

The Advent of Historically Black Sororities on Duke University's Campus

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Introduction

During the turbulent 1960s very few black students were enrolled at Duke University and those that were involved themselves in actively fighting for racial equality on Duke's campus and in the larger Civil Rights Movement. However, as the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement slowed down and Duke's administration became more responsive to the needs of black students on campus, black undergraduate women began focusing on the need to strengthen their identity and sense of community on campus. In April of 1975, two historically black sororities were chartered on Duke's campus for the first time. The advent of these sororities filled a critical gap in the lives of black women on campus. Before the founding of chapters of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta at Duke many black women attested to suffering from a lack of leadership and mentorship opportunities and to struggling to maintain their sense of identity at such an overwhelmingly white institution. The formation of the historically black sororities was not necessarily a memorable event on campus for the predominately white student body. Yet, having the choice of association with a sorority was vital in helping the black undergraduate women to continue to fight against the prevalence of white supremacy, which was deeply instilled in many members of the Duke community and which dictated campus culture at the time.

Historical Context

It is impossible to understand the advent of black sororities at Duke without analyzing the historical context at the time of their formation. Why was it that the first black students were admitted to Duke in 1963 and yet black sororities and fraternities didn't appear on campus until 1975? The 1960s were dramatic years in the Civil Rights Movement. This decade is remembered by significant civil rights gains, but also by the continuation of tragic and overt racial

discrimination and repression; it was a time of high political unrest and activism amongst the black community.

At the beginning of the 1960s, it appeared as though change was truly on the horizon. Martin Luther King's successful March on Washington uplifted disillusioned blacks and instilled within them courage to fight for their basic rights. The passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 again encouraged the spirits of those in the black community and enforced the notion among many that racial relations in the United States would soon improve. However, as it became evident that white resistance to black activism was tenacious, hope and optimism gave way to the Black Power Movement. Leaders like Stokely Carmichael spoke on the necessity of black pride and the belief that the black community had to band together to fight for its liberation by *any* means necessary. Carmichael, quite distinct from King, asserted that non-violence could no longer be the only option in the struggle toward equality. The militancy and radicalism of the late 1960s alarmed many who believed that the Civil Rights Movement's effectiveness and morality depended upon non-violent civil disobedience. Therefore, the late 1960s were a time in which non-violent protests and legal means of achieving change were largely supplemented by an increasingly militant and determined movement seeking a broad range of social changes.¹

During these years, students played a significant role in the fight for racial justice. Organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) relied on student activists as an important force in the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. Hence, during the 1960s many black college students at

¹ History.com Staff, "Civil Rights Movement," History.com, (accessed April 6th, 2014).

campuses all over, including Duke University, spent a great deal of time fighting for racial equality.

The process of desegregating Duke began in 1948, but was not completed for fifteen years. Duke first admitted five African American students into its undergraduate class in 1963. So few in number, the first students did not bring about radical change on Duke's campus. However, as the number of African American students started to grow, they began to demand that the administration provide resources for them and became increasingly unhappy with the racial discrimination on Duke's campus. The year 1968 was an especially turbulent one. On April 4th, the night that Martin Luther King was assassinated, a group of black and white undergraduate students showed up at the home of Duke University's President, Franklin Knight. The students demanded that President Knight terminate his membership at the segregated Hope Valley Country Club, implement a black studies program for undergraduate students, begin paying Duke's black employees a minimum wage, and grant the workers the right to organize into a union. They then left his home and moved to the main quad, which they occupied for five days and five nights. Roughly 1400 students remained on the quad all day and all night in non-violent protest demanding change. Then in September of 1968, the first black student association, the Afro-American Society, was established. And in October, African American students presented the administration with twelve demands regarding race relations at Duke. In 1969 black students pressured the administration to institute a Black Studies Program and an Office of Black Affairs. In addition, sixty members of the Afro-American Society occupied the Allen Building in the spring of 1969 for eight hours demanding that the University

administration make the University friendlier for its black population. Hence, black students were extremely active in creating change on the University's campus throughout this decade.²

This being said, during these years most black students at predominately white institutions were not concerned with the development of more social oriented groups like sororities. Sororities differed from many other black organizations in that the sorority was not designed to transform society, but rather the individuals within it.³ Therefore, the role of the sorority in black political life was an unclear and contested one. As a result, historian Paula Giddings, notes, "In highly charged times of black militancy, like the sixties, the sorority has frequently been thrown into a crisis of identity and relevance as a primarily social organization."⁴ Despite having a history of scholarship and community service, black sororities seemed to be out of touch with what really mattered at the time, when black activism was of utmost importance. As the African-American magazine, *Ebony*, highlighted:

Black students were rushing to sign up for the front lines of campus activism. Enthusiasm was for picket lines, not pledge lines. And hazing seemed particularly oppressive during a time when oppression was being challenged as never before. [In the sixties] membership seemed to be waning.⁵

However, as the intensity of the Civil Rights Movement faded and students became less involved in political activism in the 1970s, an opportunity arose for the sorority to become a

² Duke University, "Commemorating 50 Years of Black Students at Duke University," (accessed April 6, 2014).

³ Paula Giddings, *In Search of sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the challenge of the Black sorority movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988), 21.

⁴ Paula Giddings, *In Search of sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the challenge of the Black sorority movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988), 21.

⁵ "Fraternities and Sororities: A dramatic comeback on campus," *Ebony*, December 1983, Box 1, Folder "Clippings (chronological)," Black history at Duke reference collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Durham, N.C.

meaningful organization. The 1970s were static in comparison to the 1960s because many blacks were in a state of transition out of a period of outward militancy and into a period focused on strengthening their internal community.⁶ Black students became more concerned with their identity on predominately white campuses. Although concerns amongst the black community about civil rights did not cease to exist, there was less excitement about “the struggle.” Instead, African American students began to focus on enriching the black community by strengthening the presence of their culture and defining themselves in new ways on campus. One of the prominent ways black students achieved this goal was to establish historically black Greek organizations. Mark Morgan, a founding member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity at Duke, explained why it took so many years before black Greek letter organizations appeared on the University’s campus:

There were a number of factors. First of all...in the mid 1960s, there weren’t enough students who were black [at Duke] to have black sororities and fraternities...As we came into the early 70s and more black students were on the campus they said, ‘Hey look, we are here and we have proven ourselves as academicians and now we want a fuller college life.’...I think it took awhile because you had to have the right combination of black students being confident enough to demand these organizations coupled with the administration being sensitive enough and having seen that the black students were there to achieve and to stay and to have a more complete college experience.⁷

⁶ Elizabeth Buchanan, “In Search of Solutions,” *The Chronicle*, April 12th, 1978, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁷ Mark Morgan, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 8th, 2014.

Hence, a number of factors help explain why black Greek letter organizations did not form on Duke's campus until twelve years after the first black students enrolled. The growth of black Greek letter organizations was stunted by the small number of black students enrolled at Duke coupled with those students' desire to prove themselves, first and foremost, as academics and activists in the Civil Rights struggle. It was not until the African American community at Duke grew in size and its members became more confident in themselves that black Greek organizations had the chance to flourish.

Desegregating the White Greek System

However, decades before black sororities arrived on Duke's campus, white sororities came into being. The earliest, Alpha Delta Pi, was chartered at Duke in 1911. These sororities, just like Duke's undergraduate student body, were entirely made up of white students before 1963. Before this time, it did not matter if white sororities would accept black students into their organizations because there were no black students. However, after black students began to arrive on Duke's campus student organizations had to define, for the first time, what their membership policies were like in regards to race. Duke's administration had remained silent on the issue of membership policies until 1965 when Title VI of the Civil Rights Act encouraged the President at the time, Dr. Douglas Knight, to do otherwise.

Title VI was enacted as a part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It prohibited discrimination on the grounds of race, national origin, and color in all programs and activities that received federal financial assistance.⁸ As a result, any college or university that was receiving federal grants had to ensure that all of its programs and activities followed this policy of non-

⁸ "Title VI-Financial Assistance for the Improvement of Undergraduate Instruction," September 10th, 1965, Box 2, Folder "Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination," Panhellenic Council records.

discrimination. However, it was not until mid 1965 that the membership policies of fraternities and sororities across the country came into question. On June 17th, 1965 Francis Keppel, Commissioner of Education, declared that, “The terms of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 require individual colleges to make certain that fraternities and sororities do not discriminate on racial grounds.”⁹ Mr. Keppel declared that if a sorority or fraternity was found to be practicing racial discrimination the school would either have to force the organization to change its practices or remove the chapter from campus.¹⁰ If the school failed to do this, the government would remove all federal funding for the college. After Keppel’s announcement it became clear that practicing racial discrimination would no longer be tolerated.

Shortly after Keppel’s announcement, President Knight took action to investigate the membership policies of all of the fraternities and sororities on Duke’s campus. On June 30th, 1965, he sent a letter to the national organization of each inquiring into their admissions policies. His letter read:

Do you have any constitutional limitations forbidding a local chapter from accepting a Negro (boy or girl) if the chapter so wishes? Do you have any practices designed to keep Negroes out if the chapter itself wishes to invite the person for membership?¹¹

The national presidents of all of the sororities on Duke’s campus quickly responded. “Alpha Delta Pi,” their president wrote, “has no limiting clauses whatsoever in its National or local

⁹ Wallace Turner “Colleges Face U.S Aid Cutoff If They Permit Fraternity Bias,” *The New York Times*, June 18th, 1965.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dr. Douglas Knight to sororities and fraternities national presidents, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

constitution and Bylaws, which concern race, creed, color, or national origin.”¹² Similarly, Alpha Phi declared:

The nomination and selection of members in Alpha Phi International Fraternity is based entirely on the individual merit of each candidate without any restrictions predicated on race, color, religion, national origin, or national ancestry.¹³

Delta Gamma was also receptive, stating, “There are no restrictive clauses in the Delta Gamma Constitution forbidding a local chapter from accepting a Negro girl if the chapter so wishes.”¹⁴ Kappa Kappa Gama responded, “We have no constitutional limitation forbidding the pledging of a Negro girl or any girl.”¹⁵ Delta Delta Delta replied, “Tri Delta does not have and has never had any constitutional limitation pertaining to race.”¹⁶ Pi Beta Phi said, “Pi Beta Phi has no constitutional limitation which discriminates against anyone.”¹⁷ Kappa Alpha Theta also rejected having discriminatory policies, “Kappa Alpha Theta has nothing in its laws or policies which precludes consideration of any individual on the basis of race, religion, or national

¹² Mrs. Maurain Blake to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

¹³ Mrs. Barbara M. Collum to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

¹⁴ Mrs. Kenneth P. Groves to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

¹⁵ Mrs. Frank H. Alexander to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

¹⁶ Mrs. J.L. Perry to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

¹⁷ Mrs. Alice Weber Mansfield to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

origin.”¹⁸ And Zeta Tau Alpha confirmed, “The national constitution and bylaws of Zeta Tau Alpha do not contain any restrictive or discriminatory clauses.”¹⁹

The only sorority chapter on Duke’s campus that did not explicitly deny discrimination in its admissions policy was Kappa Delta. The letter, which President Knight received from the national organization of Kappa Delta, did not admit openly to believing in segregation, but certainly did not communicate a policy of non-discrimination.²⁰ The letter read:

One of the basic purposes of Kappa Delta as a Christian social association is to foster the art of true friendship. This means that prospective members must have qualities compatible with this purpose and the prospective life long friendships and associations, which are a part of belonging to Kappa Delta. Such compatibility is to be determined in relation to all of the qualifications of each candidate, including family, economic, and social backgrounds, educational fitness, moral standards, religion, and in general, adaptability for group association and friendship.²¹

However, despite the fact that all of the sororities, with the exception of Kappa Delta, publically denounced discrimination, they all acknowledged that they did have in place a system of recommendations. In relation to these, President Knight asked in his original letter:

¹⁸ Mrs. James W. Hofstead to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

¹⁹ Mrs. Jane S. Kerr to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

²⁰ Mrs. Frederick T. Morse to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

²¹ Mrs. Frederick T. Morse to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder “Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination,” Panhellenic Council records.

I understand that some organizations require sponsorship from a member in a student's hometown, which might be difficult to get members of a previously all-white group. Does your organization follow this practice?²²

Responses varied in their length and content, but all of the white sororities affirmed that they did rely on an alumni recommendation system to help inform their decisions about who to admit. Kappa Kappa Gamma's national president wrote:

Our alumnae, who are the natural source of information, are required to base their references on our Constitutional qualifications and may not be discriminate according to race, religion, or national origin...As to whether it would be difficult or not to secure a reference on a Negro girl form a previously all-white group, I would not be able to answer. I am sure you will agree, Dr. Knight, that we can encourage, but not legislate personal opinions and feelings of individuals.²³

Hence, many of the answers that Knight received evaded the real issue. Reflecting this pattern, the national president of Kappa Kappa Gamma wrote:

Limited by small and rigid quotas, the chapter chose to select those girls it felt were most compatible and had the greatest potential. I presume that as the gap between our cultures narrows, there will be more and more outstanding Negro girls.²⁴

Here, she inferred that Kappa Kappa Gamma would see a greater number of black members after blacks became more attuned to and integrated into white culture. The response of

²² Dr. Douglas Knight to sororities and fraternities national presidents, Box 2, Folder "Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination," Panhellenic Council records.

²³ Mrs. Frank H. Alexander to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder "Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination," Panhellenic Council records.

²⁴ Mrs. Frank H. Alexander to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder "Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination," Panhellenic Council records.

Tri Delta's national president was also one that clearly articulated that the organization did not appreciate President Knight's inquiry into the group's policies. While she did answer his questions, she also included a provision of Title VI, which stated:

Nothing in this or any other Act shall be construed as authorizing the Commission, its Advisory Committees or any person under its supervision or control to inquire into or investigate any membership practices or internal operations of any college or university fraternity or sorority.²⁵

By including this passage, the national organization dismissed President Knight's questioning on the grounds that the inquiry was unauthorized. However, the Tri Delta national president failed to include the important qualifying phrase that came after the aforementioned passage which said, "whose facilities are not owned by the institution of higher education and whose activities are financed by funds derived by private sources."²⁶ If she had included this clause, she would have refuted her own point because according to the qualifying clause, President Knight did have an obligation to look into each sorority's membership policy.

After President Knight's letters, it was affirmed that almost every sorority on campus would, in theory, be open to accepting black students. However, the only organization, which did not sign the non-discrimination policy, Kappa Delta, would have to be removed from campus if the University did not want to risk losing its federal funding.

Kappa Delta Leaves Campus

²⁵ Mrs. J.L. Perry to Dr. Douglas Knight, Box 2, Folder "Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination," Panhellenic Council records.

²⁶ "Title VI-Financial Assistance for the Improvement of Undergraduate Instruction," September 10, 1965, Box 2, Folder "Membership Policies on Non-Discrimination," Panhellenic Council records.

As a result, on September 13, 1967 the Dean of the Woman's College, Margaret Ball, received a memo from Mary Grace Wilson, the Dean of Students at the Woman's College, regarding

The Possible exclusion of one of sororities (Kappa Delta) from campus because national officers have refused to sign the University's statement regarding the clause restricting membership on the basis of race, color, or creed, or something to that effect.²⁷

The memo reported that Lucy Brady, the President of the Kappa Delta chapter at Duke at the time, had just called to report to her that the national president of the organization refused to sign Duke's policy on non-discrimination.²⁸ Dean Wilson also informed Dean Ball that Brady was very upset and wanted to know what her organization's refusal to comply with University policy would mean for the upcoming rush season.²⁹ Subsequently, Brady was informed that Kappa Delta would no longer have the right to be a part of the Duke community. It was apparent at this time that the University administrators would no longer tolerate blatant discrimination in its social organizations.

On September 27, 1967 the Sigma Delta chapter of Kappa Delta at Duke University was declared dormant.³⁰ However, Lucy Brady remained determined to keep her sisterhood alive. She proceeded to reshape her sorority as a local chapter naming it Phi Lambda Kappa and signing the University's policy on non-discrimination. It was therefore evident that it was not Brady and the other members of the Kappa Delta chapter at Duke who were against accepting

²⁷ Memorandum by Mary Grace Wilson to Margaret Ball, September 13th, 1967, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general", Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Memorandum by Mary Grace Wilson to Margaret Ball, October 18, 1967, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general", Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

black girls into their organization, but the national administration of the sorority. This became even clearer in a letter the national president of Kappa Delta sent to the alumni of Duke's chapter of Kappa Delta in which she stated:

Due to the fact that the campus situation at Duke University could not be resolved, regardless of the continuous efforts since the mid-1950's, the National Council reluctantly announces the necessity of declaring Sigma Delta chapter dormant.³¹

The "campus situation" she refers to here is the fact that Duke administrators were requiring her sorority to be open to members of all races. The president of Kappa Delta continued to blame Duke's removal of Kappa Delta not on the organization's racist ideology, but instead on other issues on Duke's campus. She wrote:

Many of you are familiar with the continual harassment against sororities and fraternities as expressed in the campus newspaper, *The Chronicle* and the campus attitude opposing National affiliation. It has become increasingly difficult for National Sororities to function on this campus particularly since they are granted neither status nor respect. We hope that future conditions will make it possible for the Chapter to become active again.³²

Through this correspondence it is evident that the national leadership of Kappa Delta was angry at its exclusion from Duke's campus, but had no intention of changing its discriminatory policies. Quite the opposite, it appeared as though the national organization planned on waiting

³¹ Mrs. J. H. Merrill to Alumnae of Sigma Delta Chapter, November, 1967, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general," Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

³² Mrs. J. H. Merrill to Alumnae of Sigma Delta Chapter, November, 1967, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general," Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

for Duke to retract its non-discrimination requirement and begin condoning sororities with a racist ideology once again.

The Continued Exclusion of Black Women From White Sororities

So in theory, any black undergraduate woman who desired to become a member of a sorority was free to do so after 1965. According to the written documents, the black women on Duke's campus had equal access to the sororities and could be provided with leadership and mentorship opportunities equivalent to those of their white peers. However, the non-discriminatory membership policies of the sororities were little more than words on a page. In practice, despite the fact that all of the historically white sororities on Duke's campus had to agree to a policy of non-discrimination, the sororities remained entirely white.

One of the primary reasons for this continued exclusion of blacks from the white sororities was the difficulty inherent in a black woman's attempt to get a letter of recommendation from an alumni member of an all white group at a time when racism was still a real force. It was not until 1967 that the first black woman was admitted into a white sorority at Duke and she remained an anomaly; it was not as if after she was accepted many other black women began to join white sororities. The student was Donna Allen and she was accepted to Pi Beta Phi; her admission sent shock waves through the campus.³³

Like all of the other sororities, Pi Beta Phi required a recommendation of the candidate from her respective hometown. The Pi Beta Phi students who wanted to pledge Allen made an effort to secure a letter of recommendation for Allen from her hometown of Elizabeth City.³⁴ Unfortunately, this elicited a negative response from Elizabeth City and a hometown

³³ Memorandum by Mary Grace Wilson to Margaret Ball, October 18, 1967, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general," Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

³⁴ Ibid.

recommendation could not be relied upon.³⁵ As a result, the Pi Beta Phi girls had to appeal to the president of the national organization to get approval to allow Allen to join. A member of Pi Beta Phi at the time anticipated trouble with their alumni regarding Allen's admittance.³⁶ She also stated:

There were several Negroes in this year's freshmen class who were good 'sorority material' but no other chapter on the campus could get the necessary (required) clearance as to recommendation.³⁷

This statement reflects the racism that was still inherent in the ideologies of the predominately white Greek sororities on Duke's campus. Dean Wilson expressed her surprise to Dean Ball in a memo in which she wrote:

I don't know what kind of publicity we are going to get on this score! There will be an extreme reaction on the part of some of our alumnae and parents, I am sure.³⁸

As a result of this continued discrimination, it is easy to see why black women claimed to be troubled by the lack of leadership and mentorship opportunities for them on campus and why they felt so isolated. Despite official documentation asserting otherwise, Duke remained a place mired in racist thought and practice. Although the loud and overt racial hostility of the 1960s waned, it was replaced by a strained and separate peace far distant from an atmosphere of racial harmony.³⁹ As Maureen Cullins, an African-American student at Duke in the mid 1970s,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Memorandum by Mary Grace Wilson to Margaret Ball, October 18, 1967, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general", Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

³⁹ Warren Brown, "Like East and West," *The Chronicle*, April 12th, 1978, Box 1, Folder "Clippings (chronological)," Black history at Duke reference collection.

illustrated, “There wasn’t much of a relationship [between blacks and whites]. In my case, I was usually one of two or three in a large lecture hall class. I was never included in any study group.”⁴⁰ The culture shock that many black women experienced when they came to Duke created a fertile ground for the development of an all black, social organization.

Formation of Alpha Kappa Alpha

Black women realized that the administration was not providing opportunities for them so they needed to find a way to combat “the overwhelming sense of isolation, fear, and inadequacy at a predominately white institution.”⁴¹ In the years that followed the admittance of Donna Allen into Pi Beta Phi, very little was done by the administration or members of the historically white sororities to integrate black students into their organizations. Many black women felt as though they didn’t have an identity at Duke and struggled to thrive at a predominately white institution. In 1974, African Americans had been enrolled at Duke for eleven years, but no organization existed on campus that catered to the needs of African American women.⁴² Maureen Cullins saw the need for a leadership program for black women on Duke’s campus. She observed:

There weren’t a whole lot of opportunities for leadership nor was there a whole lot of organizations that were easy to get in if you were an African American student. It would probably be a mistake to say that there was overt discrimination in working on the yearbook, or on *The Chronicle* board, or things like that, but it wasn’t easy. All [those positions] were kind of sewn up and had legacy appointments. For instance, I was on the yearbook staff in high school, but when I

⁴⁰ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

⁴¹ Warren Brown, “Like East and West,” *The Chronicle*, April 12th, 1978, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁴² “The Iota Mu Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.” Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. <http://www.akaiotamu.com/> (accessed April 2, 2014).

went to see if I could be on the yearbook staff here, I was barely even spoken to in the meetings.⁴³

She chatted with her roommate, Gloria Green, about the lack of opportunities for black women on Duke's campus. After their conversations, it became evident that Cullins and Green were both great admirers of the Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) women they knew, both personally and in larger society. Hence, the two of them took a strong interest in making arrangements to bring a chapter of AKA to Duke's campus.⁴⁴ Cullins explained:

We decided we would see what it would take to charter a chapter of AKA here at Duke. We got in touch with the regional director who told us we would need to work with the graduate chapter in Durham. We contacted the chapter and worked with a wonderful woman named Adelle Butts who became our advisor. And so the process began. There were national guidelines. An AKA chapter had just formed at UNC maybe two years before. So we started with Ms. Butts and she initiated the paperwork and formed us into a group.⁴⁵

The name of the group was Those Interested in Alpha Kappa Alpha (TIAKA).⁴⁶ To prove their intentions of being true AKA women, the members of the group planned programs and service projects aligned with AKA's announced mission. In addition, the national office of AKA required other credentials to be met before they would allow a chapter to be established on Duke's campus. Among other required criteria, each member of the group needed to explain her interests and reasons for desiring a chapter, as well as to describe the group's activities in

⁴³ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

preparation for a chapter, and to state the possibilities of future growth of the proposed chapter.⁴⁷

Cullins recalled the process of becoming a chartered group:

They [the graduate chapter] formed us into what they called an interest group, Those Interested in Alpha Kappa Alpha. Tee-aah-ka! And so that went on and we did what the graduate chapter told us to do. We bought the books, we paid the dues, we learned the history, we met and studied together, we hid from the women in the UNC chapter who came over to harass us...It was a lot. There was a lot to do.⁴⁸

Clearly, becoming a chartered organization was by no means a simple process. The fact that Cullins and the other interested members were willing to exert so much effort to bring AKA to campus shows just how strongly the black women on Duke's campus desired to have an organization of their own, which would enhance their college experience and provide opportunities for them in a way that the University was failing to do. And while the graduate chapter was receptive to the Duke women creating an AKA chapter on campus, the Duke administration proved more hesitant.

The dialogue between the students interested in AKA and the Duke administration first began on April 6th, 1974 when Cullins and ten other black students interested in AKA signed a letter to Anne Flowers, Acting Dean of Trinity College of Arts and Sciences. In the letter, they clearly outlined their desire to form a new group and provided justification for the reasons behind their desires. An organization to meet the needs of black women on campus was needed, the letter read:

⁴⁷ "Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Credential Checklist For New Chapter," July 1971, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general", Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

⁴⁸ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

In an effort to provide a greater choice of fraternal organizations to the black women on this campus we request university sanction for the formation of a chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority on the campus of Duke University. We feel that a chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha would benefit the Duke community in that it would meet the needs of the black women on campus. Alpha Kappa Alpha would provide opportunities for interaction with the Durham community as well as with other campus organizations. For these reasons, we the undersigned, ask that you approve the organization of a chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority on this campus.⁴⁹

Just days later on April 11th, 1974, Dean Flowers received correspondence relating to the founding of AKA at Duke from Lillian Lee, the Assistant Dean of students, who mentioned that she had talked with a number of the students interested in organizing the chapter and to a member of the Durham chapter of AKA who was helping the students to establish a collegiate chapter, Ms. Adelle Butts.⁵⁰ Dean Lee was supportive of the women's intentions:

Provided we and they can meet all requirements and satisfy the regulations of the Duke Panhellenic Council I wish to recommend the addition of this group to our campus. I shall welcome your suggestions as to any further steps we should take or any additional persons we should consult.⁵¹

Dean Lee received a response from Dean Flowers on April 22, 1974, which acknowledged that she too was supportive of the black women's request:

⁴⁹Maureen Cullins, Stephanie Ramsey, et all to Ann Flowers, April 6th, 1974, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general", Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

⁵⁰Lillian Lee to Ann Flowers, April 11th, 1974, Box 27, Folder "Sororities-general", Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

⁵¹Ibid.

I have received the request concerning the establishment of the chapter of AKA on our campus. Certainly I am supportive of such a move and would suggest you contact Dean William Griffith to find the proper procedure to move ahead.⁵²

Subsequently discussions ensued between Dean Lee and Bill Griffith, the Dean of Student Affairs. On April 30th 1974, he wrote:

I agree with you that a black oriented sorority would probably not impinge in any real manner on the total potential of students available for the sorority system, particularly in light of the fact that two sororities are in difficult straits from a membership standpoint. Given this, I would imagine that we would move along in facilitating this request if it seems to be a valid one.⁵³

However, while Griffith was supportive, his preference was to have the black women better integrate with the already existing white sororities. Cullins explained:

So I went to see Bill Griffith [the Dean of Student Affairs] to talk about AKA and he said, ‘Well you know there are other sororities on campus why don’t you choose one of those?’ And it was an interesting back and forth. Bill is a great man and he thought very broadly and I think from his initial perspective he would have preferred that we integrate the existing sororities on campus but they were very differently structured. I recall writing quite a bit for Bill about why we wanted to have this organization and they finally gave us permission to do so. And from then on out, it took us two years; it was a series of activities and paperwork.⁵⁴

⁵² Anne Flowers to Lillian Lee, April 22nd, 1974, Box 27, Folder “Sororities-general”, Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

⁵³ William Griffith to Lillian Lee, April 30th, 1974, Box 27, Folder “Sororities-general”, Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Office of the Dean Records.

⁵⁴ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

After all the necessary paperwork was completed, the Iota Mu Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha was chartered on Duke's campus on April 21, 1975 with twelve members.⁵⁵ The names of these women were Maureen Cullins, Stephanie Ballentine, Angela Bowser, Donna Chatman, Germaine Fauntleroy, Gloria Green, Elaine Hawkins, Yollette Jones, Loretta King, Angelene Reid, Vanessa Roberts, and Wanda Settles.⁵⁶

Formation of Delta Sigma Theta

Delta Sigma Theta (DST) developed at the same time as AKA and for very similar reasons. In the spring of 1974, eight other members of Duke's black female community felt the need for a support group for African American women on campus. The students investigated the possibility of bringing a chapter of DST to Duke. They were familiar with the goals of DST and identified with them. Elaine Ferguson acted as the advisor for the group of women. Elaine was a student at Duke Medical School at the time who had graduated from Brown University and was a member of the charter group of DST at Brown. From her personal experiences, Ferguson was able to shed insights into how the women should go about bringing a chapter of her sorority to Duke.⁵⁷

At the beginning of 1975, the eight interested women and Ferguson contacted the regional director of DST, Louise Riddick. Riddick gave them permission to organize as a group. Gail Morgan, one of the active students, became the group's president and led the group in learning about Delta history. In addition to the support that Ferguson gave, the Kappa Omicron

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "The Iota Mu Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated." Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. .<http://www.akaiotamu.com/>(accessed April 2, 2014).

⁵⁷ Lavern Jones, "Delta Sigma Theta at Duke: April 1975-April 1985," Box 3, Folder "Delta Sigma Theta", Office of Minority Affairs Records.

chapter at the University of Chapel Hill and the Alpha Lambda Chapter at North Carolina Central University supported the women at Duke.

On April 5th, 1975 Louise Riddick initiated the eight charter members into the Lambda Omega chapter of DST. The names of the eight original members were Rochelle Dennis, Patricia Evans, Helena Gourdine, Linda Hooker, Deborah Kennedy, Gail Morgan, Vanessa Rogers, and Marilyn Wise.⁵⁸

The University Administration's Reaction to Black Greek Organizations

Although it is not clear from the correspondence, Duke's administration was certainly hesitant about the formation of black sororities on campus and the students attempting to form the black Greek letter organizations sensed this apprehension. Mark Morgan, one of the founding members of Omega Psi Phi, explained the reaction of the administration:

They were welcoming but I discerned that they were also cautious. In terms of what was going on at this time, this was new on the campus and new on many of the white campuses and because of what was going on in the country at the time, they were cautious. Just a few years [earlier] were the assassinations of King and Kennedy and there were also the aspects of the emergence of the Black Panther Party. There was a lot of talk as well about going back to Africa in terms of [the United States] being a difficult society for blacks. You had a lot of separatist movements. Angela Davis was very strong and very symbolic at the time. There were all of these influences and as a result with the black fraternities and sororities coming there was an aspect of the administration that said on one hand, 'Okay you want this concession from the administration and we will present and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

allow you to have it' and on the other hand, 'Why are the blacks separating from the rest of the white Greek life? Isn't Greek life life sufficient with all the choices they have right now? Why does it need to be an all black organization?' There was some concern that we may be some revolutionary offshoot of some black separatist group or some insurgent group that was going to be the college version of some insurgent group... I think there may have been some concern that there was going to be some movement on college campuses by empowering or planting black students that may have some insurgent feelings on the campus. So I think there was caution, but also support."⁵⁹

As Morgan speculated, given the historical context of the time, the administration was certainly more concerned with the advent of black Greek letter organizations than they were with black students joining predominately white sororities and fraternities. Sue Wasiolek, a longtime member of Duke's administration, confirmed Morgan's belief that the administration was worried at the time. She explained:

I think the response from the administration towards black sororities was kind of twofold. Most administrators, if they were being honest with you, would tell you they wouldn't want greek organizations of *any* kind if they were going to bulldoze the campus and start over. Most of us here didn't view the black sororities as significantly different from other greek organizations. That being said, there was a mystery about them. Bill Griffith was a member of a fraternity, he was a Beta at Duke, so he knew what white fraternity life was like. But at the time we didn't have anybody on the team that knew about black Greek life until Maureen Cullins

⁵⁹ Mark Morgan, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 8th, 2014.

came [and joined the administrative team]. She wasn't open about what was going on, but she did shed some light on some things, we learned a little bit more... We felt from personal experience we had a better understanding of what was going on in the white sororities.⁶⁰

Wasiolek acknowledged that the administration was especially concerned about black greek life because it was uncharted territory. Wasiolek explained some of the apprehension:

It was during this period of time that Duke was emerging out of the Civil Rights Movement. We had just changed presidents from Douglas Knight to Terry Sanford and Sanford made it *very* clear that there would be no discrimination...So there was this real strong commitment to non-discrimination and yet there were *so* many questions about these black greek organizations. Were they safe? Were they harming people? So you know we were fearful.⁶¹

Because of this fear, the administration made many attempts to try and learn more about these organizations. To better understand the black sororities, members of the administration frequently met with black students in the groups and tried to communicate with the national office of the organizations. Wasiolek explained the challenge of trying to understand the groups:

We tried to meet with students; I felt that I had very good relationships with members...I really talked to them and really adored them and they were good students and good people but I never got in, I never got on the inside...I usually had a little bit more of an in [with the white groups].⁶²

⁶⁰ Sue Wasiolek, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 2nd, 2014.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Because of this lack of insight into the inner workings of the black sororities on Duke's campus, Duke's leadership remained skeptical. "With a lack of information and ignorance," Wasiolek said, "You sometimes get afraid."⁶³ Still, the administration remained supportive of the black sororities and helped them to develop in their emerging years. Yet, the Duke administration failed to address the continued segregation of black and white sororities.

Wider Campus Reaction to the Formation of Black Greek Organizations

The advent of black sororities on Duke's campus certainly made a meaningful impact on the lives of those in the organizations. However, it seems the larger campus body was hardly aware of these organizations' existence. Sue Wasiolek, a white student at the time the black sororities were founded, declared:

As a [past] student I have no recollection whatsoever of the historically black sororities coming to campus. I do remember Omega Psi Phi, but I have no recollection of Delta Sigma Theta. I just remember them appearing. There was no big campus response or blitz.⁶⁴

Cullins remembers things similarly, but with a slight difference:

In terms of...the larger campus of white students, I don't know if they were aware of us quite honestly. It wasn't a big deal. *I don't think they cared.* I can't even remember any *Chronicle* coverage quite honestly. I just don't recall that there was anything that impactful.⁶⁵

The reason for this lack of response can be attributed to the small and insular nature of the black community at the time. Totalling only a few hundred in a population of thousands, the

⁶³ Sue Wasiolek, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 2nd, 2014.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

presence of black students and their activities on campus was far from overwhelming. On the other hand, it seems as though the establishment of the first historically black fraternity on Duke's campus created a larger splash. One of the founding members of Omega Psi Phi recalled:

There was a huge reaction... There was some shock by it... And there was a fascination as to what this new presence of a greater number of black students was bringing.⁶⁶

A white student remembered things similarly in her statement:

When Omega Psi Phi came people knew, it was in the paper, people knew it was coming, they were the first historically black greek organization. I don't remember the particulars of how it happened. I just remembered it happened. And then after that the groups that sort of followed like the sororities, I can't tell you the when and the how because I just don't remember.⁶⁷

And the Dean of Minority Affairs, Caroline Lattimore, described, "Omega Psi Phi, that was the cutting edge, the door had been opened for the NPHC to bring sororities and fraternities here. It was big news."⁶⁸ So it appears that while the fraternities on campus roused an interest, the advent of the sororities went unnoticed. This reinforces the notion that black women on campus at the time were such a small group that they did not attract major interest. Therefore, the development of AKA and DST was really pivotal in helping black undergraduate women understand and strengthen their identity on campus. Having a network of support to rely upon proved to be especially necessary as time went on and their organizations began to face heavy censure from members of Duke's white community.

⁶⁶ Mark Morgan, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 8th, 2014.

⁶⁷ Sue Wasiolek, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 2nd, 2014.

⁶⁸ Caroline Lattimore, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 11th, 2014.

Voluntary Segregation Criticism

After black sororities formed on Duke's campus in 1975, it made sense that their membership remain solely black; the very purpose of their establishment was to form groups to meet the needs of black women on campus, who were essentially excluded from the University's predominately white social organizations. Hence, the phenomenon of voluntary segregation was only logical. Yet, many white students saw the blacks students forming their own Greek letter organizations as part of their intent to separate from the larger Duke community. Caroline Lattimore, the Dean of Minority Affairs beginning in 1978 and a black student at Duke previous to that, explained the reaction as:

It was one of, 'We aren't sure what this is all about.' We used to hear a lot in the 1970s from the whites: they said [to us blacks], 'You are isolating yourself, you're all in one group.' But when you had Tri Deltas and other groups together no one would say that. It would be two hundred of them. But if you had forty or fifty of us, people would say, 'You're just isolating yourself.'⁶⁹

Many students in the majority population failed to acknowledge that white students were equally responsible for maintaining separation. Rob Hampton, a student during this decade, reflected on how to solve the voluntary segregation problem:

Only when the invisible wall between black and white students at Duke is torn down will the prejudices, subtle enmity, and racial curiosity bred by separatism begin to subside.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Caroline Lattimore, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 11th, 2014.

⁷⁰ Rob Hampton, "Ideas for integrating life at Duke," *The Chronicle*, October 26th, 1979, Box 1, Folder "Clippings (chronological)," Black history at Duke reference collection.

Clearly, the black community did not exclusively create the problem of voluntary segregation. Indeed, many blacks were angered by the frequent criticism that they were voluntarily segregating and not making efforts to interact with white students. Valdassia Merrick, a student in 1979, argued:

The fuss is not over voluntary segregation; people with commonality are attracted to each other. The problem is with the perpetuation of white supremacy and over the lack of respect appreciation and recognition of black people [on Duke's campus].⁷¹

Teri Dansby, Vice President of Delta Sigma Theta, expressed similar concerns. "Why is the central thrust of any 'gathering' that is supposed to address the issues of import to black people almost always 'voluntary segregation,'" she asked?⁷² Lattimore also spoke to the white community's preoccupation with large groups of black students gathering together to hang out:

There used to be a place called 'the black bench' right outside Cambridge Inn [now West Union] and everyday at about noon some of the black athletes would come out and it was like celebrity time and you would see twenty or thirty blacks all together sitting together in one section and at first I don't think the majority Duke population understood what was going on, but it was just friendship. It was that family. It was the way of feeling that you were wanted, that you didn't have to feel isolated or alone, that others understood what you were going through.

Often times when we were out there on the quad the majority community would

⁷¹ Evelyn Polk, "Black Rally Draws Large Crowd," *The Chronicle*, November 8th, 1979, Box 1, Folder "Clippings (chronological)," Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁷² Wilton Aston, "Duke: a microcosm of the black struggle," *The Chronicle*, October 25th, 1979, Box 1, Folder "Clippings (chronological)," Black history at Duke reference collection.

sometimes go around us and be like, ‘What’s going on over there?’ But it was just conversation, that is all it was.⁷³

Like Lattimore, other black students at Duke worked hard to prove that voluntary segregation was not unnatural. In another one of her *Chronicle* articles Teri Dansby wrote:

I think that most of the time blacks are together a lot because you naturally cling to somebody who sees things as you see them, somebody who’s from the same cultural milieu. It’s a natural kind of thing. I don’t think people should see it as strange.⁷⁴

Here she was alluding to the loss of cultural identity that black students experienced with predominately white groups. In another article Dansby wrote, “If integration means that I have to denounce my culture then it’s not a good idea.”⁷⁵ While the lack of interaction between black and whites was a serious concern of members of both races it was evident that sororities members’ desires to maintain the strength of black culture far outweighed their desire to integrate with white students. Elizabeth Buchanan wrote:

Blacks students are very conscious of their blackness, and they’re conscious of maintaining their identity because sooner or later they’ll be going back to the black community⁷⁶

As minority students, members of the black Greek organizations at Duke felt a real need for solidarity. Alpha Phi Alpha President, David Williams, stated, “The black community here is

⁷³ Caroline Lattimore, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 11th, 2014.

⁷⁴ Teri Dansby, “Dansby reflects,” *Prometheus Black*, October 24th, 1979, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Buchanan, “In Search of Solutions,” *The Chronicle*, April 12th, 1978, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

small so the need to be in an association for support is large.”⁷⁷ The claim that the number of black students at Duke was small was by no means invalid. In the fall of 1979, Duke reported to the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare that only 433 students, or 7.6 percent of the undergraduate student body, belonged to a “minority” ethnic group; 70 percent, or 305 of those 433 students, were black.⁷⁸ Harry E. DeMik, associate registrar at the time, could not give a description of what the “majority” of Duke students composed except for “Caucasian.”⁷⁹ The number of black students enrolled at Duke remained small as Duke struggled to recruit blacks. Valerie Mosely, a black student at the time, hypothesized some of the reasons Duke had to struggle to attract minority students, “The problem may be that the stay at Duke is not an enjoyable one for blacks.”⁸⁰ Moreover, there were only five full time undergraduate faculty and three visiting undergraduate faculty of color.⁸¹ Therefore, black students had very few people on campus with whom they could identify or rely upon to be mentors. It made sense that the African American students desired their own organizations which could meet their unique needs and uphold their unique culture, one that was constantly being oppressed through the white supremacy that was institutionalized in Duke culture. Warren Brown, another black student,

⁷⁷ Kitty Bringham, “Black Greeks Emphasize Service, Try to Foster Unity,” *The Chronicle*, February 14th, 1984, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁷⁸ Annette Tucker, “Trend Moving Towards Resegregation.” *Aeolus*, October 17, 1979, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Beverly Norwood, “Meeting asks, what is racism?” *Aeolus*, October 31st, 1979, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁸¹ Rob Hampton, “Ideas for integrating life at Duke,” *The Chronicle*, October 26th, 1979, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

agreed, noting, “Being a minority you automatically establish family type relationships with those of your own color. It is not forced, it is not planned, it just happens.”⁸²

Lattimore explained why the black students banded together:

The black community felt that by joining together we could develop a family and a family tells you we love you for who you are so that when you go to classes and you’re the only black there in 1978 or 1979 or you only have one or two in a class you don’t feel so alone. Nobody said anything to you, but nobody said ‘hi, you’re here, we welcome you.’ You know, that was something that we wanted, but it didn’t happen. We wanted to engage.⁸³

Another reason that black students often chose to “voluntarily segregate” by joining black sororities rather than white ones was social pressure from the black community. Black students who associated too closely with whites faced possible rejection. Dansby explained:

Upon arrival at Duke University black students are faced with a tumultuous existence. They must first make a few identity decisions, whether to form ties with black students or white students. Choosing the latter, the black student runs the risk of rejection by other black students⁸⁴

Another student acknowledged, “Both blacks and whites complain that they are missing knowledge of other cultures, but the reasons for social separation have to do more than anything with peer pressure.”⁸⁵

⁸² Warren Brown, “Like East and West,” *The Chronicle*, April 12th, 1978, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁸³ Caroline Lattimore, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 11th, 2014.

⁸⁴ Teri Dansby, “Trying to cope,” *The Chronicle*, April 12th, 1978, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁸⁵ Warren Brown, “Like East and West,” *The Chronicle*, April 12th, 1978, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

Similarly, social expectations in the white community and a definitive mystique surrounding black sororities kept white students from pledging them. Elaine Hardey, DST President in 1984, explained, “Quite a few whites are interested, but social pressures may keep them from joining.”⁸⁶ She stressed that while DST was open to whites joining she did not feel as though her organization should rethink its commitment as a black women’s support group. Other members of DST expressed the view that whites didn’t join because they drilled Delta history into their organization’s pledges and that this history was one unique to the black community.

Interestingly, there was one white member in black Greek life at Duke in the 1980s; Kathy Hensley was a member of DST. Hensley admitted that she joined because she was, “very impressed with [the Delta’s] unity, their emphasis on service, and the genuine love, not just that [she] saw, but that [she] felt.”⁸⁷ Reinforcing the idea that white sororities were focused solely on social programming, Hensley explained, “When I first came to Duke I was very disillusioned with social life at Duke and I felt white sororities were artificial, emphasizing social events.”⁸⁸ Hensley’s membership in an all black organization certainly wasn’t easy; many questioned her decision and thought she joined just for attention. She said that she was often ostracized, “There [was] pressure just because white people [didn’t] understand the black Greek group.”⁸⁹ However, she emphasized that she was, “so much more than a skin color.”⁹⁰ Wasiolek remembered, “There was a year that I recall where one of the black sororities accepted a white member and it was a big deal. It was a *big* deal.”⁹¹

⁸⁶ Kitty Bringham, “A Personal Resolution,” *The Chronicle*, February 14th, 1984, Box 1, Folder “Clippings (chronological),” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Sue Wasiolek, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 2nd, 2014.

The Criticism of Division⁹²

In addition to the criticism of voluntary segregation, another major criticism of the advent of black sororities on campuses like Duke, where the black population was a relatively small proportion of the total student body, was that the formation of historically black Greek organizations led to a breaking up of the once unified black community. This simplification of the black community as a single monolithic entity was dangerous. Khalif Ford, an African American student at the time, stressed that:

Before 1974 when the first historically black Greek organization came to Duke, the university already had a diverse and distinct black population. This pre-Greek population was not a completely harmonious one. Therefore, the phenomenon that the post-Greek, black community has an inability to coexist happily under a blanket of unity at all times is not at all surprising, nor is it a departure from Duke's history.⁹³

People often recollect that the pre-Greek black community was united, however that was not necessarily the case. The pre-Greek black community was certainly smaller though and this may have led people to conclude that the blacks acted as a single unit before the formation of black Greek life.

Given the diverse interests of the black community it only made sense that a multitude of different black Greek organizations were chartered at Duke. Yet, while each organization “represent[ed] distinct principles and communities, their purpose of providing uplift to the black community as a whole [made] it possible for these various fraternities and sororities to coexist

⁹² Khalif Ford, “An Omega Considers Historically Black Greek Organizations,” *The Talking Drum*, March 30th, 1996, Box 1, Folder “Black fraternities and sororities,” Black history at Duke reference collection.

⁹³ Ibid.

with one another.”⁹⁴ Moreover, Cullins agreed that the coming about of different choices for association did not divide black students. She reflected:

The great thing is being in the organizations didn't divide us. It didn't mean that you had this alliance so you couldn't work with or be with or hang out with people in other organizations. It wasn't that. I know that is the case on some campuses...[having the different organizations] provided a choice.⁹⁵

However, as the number of black Greek organizations grew it became evident that there needed to be some type of organizing body for them to address grievances to, coordinate schedules within, and represent the members of each individual organization.

National Pan-Hellenic Council Development

In addition to having to deal with an intense amount of criticism, the black sororities on Duke's campus had to overcome the obstacle of not having a national organization in place to assist them in their endeavors like the white sororities had. A structure to coordinate the efforts of the historically black Greek organizations was not set up immediately after the arrival of these groups on Duke's campus. Beginning in 1978 all black sororities were involved with the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) and all black fraternities with the Interfraternity Conference (IFC). The NPC is the umbrella organization for twenty-six predominately white sororities.⁹⁶ It ties each of sorority to a larger governing body representative of each sorority. Similarly, the IFC coordinates the activities of and represents the sixteen national fraternities.⁹⁷ Both of these bodies existed on Duke's campus at the time that black sororities and fraternities

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

⁹⁶ "National Panhellenic Conference." National Panhellenic Conference. <https://www.npcwomen.org> (accessed April 3, 2014).

⁹⁷ "North-American Interfraternity Conference." The NIC. <http://www.nicindy.org> (accessed April 3, 2014).

formed. However, black Greek organizations were not treated as equal members within these predominately white groups. Wasiolek explained:

At that time *all* of the sororities were under the NPC and all the fraternities were under the IFC. There was no NPHC. There was no multi-Greek council. There were just the two. The NPC constitution said we don't discriminate according to race or anything. However, if you were an NPC sorority you had full voting rights. If you were not an NPC sorority, like Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta, you were an associate member and you could vote, but you could only vote on things not related to rush and that acknowledged that their rush or intake processes were totally different...But that felt very unfair and it felt very unequal to the black sororities. So we would have [NPC] meetings once a week and many, many times the black sororities just didn't attend. There was so little about those meetings that was relevant to them. So little. I mean they didn't plan the same types of events; they viewed their organizations in such different ways.⁹⁸

The DST president at the time cited her organization's reasons for joining the NPC as an associate members as, "In addition to establishing an inter-Greek relationship with other campus sororities, this moved enabled Lambda Omega to use campus facilities for its activities."⁹⁹ However, it became clear that some other organizing body, one that was more in tune with the needs specific to the nature of the black Greek organizations, was needed on campus.

In the year of 1979 an Ad-Hoc Committee of Minority Greeks was set up. The committee's purpose was to maintain unity and cooperation among the black Greek

⁹⁸ Sue Wasiolek, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 2nd, 2014.

⁹⁹ Lavern Jones, "Delta Sigma Theta at Duke: April 1975-April 1985," Box 3, Folder "Delta Sigma Theta", Office of Minority Affairs Records.

organizations at the time (Delta Sigma Theta, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Omega Psi Phi).¹⁰⁰ In addition, the committee planned to organize a homecoming step show and parties together. In 1981, the Association of Black Greek Organizations was officially founded. Like its predecessor, the Ad-Hoc Committee of Minority Greeks, the Association's purpose was to:

Coordinate, supervise, and execute service and social activities that are of the nature and interest of this association directed toward the betterment of the black community as a whole.¹⁰¹

One representative from each black Greek organization was selected to serve on the council, attend its meetings, and relay the information discussed back to his or her respective organization.

The formation of this organization came after a letter that the administration of Duke received from the Association of Fraternity Advisors in February of 1981.¹⁰² The Association of Fraternity Advisors was a national organization for student affairs professionals involved in the advisement of fraternities and sororities on college campuses. At the association's annual meeting in December of 1980, they discussed a variety of issues pertaining to the Greek community and developed a number of resolutions. Of particular relevance is Resolution #1,

¹⁰⁰ Lavern Jones, "Delta Sigma Theta at Duke: April 1975-April 1985," Box 3, Folder "Delta Sigma Theta", Office of Minority Affairs Records.

¹⁰¹ "Association of Black Greek Organizations Constitution," March 6, 1981, Box 3, Folder "Black Greeks", Office of Minority Affairs Records.

¹⁰² William J. Brennan to Colleague, February 1981, Box 3, Folder "Black Greeks", Office of Minority Affairs Records.

which calls for all sororities and fraternities to be treated in the same manner by campus communities and administrators.¹⁰³ The Association wrote:

Traditionally, the relationship between the campuses and predominately black Greek organizations has been ill defined: most contact has been reactive rather than proactive and campus Greek advisors have tended to focus on the differences rather than the similarities between these organizations and their more ‘traditional’ counterparts.¹⁰⁴

The letter went on to say that it was time for advisors to begin emphasizing the similarities between all Greek organizations to:

Ensure that predominately black fraternities and sororities enjoy the same quality of support and advising that historically has been provided to the predominately white sororities and fraternities.¹⁰⁵

Subsequent to the formation of the Association of Black Greek organization, more thought was given to establishing a Black Panhellenic Council at Duke. At this point, the historically black sororities were members of the National Pan-hellenic Council (NPHC) but no NPHC chapter existed at Duke. The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) is the coordinating body of the nine historically African American sororities and fraternities nationwide. In a letter to Dr. Robert Bryant, the Acting Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, from Dr. Caroline Lattimore, the Dean of Minority Affairs, on October 8, 1981, she noted:

¹⁰³ “Association of Fraternity Advisors Resolution #1,” December 1980, Box 3, Folder “Black Greeks”, Office of Minority Affairs Records.

¹⁰⁴ William J. Brennan to Colleague, February 1981, Box 3, Folder “Black Greeks”, Office of Minority Affairs Records.

¹⁰⁵ “Association of Fraternity Advisors Resolution #1,” December 1980, Box 3, Folder “Black Greeks”, Office of Minority Affairs Records.

We are still conducting a series of discussions on the pros and cons of establishing a Black Panhellenic Council here at Duke. The discussions have been held with the administrators and students and at this point, we have not yet reached any definite conclusions.¹⁰⁶

She went on to invite Dr. Bryant to a meeting about the Black Panhellenic Council at which he had the opportunity to share his insights about what having a Black Panhellenic Council at Duke would mean.

Despite the discussions as to whether or not to bring an NPHC chapter to Duke's campus, it was not until the spring of 1995 that this actually occurred. Before the spring of 1995, all of the University's historically black Greek organizations continued to be run by the Association of Black Greek Organizations. While this body proved to be important, black sororities and fraternities still suffered from a lack of organization. The Association lacked the national character and basic structure of the NPHC. Members' of historically black-Greek organizations expressed growing concerns that the Association could not meet their needs. This led to the 1995 initiation of the Duke chapter of the NPHC.¹⁰⁷

Wasiolek spoke to the reactions of the administration to the development of an NPHC chapter at Duke. She recalled:

Bill Griffith [Dean of Student Affairs] will tell you that he was completely and totally opposed to it...he believed that the Greek organizations had more in common than they were different and that dividing them would racialize even more their organizations. So he was not a fan. And he was one of my mentors and

¹⁰⁶ Caroline L. Lattimore to Dr. Robert Bryant, October 8, 1981, Box 3, Folder "Black Greeks", Office of Minority Affairs Records.

¹⁰⁷ Marsha Johnson, "Group provides minority forum," October 3, 1996, *The Chronicle*.

his thoughts influenced me greatly so I was glad I was not here [she was at law school] because I don't know that I would have been a proponent.¹⁰⁸

Yet, despite the administration's uneasiness with the advent of the NPHC chapter at Duke, it proved to be a very positive change for the black Greeks on campus. The NPHC provided black sororities with a source of guidance and oversight that they had before lacked and helped them to establish further credibility on Duke's campus.

Role of Black Greek Letter Organizations In Members' Lives

To overcome the overwhelming sense of isolation, the institutionalized white supremacy, the criticism from the majority community, and the lack of a national governing structure, black sorority members became incredibly close, life-long sisters. The black sororities played a critical role in the lives of their members at a time when Duke was such a challenging environment for black students to succeed in. By sticking together, black undergraduate women at Duke found a way to not only to survive, but also to prosper. Cullins explained many of the benefits of membership:

We were very excited. It was an opportunity for leadership. The sororities granted an instant community. It was a way to know Durham and to be in contact with the graduate chapter because they continued to advise the organization. Mainly, we just had a lot of fun. It did a lot to ameliorate the isolation that I would say we felt in general. There was that opportunity to belong that was really missing and the opportunity for mentorship that was really just a vacuum at the time we were [at Duke].¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Sue Wasiolek, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 2nd, 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

However, Cullins also pointed out that she didn't believe black students who didn't join a Greek organization were disadvantaged or missing out. She illustrated:

I think [Alpha Kappa Alpha] was an opportunity for leadership in the community and a group of friends and people who had your best interest in mind. And people find that in many ways so I don't know that people who weren't in the organization lacked anything. It was what we felt we needed to do and that made meaning for the group of us and then other people chose to do other things.¹¹⁰

But, membership in a black sorority for a black woman certainly could be helpful in securing for that woman a network of support because race relations on campus remained troubled. Cullins attested:

I mean people were cordial, but it had its moments. The girl across the hall from us had a picture of Lester Maddox on her wall, the very racist governor of Georgia... I won't forget when the girl across the hall made a phone call to her dad and said 'Daddy, there are two colored girls across the hallway from me. What should I do?'¹¹¹

And in addition to helping black women thrive during their undergraduate years at Duke, membership in a sorority provided them with an opportunity for continued support and sisterhood throughout their entire lives. Caroline Lattimore, an AKA member extremely involved without the organization's leadership, explained, "AKA to me has been a program that has helped me with my goals in life."¹¹² The advent of black sororities at Duke offered black undergraduate women a support network for life.

¹¹⁰ Maureen Cullins, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 3rd, 2014.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Caroline Lattimore, interview by author, Durham, NC, April 11th, 2014.

Conclusion

The historically black sororities of AKA and DST did not appear on Duke's campus overnight. The process of chartering these organizations at the University was a slow one that required an immense amount of effort on behalf of the founding members of these organizations and a supportive University administration. However, since their establishment, the role of AKA and DST on Duke's campus has been a critical one. The creation of black sororities provided undergraduate African American women with an opportunity to strengthen their identity on campus, a support network to help them navigate the white supremacy, which characterized Duke's culture, and newfound opportunities for leadership and mentorship. Association with AKA or DST helped black women to persevere at an institution at which they were an extreme minority. While the formation of these sororities may not have been significant to the majority campus population, AKA's and DST's establishment at Duke was pivotal in enhancing the college experience of these organizations' members. Although the black sororities did not solve all of the problems that African American women at Duke had to face as the University endeavored to shed its identity as a racist institution, the sororities did offer their members a supportive community so that they did not feel as though they were struggling alone. By banding together, black sorority members were able to overcome the many challenges that life at Duke presented them with to develop into successful college graduates.