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Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity

The Journal of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education

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Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity
Volume 9, Issue 1 | 2023

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The *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* (ISSN 2642-2387) is published by the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), a production of the University of Oklahoma, in partnership with the University of Oklahoma Libraries.

Examining Responses to a Racist Event in a Sorority and Fraternity Life Community: A Case Study

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Racism has been interwoven in implicit and explicit ways within historically white sorority and fraternity life (SFL) communities since their inception. However, few studies have provided insight to how practitioners address the realities of racism in SFL broadly, or specifically how SFL practitioners have attended to race-based incidents on their local campuses, the success of these initiatives, and to what degree their actions have been sustainable over time. This project sought to contribute insight to these dynamics by mobilizing a case study approach guided by an institutional response framework to focus on how a particular SFL community at Sunnydale University (a pseudonym) took steps following a racist event that occurred on their campus. Using data collected from five professionals and 19 students on campus, as well as from institutional documents, findings from this study revealed the following: the lack of preparedness and plan to address racist events, how they moved toward immediate and continued engagement in equity work, as well as the challenges with striving toward racial equity. We then provide implications for higher education professionals and future research.

Racism has been interwoven in implicit and explicit ways within historically white sorority and fraternity life (SFL) communities since their inception (Garcia & Shirley, 2019; Gillon et al., 2019). For instance, overtly racist incidents such as racist-themed parties and being in blackface (Osborne, 2019; Sheeler, 2018), use of discriminatory language (NBC 10 News, 2020), and targeting of Students of Color (Pietsch, 2020) are historical and contemporary realities of historically white sororities and fraternities. These legacies of marginalization have consequently led to a movement to abolish

sororities and fraternities on college campuses (Brown, 2020), which has left the future of SFL in a precarious position. Given these histories and contemporary realities, SFL campus-based professionals are expected to possess the cultural competency to respond to racist incidents and ensure organizational practices affirm diverse identities (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2018).

The Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA, 2018) offered a core competencies manual to guide SFL professionals, which includes two domains, foundational knowledge, and professional skills. One component of foundational knowledge is student safety; within it, professionals are responsible for “managing crisis response procedures” (AFA, 2018, p. 13). Within the professional skills, professionals are encouraged to strengthen their expertise in “working across differences” by “embracing our differences,” which includes “learning about, and interacting with people from all cultures... recognizing one’s own bias and privilege,” and importantly “advocating for inclusive policies, practices, and learning environments” (AFA, 2018, p. 25). However, few studies have provided insight to how SFL practitioners address or have attended to race-based incidents on their local campuses, the success of these initiatives, and to what degree their actions have been sustainable over time.

Through this case study (Yin, 2018), we sought to fill this gap by exploring ways an SFL community facilitated efforts to address racial equity-related challenges. Namely, this qualitative investigation centered on an institution that experienced a public incident related to racism and explored how their SFL community responded. The research question that guided this project was: How did a sorority and fraternity life community that has encountered racism describe their response and movement toward

racial equity? This paper adds to the limited scholarship on racial equity in SFL, together with helping inform practice in higher education.

Literature Review

To frame our project, we reviewed two bodies of literature. We begin by describing racial climates and racism in SFL communities before, then examining scholarship on how institutions and organizations respond to racist incidents.

Racial Climates and Racism in SFL

Founders of historically white sororities and fraternities created them with exclusionary expectations across gender, race, and religion (Garcia & Duran, 2021; Gillon et al., 2019), including through explicit exclusionary clauses in early membership documents (Barone, 2014). Though organizations have articulated desires to diversify membership over time, historically white sororities in the National Panhellenic Council (NPC) and historically white fraternities in the North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) have maintained a predominantly white membership (Gillon et al., 2019). Park's (2008) study on the experiences and perspectives of Asian American women in relation to SFL provides some insight to this continued pattern. The continued lack of racial diversity within NPC and IFC may, in part, be attributed to discussions of "fit" in which Students of Color are not seen as belonging and because Students of Color are deterred from pursuing membership because they are seen as predominately white spaces (Park, 2008). These outcomes and other instances of racism within SFL are examples of how whiteness functions within historically white sororities and fraternities (Harris et al., 2019).

Culturally based sororities and fraternities, including Historically Native American Fraternities and Sororities and organizations within the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, Inc. (NALFO), National APIDA Panhellenic Association (NAPA), National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), and LGBTQ organizations, among others have served as alternative spaces to historically white groups in that they intentionally center students with minoritized identities. Yet studies have found that culturally based sororities and fraternities are often under-resourced and supported, particularly within predominately white institutions (Duran et al., 2022; Garcia, 2019; Garcia et al., 2021), which further exacerbates racism and racial inequities in SFL. For instance, Garcia et al. (2021) examined 18 SFL institutional websites across the southeastern U.S. and reported that the websites consistently offered lesser information in terms of quality and quantity regarding culturally based organizations when compared to historically white groups. In Duran et al.'s (2022) study of 15 SFL professionals who advised culturally based sororities and fraternities, participants recognized that campus communities and SFL more specifically emphasized historically white sororities and fraternities over culturally based groups, that they regularly possessed less human and financial capital, and were often supervised by professionals that lacked skills and knowledge to serve these groups adequately. Findings from the Duran et al. (2022) study were echoed from a student perspective in Garcia's (2019) work wherein Latina/o sororities and fraternities members discussed how historically white and culturally based groups were racially divided and often did not see historically white organizations as spaces that would welcome Students of Color. Even further, participants in Garcia's (2019) study shared that

members of historically white organizations largely did not know that culturally based groups existed within SFL and did not feel supported by the professional staff in the SFL office. These studies underscore how culturally based sororities and fraternities navigate racism within SFL.

When examining the climates of historically white sororities and fraternities, SFL members attending predominantly white institutions are often subjected to racism with regard to their identities and membership (Garcia, 2019; Morgan et al., 2015). Such racist acts involve racially themed parties and language (Garcia & Shirley, 2019) and inequities within recruitment and membership programs in historically white sororities and fraternities (Beaird et al., 2021). For example, in examining recruitment videos of NPC chapters in the South, Beaird et al. (2021) found the majority of videos illustrated that NPC sororities were “all White organizations” (p. 8). Specifically, in instances when a chapter featured a Woman of Color, that person was frequently shown throughout the video “almost as a prop” to counter the stereotype that they were all-white organizations (Beaird et al., 2021, p. 8). Underscored in this body of literature ultimately is how explicit and implicit forms of racism manifest in SFL even when commitments to equity may be present.

Institutional and Organizational Responses to Racist Incidents

Scholarship has illustrated the (in)action institutional leaders take when incidents fueled by racism occur on college campuses (e.g., Briscoe, 2022; Cho, 2018; Cole & Harper, 2017; Davis & Harris, 2016; Griffin et al., 2019; Jones, 2019). Many studies took a critical perspective on the communication institutional leaders craft to respond to racist events (Cole & Harper, 2017; Davis & Harris, 2016; Jones, 2019). Using methods such

as discourse analysis or rhetorical analysis, researchers underscored that statements released by institutional leaders often downplay the presence of racism on college campuses when reacting to events like student activism on campuses (Jones, 2019) or racism perpetuated by students (Cole & Harper, 2017).

Of particular relevance to the present study, Davis and Harris (2016) conducted a document analysis informed by critical race theory (CRT) of institutional and organizational written responses to three racist-themed parties held by sorority and fraternity organizations. What they found was similar to the broader landscape of scholarship, underscoring that response letters tried to evade implications of racism (instead framing the instances as fueled by ignorance) or that audiences misunderstood the intent of the event (Davis & Harris, 2016). Moreover, Davis and Harris (2016) observed how campus and organizational leaders did not address these manifestations of racism until negative media attention emerged. These written statements are an institutional form of color-evasiveness, an intentional effort not to recognize the role of race and racism (Annamma et al., 2017) that characterizes many responses to racist incidents. In these responses, campuses often describe racist incidents as fleeting moments as opposed to underscoring how racism is embedded within the institution (Cho, 2018).

Research has also explored how professionals are expected to respond to these events (Griffin et al., 2019), the limitations of actions taken to address racism (Tichavakunda, 2021), and how students perceive institutional (in)actions (Briscoe, 2022). What is seen in studies on higher education professionals who must take action after racist acts occur, like chief diversity officers (Griffin et al., 2019), is that more

senior administrations expect them to be impartial when dealing with these events, which does not always align with their personal perspectives. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that students are regularly let down by institutional responses to racism on campus, seeing responses as not action oriented or at worst, as furthering additional forms of oppression in the process (Briscoe, 2022). This body of scholarship consequently informed how we investigated these realities within SFL.

Theoretical Framework

To interrogate how SFL professionals engage in work disrupting racist foundations present in their communities, this research used Cho's (2018) institutional response framework to inform the understanding of the case. Cho's framework stems from several theoretical bodies of knowledge, including critical race theory, specifically drawing from Bell (1980) and Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001). Although Cho (2018) developed the framework exploring how institutional leaders respond to student activism, she intended it to apply more broadly to how campus professionals make decisions following race- and oppression-based incidents. The framework includes two key dimensions, with the first accounting for the degree to which institutional leaders buffer or bridge toward meeting students' needs. Buffering involves efforts to prevent changes to institutional practices and policies, whereas bridging involves "adopting, incorporating, and transforming their internal workings" (Cho, 2018, p. 86). The second dimension accounts for the extent to which power is shared between the institution and students (e.g., whether the student's voice is heard and acted on).

The institutional response framework accounts for these two dimensions in offering the following response labels: schisming, appeasement, co-option, and

partnership (Cho, 2018). In schisming, institutional leaders do not value student's voice or take meaningful action to move toward change: "In this manner, institutions buffer student concerns while retaining control of the conversation" (Cho, 2018, p. 86). Often in the case of schisming, institutional leaders reason that racist incidents are individual acts as opposed to systemically embedded. In appeasement, institutional leaders demonstrate a façade of response while still buffering, such as releasing institutional statements that do not include meaningful change. Co-option "is the intentional merger or erasure of a subordinate group within the dominant group to preserve the existing organizational structure and power" (Cho, 2018, p. 87), whereas partnership provides students the power to address issues within the campus. The final piece of the framework positions the four response characterizations within a continuum that reflects the extent that institutional leaders recognize race and racism, exemplified through the framework's inclusion of a third dimension that reflects a range of institutional racial awareness from colorblindness to consciousness. The components of this framework were thus beneficial as we made meaning of the data for this project.

Study Design

This study mobilized case study methodology (Yin, 2018), which lends itself to projects that seek to understand a phenomenon within a bounded system. Different from other qualitative designs that center on understanding individuals as a unit of analysis, case studies focus on a bounded system and on collecting multiple perspectives to comprehend a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). In this case, the bounded system involved an institution that experienced a publicly-facing racist event in the past

five years. The chosen phenomenon concerned how institutional actors moved forward from these issues and attempted to center racial equity.

Institutional Recruitment

To select an institution for this project, we disseminated information about the study via social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and through professional association listservs (e.g., Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors). The recruitment materials asked for SFL communities that had encountered a publicly-facing racist incident within five years. We selected the five-year period because we were interested in understanding a contemporary event of racism given the topical critiques of racial justice in SFL (e.g., Brown, 2020). Though we were open to what the nature of the racist incident would be, we defined *publicly-facing* as involving those receiving news media recognition on a local, state, or national level. We explained to those interested in having their SFL community participate that they needed to be willing to serve as a gatekeeper to have campus constituents engage in the research (e.g., students and student affairs professionals) and would also need to provide relevant documents, further explained below. These forms of data would allow us to gather a multi-faceted view of the event and response that occurred, satisfying the case study methodology's aims (Yin, 2018). Like all participants in this study, gatekeepers were informed through conversations and the study information form that they could withdraw from the study anytime.

Institutional Site Information: Sunnydale University

Central to case study methodology is being able to communicate to a reader the nuances present in the context of the bounded system (Yin, 2018). We strive to achieve

this goal while also acknowledging privacy concerns, a difficult balance to procure. The institution in this study was a 4-year public institution in the Western United States with the pseudonym Sunnydale University. Sunnydale is known to be a residential campus and enrolls a predominantly white student demographic. Sunnydale struggles with the recruitment of Students of Color, with over half of its student population being white. One-fifth of students at Sunnydale are affiliated with SFL. Sunnydale has a Multicultural Greek Council, composed of numerous culturally-based sororities and fraternities, and a Panhellenic Council and Interfraternity Council. Though over 25% of organizations represented at Sunnydale are under the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), the percentage of SFL membership in MGC chapters is smaller. Within the past five years of this study, Sunnydale gained attention for an incident involving blackface perpetuated by members of a historically white fraternity, the focus of this project.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Once we received interest from Sunnydale, we recruited participants with the help of the most senior-level SFL professional (Tara), our key informant, a term used by case study researchers to discuss those who “can provide you with insights into a matter and also give you access to other interviewees who may have corroboratory or contrary evidence” (Yin, 2018, p. 118). We began by interviewing Tara, asking for details about the incident and how she viewed the response. From there, we worked with her to identify institutional actors who could offer perspectives on the institutional response to the racist incident. Next, we reached out to all individuals Tara suggested and provided them with the details of the study and an informed consent form, offering the opportunity for each to determine whether they wanted to participate. Finally, we

held individual interviews with the following people: Eric, the senior student affairs officer (SSAO), who worked intimately with the office when reacting to the event; Chris, the director who had SFL in his portfolio; and two SFL office professionals who were hired on after the racist event, Julia who advised the Panhellenic Council and Makana who advised MGC. Makana identified as Asian Pacific Islander; all other professionals, including Tara, identified as white. All names used in this study are pseudonyms. We concluded by holding another interview with Tara to discuss the insights we gathered and ask further questions. These interviews occurred via Zoom and lasted 60-90 minutes in duration on average.

After completing these individual interviews, Tara share information about the study, including the informed consent form, with students in different SFL councils to invite them to participate in a focus group. We held three focus groups, one for each council represented on campus. Nine MGC, five Panhellenic, and five IFC members chose to engage in council focus groups, amounting to 19 student perspectives. All Panhellenic and IFC members identified as white, except for one Panhellenic member who identified as Hispanic and white. All MGC members identified as Asian American, Latina/o/x, or multiracial. Interviews occurred through Zoom and ranged from 75-90 minutes. Finally, echoing Yin's (2018) argument that a rigorous case study uses numerous sources of evidence, we asked Tara to provide archival records that provide more context on the incident and their response. She sent news clippings and executive reports on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the SFL office. Note that although Tara helped disseminate recruitment information to staff and students, she was not

informed who ultimately chose to participate to ensure participants did not feel coerced to do so.

Data Analysis

Analysis for this project was ongoing and reflected principles of case study methodology and Cho's (2018) framework. Representing both a data generation and analysis strategy, we engaged in debriefing conversations as a three-person research team after each interview or focus group we had. Doing so allowed us to make sense of what was occurring in the case study, using the theoretical propositions that we were bringing in and considering plausible rival explanations—both characteristics of case study analysis (Yin, 2018). After we collected all data, we individually reviewed the transcripts from interviews and focus groups and the materials provided by Tara. In doing so, we identified salient pieces of data that aligned with our research question and coded these excerpts. We subsequently had conversations on how these excerpts related to Cho's (2018) institutional response framework. From there, we came together as a team to engage in a broader thematic analysis, moving our individual analysis toward larger patterns that characterized the case study under investigation.

Trustworthiness and Positionality

Conducting qualitative research requires scholars to ensure the trustworthiness of the project, meaning they take steps to ensure that the study is rigorous and sound. In this present work, we considered two forms of triangulation highlighted in Yin's (2018) text to ensure trustworthiness. For example, we engaged in data triangulation, which requires using "information from multiple sources that also can corroborate the same finding" (Yin, 2018, p. 128). By holding interviews and focus groups with individuals

positioned differently and collecting documents for analysis, we ensured we considered several vantage points when developing our findings. Expanded upon more below, one of the strengths of this study is that we had three researchers who comprised our team, each of whom held distinct social identities and brought a unique point-of-view to the project. Consequently, we attended to what is known as investigator triangulation.

Case study researchers recognize how their selves inform how they understand the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2018). Given this reality, we find it necessary to describe our positionality—who we are and the perspectives we brought with us to this study. Crystal has been involved in SFL in varying capacities over the last 15 years. Her journey began as a member of a historically white sorority, then as a chapter advisor to her undergraduate chapter for five years, followed by working with these organizations in her student affairs position, and inevitably engaging in SFL research. As a Latina and white individual, she recognizes the privilege her white identity affords her and remains cognizant of the complex ways race plays a role in student experiences. She maintains critical hope that SFL can be a more equitable space but recognizes this is not possible without engaging in anti-racist practice. Antonio has varying relationships with SFL, having served as an advisor for a Latinx/o fraternity and working as a house director for a historically white fraternity. His interest in SFL research stemmed from a desire to understand how dynamics of marginalization manifest in these communities, given his own identity as a queer cisgender Latino man. While collecting and analyzing data, he remained mindful of his outsider status as someone who is not affiliated with a fraternal organization but utilized his lens informed by his personal and professional experiences. Michael identifies as a queer white

cisgender man who previously worked as a campus-based SFL advisor at multiple institutions and maintains membership in a historically and predominately white NIC fraternity. Over time, Michael witnessed incidents similar to those explored in this study occur at his previous institutions and developed an interest in understanding institutional response to crises and concerns through the lens of campus-based practice. In the study, Michael remained mindful of his role as a researcher with insider/outsider experiences, and frequently processed this with his co-authors during debriefing.

Limitations

Although we took several steps to ensure the trustworthiness of this project, we would be remiss not to engage some of the limitations present in the research. Of note, the case study approach provided many strengths, but we postulate it may have deterred potential sites from participating. Needing to speak with numerous stakeholders and possibly risking the anonymity of their institutional responses may have led some professionals to not want to engage with the project. Although we initially planned for this project to focus on multiple sites, only one institution agreed to the research from beginning to end. Furthermore, another inherent limitation of case study research is that readers understand the phenomenon as situated within a particular context (in this case, Sunnydale University). Therefore, our findings will still provide valuable insight for other settings, but those engaging with the work must consider the specific dynamics present within their own environments.

Findings

In a retrospective timeline developed by the SFL office at Sunnydale University, the document reads: “[Fraternity] hosts a brotherhood event... One [fraternity]

member... was photographed in blackface..." This incident caused a chain of events that led Sunnydale University and its SFL office to wrestle with past and present forms of racism present in the community. Examining how the SFL community at Sunnydale University navigated this situation can provide perspectives into issues and opportunities existing in this work. Findings included the lack of preparedness and plan to address racist events, movement toward immediate and continued engagement in equity work, as well as the challenges with striving toward racial equity. Notably, these findings primarily focus on perspectives from administrators as they described the decision-making and response process, though student insights were vital to further understanding how they were engaged as stakeholders in the process.

Lack of Preparedness and Plan to Address Racist Events

Practitioners in the SFL community at Sunnydale University felt a lack of preparedness to respond to the blackface committed by a member of a historically white fraternity, with some university administrators questioning if the institution should react at all. The unpreparedness was perhaps unsurprising considering that Eric, a senior student affairs administrator, reflected that although the office's protocols had improved over time, he recalled no risk management, standards, judicial processes, or training for new/members when he got to Sunnydale University ten years prior. Eric shared, "It was really a lot of Wild West type of events that were going on. And I was quite fearful of what might happen if we weren't a little more involved." Julia, the current Panhellenic advisor, did not work at Sunnydale University at the time of the incident, but she shared, "I know that they reacted to the situation instead of preparing proactively for it to not happen perhaps, or they didn't even really have a plan on how to react if this did

happen, if a crisis did happen like this.” The incident also occurred over the weekend, further complicating the SFL staff’s response.

When the incident occurred, Tara and her colleague were the only two coordinators in the SFL office and were only about a year into their roles. Once the picture of the fraternity member in blackface started to be sent around Sunnydale University’s student body, Tara received an email of the picture sent to her and the university president. She recalled, “I was like, what is happening?... It was a weekend, so I had no conversation with the university staff.” She told students to remain calm and not answer questions from the media. Still, she felt as though “everybody went into panic mode” and was unprepared for the communication and subsequent council meetings planned before the incident took place, meetings in which they anticipated people would attend to speak about the racist incident. Tara noted, “We hadn’t even had time to debrief it. I hadn’t even had time to really talk with the university staff. We were still scheduling meetings trying to figure out like, what’s going on?” Chris heard from multiple administrators, including the Dean of Students, the weekend of the incident; however, the details of what happened were unclear. Chris shared, “It was along the lines of, ‘There’s been a bias incident... I’m meeting with the president of the chapter in like 30 minutes. I don’t have details.’” He spent “four or five hours on the phone... trying to coordinate and learn what had happened.”

Tara described the response as “a mess” and felt it was more of a frantic, crisis response with no crisis plan in place. Chris recalled working with administrators to “piece together a campus message,” and some even questioned whether a message should be sent. Chris posited, “It was really unclear how much this was going to be

impactful at first.” Chris and Eric named how communications administrators at the institution wanted to see if the situation gained traction before addressing it, an example of buffering and the institution’s reliance on a colorblind perspective (Cho, 2018). As Eric observed, “We have communications professionals who believe saying nothing is the way to make things go away.” In instances like these, this practice only has negative consequences, for as Eric stated, “If we say nothing, this whole space gets filled with another narrative, and our responsibility is to educate first. And so, if we don’t educate first, we lose.”

Part of a lack of a plan involved practitioner preparedness. For example, Tara and her colleague, two white Panhellenic women, did not feel prepared for the DEI components involved in SFL work. Tara shared:

My colleague and I, at the time, were examining things, really learning the ins and outs of everything. And we were like, we need to do some DEI stuff, but how and when and who?... that’s when the [racist incident] happened. And so it kind of just catapulted everything, and we were like, ‘Oh, well, we’re not ready, but here we go.’

Tara reflected that she felt she needed to be trained for this type of work while in graduate school, and found herself working with an SFL colleague and leaning on experts. She also talked about a lack of support and feeling like they were “tossed to the wolves” when the incident happened. The SFL office and practitioners were largely left to their own devices to engage in this work, with the immediate response to publicly-facing incidents being a campus-wide effort but the long-term response being relegated to the SFL community.

Moving Toward Immediate and Continued Engagement in Equity Work

Members of the Sunnydale community called on institutional leaders to craft an immediate response to the blackface incident. Eric explained that the original plan was to coordinate an event “for our community to come together, to just recognize the impact of what had happened.” However, he observed that because other administrators framed the incident as being isolated within one fraternity chapter, “We were talked out of doing that event by a number of university leaders around marketing and communications.” Looking back, Eric felt this was “a major, major mistake” and “painted a picture that the president and the administration didn't care.” In light of the institutional response framework (Cho, 2018), although the original plan would have involved sharing power with students in developing a response, administrators intervened to ensure power was centralized within the institution.

The IFC had a council meeting on the Monday following the event, and many campus members attended. Tara recalled, “We had 100 or more people show up to this meeting with our university media.” She briefly touched base with her supervisor and the IFC president before the meeting, and they decided, “Let's let folks have an open forum at the beginning. And then we'll continue to conduct business and have a follow-up meeting to discuss.” However, Tara asserted this ended up being a “Terrible, terrible plan in hindsight... essentially, the IFC president who was [not present for or a part of the incident], was just being, for lack of a better word, just destroyed verbally in this meeting.” Tara's supervisor supported this plan but did not intervene in the necessary ways during the meeting. Tara shared, “I wasn't ready for this. But we couldn't anticipate the amount of harm that was caused and the amount of uprising that would come

immediately following it.” The immediate work did not end there but continued with addressing a protest at the fraternity house that ensued following the meeting.

Following the campus upheaval, the president of the university released a statement. However, as Eric shared, “Our president is not good at language... he wouldn't and couldn't say the words racism, institutional or [Sunnydale] in the same sentence.” Eric described:

Things continued to boil. Boil down to the place where we got several other reports of things happening in Greek organizations...to which the president said, ‘We are shutting down the Greek system’...He did this without even talking to the Greek life staff.

Eric was not certain the university president’s actions were right and wanted time to communicate with the SFL office. However, he understood that the president needed “to do something to send a signal... because he was getting hammered and he was looking at enrollment melting away and articles showing up in [major news outlets].”

Unfortunately, the president’s empty statement and response to “send a signal” indicated appeasement (Cho, 2018), as neither were developed in collaboration with students and would not lead to transformative change.

The Panhellenic advisor, Julia, reflected on the president’s decision to suspend the entire SFL community noting, “I think that people think that that was an inappropriate response.” She explained that though some people would suggest shutting down SFL permanently, others believed the fraternity where the racist incident occurred should have been removed from campus. This decision, however, belonged to the Student Conduct office. Julia reasoned, “The [Student Conduct office] operates on a very legal basis. What laws are you breaking?... And I know that I was told that someone said that, well, technically, legally, that was free speech.” Julia further

explained that the sentiments that the chapter should not be on campus continued even years later: “They are consistently trying to essentially win back their trust from the community even still. I know that there are sororities that still to this day vote on whether they want to do events with [the chapter].” Chris saw the Panhellenic response as “totally different” from IFC, in that Panhellenic “took the opportunity more so to learn and listen.” Because of this, Chris believed Panhellenic and MGC repaired some of their relationships faster.

Following these immediate institutional responses, the SFL team knew they needed to work to address the culture of SFL more long term. As a first step in this effort to share power with students (Cho, 2018), Tara started engaging in conversations with SFL presidents and leaders. Members of MGC organizations shared what Tara described as a national trend: “[We’re] not supported by the university, we’re not supported by Fraternity and Sorority Life. We’re very separate from Panhellenic and IFC.” In her discussions with members of historically white organizations, the focus was more on how they felt like they were always in trouble with the office:

‘We don’t have a close relationship with the professional staff members. The university hates us. We’re always in trouble.’ But nothing ever came up about any equity work or interest in doing any of that, that wasn’t even at the forefront of their minds. It didn’t even come up in conversation. And so, I think that also told us the need was there.

These conversations affirmed the need for equity work within the community, particularly because students within IFC and Panhellenic organizations did not express urgency to address a culture that supported racist incidents. As a result, Tara and her colleague began to explore DEI efforts within other institutional SFL communities and developed a collaborative relationship with Michael, a lead administrator in Sunnydale’s

Office of Diversity and Inclusion and a National Pan-Hellenic Council organization member. Rather than rely solely on the expertise of others, Tara also began expanding her knowledge of DEI concepts by attending “as many professional development opportunities as possible.”

The SFL office brought in an external consultant who provided recommendations for the office to engage in. Among those recommendations was the need to hire an equity and inclusion coordinator and someone to serve as the primary advisor for the MGC, which took time but was inevitably carried out. The SFL office also added a diversity and inclusion component to the office’s “standards of excellence accreditation program” that chapters are evaluated on. Julia shared that chapters were required to appoint a DEI chair and a DEI “action plan for the year of what they were going to do about educating their chapter on DEI.” For context, a DEI goal planning document the staff shared with us as a research team highlighted eighteen bulleted action items. Additionally, each of the councils appointed representatives to council DEI committees, which Julia explained: “help plan DEI events or kind of make recommendations for any changes for [the] council overall.” In some ways, these actions were efforts to engage in what Cho (2018) described as a partnership, wherein students share power in cultivating change.

The SFL staff also conducted mandatory training for student leaders and monthly president meetings. The SFL staff deemed training necessary and urgent; therefore, they experienced tensions with members that did not view the training as such Tara considered president meetings critical for both trust building and compliance. This

compliance-based model left Tara questioning the motivations of mandatory training.

She shared:

We needed to get people in the door for our trainings, because we knew how important they are. But why would they show up if they didn't even have to?... Because we started implementing a lot of workshops. And for better or for worse, we were mandating a lot of them. They were huge... we were hosting 1,000 person training. And I needed everyone to get there, and they did. Everyone comes, and they comply.

Makana said they did 30 individual training sessions with 15-minute educational content and 25-minute dialogues for every chapter. Beyond formalized initiatives, the SFL professionals also engaged in regular conversations with members regarding DEI efforts. Julia explained that in the context of Panhellenic, these discussions ranged from inclusive language and practices in recruitment to “How do you talk about the blackface incident during recruitment events?” to “talking about microaggressions.”

Challenges with Striving Toward Racial Equity

Engaging in conversations regarding the racist incident highlighted the very different ways that white students and Students of Color experienced SFL at Sunnydale University. As the institutional response framework (Cho, 2018) accounted for institutional racial awareness, the distinction in students' perceptions of colorblindness to consciousness was notable. One of the IFC members shared, “I think I'd been going through my life pretty ignorant... to the way that people were feeling and maybe like the oppression at [Sunnydale] that existed.” Regarding the racist incident, another IFC member commented that Black students “weren't as surprised. They were angry but weren't as surprised something like that would happen at [Sunnydale], which was shocking to me.” Through the Panhellenic advising lens, Julia shared that even before the incident, there was a divide between the historically white organizations and those

within the MGC. The blackface incident understandably exacerbated these rifts and made implementing collaborations within the community challenging. To this point, Chris commented:

It fractured our three councils, and not just... first of all, but also there was a conflict between chapters on councils about the appropriate response or how much was too much, or what appropriate involvement should be. And our [MGC] took up really the mantle of saying, 'We've been saying for years this is a problem, and now it's time to listen.'

Julia reified the belief that Sunnydale was not safe for Students of Color, and in particular, SFL was not safe and alarmingly unwelcoming. She stated, "And I think that just was the final really straw for them to say, 'No, I don't want to associate ourselves with you.'" Because MGC did not have a good relationship with another staff member in the office, it became clear that their lack of a full-time advisor was another challenging circumstance. "Every council needs full-time advisor attention," Julia mentioned.

A major challenge in changing the culture in SFL resulted from the disparate views that the councils had on the severity of the blackface incident. As previously mentioned, Tara found that the issue "wasn't even at the forefront of their minds" for NPC and IFC students. This notion aligned with an experience shared by an MGC member who recalled:

I remember being in the dorms, and the sorority girls were just focused solely on, I cannot go and party because we're put on probation... And so their mindset was, 'we're getting stuff taken away from us, why?' Instead of... 'an issue occurred. Why did it occur? How can we help? What can we do?'

Concerns about being in trouble taking precedence over the incident were not isolated within NPC organizations. Chris described IFC as feeling attacked and helpless, "pissed at the organization that did it." An IFC member, for instance, felt that the ways IFC organizations were blamed were an example of the university using SFL as somewhat

of a scapegoat. This IFC member elaborated that the need for conversations about racism and identity was important but did not think the institution was committed to these aims. The member articulated:

And I think maybe at some point it's like, oh, we're just going to do this to like save face, is sort of like maybe a feeling that people have, like campus was just trying to save face instead of actually trying to address problems.

This IFC member questioned the motivations for institutional leaders to address racism within the community, recognizing how appeasement (Cho, 2018) was at play in institutional response.

Julia also provided perspective on how administrators at the institution often used SFL as a scapegoat for racist tendencies among the larger campus community. Julia posited:

It's very easy to be like, well, [SFL] is horrible, and these students are awful...I'm not saying they're wrong, but you could also name other people that are also doing the same things. So, I think they like us when they want our numbers, and they want our money, and they don't like us when they think something bad is going to happen, like a PR thing.

Related to this point is the frequent abdication of senior-level administrators to locate this issue in a campus-wide culture instead of designating it as a problem within SFL alone. Tara felt a lack of support more broadly from higher administrators, believed the institution's priority was public relations, and that the siloed nature of the institution left administrators "super far removed from [SFL]." Upper level administrators' only engagement involved crisis, which Tara did not feel was a helpful model. Similarly, Makana noted that it was typically difficult to get statements out at the institutional level, and though the SFL office got to a point where they could have a statement ready in 12 hours, it would still take a week for it to be approved. Makana stated:

And our community looks to that, 'why isn't [SFL] making a statement on this?' And we've just had to tell students like it's going through the approval process like we have to get this approved, where other departments do not. And so that is really tough.

Julia felt like other departments on campus had more freedom to make statements "whenever they want," which caused her frustration. For example, when an anti-Semitic incident happened on campus after the blackface event, Julia recalled the councils banding together to write a joint statement supporting the targeted organization. However, it took more time for the SFL office to make a statement. She noted, "And that's kind of what sparked a lot of conversations around this. [There] needs to be a better protocol because this cannot keep happening." Additionally, Julia discussed the challenges with perceptions from other professional staff members on campus inhibiting them from volunteering with or supporting SFL office efforts. She felt a sense that "people really hate fraternity and sorority life." As campus partners responded negatively to SFL, Julia felt that she would have a similar view: "It was a horrible event. If I didn't work in fraternity/sorority life, I probably wouldn't appreciate us either." Still, Julia felt a sense of progress despite receiving passive-aggressive comments from campus partners.

The participants in this study also raised the question of who receives racial development education in SFL. Although the focus of efforts is far-reaching, student leaders within their respective organizations are more likely to engage with these efforts than members more broadly. Further, students believed the reach was disproportionate, including groups unrelated and unassociated with the racist incident, which resembles a form of co-optation in which institutions "use students' knowledge and action" while minimizing the power they truly have regarding steps taken (Cho, 2018, p. 87). For

example, a student leader from an MGC organization reflected on expectations created after the incident. They shared:

It kind of sucks when we do go to these trainings, and these dialogues, because it kind of feels like we are expected to be the ones talking. When like it should be a whole community dialogue because it affects everyone, these issues... They say like one member per chapter is required to go, and you go there, and you don't see all orgs represented. And so, you can tell who sees the issues and who don't.

Julia reflected on this distinction between IFC and Panhellenic members and their desire to engage in DEI work. She appreciated Panhellenic's efforts to attend events over the years but also understood this was not a reflection of all members. She commented:

I think there's always going to be people that just don't care. And unfortunately, the way our office works, I just don't really talk to those people very much. I don't even think they know who I am or what I do.

As a result, members who are concerned feel their efforts are overshadowed by those who do not. An IFC student shared similar sentiments and felt frustrated by being "grouped" into the same category as the chapter and member who committed the racist act. The student described, "A lot of us... do know better and would not associate ourselves with people, events like that... a lot of people felt that they were being assumed to think the same way, even though they didn't."

For campus-based professionals, Makana received the most pushback from IFC students, leaders, and advisors. Makana articulated, "It's going to be usually an IFC member who doesn't want to hear it, I would say, and is very vocal about that." For example, Makana recalled when implementing a healthy masculinities program with IFC and getting pushback from advisors who were conflicting with the messages in the program. In such instances, Makana found themselves going "straight to their

headquarters” to take action. However, roadblocks such as these were not the case across all students, and in particular, Makana did see hope for positive change. Makana detailed that students were “getting better at this” and starting conversations in their chapters (e.g., Panhellenic chapters inquiring about anti-trans policies in their organizations, executive DEI summaries from each chapter annually, and meeting learning outcomes established). Tara also named tensions in the difference this work made; Tara stated:

We do have a lot of white students...who might see this work a little bit differently. And so, there's a lot of dissonance, I think, and a lot of conflict across campus...I'll get reports of individuals just blatantly being racist...We just do our best as a community and office to support students, to try to change that stereotype.

Tara had hope and saw changes in the community but recognized that change would not be immediate and would not involve every member, reifying the challenges they would encounter in striving toward racial equity in the future.

Discussion

This research provides insight to a dynamic that has received little focus within SFL research—how SFL communities address and move toward racial equity following a racist event. Importantly, when viewed through the lens of Cho's (2018) institutional response framework, the findings from this case study indicate the limitations of responses taken by a broader campus community to this event. This study also demonstrates that though SFL has struggled with racial exclusion since its inception, these patterns continue to remain, an insight made evident by other scholars (Garcia & Shirley, 2019; Gillon et al., 2019; Salinas, 2019).

When we started to work on this study, our team was interested in considering how practitioners made decisions in addressing racist incidents. However, we did not expect to find the immense pressure that is placed on new SFL professionals to address racism within their communities. The lack of a response plan was a challenge that made the initial decision-making process in addressing the incident a matter of trial and error. Such patterns echo research on higher education professionals demonstrating that those who have to take action after racist events frequently feel unable to address these realities in meaningful ways that align with their politics (Griffin et al., 2019). Tara regretted how some things, such as the IFC meeting, were handled though she felt better prepared to respond to racist incidents in the future based on what she learned. In fact, along the way, the SFL office encountered what Cho (2018) labels as a form of buffering in an institutional response.

Although participants, including students and professionals, all shared that the same ideologies around race present in Sunnydale University's historically white SFL organizations were reflective of those among the greater campus, the work to educate students about race and racism seemed isolated to members of SFL organizations. When viewed through Cho's (2018) framework, this lack of attention to the campus community minimizes the presence of racism at Sunnydale, only serving to function as a schism. This inattention to campus-wide action ultimately resembles how institutional leaders frequently see incidents as fleeting instead of as intrinsically ingrained at the college or university (Cho, 2018). In addition, the messages that administrators frequently develop in response to racist events are usually evasive and fail to acknowledge how these patterns indicate campus climates (Cole & Harper, 2017; Davis

& Harris, 2016; Jones, 2019). This theme ultimately came through as communication professionals at the institution encouraged leaders not to respond to the event immediately or directly at Sunnydale University because they believed that it would not have a tangible impact on the community, which only served to minimize the severity of the situation.

This phenomenon of placing all onus of racist acts committed by students who are SFL members on the SFL staff also underscores interest convergence (Bell, 1980), a component of CRT that grounded Cho's (2018) framework. Interest convergence complicates motivations for addressing acts of racism by white people arguing that concessions in power to Black people are only made when there is something to gain from these exchanges (Bell, 1980). Sunnydale University's SFL office had not engaged in extensive work addressing DEI about race until this blackface incident gained attention. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that educational efforts to address racism were not more expansive to the larger campus community. This finding raises the question of whether institutional leaders believed racism was only an issue within SFL or if this was a matter of interest convergence in which leaders chose because they had nothing to gain by addressing racism at a larger scale.

In both the initial response and ongoing work to address racial equity, Makana and Tara were intentional in discussing with members of MGC to understand the ways they made sense of the racist incident and how they experienced being a part of SFL at Sunnydale, which is valuable as Students of Color can feel letdown by inaction taken after incidents of racism (Briscoe, 2022). The conversations communicated in our findings illustrated how Students of Color experienced SFL and the larger campus

community. The work needed to facilitate these conversations with MGC is an example of how educators can move toward partnering with students, acting as a bridge to borrow the language of Cho (2018). Yet, it was clear this work was limited, as evidenced by MGC members feeling grouped into DEI efforts in inappropriate ways.

It is important to point out that several participants described the insignificance of the blackface incident to members of historically white sororities and fraternities, which was a clear example of how racism is normalized. What is unique about this pattern is that it displays how student groups themselves are not always unified in the way they perceive the actions institutional leaders take to respond to events. Therefore, though Cho's (2018) framework examines institutional responses, this finding underscores the importance of understanding differences within student communities. In essence, the institutional response was problematic, and students replicated similar forms of colorblindness after the event. This dynamic was reflected in Tara's conversations with historically white organization members following the incident, who did not consider it an issue that needed to be addressed and that it "wasn't even at the forefront of their minds." An MGC member then reinforced this point as they overheard members of Panhellenic sororities discussing how unfair it was that they were placed on social probation by the SFL office. These reflections are consistent with SFL studies showcasing how members of historically white organizations frequently do not recognize racial patterns as being ingrained in their organizations (e.g., Joyce, 2018) or people frame the incidents as misunderstood (e.g., Davis & Harris, 2016). However, our project extends these insights as we illustrate how this occurred after a racist event occurred from various stakeholders.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

There are several recommendations that derive from this work. First, there are implications for student affairs and SFL practice. Notably, and much like asking students to be aware of their chapter policies and protocols, SFL offices need a crisis response plan in place for discriminatory incidents, including racist acts, that outlines plans for communication, including which stakeholders should be reached (how/when to communicate with media, students, the larger university), what course of action will follow, and how to address repercussions for individuals and organizations at fault. Importantly, these plans should not take a color-evasive approach (Annamma et al., 2017); rather, it is essential that they name racism and include explicit anti-racist education and initiatives. They should also be in frequent communication with and working alongside students, campus administrators, and stakeholders regarding response strategies and expectations after that. This may include an annual presentation for chapter and council leaders, led by a campus practitioner who works primarily in crisis response. More passively, this might include publishing information and response strategies to particular incidents on a public department or institutional website. (Inter)national organizations can ensure campus-based SFL advisors receive the organization's plan, including noteworthy staff members and updated contact information. Further, campus-based practitioners can attend to the institution's internal and external communication strategy and create shared understanding regarding who does and says what and to whom should crises occur. This development can occur throughout the year and even prior to full-time work. For example, graduate preparation programs can engage graduate students in course case studies and dialogue about

institutional crises and the link between functional areas (in this case, SFL) and stakeholders (e.g., administrators, alumni chapters, councils, inter/national organizations).

SFL communities must engage in proactive work alongside students to address racism and other forms of discrimination before an incident (or additional incidents) occurs on their campus. This includes student leaders from individual chapters and works through council-based advising. The damage that occurs in the aftermath of a racist event ripples through the organizations and the members themselves. Therefore, actions taken to respond to such incidents are important in moving communities forward; they cannot erase the pain inflicted on Students of Color and individuals with other minoritized identities. In practice, institutional leaders should invest in assisting SFL professionals in developing curricula with attention toward centering racial equity efforts. This type of work must be done in collaboration with other campus offices (e.g., those related to DEI efforts), faculty that study these topics (such as those in ethnic studies, higher education programs, sociology, gender, and women's studies), and (inter)national SFL organizations. Additionally, campus professionals should consider joint efforts with other institutions, especially in surrounding areas. Importantly, these collaborations must ultimately center students and their power, an imperative brought forward by Cho (2018). This might also mitigate some of the imbalance that occurs when campus-based advisors' efforts are drawn away from work with MGC organizations, as reflected in previous research (Duran et al., 2022; Garcia, 2019). Specifically, institutional leaders should pay close attention to which students garner the most time from incidents such as these. If racist incidents pull council advisors away

from work with students in MGC, leaders should better reallocate advising responsibilities, time, and resources to MGC groups to bridge that gap.

Regarding educational response, campuses, and organizations should consider what happens when “all” are implicated in a community response. For example, suppose an incident involves one member in one IFC chapter, SFL professionals must weigh the benefits and detriments of creating different educational expectations for culturally-based SFL organizations and for members of Panhellenic chapters. This may include considering whether community-wide “moratoriums” are helpful or a hindrance. Perhaps adjudication or response more directly with individuals, organizations, and councils involved will create more nuanced and direct expectations on those who commit such acts rather than additional work on top of that being done by the communities that were themselves affected. Specific to racist incidents, campus-based SFL practitioners should be mindful of the harm created within the community and the reverberations that occur. Response cannot exist in a vacuum, “one size fits all” approach.

Finally, there are implications for research. Future studies may examine practitioner preparation to respond to incidents surrounding race/ethnicity, gender, religion, sex, and sexuality. Moreover, given Tara’s comments that her graduate school years did not equip her with the skills to respond to such incidents, scholars may be inclined to examine how graduate preparation programs are developing curricula concerning the intersections of DEI and crisis management. Further, the nuances associated with practitioner identities and the incidents themselves are worthy of exploration (e.g., the experience of Practitioners of Color when a racist incident

happens). Next, the positioning of SFL students as separate from the larger institution and connections between campus-based DEI work and that of (inter)national organizations are topics ripe for future research. To better understand SFL student positioning on campus, and how they receive (or do not receive) DEI training and development may shed light on unknown areas that call for further attention or support.

Conclusion

Guided by an institutional response framework (Cho, 2018), this case study moves forward the field's understanding of ways SFL practitioners can engage members of sorority and fraternity organizations in recognizing the role they play in racial equity, encouraging them to (re)construct equitable-centered policies and practices within these groups. Although emerging research has helped us to better understand racial dynamics within SFL organizations, little research has unpacked professional practice in responding to racist events. As communities in and outside of SFL have called for the abolition of SFL, given its perpetuation of racism (Brown, 2020), it is increasingly important to learn how to better center racial equity in SFL. Such actions are necessary for the continuation of sororities and fraternities in the United States as professionals help challenge how racism manifests in these communities.

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