 1 = I am or will be more likely to have someone participate in physical and/or mental activities during membership intake because it happened to me. Item 2 = Hazing is a necessary practice to build unity. Item 3 = Hazing as a tradition is so strong in student organizations that it

#### 10 Journal of International Social Issues

will always be a part of the pledge/intake process. Item 4 = It is important for new members to participate in hazing activities to gain respect by older members.

Results of the data analysis indicated that members of organizations traditionally associated with hazing answered *strongly agree* at a rate of 13% when responding to the item “I enjoy or will enjoy the control I have over potential members during the membership intake because it happened to me”; nonmembers’ response rate to this item was 26%. In response to the item “Physical and/or mental activities are viewed as a necessary competent of membership intake process,” respondents tended to select *strongly disagree* (members 40%, nonmembers 25%). In response to the item “I experienced or am willing to experience physical and/or mental activities during my MIP,” 45% of members and 28% of nonmembers *strongly disagreed* and 28% of members and 16% of nonmembers *strongly agreed*. These data indicated no significant differences in members’ and nonmembers’ attitudes and perceptions related to the status of *paper* or *pledge* entrance into BGLOs.

#### Discussion

The majority of the participants in this study were from a small private HBCU in Mississippi. However, respondents from the institutions surveyed provided relevant information. There were more female participants than male participants, so attitudes and perceptions were more reflective of females at the participating HBCUs. Data indicated that 56% of the respondents reported knowledge of a hazing incident having occurred at their institution in their tenure at the school. The majority of the participants were nonmembers of BGLOs.

The results indicate that hazing still exists in BGLO, even though pledging was abolished in 1990 and replaced with a membership intake process. The need for potential members to be respected by older members, asserting control over potential members, and the desire for potential members to be “pledge” members rather than “paper” members are very important factors for new and potential members.

#### Implications for Research, Policy, and Education

BGLOs must be aware of and compliant with anti-hazing statutes in Mississippi. The researcher recommends that these organizations increase efforts to educate students about the effects of hazing. Future research should focus on reviewing and analyzing incidents of hazing in BGLOs and noting patterns of specific behavior.

The researcher recommends that future studies include all colleges and universities in Mississippi, including other HBCUs as well as majority institutions.

It is imperative that chapter advisors be fully aware of college and university policies on hazing and membership intake. The researcher recommends that all advisors be financially active in their national organizations to ensure that advisors are current on rules and regulations related to their organization. Increased communication among organization members and college and university administrators could prove invaluable in deterring hazing incidents.

Qualitative research using focus groups or interviews could enhance understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of members and nonmember of BGLOs related to hazing. This approach could also serve as an oral history for researchers interested in advancing this research.

### References

- Boucher, J. L. (2003). *Hazing and higher education: State laws, liability, and institutional implications*. Retrieved from [www.StopHazing.org](http://www.StopHazing.org)
- Butler, E. R. (1990). Initiations revisited: Improving students' adjustment and persistence with sanctioned rites of passage. *Rituals*, 29(2), 137-149.
- Campo, S., Poulos, G., & Sipple, J. S. (2005). Prevalence and profiling: Hazing among college students and points of intervention. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 2, 137-149.
- DeAngelis, G. (2002). *Hazing: Applying student development theory to a societal issue*. Retrieved from [www.StopHazing.org.org](http://www.StopHazing.org.org)
- Hoover, N., & Pollard, N. (2000). *Initiation rites in American high schools: A national survey*. Alfred, NY: Alfred University.
- Josefowitz, N., & Gadon, H. (1989). *Fitting in: How to get a good start in your new job*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Kimbrough, W. M. (1997). The membership intake movement of historically Black Greek letter organizations. *NASPA Journal*, 34, 229-239.
- Kimbrough, W. M. (2003). *Black Greek 101*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Manley, R. E. (2003). Hazing plauges Greeks. *The Fraternal Law*, 86, 1-6.
- Newsome, K. (Summer, 2009). Factors that Influence the Decision of Black Males to Seek Membership in a Historically White Fraternity. Florida State University Libraries.
- Nuwer, H. (1990). *Broken pledges: The deadly rite of hazing*. Atlanta, GA: Longstreet.
- Nuwer, H. (1999). *High school hazing: When rites becomes wrongs*. Newburyport, MA: Watts Press.
- Olmert M. (1983). Points of origin. *Smithsonian*, 14, 151-154.
- Trochim, W.M.K. (2006). Descriptive Statistics. Retrieved 09 October 2006 from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/statdesc.htm>