

Developing a Black Student-Led Support Infrastructure at Wayne State University, a Predominantly White Institution

Kamali A. Clora*, Miles N. Reuben†, and Kenya Swanson‡

In 2018, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) named Wayne State University (WSU) the nation's fastest-improving university for graduation rates with an increase from 26% to 47% between 2011 and 2017. This growth was influenced by programs and organizations focused on narrowing the student population achievement gap, including men of color. Since 2016, WSU has utilized a culturally competent approach to support Black male students. The approach highlighted here is The Brotherhood, a student-led organization geared toward undergraduate Black men. As part of the larger initiative to increase graduation rates, this organization concentrates on social action and student engagement while encompassing facets of academic, social, and emotional wellness. We conducted a study to obtain quantitative and qualitative data about this organization's potential impact on Black male undergraduate students. Our results suggest that WSU Black males participating in The Brotherhood have performed better academically than other Black WSU students in their cohort. Additionally, we found that these members learned critical transferable skills applicable to their career fields. Here we describe the fundamental components of The Brotherhood that are attributed to these findings.

Keywords

African American graduation rates • Student success • Student-led • predominately white institution • cultural competence • equitable education

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Conflicts of interest:

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.



Introduction

Wayne State University's (WSU) rise as a national model for student success reached a new milestone in May 2020, when its six-year graduation rate surpassed its goal of 50% more than a year before completion of its "Distinctively Wayne State" strategic plan (Taylor, 2020). This strategic plan focused on addressing the overall low graduation rate at WSU. More importantly, the plan developed a set of programming to alleviate the achievement gaps among students. Black students have the lowest graduation rates at WSU, with a six-year graduation rate of 34.6%. However, this percentage has increased nearly five times as much over the past decade. This is largely due to the number of culturally tailored programming implemented in the previous six years. All students have access to this programming as WSU is labeled as a Proposition 2 institution by the State of Michigan, meaning all university-funded programs are open to all students. Some programs are specifically tailored toward Black men, which included Warrior VIP and The Network. These programs foster community belonging for students through academic support and professional development. This also includes the Office of Multi-cultural Student Engagement, which offers resources centered on diversity and inclusion. The programming component studied in this project is The Brotherhood, specifically its impact on the student success of Black male undergraduates at WSU. The Brotherhood is a student-led organization that arose in 2017 from the Black student leadership created in spaces like Warrior VIP and The Network. Through empowerment, identity, mentoring, and community, The Brotherhood aims to help minority males toward academic success and learn leadership skills for their future careers. Initially, The Brotherhood intended to be a safe space for undergraduate Black men to commune and develop accountability among themselves. After establishing built relationships within the group, other aspects like academic growth and professional development followed to ensure members were fully supported in their pursuit of a degree at WSU. These efforts have been recognized throughout the university, with The Brotherhood receiving over \$23,000 of program funding from 2018 to 2020. With this study, we ask: has The Brotherhood contributed to the student success of undergraduate Black men at WSU? This article analyzes the efforts of The Brotherhood and its contributions to the Black student support infrastructure at WSU. Our goal is to present the results and concepts gleaned from the study as best practices for consideration at other institutions and their needs for supporting Black men. This study provides key takeaways shown by data to support undergraduate Black men in higher education.

Methods

Population

Thirty Brotherhood participants were selected to evaluate the impact of this organization on students. This chosen sample size was the total population of all Brotherhood members because including all cohorts from 2017 to 2019 in this study would allow us to gather accurate results. Participants for this study were considered eligible under the following criteria:

- Brotherhood membership
- Identify as a Black male

- A WSU undergraduate student at the time of Brotherhood membership
- 18 years of age or older

Requirements for Brotherhood membership consisted of students maintaining or increasing toward a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.50 or above. Additionally, students needed to attend three academic events and two social events sponsored by The Brotherhood per semester. Brotherhood events were curated for Black undergraduate men and were developed by the collective interest of its members, but all students were welcome to attend.

Protocol

The research staff completed the informed consent process as approved by WSU's institutional review board. Qualitative and quantitative data will be gathered from 30 members of The Brotherhood through an anonymous 10-question Qualtrics survey completed by participants. The survey will gather data on The Brotherhood's core objectives: professional development, academic success, and community belonging. The survey will also ask students to self-report their current or previous undergraduate GPA at Wayne State University. Current undergraduate student Kamali Clora will complete all data collection procedures under faculty mentor Kenya Swanson. These procedures will take place only online through email and Qualtrics. The Qualtrics survey will be anonymous and will not record any identifiable information. The Brotherhood membership roster and email information will be available only to Kamali Clora and Kenya Maxey. No participant information will be shared with anyone except the shared research team, nor will students be exposed to any physical or psychological harm. This project did not require follow-up procedures with participants, and all participants have access to the reported findings.

Timeline

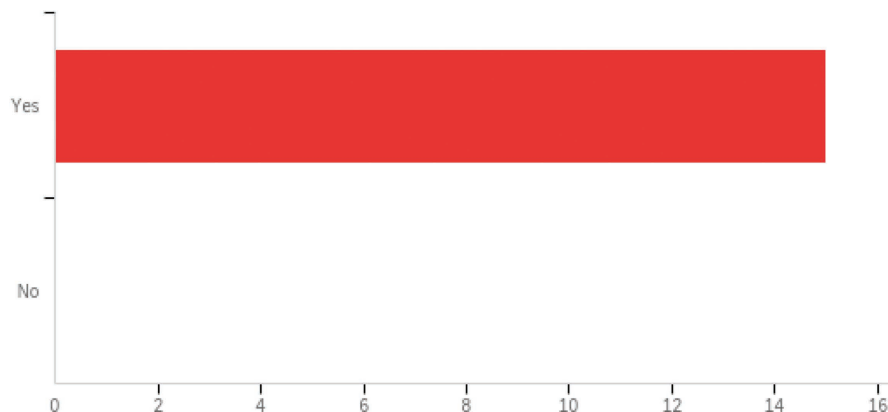
On Monday, September 27, 2021, Kamali Clora emailed the 30 Brotherhood members a voluntary 10-question Qualtrics survey to complete. This survey was anonymous and provided information that helped understand the impact The Brotherhood had on undergraduate Black males at WSU. Students had two weeks to complete this survey if they chose to do so. Participants were told that they may withdraw at any time and that the study posed no psychological or physical harm. Moreover, they received an adult research information sheet (Appendix A) and a detailed research protocol. This provided documentation of participant rights and transparency of study procedures. The survey data was collected and reported in averages to the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) with no identifiable information. UROP invites WSU students across all disciplines to engage in undergraduate research. The following instructions were included in the Qualtrics survey. Questions 1–9 asked participants to select responses on a 1–5 scale: 1—Strongly Disagree, 2—Moderately Disagree, 3—Neutral, 4—Moderately Agree, and 5—Strongly Agree. Question 10 was presented in free-response format.

1. The Brotherhood provided an inclusive, safe space where I felt accepted and free to express my ideas and beliefs.
2. The Brotherhood helped me discover more about my identity and learn more about the communities I am affiliated with.
3. The Brotherhood supported my mental and emotional wellbeing.
4. The Brotherhood improved my academic study skills through event programming and peer accountability.
5. The Brotherhood actively connected me with University resources to better navigate academia.
6. The Brotherhood improved my self-efficacy and determination to graduate.
7. The Brotherhood aided my ability to network with professionals in my career field.
8. The Brotherhood fostered career readiness opportunities that helped me develop my postgraduate goals.
9. The Brotherhood gave me the tools and opportunities to beneficially impact my campus community.
10. The Brotherhood is collecting quantitative data to evaluate the academic performance of our members in comparison to other Black students in their cohort. We ask if you could please provide your current cumulative GPA or if you have graduated, please provide your final undergraduate GPA? This data will be completely CONFIDENTIAL and have no identifiers. This information will be used to compile an average GPA from members of The Brotherhood (Example format: 3.00). If you choose not to provide this data, please write N/A.

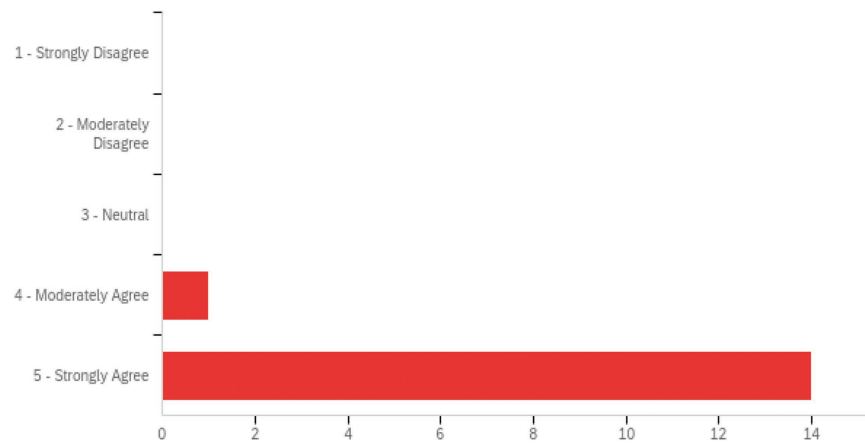
Results

These graphs show the x axis as the number of survey participants and the y axis as the distribution of available responses. The following preliminary declaration was added to confirm participant consent. The survey response rate was 15 participants out of 30 (50%) over a 10-day survey collection period.

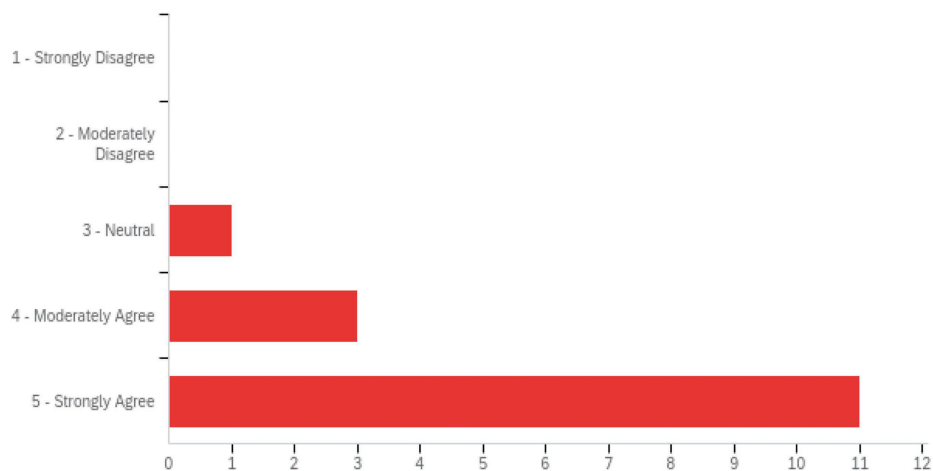
I hereby certify that I meet the criteria to participate in this study and consent to all study procedures. [Answer Selection: Yes or No]



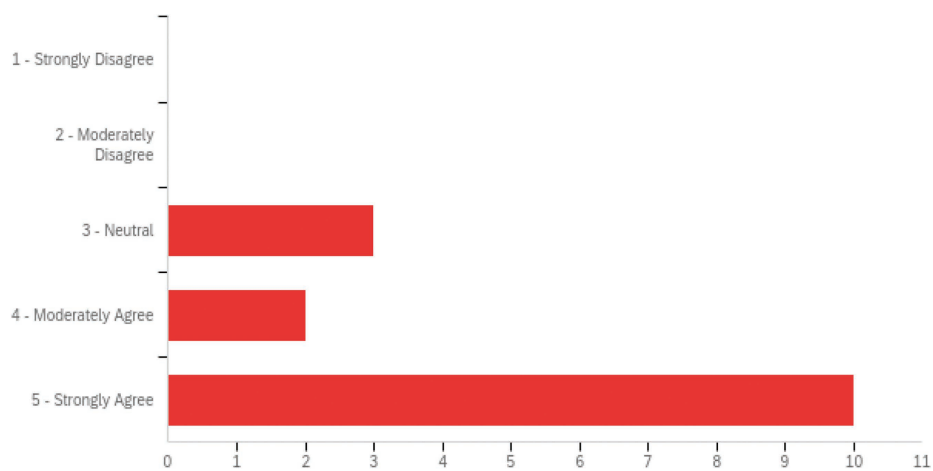
Question 1: The brotherhood provided an inclusive safe space where I felt accepted and free to express my ideas and beliefs.



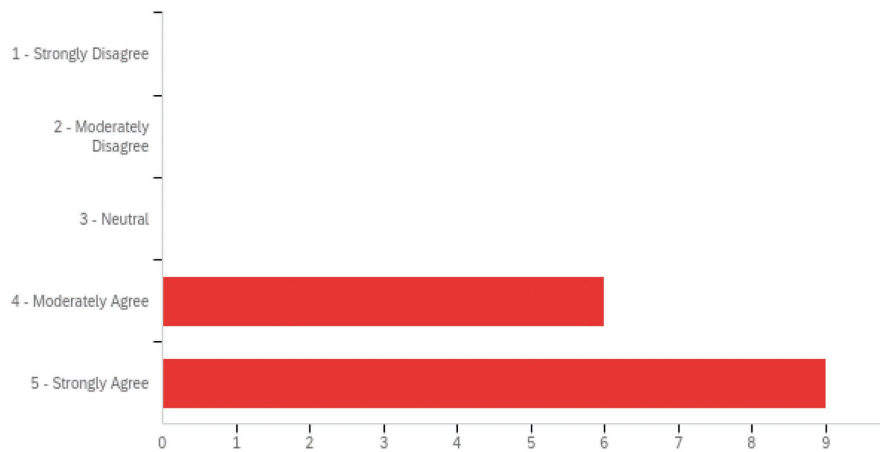
Question 2: The Brotherhood helped me discover more about my identity and learn more about the communities I am affiliated with.



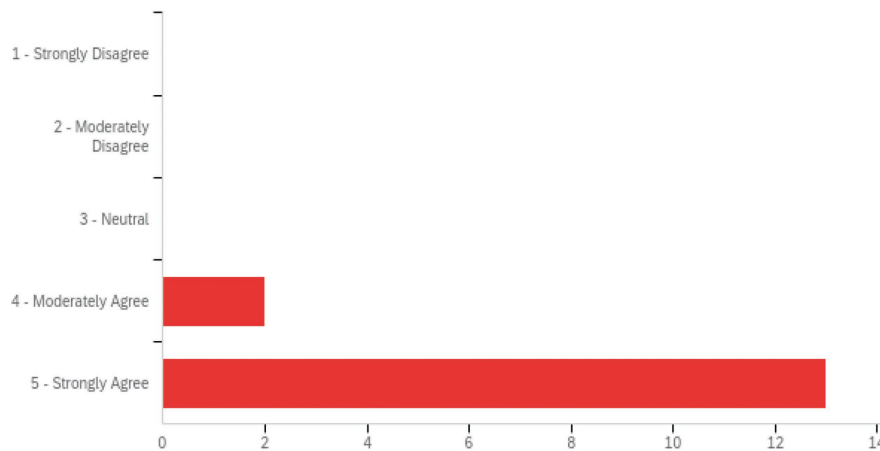
Question 3: The Brotherhood supported my mental and emotional wellbeing.



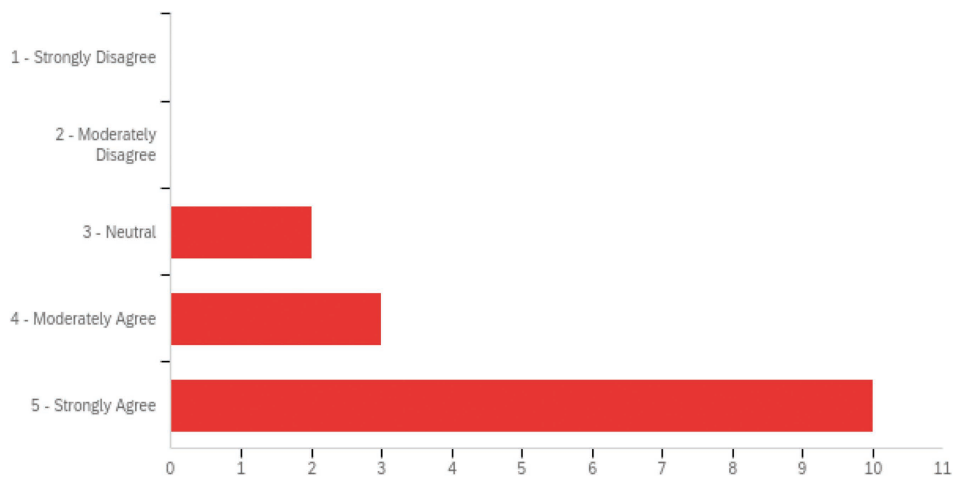
Question 4: The Brotherhood improved my academic study skills through event programming and peer accountability.



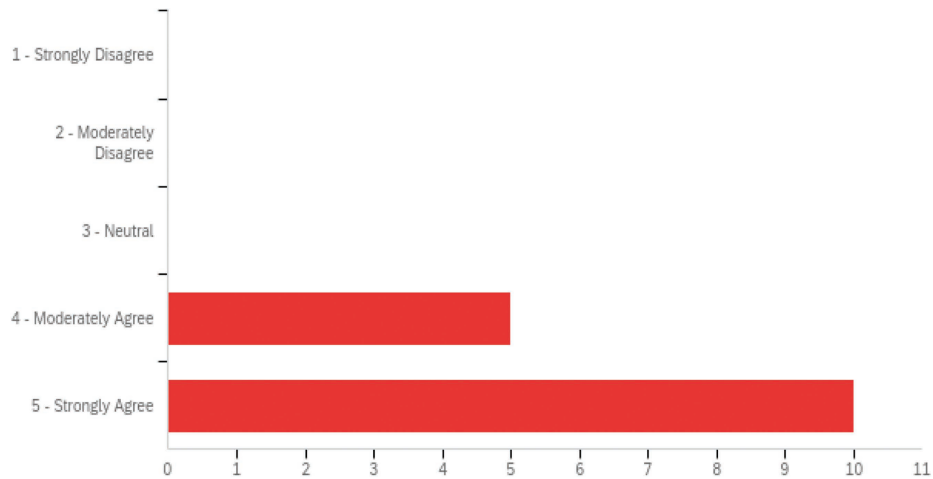
Question 5: The Brotherhood actively connected me with University resources to better navigate academia.



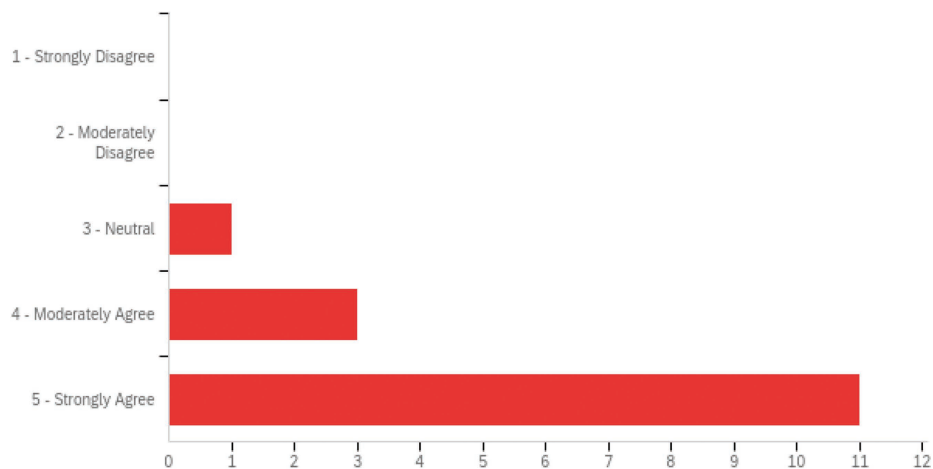
Question 6: The Brotherhood improved my self-efficacy and determination to graduate.



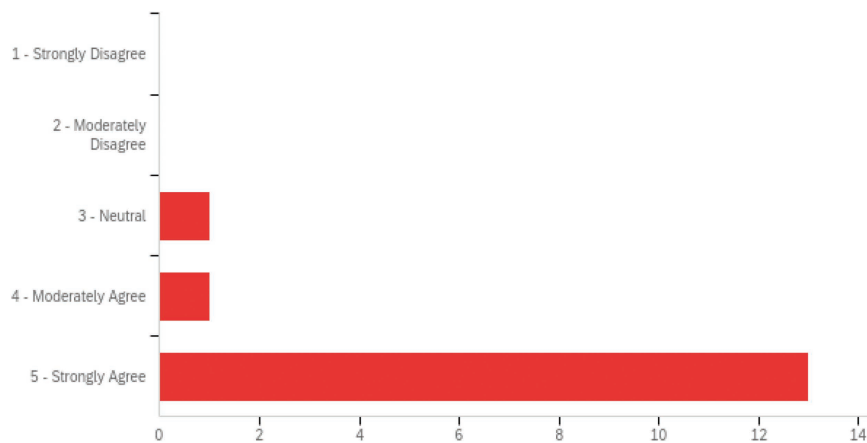
Question 7: The Brotherhood aided my ability to network with professionals in my career field.



Question 8: The Brotherhood fostered career readiness opportunities that helped me develop my postgraduate goals.



Question 9: The Brotherhood gave me the tools and opportunities to beneficially impact my campus community.



Question 10: The Brotherhood is collecting quantitative data to evaluate the academic performance of our members in comparison to other Black students in their cohort. We ask if you could please provide your current cumulative GPA or if you have graduated, please provide your final undergraduate GPA? This data will be completely CONFIDENTIAL and have no identifiers. This information will be used to compile an average GPA from members of The Brotherhood (Example format: 3.00). If you choose not to provide this data, please write N/A.

Responses

N/A
4.0
3.2
3.88
3.2
3.5
2.87
3.61
2.8
3.14
3.7
2.98
3.23
3.24
3.56

Analysis

Questions with the most positive feedback were Q1, Q5, and Q9. The mean responses to those questions are as follows.

- For question 1, 98.6% of participants strongly agreed that The Brotherhood provided an inclusive, safe space where they felt accepted and free to express their ideas and beliefs.
- For question 5, 97.4% of participants strongly agreed that The Brotherhood actively connected them with University resources to better navigate academia.
- For question 9, 96% of participants strongly agreed that The Brotherhood gave them the tools and opportunities to beneficially impact their campus community.

The question with the least positive feedback was question 3. For this question, 4.47 or 89.4% of participants strongly agreed that The Brotherhood supported their mental and emotional well-being. All other questions had a response rate of 90.6% for strongly agreeing with an average standard deviation of 0.51.

Mean Survey GPA

- Survey participants had an average reported GPA of 3.35 (B average).
- 78.6% of survey participants had a reported GPA of 3.0 or above.

Cohort Comparison GPA

- The mean GPA of all Black or African American students at WSU was 2.35 (C+ average)
- The mean GPA of all Black or African American male students at WSU was 2.32 (C average)
(Wayne State University, 2021)

On a 4.0 GPA scale, survey participants have an average self-reported GPA of 25.75% higher than undergraduate Black males at WSU. This finding supports that Brotherhood members who completed the survey perform an entire letter grade higher than undergraduate Black males at WSU.

Following are the scale averages for responses to each question in their respective survey category:

Community Belonging

- Question 1: 4.47 out of 5
- Question 2: 4.67 out of 5
- Question 3: 4.93 out of 5

Mean of questions 1–3: 4.69/5

Academic Success

- Question 4: 4.60 out of 5
- Question 5: 4.87 out of 5
- Question 6: 4.53 out of 5

Mean of questions 4–6: 4.66/5

Professional Development

- Question 7: 4.67 out of 5
- Question 8: 4.67 out of 5
- Question 9: 4.80 out of 5

Mean of questions 7–9: 4.71/5

The professional development category of the survey had the highest positivity rate, with 94.3% of participants strongly agreeing to the questions. The academic success category had the lowest positivity rate, with 93.2% of participants strongly agreeing to the questions.

Discussion

Limitations

In reflection, giving participants only 10 days to complete the survey may have limited the number of survey responses due to the short amount of time. Additionally, we recognize that although self-report methodologies continue to be one of the most widely used assessments for capturing

qualitative and quantitative survey information, their limitations must be acknowledged. We note that asking participants to self-report their experiences in The Brotherhood and GPA data may not be precisely accurate to their real accounts, as well as recall bias and self-selection bias. It is worth mentioning that a 50% response rate could have affected the distribution of responses, which may have been a result of communication barriers like invalid email addresses. Finally, using a 1–5 rating scale was helpful for quantifying responses; however, it does limit the range and depth of the participant's responses. This makes the need for anecdotal data more important for capturing the thoughts and feedback of participants.

Future Directions

Moving forward, comparing participants' responses with GPAs below 3.0 with students who had a GPA above 3.5 could reveal gaps within the survey evaluation. Cross-examining these responses could highlight areas of focus for The Brotherhood in the future. Also, collecting average semester GPAs from 2017 to 2019 would help to observe GPA trends between each year and assess the programming that possibly led to those trends. The GPA collection would have to be completed more accurately either through requesting transcripts from members or by the faculty advisor providing them. Regardless, this process will need a more extensive Institutional Review Board approval. To gather more anecdotal data, conducting individual interviews with participants could prove beneficial, especially because the survey is not intended to encompass all the experiences of The Brotherhood members.

From this study, we learned that The Brotherhood's structural components—institutional support, safe spaces, unique events, social action, and leadership development—are key factors that helped advance the success of Black undergraduate men at WSU. These components were crucial in helping establish the Black student-led support infrastructure at WSU. More studies may be warranted to gather a more robust understanding of this impact on Black undergraduate males. These five key components can be further studied within similar frameworks of other institutions to observe the repeatability of outcomes. The component of institutional support was developed through the individual connections between The Brotherhood members and senior administration at WSU. These connections provided The Brotherhood a gateway of connections to university resources and personnel. Additionally, the Black male undergraduate rate was a significant target area for WSU, as Black men had the lowest graduation rates. Due to The Brotherhood's aligned mission with WSU, faculty and administration admired these student-led efforts to help combat this issue. The second component, safe spaces, acted as a foundation for relationship development among members. The Brotherhood provided the after 5 p.m. help students needed. This was built on the philosophy that faculty and staff go home at the end of the business day and may not be accessible. Members were always provided with after-hours peer academic accountability and accepting conversation space to alleviate this problem. This allowed for relationships and trust to grow organically. With this foundation, the organization expanded the scope of impact to event programming and community involvement. The unique events component was a pivotal factor in maintaining the recruitment and retention of members. The events varied in subject and allowed members to engage with other students actively. These events fostered opportunities for in-person outreach and reflected The Brotherhood members' variety of interests. These events were new to the student engagement landscape at WSU, making them uniquely different from other campus programming. Brotherhood events appealed to Black students and were a model for other student

organizations at WSU. The fourth component of social action allowed members to deeply reflect on their identities through community service. The majority of this work was focused on the education of Black youth. Brotherhood members were able to realize their purpose in the community and socialization about society. The leadership development component celebrated the differences of each member and what they brought to the table. Members were given a chance to have ownership in events and planning sessions to promote leadership succession. This breakdown of each component is a glimpse of The Brotherhood's more extensive infrastructure.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), undergraduate Black men across the United States have the lowest undergraduate graduation rates on average (NCES, 2019). The preliminary data collected supports The Brotherhood's fundamental components and can be used as best practices for developing similar spaces for Black men at other institutions. From this data, Black student-led support could be a pivotal factor in increasing graduation rates. However, given certain caveats within the data collection such as the 50% response rate that is not reflective of the total population of Black male undergraduates at WSU and self-selection bias, we cannot conclude that The Brotherhood has in fact helped to advance student success for Black men at WSU.

These results provide insight into specific components of The Brotherhood. This data does not include the entire context of The Brotherhood's impact on students. However, these findings provide evidence that the key fundamental components of The Brotherhood have advanced Black student success and established a foundation for more research opportunities that focus on undergraduate Black men. We conclude that the data supports the efficacy of The Brotherhood's work in community-building, academic success, and professional development for at least half of The Brotherhood's membership. More tangibly, the results show that survey participants perform a whole letter grade higher than other Black students in their cohort. Ultimately, WSU can do more to further promote student success, like many other institutions. However, this work cannot only be done by the administration, but the help of student contributions is also needed.

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Appendix A

Developing a Black Student-Led Support Infrastructure at a PWI

Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: *Developing a Black Student-Led Support Infrastructure at a Predominantly White Institution*

Principal Investigator (PI): Kenya Swanson, M.Ed.
Academic Success Center
313-577-3224

Funding Source: WSU Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program

Purpose:

You are being asked to participate in a research study of analyzing the efforts of THE BROTHERHOOD and its contributions to the Black student support infrastructure at Wayne State University. Due to your affiliation as a member of THE BROTHERHOOD student organization, you have been selected as an eligible participant for this study. To obtain the information needed to meet the objectives of our project, we have sampled 30 BROTHERHOOD members. This sample size was decided because this is the total population of all BROTHERHOOD members and would provide accurate averages of our data. The study is being conducted online via Qualtrics survey and will be sent via email. Data received from participants will be important in evaluating the academic, cultural, and professional experiences of undergraduate Black male students in THE BROTHERHOOD. From our findings, we hope to provide key takeaways derived from data to better understand how to support undergraduate African American men in higher education.

Study Procedures

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to complete an anonymous 10 question multiple choice Qualtrics survey sent via email. This survey takes approximately less than 5 minutes to complete. Qualitative and quantitative data will be gathered from 30 members of The Brotherhood through an ANONYMOUS 10 question Qualtrics survey completed by participants. The survey will gather data around The Brotherhood's core objectives: professional development, academic success, and community belonging. The survey will also ask students to report their current undergraduate GPA or the GPA they completed undergrad with at Wayne State University.

Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there will be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks

There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Submission/Revision Date: 9/25/2021 Page 1 of 2
Protocol Version #: IRB-21-09-3957

Form Date: 03/2019

Developing a Black Student-Led Support Infrastructure at a PWI

Confidentiality:

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept without any identifiers.

Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with Wayne State University or its affiliates.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Kenya Swanson or one of her research team members at the following phone number 248-901-6885. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

Participation

By completing the survey you are agreeing to participate in this study.

Appendix B



I hereby certify that I meet the criteria to participate in this study and consent to all study procedures.

- Yes
 No

The brotherhood provided an inclusive safe space where I felt accepted and free to express my ideas and beliefs.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
 2 - Moderately Disagree
 3 - Neutral
 4 - Moderately Agree
 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood helped me discover more about my identity and learn more about the communities I am affiliated with.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
 2 - Moderately Disagree
 3 - Neutral
 4 - Moderately Agree
 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood supported my mental and emotional wellbeing.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
 2 - Moderately Disagree
 3 - Neutral
 4 - Moderately Agree
 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood improved my academic study skills through event programming and peer accountability.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Moderately Disagree
- 3 - Neutral
- 4 - Moderately Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood actively connected me with University resources to better navigate academia.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Moderately Disagree
- 3 - Neutral
- 4 - Moderately Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood improved my self-efficacy and determination to graduate.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Moderately Disagree
- 3 - Neutral
- 4 - Moderately Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood aided my ability to network with professionals in my career field.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Moderately Disagree
- 3 - Neutral
- 4 - Moderately Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood fostered career readiness opportunities that helped me develop my postgraduate goals.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Moderately Disagree
- 3 - Neutral
- 4 - Moderately Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood gave me the tools and opportunities to beneficially impact my campus community.

- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 2 - Moderately Disagree
- 3 - Neutral
- 4 - Moderately Agree
- 5 - Strongly Agree

The Brotherhood is collecting quantitative data to evaluate the academic performance of our members in comparison to other Black students their cohort. We ask if you could please provide your current cumulative GPA or if you have graduated, please provide your final undergraduate GPA? This data will be completely CONFIDENTIAL and have no identifiers. This information will be used to compile an average GPA from members of The Brotherhood (Example format: 3.00). If you choose not to provide this data, please write N/A.



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