

## **Black Excellence and Community: The Divine Nine at Frostburg State University**

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### **Abstract**

Divine Nine fraternities and sororities have given thousands of black students a sense of support and community while attending college and beyond. This review dives into the history of these organizations at Frostburg State University. The purpose of our study is to discover how these organizations started at Frostburg State and how they impacted the community. Throughout our research process, we interviewed faculty members of such organizations inquiring about their experiences and the impact the organization had on their lives. We also used other resources such as peer-reviewed journals and historical archives. This review aims to shine a light on the experiences of black students attending a predominantly white institution.

### **Introduction**

Over the 125 years of Frostburg State University, the black student community has evolved into the excellence seen today. Many of the pioneers that aided and advocated for change within the university were members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), also known as ‘The Divine Nine’. The fraternities and sororities that are a part of the organization here on campus are Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. The fraternities and sororities that are a part of the National Pan-Hellenic Council are Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc. The NPHC was founded at Howard University in Washington D.C. Although the NPHC was founded in Washington D.C. in 1930, each of the fraternities and sororities were founded on different campuses in different years. The earliest was Alpha Phi Alpha which was founded at Cornell University in 1906 and the latest was Iota Phi Theta which was founded in 1963 at Morgan State University. When the National Pan-Hellenic Council was founded on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1930, its mission was to uphold the traditions and conducts of its fraternity/sorority while also uplifting the entire community of Frostburg as a whole. The chapters were set up to create leadership opportunities, educational programming, and training for their members. Their optimism and perseverance have inspired generations. Today, the divine nine chapters at Frostburg State have won numerous awards for their academic excellence and philanthropy. The purpose of our study is to discover how the National Pan-Hellenic Conference became established at Frostburg State and the overall impact of the organization on the black experience at the university. Some questions that guided our research are: What was the impact of the Divine Nine on the black student experience at Frostburg? What are the necessary steps to bringing a new chapter to campus?

### **Methods**

Our team conducted interviews with various members and associates of Divine Nine faculty members located at Frostburg State University. These members included Isaiah Ewing (Secretary of Kappa Beta Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma), Shawn Jones (Advisor of Iota Phi Theta and Kappa Alpha Psi, and Kappa Alumni), and Jada Malone (Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated member). To conduct these interviews team member Javon Blackmon completed a course to become IRB certified. Each interviewee was asked 7 questions about the history and standing of Divine 9 at Frostburg State University. Some of those questions include:

1. How long have you been affiliated?
2. What drew you towards your organization?
3. What are your favorite parts about being a part of a D9?
4. Do you have any D9s in your family?
5. How did you find out about D9s?
6. What is your organizations' History on Frostburg Campus?
7. Do you feel accepted on this campus?

Along with interviews, our team utilized the Dr. David M. Gillespi collections office, which gave us access to the Black Student Union Magazine *the Unity Line*, the Frostburg State University Yearbook *the Nemacolin*, and the collection of Pansye S. Atkinson. While in the special collections office, we searched through campus event folders, pictures, and numerous files relevant to our topic and took pictures. We also utilized the National Pan-Hellenic Conference webpage on the Frostburg website. Other sources, such as Google Scholar and the Lewis J. Ort Library were used as a guide through our research process. We accessed these resources by typing in keywords such as 'Divine 9' into the search engines discussed. We used these methods to help us understand and explain the course concepts of fraternal/ethnic societies and clubs along with cultural enclaves.

At the library, we first looked through the yearbooks just to see what was in there to see if there were any pictures or text that would point in the direction we were trying to go in. We wanted to share the black excellence and community here at Frostburg. Out of the yearbooks, we found that Black Greek life did not start showing up until about 1977 until the most recent we looked at was 1988. We focused on any pictures that showed what Black Greek life got into and if they ever had any special events that we could show. Present-day Black Greek life will have stroll competitions in which they would perform their specific steps and strolls against one another, and we also have probates which are when the organization introduces their new members to the student body. A lot of students come out to those events to support so we wanted to see if there were any early showings in the yearbooks. Unfortunately, we did not find any in the yearbooks, but we were still able to take pictures to show the different Divine nines on campus through the years.

Fraternal/ethnic societies and clubs are associations formed by individuals who share common interests, professions, or ethnic backgrounds. These groups are characterized by a sense of friendship, mutual support, and camaraderie among their members. They provide a platform for

people to connect with others who share similar passions or cultural heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and community. Cultural enclaves refer to communities where a particular ethnicity is highly concentrated and that maintain a strong sense of ethnic or national identity. These enclaves serve as spaces where individuals from the same cultural background come together. The way that our topic, the divine 9, relates to cultural enclaves has been seen here in Frostburg for a while. When speaking to some of the interviewees, they mentioned how some of their members would live together in suites (quads) in the residence halls. By living together, members of the Divine 9 fraternities and sororities can create a microcosm of their cultural enclave within the campus community. It offers a space where they can celebrate their heritage, exchange ideas, and support one another academically, socially, and emotionally. This living arrangement can also help promote visibility and raise awareness about the rich cultural traditions and contributions of the Divine 9 organizations within the larger campus community.

## **Results**

Our team sought to research the impact that Divine 9 organizations had on the experience of black students at a predominantly white institution (PWI). We found a new more intimate perspective of these organizations while analyzing the responses from our interviews. When asked “What drew you towards your org?” Most interviewees described either some type of lineage from their family members or relatives, or they were inspired by their presence and way of unity. Isaiah Ewing stated, “Growing up I was always the only child, so I never really had siblings growing up or an older figure to really be a role model for me. When I came to Frostburg, the Sigmas (Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc.) came to me with open arms. They never tried to force me to join their organization but instead tried to help me get recognition on campus by introducing me to important people, helping me join other organizations, and just overall getting me more involved on campus.” Jada Malone stated, “What drew me to this sorority was the real work that was being done within it, showing the campus that they really fulfilled their sorority principles, also because the women on this campus at the time carried themselves as finer women and didn’t make it seem like they were above anyone else.” When asked what their favorite parts are about being in the Divine 9 interviewees credited the life-long connections and sisterhood/brotherhood they gained and experienced since joining. Ewing stated “The family aspect of everything and just the unity and all the connections it brings. I’ve gotten job opportunities simply just by wearing my letters out in public. I also love the fellowship whether that be stroll competitions, cookouts, gatherings, etc. It’s all love at the end of the day.” Another interviewee Shawn Jones also felt that his connections made while being a Kappa (Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc.) are one of the greatest benefits of membership.

Our team also researched the correct procedure for starting a new chapter on campus. The first step is to get approved by the State Director of the desired organization at the university and national level for the new member education program. The second step is recruiting members by conducting a number of interest meetings. After recruitment, the chapter must complete the Intake Petition Form and submit it to the Assistant Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life. The Intake Petition is an outline of their new member program along with a calendar of events and practices

including locations. The fourth step is for members of the chapter to attend the anti-hazing program sponsored by the university. There is a fee of \$5 for each member due two weeks after initiation. The final step is completing The New Member Celebration Show Agreement Contract. After those procedures are all completed, the chapter has the opportunity to put on a show on campus to celebrate the initiation of new members. The show is called a probate. Each probate is different from one other, but they usually consist of reciting the Greek alphabet in order, reciting the founders and where the organization was founded, and even the names of previous classes of the specific chapter.

With some further research, we were able to find out that one of the divine 9 fraternities, Alpha Phi Alpha, will be returning in the upcoming years as they were voted to be eligible to return to campus. There has also been word that Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. Will be making a potential return to the campus in the '23-'24 school year. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. is the first intercollegiate Greek-letter organization founded for African Americans. Similarly, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Is the first Greek-letter organization established, in 1908, by African American college women.

### **Discussion**

Community is very important as a freshman leaving home for the first time or even as a non-traditional student. When you are in a space filled with people who understand, support you, and are working towards the same goals as yourself it takes off a little bit of weighted loneliness.

Based on our team's research and interviews, the Divine 9 organizations have made a positive impact on the Black student experience at Frostburg State University. Our interviewees stated that they felt more accepted on campus after joining, giving a sense of community or "home away from home". Overwhelmingly, they expressed the want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, to build a community of people around them to help build not only themselves up but others as well, socially and academically. Lanisha R Reese wrote in the November-January 1995-96 issue of *the Unity Line*, "Black Greek organizations have much to offer in the way of leadership, brother and sisterhood, and academic excellence." The results turned out to be what we thought they would be. The community and relationships that Divine 9 build amongst students here truly does create that safe space for them. That safe space allows those students to make an impact on campus whether they are doing service events with their brothers or sisters or if they are conducting a community philanthropy event.

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