

This document appeared in the Journal of the Research Association of Minority Professors.

**BLACK STUDENT UNIONS AT  
SELECTED COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

ROGER L. PULLIAM

*Assistant Vice President  
Chancellor of Academic Support Services and  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater*

RICHARD MCGREGORY, JR.

*Director of McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program Scholar  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater*

GOLDY BROWN III

*Undergraduate Research Scholar  
McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program Scholar  
Undergraduate Research Program  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater*

**Abstract.** *The literature has numerous citations on how officials find it useful and often necessary to work through student organizations and leaders in order to mold student opinion along the lines of administrative directives. Dormitories, social clubs, fraternities and sororities shaped the views and conduct of students. These groups and others at black colleges helped to maintain the system of discipline (Fisk University Bulletin, June, 1940). This study examined the evolution of African-American student organizations on college campuses and the role they play in students' achievement. The results of this study are based upon a survey conducted with Black Student Unions at selected colleges and universities, which are included in this article.*

**The Historical Black College Life**

During the early twentieth century, with the decline of northern missionary influence, fraternities and sororities gained official acceptance to become a regular feature of extracurricular life at many black colleges and universities. Fraternities and sororities were the first student initiated and controlled extracurricular organizations to appear at the black colleges and universities. For that reason, it is necessary to examine their operation purpose at some length. Their development represented a significant departure from most of the extracurricular student organizations that preceded them at black institutions of higher education. Fraternities and sororities have possessed a high level of organization and discipline. This gave them a measure of influence over student government at the black college that far exceeded that of independent students. They controlled student government by controlling their own members. Through careful scrutiny and direction, fraternities and sororities controlled behavior

among their members, required their involvement in campus politics, and set the political agenda among student.

## **COMMITMENT TO EDUCATE AFRICAN-AMERICANS**

Bakke, Defunis, and other officials emerged with significant political support to challenge programs that resulted from the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. One memorable occasion was when Spiro Agnew, Richard Nixon's Vice President, made a speech in Iowa signaling the country's retreat from the previous commitment to educating African-American college students. Overnight, this speech echoed a policy change from the Richard Nixon administration, which was followed by a subsequent administrative retreat from a well-articulated vision for higher education to educate what was commonly known as "one third of the nation".

Programs such as pre-college experiences and college preparatory courses play a role in assuring African-American students' higher education. Since its inception with the Higher Education Act of 1965, the federal TRIO programs remain the greatest and most extensive support of African-American student achievement throughout the country. It's evolution has gone from an Upward Bound Program that serves grades 9-12 to that of an Educational Talent Search Program that serves students in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade up to high school drop-outs and college drop-outs. A further enhancement of the programs was the Educational Opportunities Centers (EOC), which addresses the need for adults to enroll in college. Conversely, the EOC had the potential of serving some of the parents of students that are enrolled in the Upward Bound Program and Educational Talent Search. A final enhancement and the most attractive one to institutions has been the McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, which prepares students to earn Ph.D.'s and enter the professorate.

The Department of Public Instruction, State of Wisconsin, has funded an array of pre-college programs since 1985. These pre-college programs have expanded to include academic and career related curriculums. The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater established the Office of Pre-College Programs in the fall of 1985. This office now combines the Upward Bound Program, Educational Talent Search, Pre-College Summer Residential Camps, Fall/Spring ACT Seminars, and Fall/Spring Saturday College Programs.

## **Method**

A study was conducted to examine the evolution of African-American student organizations on college campuses and the role they play in students' achievement. A total of 109 schools from thirty-six (36) different states responded to the survey of the study. The respondents to the survey were split between Black Student Union officers, faculty/staff advisors, and other university officials. This balance indicated a reason to believe that the total responsibility for the Black Student Union is shared. A summary of respondents is noted in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE 1.

Status of Survey Respondents

Person	Ratio	Percentage
President	26/109	23.8%
Other officers	6/109	5.5%
Faculty/Staff Advisor	39/109	35.8%
Unidentified Person	38/109	34.9%

TABLE 2.

Type of Advisor

Type	Ratio	Percentage
Faculty	26/92	28.3%
Staff	66/92	71.7%

**Results and Findings**

The data in Table 2 indicates that staff members are more likely to be advisors than faculty members. African-Americans are generally hired as staff rather than faculty. A significant number of African-American professionals at predominately white institutions are in student affairs. Institutions continue to be remiss in not promoting African-American staff through the faculty ranks, especially since they are not actively recruited as faculty.

It varies from campus to campus whether the advisor is a staff or faculty member. There is no compelling reason why one should be selected over another. Moreover, the chief issue to keep in mind is the resourcefulness and commitment of the person in this position. The advisor should have the ability to keep students on task and focused with a comprehensive plan.

The issue of the advisor to the Black Student Union leads to other faculty and staff members having designated roles without the time commitment of the advisor. For example, faculty members may become ad hoc advisors with the responsibility of advising students relative to the African-American Heritage Celebration, African-American Student Investment Club, Study Abroad Forum, or Spring Trip.

There is no established number of participants that makes an active Black Student Union. The level of activity in the Black Student Union could be predicated on the

number of African-Americans enrolled in a given institution and the issues that present themselves during the school year.

The data from the responding institutions confirms a cross section of active participants. The percentage of active members does not have to increase or decrease with greater enrollment. However, a Black Student Union with a very large enrollment and little coordination could lead to more frustration than a Black Student Union with a small enrollment and a few foot soldiers.

The survey respondents spanned a cross-section of African-Americans at predominately white, small, medium, and large schools. Based on the responses received from the participating institutions, it was revealed that 63.3% of the African-American students actively participated in the Black Student Union.

The level of participation by students in the BSU is closely allied to the Black Student Union’s agenda. If there is no agenda that reflects the needs of students, members of the BSU executive committee will experience a high level of frustration. The BSU must establish an agenda that has a political, social, economic, religious, and cultural focus. This should enable the BSU to remain current.

Participation in Black Student Unions fluctuates. This up and down syndrome tends to occur at the beginning of the school year when everyone is excited to see each other, there are new freshmen “on the yard”, and people have good experiences during their brief absences from campus. The established African-American History Month is a high point for the BSU. Other than the African-American History Month, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Event is the most prevalent of events and activities at predominately white institutions. As noted in the survey, the MLK Commemorative Event is held at over 85% of the institutions and African-American History Month is held at over 97% of the schools.

TABLE 3

Campus Has African-American History Month

Yes/No	Ratio	Percentage
Yes	105/108	97.2%
No	3/108	2.8%

TABLE 4.

Campus Has Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Event

Yes/No	Ratio	Percentage
Yes	86/101	85.1%
No	15/101	14.9%

One-fourth or 25% of campuses surveyed had African-American Cultural Centers. The campuses that did not have one, noted that there were other activities sponsored that more than made up for the lack of an African-American Cultural Center.

African-American participation in pre-college summer programs is a positive activity. 52% of respondents said pre-college students were actively engaged in a summer program at their respective institution. The same can be said of college transition programs, which are sponsored by 48% of the institutions. Interacting with current students, faculty, and staff could decrease the level of anxiety that students might have about entering college. Students should be recruited indirectly to the campus through the pre-college programs as early as 6<sup>th</sup> grade. These programs should also be residential if at all possible.

Reunion activities for African-American alumni are prevalent at approximately 50% of the institutions. This is reflective of the fact that African-Americans are enrolling and graduating from these institutions at a respectful level. The reunion of African-American alumni has many returns for the campus community. These returns come in the form of professional role models, career modes, and sponsorship of scholarships. Reunions provide the university an opportunity to monitor the growth of alumni who are contributors to campus enrollment and fund raising.

The Gospel Choir at predominately white institutions is popular and visible at approximately 63% of the campuses responding to the survey. The Gospel Choir is an excellent recruitment and retention tool for campus. Some gospel choirs offer academic credit and classroom instruction by teaching faculty. Others are consistent with the operational structure of student organizations.

One prevalent question that has arisen with the Gospel Choir is that it requires a significant amount of students' time, which limits their involvement in other campus events. Academic credit can improve the quality of the Gospel Choir. It can be very complimentary to the music department. A significant number of participants in the choir could be music majors and minors and the gospel choir could integrate the university choir, university band, and other groups into its campus concerts.

Gospel Choirs are challenged to include the following activities on their annual calendar of events:

1. Inviting campus musical groups to be a part of their programs.
2. Hosting at least one of their major programs in the off-campus community church.
3. Inviting a Historically Black College choir to campus periodically.
4. Performing at a Historically Black College campus periodically, especially during Spring Break.
5. Visiting urban communities and schools where the students come from.

The survey notes that 68% of Black Student Unions are significantly involved in leadership conferences. Less than one quarter of Black Student Unions are aware of

and/or are participants in the National Black Graduate Student Conference or other professional and pre-professional conferences. The survey revealed that Black Student Unions only have a 22.3% rate of involvement and participation in professional or pre-professional conferences.

Unlike the survey results, 22% of students participate in National Black Graduate Student Conferences or other professional and pre-professional conferences; African-American students have become active in presenting papers at conferences. Fifty-seven percent of African-American students present papers at conferences. These presentations are taking place at multicultural leadership conferences more so than at professional and pre-professional conferences.

TABLE 5.

African-American Students Presenting Papers At Conferences

Yes/No	Ratio	Percentage
Yes	46/108	42.6%
No	62/108	57.4%

African-American students must be targeted for inclusion into undergraduate research activities, which have financial incentives for students to conduct practical and applied research with a faculty mentor.

The National Black Graduate Student Conference is highly recommended for African-American students who wish to network with graduate students and present professional papers. Students are also encouraged to work collaboratively with mentors and to identify other professional conferences where they could present papers and posters. The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, which encourages students to earn a Ph.D. and pursue the professorate, has been in existence for nine years. Institutions are encouraged to secure funding to implement a McNair Program or a reasonable facsimile.

Almost 28% of the responding institutions indicate that African-American students have been active participants in study abroad programs. Study abroad activities are expanding beyond private institutions into the domain of public institutions.

A study abroad experience can assist student retention. Each campus should have goals and objectives for getting a number and percentage of students to have a study abroad experience. These experiences might be offered by an academic department on a semester basis or selected trips that vary from a week or two weeks during the summer, semester break, and/or spring break. These trips may also be for credit, independent study, or non-credit.

African-American cultural ensembles were visible and active at 42% of the campuses. These ensembles are generally noted as being directly or indirectly related to the Gospel Choir and/or multicultural centers.

The need for faculty members of color extends beyond that “one” that is usually present on campus, because (like other communities) there is also unity and diversity within the African-American community. Therefore, it is obvious that some African-American faculty members might be further removed from serving as an advocate for African-American students than others.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The presence of African-American faculty members is crucial to the success of students and faculty in the university community. The university community is the beneficiary of their presence, perspectives, and experiences. The African-American students gain similar benefits plus assurances that come with having faculty members who can articulate their views within the academic arena.

Recruitment programs such as “Fridays on Campus” and “Weekends on Campus” are appropriate steps to giving students an understanding of the campus environment and assisting them in their ultimate transition from home to college. The Upward Bound Program has pioneered the concept of college transition. These models have been the basis for campuses sponsoring college transition programs independently of federal funding.

Financial Aid is a determining factor as to whether or not a student elects to attend a university. Many campuses have gone beyond the traditional issue of need-based awards to move within the realm of academic merit. The history of African-Americans in higher education reveals that they have the numbers and wealth to be a viable force in establishing and endowing scholarships in proportion to their presence on college campuses. It is difficult to find a given campus that has not produced a core group of African-Americans of stature in the professional world. It would be remiss if the campuses did not move forward and encourage these individuals to give collective and individual gifts to the campus community.

Specific challenges for meeting the academic needs of African-Americans will be based upon the academic strength of students and on their economic status. The growing pool of multicultural individuals makes it mandatory that students are recruited from a broader perspective than that of the past. Programs and services available for these students will be more institutionalized and integrated into the academic network.

Given the limitations that will likely be placed on race-based scholarships in the future, we envision successful African-American professionals and alumni taking the initiative to provide students support for higher education external to universities. This support will come in the form of churches, businesses, fraternities and sororities,

lodges, and other African-American institutions. This is consistent with the success that has been experienced by other ethnic groups.

The success of African-Americans in the public sector, the private sector, and the not for profit arena will also be a determining factor in their success in higher education. For example, as elected or appointed officials, there are mandates by which individuals are able to use their authority based upon their perception of issues without being limited to another person's biases and arbitrary restrictions.

## References

- Bacote, Clarence M. (1969). The Story of Atlanta University. A Century of Service, 1865-1965. Atlanta, GA.
- Bayer, A. and Boruch, R. (1969). The Black Student in American Colleges. ACE Research Reports, Vol. 4 (Washington D.C. American Council on Education).
- Fisk University Bullentin (1940). Vol. 14, No.4, p. 20
- The Fisk Herald (1988). Vol. V, No. 9, p. 7
- Graham, Edward K. (1969). The Hampton Institute strike of 1927: a case study in student protest. American Scholar. Volume 36.
- Horowitz, Helen L. (1987). Campus life: Undergraduate cultures from the end of eighteenth century to present. Alfred A Kopf Inc. New York, p. 233.
- Jones, M.D. and Richard, J.M. (1990). Talladega College: The first century. Tuscaloosa, Alabama Press.
- Logan, Rayford W. (1969). Howard University, New York University Press, New York, New York, p. 218.
- McGinnis, J. (1988). A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University, pp. 166.
- Morton, R. (1941). Finding a Way Out, pp. 111-119. Garden City NJ: Double Day.
- Wilson, William J. (1978). The Declining Significance of Race, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois.
- Wolters, Raymond (1975). The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920's, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, p. 276.
- Woolfolk, G. (1962). Prairie View: A study in public conscience. New York, New York: Pageant Press.

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Peace In The Streets: Breaking The Cycle of Gang Violence**

**Arturo Hernandez (1998). Child Welfare League of America.  
Washington, D.C. pp. 197, \$22.00, ISBN O-87868-692-4.  
Reviewed By Geary Newhouse, Associate Professor  
Counseling, Texas Southern University**

Arturo Hernandez, the author of *Peace in the Streets: Breaking the Cycle of Gang Violence* began working with gang members in his early teens when he joined a detention ministry so he could visit friends in juvenile hall. Since then, he has worked as a public school teacher, a school guidance counselor, a family therapist, and a consultant on juvenile delinquency and youth gang intervention, and has founded two experimental schools for gang-involved youth. He is completing a doctoral degree in educational psychology.

*Peace in the Streets* is a compelling true-life story of gang life transformed in South Central Los Angeles, and a practical guide to parents, teachers, and communities. The author gives a moving account of gang-involved youth, and recommends that communities' efforts to reclaim these children must involve their parents. *Peace in the Streets* reminds us that gang members are our children; it gives an alternative, a way to bring our children back from self-destruction.

In the first half of the book, a difficult but realistic and permanent solution to our nation's gang problem is given. The author struck an agreement with the parents and teenagers of two of the oldest neighborhood gangs in East and South Central Los Angeles. The deal created a one-room schoolhouse, where the author became the teacher of 30 gang members. The youngest student was 13; the oldest was almost 20. Both the gang members and their parents knew that the author had no teaching credentials or college degree, he was 22, and that school would operate on only a few hundred dollars a month. They had an idea that they believed in; an idea about what they could do as a neighborhood school raising neighborhood children. To that idea they added some common sense, a lot of caring, and the help of friends and neighbors to accomplish their goal.

The gang members in this school had long histories of truancy, violence, crime, and addiction. Yet for one year, not one student was arrested, was in danger of dropping out, or particularly in lethal violence. Surprisingly, this result was not that difficult to achieve.

The second half of the book is based on the author's experience with gangs in Prima-Maricopa Indian Community on the Salt River Reservation, Arizona. The author observed a community take collective responsibility for the problems of its youth. In this book the author moved the dialogue on the gang problem away from one of a war on children to a constructive conversation in which the community decided to heal its difficult children. An organization of adult and teen volunteers was organized from

the pulpit by the priest. Families in the parish volunteered to be mentors to boys and girls in the neighborhood who would soon be released from incarceration. The teens who volunteered served as a peer support group.

The author noted that most gang members have parents who love them. That is seldom the problem. But some children need help beyond what a loving parent can offer. The gang members became involved in a variety of activities (clubs, field trips, tutoring, etc.) and the adults took time with them. Gang members were placed in positive circumstances, the very bright ones were encouraged to work toward scholarships in programs for gifted students, the ones with learning disabilities received the help they needed, some who were bored were offered alternative education programs, the emotionally taxed and addicted had access to counseling, and the low-income students were offered some options to combine school with work.

In addition to modifying gang behavior, the author sought help from therapists, interns, student teachers from USC, and officers from the L.A. Police Department who patrolled the local area and complemented gang members on their progress. Interestingly, most of the gang kids wanted to be police officers when they grew up. The police sponsored a Police Explorers group, a type of scout troop. Field trips were taken, and gang members helped out at the station. Other organizations helped as well to encourage gang members to deviate from their ways. Cooperative parents and willing community members, employers, judges, parents, the educators, the researchers, the ministers, the police officers, the coaches: became a village to each other with a sense of common purpose.

Listed below are eight steps the author offers that communities can take to eliminate the formation of gangs. He indicates that the gang problem is a mental health issue, a child-raising issue, and an educational issue.

- Step 1: The Community Affirms all its Children
- Step 2: The Children's Advocate and the Child-Raising Community
- Step 3: Creating and Supporting Transformative Schools
- Step 4: Parents as Partners, Not Patients
- Step 5: Supporting Transitions Between Institutions
- Step 6: Identifying Disabilities
- Step 7: Something to Care About and Take Pride In.
- Step 8: Promoting Recovery from Addictions

This book is a penetrating and insightful guide on what to do about youth and violence. Gang youth can be saved. Hernandez makes his points clear with vivid examples from real life experiences. This book is necessary to be read by anyone who is serious about personal transformation and peace in our communities.