

by Lekan Oguntoyinbo

[Diverse Issues in Higher Education](#)

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The University of Alabama's Greek system, which dates back to the late 1840s, is one of the largest and oldest in the country. With its lengthy track record of dominating student government, which for nearly 100 years has served as a training ground for many of the state's leading politicians, the system has one of the highest profiles in the country.

The overwhelmingly White system is also one of the most controversial for famously refusing to accept Black members. The system's determination to exclude Blacks has been a source of controversy for decades and has been the subject of stories in several prominent national news outlets, including *Esquire* magazine and NPR and a major embarrassment to a university with a turbulent racial history.

The system may soon put that dubious history behind it. Prodded by University of Alabama President Judy Bonner, some White sororities offered bids to several Black students last month. The developments came following a story in the university's campus newspaper that alumni and advisors of some White sororities had pressured the chapters to deny bids to Black members. The revelation was another black eye to the university, which is commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its integration this year, and which has struggled to live down its reputation as a racist institution. A student and faculty march on campus that attracted attention from the national media further fanning demands for change.

But many observers and experts on Greek life point out that stories of racial exclusion among White Greek-letter organizations are not just an Alabama phenomenon. They note that Black fraternities and sororities are actually more likely to accept people of other races.

“First you have to consider that many White fraternities and sororities had Whites-only clauses until the '70s, so you're seeing the legacy of that historical racism,” says Dr. Matthew Hughey, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut in Storrs and a member of the university's Institute for African-American Studies. “Alabama has been called out for years for this semi-secret group [of fraternities and sororities] called the Machine. But this happens all over the United States. It's easy to call out flagship schools in the South. But they function in the same way all over the country.”

He points out that a fraternity and sorority at Dartmouth recently got in trouble for holding a Crips and Bloods-themed party over the summer. According to published reports, racially insensitive language was used at the party.

Adds Gregory Parks, an assistant professor of law at Wake Forest University, who closely follows issues of legality regarding Greek-letter organizations: “Most people have automatic subconscious anti-Black biases, and they play out in various forms of behavior. The story doesn't surprise me. I'm sure if you ask these alumni, they will say they have no ill will, but that doesn't mean they don't ascribe negative qualities to African-Americans.”

Hughey says that, in many instances, the exclusion of students of color from these powerful White Greek organizations effectively denies them access to resources and networks that could be helpful to them in college and beyond.

Ron Binder, associate dean of students at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford and co-chair of the Fraternity and Sorority Knowledge Community for the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators, says he's noticed a trend of more racial, ethnic and religious diversity among White Greek fraternities and sororities — as well as a trend in the emergence of more Greek letter groups that cater to Asians, Hispanics, American Indians and Christians.

“We see a lot of diversity in terms of religion and sexual orientation,” adds Binder, a 30-year student affairs veteran whose resume includes stints as Greek adviser at the University of South Carolina, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Georgia.

But, he adds, “one group where we're lagging behind, in my opinion, is African-Americans.”

That opinion comes as no surprise to Hughey at the University of Connecticut.

“African-Americans are still seen as the ultimate type of other in this country,” says Hughey, adding that many Whites still view Blacks as dangerous, dysfunctional and not good enough. Many White fraternities and sororities simply do no form of outreach to this population, says Hughey, a White man who pledged Phi Beta Sigma in college. “Campuses themselves are very segregated entities. The color line is quite stark.”

If anything, Black fraternities and sororities are more likely to accept people of other races. Alpha Phi Alpha initiated its first White member in the 1940s, at the University of Chicago, according to Walter Kimbrough, author of *Black Greek 101* and president of Dillard University in New Orleans. At the University of Alabama, Zeta Phi Beta, a Black sorority, initiated a White member in 1986. The following year, Phi Beta Sigma initiated a White member. A White sorority didn't initiate its first and only Black member until 2003.

“Historically African-Americans, despite our history, have been some of the most welcoming people in the country,” he says. “We've always been more diverse and inclusive than other groups. [In the fraternities and sororities], there were never were any rules that prohibited non-Blacks from joining.”

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