Final Practicum Report: Multicultural Greek Council

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As I entered the University Union for my first meeting of the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), I had many fears, questions, and curiosities. However, I had a strong inkling that my practicum experience would be one of the most moving experiences of my graduate career. This statement proved to be very true, and I am so grateful for the knowledge I have gained through my work with minority, Greek students. This final practicum report will highlight the theories and concepts that closely relate to my experience co-advising the Multicultural Greek Council.

What the student has done/accomplished in the prac

Throughout the Spring 2010 semester, myself, and Alex Cameron were tasked with advising the Multicultural Greek Council and doing research to design a new structure for the organization to best accommodate student needs. While researching new designs, we were to study the policies and procedures of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) to see if the creation of this organization at Western Illinois University (WIU) would be a good fit.

Throughout the first half of the semester, Alex and I spent a lot of time completing independent work and research. We researched thirteen benchmark schools to find out the organizational structure(s) for their organization(s). This included researching their websites, looking through constitutions, and speaking directly with advisors of the minority Greek councils. We also spoke with and researched the National Pan-Hellenic council to see what implications were involved with creating a local NPHC council and if this was a possibility at WIU. This research provided us with many options for how to structure our multicultural Greek organizations. Amongst the most common structures were schools with NPHC only, MGC only, or both MGC and NPHC.

After gathering all of this important information and gathering knowledge about the organizations involved with MGC, Alex and I began interviewing students and advisors involved with MGC chapters at WIU. Collectively, we interviewed around thirty individuals and gathered a wide range of opinions for how we should structure MGC. We faced many struggles getting people to interview with us, and when some decided to meet with us, they had little or no knowledge of MGC's current structure, so we were not able to gather much information. However, some individuals showed a great amount of passion for this subject of research and provided strong opinions. Some groups, mainly those associated nationally with NPHC, were in strong favor of a full split of the local and national organizations. Others, especially a couple of advisors, were very opposed to the creation of MGC in the first place. These individuals felt that the creation of MGC or NPHC further segregates the minority population from the white students. They thought that MGC chapters should be integrated into the Pan-Hellenic Council and Interfraternity Council.

After all of our interviews were complete, I gathered all of the data and created data sets to combine our findings. Our findings showed that the organizations affiliated with NPHC were equally divided in their opinions while local chapters were generally opposed to the split of MGC. Nearly every individual interviewed felt that MGC does not currently possess the strengths and qualities needed to succeed as an organization, and many changes are needed to the constitution and bylaws, and student leaders need to take a more active role in guiding the organization before a split can happen.

Meanwhile, while gathering all of this information, I also attended weekly one-on-twos with Nick Katz, my supervisor, and Alex. I also attended weekly general assembly meetings with MGC. These meetings allowed me to process my thoughts with Nick and Alex, and gather

more input to the students involved in the organization. The general assembly meetings proved

to be the best outlet for gathering student feedback because the students were able to ask

questions and feed off of one another to provide input.

After our research was complete, Alex and I, along with Nick's help, formulated two

options for the Multicultural Greek Council. Option one involved keeping MGC's current

organizational structure, but rewriting the constitution and bylaws to create a more efficient,

effective organization. The second option involved the creation of a United Greek Council

(UGC). UGC would have one President and two Vice-Presidents—one Vice President for MGC

and one Vice President for NPHC—along with a treasurer and secretary. UGC would consist of

two subgroups (MGC and NPHC) who would meet separately weekly. However, every other

week, the groups would meet collectively to work together. In creating this option, we thought

the creation of subgroups would allow the groups some independence and autonomy, while also

forcing them to work together and develop a greater appreciation for each other's groups.

These two options were presented at an open forum, where all students and advisors

involved with MGC could attend to learn about the options and ask questions of Nick, Alex, and

myself. This open forum proved to be the most difficult part of my practicum, but also the

greatest learning experience of my practicum. Throughout this paper, I will highlight the group

dynamics, theories, and environmental structures that were evident in this setting. At the

conclusion of this meeting, nearly every student involved was not satisfied with either of the

options presented to them, but rather wanted a full split of the NPHC and MGC chapters.

Currently, we are looking at updates to be made to the constitution and bylaws of MGC.

On Wednesday, April 28, MGC will meet to vote on the two options developed by Alex and

myself. A full split will not be an option because the students have not proven that this is a wise

decision, and the institutional support for two multicultural Greek organizations is not feasible at this point.

My Academic Knowledge Base in CSP in Relation to My Practicum Experience

The following section will highlight the multitude of theories and concepts that I was able to relate to my practicum experience. My work with MGC provided many opportunities for me to witness these academic knowledge bases and concepts in action.

Group dynamics. Many of the concepts I learned in group dynamics appeared in my work with the students involved in MGC. Specifically, a lack of cohesion was present, conflict was usual, and groupthink was evident throughout the open forum.

Cohesion. Forsyth (2006) describes cohesive groups as "unified and morale is high. Members enjoy interacting with one another, and they remain in the group for prolonged periods of time" (p. 118). In relation to MGC, every aspect of cohesion as described in this statement was not evident. Students were not unified, spirits were always low, and individuals did not demonstrate a commitment to the organization. From what I learned in group dynamics, I can attribute this lack of cohesion to a few factors. First, the size of the group was an obstacle. While the group is not overwhelmingly large, there are at least thirteen individuals involved, and sometimes, there are up to twenty. Also, the strucure of the group does not allow for cohesion. There are no rules regarding chapters sending the same member consistently to meetings every week. Therefore, some chapters may have a new member in attendance every week. Because of this, MGC as a group is always changing. The structure also only requires members to interact once per week in general assembly meetings. Members do not meet outside of these meetings to work on common tasks or develop a personal commitment to the group. With the current structure, cohesion is unlikely to occur.

One way that Alex and I worked to change this is through updates to the bylaws. We recommended that the group require consistent members throughout the semester, and that MGC work together towards common goals such as programming, academic standards, and philanthropy. Hopefully, as bylaws change and the structure requires members to become more invested in the organization, they will become more cohesive.

Groupthink. Groupthink was extremely evident during and after the open forum in which we presented the students with their options. Forsyth (2006) describes groupthink as a time when members try so hard to agree with one another that they make mistakes that could be detrimental to the organization or group. While MGC is not a cohesive group, they really joined together during the open forum because they disagreed with the options presented to them. Before the forum, the local chapters were very against a full split of the organization. However, during the forum, the NPHC chapters put up a strong fight for the split and the local chapters became frustrated with the situation and gave in to groupthink. If they gave in to groupthink, they would share a common view with the NPHC chapters and would develop a sense of cohesion in that they were all against the options presented to them.

Intergroup Conflict. Forsyth (2006) also describes the phenomenon of intergroup conflict, especially an "us vs. them" ideal (p.411). The "realistic group conflict theory" as highlighted by Forsyth (2006, p. 413) describes the concept the concept is evident when groups compete for scarce resources—in this case, the resources are minority students. Both the NPHC and local chapters are struggling to get African American and Latino students to join their organization and the fact that the other organization exists poses a threat to each group of chapters. This intergroup conflict caused thoughts of privilege amongst the groups although all involved have been historically oppressed. Many of the NPHC chapters felt they were "better

than" the local chapters because of their rich historical background and that they should exist

over the other groups. This was the greatest source of conflict throughout the semester, and I

tried my best to reduce this conflict by challenging the students to get to know one another on a

personal level rather than through their chapter affiliation.

 Student characteristics. There were only a few student characteristics involved with my

practicum experience. The two main characteristics that I dealt with on a regular basis were

African American and Latino students. As I mentioned before, these characteristics provided

interesting group dynamics and were often the source of conflict amongst group members. In

order to get to know these student populations better, since I do not belong to either population, I

read *Black Greek 101* by Walter M. Kimbrough. This book provided great insight into the

historical basis for the "Divine Nine" Greek organizations and the levels of oppression they dealt

with over the years. Other than that, the students dealt regularly with their identity in the MGC

setting and it was my job to help them develop their identity and find a role in MGC. This was

somewhat of a struggle for me as a white person, but I gained great experience in talking with

students about their identity and figure out ways I could help them.

 Environmental theory. In order to provide some background, I have chosen to analyze

the environment through a few of Chickering's environmental influences in relation to aspects of

the environment described by Forsyth (2006). Forsyth discusses places, spaces, and locations as

factors that can contribute to a healthy of unhealthy environment.

 Institutional Size and Friendships and Student Communities. Chickering (1969) as

cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) described institutional size as a factor of

the environment. In this case, WIU is a decent size, but the size of the African American student

population and Latino student population is not an overwhelming size. These students are

competing for members of these populations to become members of their organization and

tension is very evident in MGC meetings. Because of this tension, members affiliated with

NPHC tend to sit together at meetings and members of local chapters tend to sit together and

communicate only with one another. Meetings are structured to cater to this and there is never

opportunity for the two groups to interact with one another.

       Student Development Programs and Services. Another factor that contributes to an

unhealthy environment is the student development programs and services available to MGC.

Greek life programs has two graduate advisors and one full time professional staff advisor. The

graduate advisors work solely with the Pan-Hellenic Council and Interfraternity Council. Nick

oversees all three groups and is spread very thin and is only capable of providing so much

attention to MGC. Therefore, MGC is often neglected and does not get the support it needs. The

lack of a supportive presence at meetings is very detrimental to the success of this organization.

Because of this one factor, students are not able to concentrate on other aspects of the

environment because they do not have the training or knowledge provided to them through a

supportive advisor.

Student development theory.

       Sue and Sue and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson. My knowledge of theories developed

by Sue and Sue (2003) and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) were extremely helpful in my

work with minority students. Sue and Sue's critical race theory helped me recognize some of the

stages students might be in developing their racial identities. During particular situations, I was

able to reflect on Sue and Sue's theory and try to understand what stage a student was in and try

to support and challenge them to develop further.

Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson's white racial consciousness model helped me understand my own level of development as a white person. I would currently place myself in the reactive racial attitude. I have been more concerned with trying to understand my unearned privileges and work towards addressing discrimination. This experience has challenged me to understand the complexities involved with race, and while I have a lot of learning to do, I understand that I am not perfect. This was extremely beneficial to know in working with students because I had to force myself not to use my knowledge as a student affairs' professional to seem like I am reflecting my knowledge on others. I realized that these students had a lot to teach me, more that I taught them.

Observation of Elements of the Academic Knowledge Base by Others

Sue and Sue and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson. Nick was very intentional in having conversations about privilege with Alex and myself in our one on ones. He referenced Sue and Sue many times and helped us connect our practicum experience to theoretical frameworks. He also helped us recognize the privilege we possessed and how that might affect our work with primarily minority students. These conversations helped me reflect on my experience and connect my work with my studies.

Research. This practicum also allowed me to expand my knowledge base in research methods. I had to gather information from benchmark schools, conduct interviews, and accumulate and interpret data. Developing interview questions that would help us gain useful information was challenging, but through multiple revisions, I learned how to develop a good interview question. I also got more practice in interpreting data sets, and while the sets did not align with the feedback we got later, it allowed me to turn qualitative data into useful descriptive data.

Where the Academic Knowledge Base Could Be Further Utilized

Group Dynamics. I feel that knowledge of group dynamics can be used in so many ways and is currently neglected. The students involved with MGC need more support and guidance in trying to create an effective organization. So many elements of group dynamics play into the lack of success in this organizations, and with a few tweaks, the students can become more cohesive and efficient. I would recommend that the Office of Student Activities analyze the constitution and bylaws of MGC and how it affects group dynamics. I would also recommend that the MGC executive board undergo more training to develop the leadership skills needed to run an organization.

Professional Development. I also feel that the Office of Student Activities can do more to enhance the professional development opportunities available in this practicum experience. While I was able to gain so much knowledge, I would have liked to catch a glimpse into the other councils and what a Greek life advisor does on a day-to-day basis. I spent so much time researching options that I did not have the time to devote myself to being a good advisor to Greek students.

What I Have Gained from the Practicum Experience

In reanalyzing my goals set at the start of the semester, I realized that I have completed many of my goals and learned much more. When I applied for this practicum, I knew that I wanted experience with Greek life and also with working with diverse populations. While this was a challenging practicum, I am extremely appreciative of this experience and I gained so much knowledge of both Greek life and minority populations.

One of my goals was to determine the organizational structure of MGC by the end of this semester and implement the changes before the end of the semester. While this did not happen, a

strict timeline that would have allowed for this would have caused many more problems and would have stifled discussion with the students. I believe we made the right decision to ignore the original timeline and prolong discussion and research in order to make the most appropriate decision for the students.

One of the most valuable lessons I have taken away from this experience is to be persistent. No job in student affairs is extremely easy, and the answers are not provided to you. It takes knowledge, passion, and persistence to work with difficult situations, and in the long run, you can see evidence of the hard work you put in. I have gained such a tremendous amount of knowledge and experience from my practicum and I believe I will cherish this as a valuable experience throughout my career.

References

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