

The Impact of Cultural Organizations and Resources on Black and Latina Academic Achievement at Wellesley College

At Wellesley College, cultural organizations for Black and Latina students are among the largest, most powerful, and most highly funded student groups on campus. They throw parties and barbeques, host culture shows and college government debates, plan fashion shows and panels, protest, bring guest lectures to campus, and attend conferences. Behind all of these events and activities, however, a main objective of most of these organizations at Wellesley College is to 'support' Latina students and students of African descent. In this work, I will explore how and why these organizations were founded, how they support Black and Latina students, how that support impacts student academic achievement, and why these students need support from racially and ethnically similar peers at all. Most importantly, I will suggest ways in which the Wellesley administration and student leaders of Black and Latina cultural organizations can help those organizations have the most positive possible impact on academic achievement.

The Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gap in America

The American racial achievement gap is the "discrepancy in educational outcomes... between various student groups in the United States," with "African American, Native American, certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and their White and Asian American counterparts on at the higher end of the academic performance scale" (Sawyer 1). The racial achievement gap is not a new phenomenon; it existed even before the founding of United States, beginning with the deculturalization of indigenous inhabitants of the land and the denial of education to enslaved Africans and early African Americans. Not

surprisingly, these same two groups- African Americans and indigenous peoples (including American Indians and the majority of the US Latino population, who are descended from the indigenous inhabitants of the southwestern United States and Mexico)- who were denied educational opportunity over the past three centuries are the same groups who achieve less academic success today.

The achievement gap has seen some changes over the past forty years, however. Discouragingly, although it narrowed significantly in the 1970s and early 1980s, improvement stabilized and the positive trend has been reversing since the 1980s (Jaekyung). As the gap is growing, so is the importance of addressing it, because of the rapidly changing demographics of the United States. In 1970 only twenty percent of Americans were not white, but in 2007 the percentage was forty-two, and that percentage is expected to keep increasing (Sawyer 40). Therefore, now is the time to recognize the urgency of decreasing the achievement gap at all levels of education.

In order to do so, we must be willing to accept that although there are a variety of reasons that the achievement gap exists in America, such as socioeconomic inequality, structural racial and ethnic inequalities and the racialized experiences of groups of students of color are important contributing factors that impact success at every level of education. Furthermore, while some aspects of the collegiate achievement gap are caused by outside or prior factors, institutions of higher education must commit to addressing the aspects of that gap that are caused by the racial environment of the institutions themselves.

Among high school students, the academic achievement gap manifests in the form of lower grades, standardized test scores, rates of placement in Advanced Placement courses, graduation rates, and higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and placement in special education courses. While the gap is also present between white students and American Indian students,

as well as Pacific Islander students and Southeast Asian students, in this analysis focuses on the two largest groups of negatively affected high school students, which are Black and Latino Americans. In 2000 the mean grade point averages for White and Asian American high school students were 3.01 and 3.2 respectively, while the mean GPA for Latino Americans was 2.8, and the mean for Black Americans was just 2.63 (Gandara and Contreras 22). SAT scores and high school dropout rates follow a similar pattern. Socioeconomic disparities are one major cause of the achievement gap; there is a documented achievement gap between students from low-income backgrounds and students from middle class and affluent backgrounds. This includes low-income White students, and a disproportionate number of African Americans and Latino Americans, who have “have lower average incomes and much less family wealth than whites” (Buck 28). Yet, socioeconomic disparities are not the sole dividing factor between higher achieving American students and lower achieving American students. There is a clearly documented, specifically racial achievement gap- “patterns of ethnic differences in achievement persist” even after income related variables such as family income, family structure, and the amount schools spend on each student are taken into account.” In fact, the achievement gap has been shown to exist between Black, Latino, and White students at every economic level, even students who live in affluent neighborhoods and attend affluent schools (Sizemore).

So, it is clear that when discussing the achievement gap in America’s secondary public schools, race itself matters. There are many theories as to why race impacts academic achievement for Black and Latino students. One theory is that remnants of the eugenics movement, a “scientific” and social movement that led to the widespread belief that people of color are biologically less intelligent than Whites, still exist among those who run and teach in Americas schools, leading to the tracking of students of color away from enriched academic programs and low expectations for those students in the classroom (Sawyer 29). This possibility

is supported by research showing that teachers do in fact expect less from their students of color, and that this can cause lowered levels of achievement among those students (Gandara and Contreras 83).

Another theory that may explain part of the racial achievement gap in America's public schools is that negative peer pressure, in the form of encouragement not to "act white", may be prompting students to actually adjust their achievement to a lower level in order to be accepted as authentically black or Latino. Although some scholars have asserted that "culture and student behavior do not seem at all related to racial and ethnic achievement gap trends" (Jaekyung), in his book *Acting White*, Stuart Buck argues that "other students attitudes have more effect than family background or anything about the schools themselves" (33). It is important to note that, according to Buck, the "acting white" phenomenon is a byproduct of the desegregation of American schools, which put students black and Latino students in unfamiliar and often hostile environments, usually with white teachers, that led to the lingering association of enjoying school and striving to impress a teacher with "whiteness." Therefore, this factor would mostly affect the performance of minorities in integrated or suburban schools (Buck 35), if it is salient at all.

Finally, microaggressions which lead to stereotype threat are generally accepted as one of the causes of the achievement gap among Black and Latino high school students in America. Microaggressions are "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual)" automatically or unconsciously directed toward people of color (Solorzano 2000, 60) and stereotype threat is "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (Steele 1999), that leads to decreased confidence, overcompensation, and ultimately decreased performance. These concepts are related to the impact of teacher expectation on student performance, as one of the

main sources of “threats” that lead to stereotype threat are teachers. In a study conducted at a Los Angeles high school, 80% of student said that their races played a negative role in how they were perceived by teachers because of microaggressive statements they had heard from those teachers (Sawyer 103).

While all of these factors are thought to affect both Black and Latino students in America, For Latino communities in America, language and immigration status add an additional layer of factors contributing to the primary to secondary school achievement gap. Although most Latino students are born in the United States, twenty percent of them are the child of an immigrant, and fifty percent begin elementary school speaking only Spanish (Gandara and Hopkins 32). Ten percent of American students do not speak English well enough to be considered fluent speakers of the language, and seventy six percent of those “English Learner” students are Latinos (Gandara and Hopkins 7). This group of students is growing rapidly in the United States, and they face significant additional challenges because they must learn English and the regular curriculum at the same time. If they do not speak English well by the time they leave elementary school, they are likely to be placed on remedial tracks despite their level of analytical ability, and if they do not master English by the time they enter high school, they have only a forty percent chance of graduating (Gandara and Hopkins 32, 101). For those students who are undocumented immigrants themselves, the odds of being academically successful are even lower, particularly due to lack of access to social services such as government subsidized food and health care. The average Latino student in America, whether a citizen or not, is also at an additional disadvantage because Latino students are more likely than students in any group to go to school with others like themselves, and therefore less likely to even have the option of reaching for opportunities like advanced classes (Gandara and Contreras 23).

At the postsecondary level, the achievement gap can be seen in the form of lower

grades, slower progression, and lower graduation rates. Once again, this achievement gap definitely has a racial component, as it is still present even when controlling for family socioeconomic status and high school preparation (through SAT scores) (Massey). In fact, according to a comprehensive study by Spenner and Buchanan, only forty percent of the college achievement gap can be attributed to non-racial factors such as family income, occupation and education levels of parents, family size and structure, rural or urban background, cognitive ability, and prior preparation (Spenner and Buchanan). And, on the average, the gap widens from freshman year to graduation. Furthermore, not only does the American college achievement gap remain when family background and academic preparation are controlled for, but it is largest for college students who are most high achieving- those who earned the highest SAT scores during high school and those who enroll at the nation's most selective institutions of higher education (Spenner and Buchanan). It is therefore worthwhile to specifically examine the achievement gap at these institutions, where students are motivated and generally prepared for the rigors of college.

Because the achievement gap at elite American institutions affects some of the nation's smartest and most driven students the most, one can reasonably conclude that many of the factors causing the primary and secondary school racial achievement gap either are not acting, or are not quite as salient at the college level. As previously noted, more than half of the gap still remains when family social and economic background is taken into account. And, unjust distribution of school spending cannot be the culprit at these elite institutions- especially when using a need-blind method to calculate student aid, most schools are actually spending *more* for the average Black or Latino student to attend than they are spending for the average white student. Negative peer pressure to avoid "acting white" is a controversially cited cause of the achievement gap at lower levels, but it is certainly not a factor in elite post-secondary education.

The students that make it to an selective institution are the ones who did not experience, or did not succumb to, such pressure to avoid high achievement in high school. In a study of freshman at a highly selective institution, researchers found “little evidence among our respondents of exposure to an adolescent peer culture than systematically devalued academic work and education” during high school, and found “little evidence of a negative social valence being attached to school-related work” during college (Massey 112).

In the case of the Latino-White academic achievement gap specifically, there are clear factors that are less salient at the college level than they are in primary and secondary school. The critical factor of language does not play as large of a role because in order to even gain admission to college, and specifically highly selective colleges, students must already possess a strong command of the English language. The restrictions that result from being an undocumented immigrant to the United States are important when discussing Latinos and higher education in America, but not specifically due to their connections to the achievement gap. They are important mostly because they prevent many students from enrolling in college in the first place. The Plyler v. Doe Supreme Court ruling of 1982 prevented public primary and secondary schools from denying undocumented immigrant students education, but it did not address public post-secondary education (Gandara and Contreras 36). Therefore, many undocumented students are either unable to gain admission to selective public universities, or unable to pay tuition when they do because they receive no financial aid as foreign students. At selective private universities however, undocumented students are usually not barred from admission, and many elite private institutions meet their full financial need.

Having eliminated these possible factors for the unexplained sixty percent of the college achievement gap at highly selective institutions, we are left with race related factors caused by the college environment itself- namely, the effects of stereotype threat and racial

microaggressions. Microaggressions can manifest in a variety of ways on college campuses, from comments made by fellow students to the low expectations of some professors, and can significantly impact the relationships students of color have with faculty, fellow students, and administration. African American students in the Solorzano study stated that the “sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion resulting from racial microaggressions” made them feel that they could not perform well academically; some students even reported that racial microaggressions had led them to drop classes, change majors, or transfer schools (Solorzano 2000, 69). Like in primary and secondary school settings, microaggressions also bring attention to negative stereotypes about racial minority groups, leading to stereotype threat. Extensive research has shown that stereotype threat has been shown to undermine the academic performance of college students of color, and there is a consensus that it is a major cause of the achievement gap in American higher education, especially at highly selective institutions (Solorzano 2000, 62).

The negative impact of the racial and ethnic achievement gap on Black and Latino students in America is a large problem with widespread and increasingly urgent consequences. While this may be daunting and discouraging for some, for America’s universities and their students, it may be good news. Although some aspects of the collegiate achievement gap are caused by nonracial factors like family background or prior factors like academic preparation and therefore may be out of the reach of administrative and student problem solvers, at least sixty percent of it is due to factors that act at the university level. To reduce the achievement gap, institutions at each level of education must do what they can to decrease their contribution; at the nation’s selective colleges and universities, it appears that means working to improve the campus and classroom climate for students of color. For those institutions, part of reducing the achievement gap and improving campus climate may be giving racial and ethnic student

organizations the full political and financial support they need.

The History of Black and Latino Student College Organizations

Racially and ethnically affiliated organizations have been an important part of American colleges and universities for over one hundred years. From sororities to gospel choirs, these groups were largely founded in the early and mid-decades of the 20th century to serve as social and academic support systems, and especially on predominately white campuses, as powerful advocates for the needs and desires of students of color. Today, the social, academic, and political needs of black and Latino college students in America are very different than they were a century ago; however, the need for these organizations still exists.

In 1865, Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickinson White had the idea to found an “institution where any person can find instruction in any study”, a novel idea for the time that led to the creation of Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. “Any person” included people of color as well as women, so Cornell was one of the first institutions to open its doors to students of all races and sexes, creating a unique situation among American institutions where both men and women of color studied next to whites. However, the times could not completely be escaped; Cornell’s early years occurred directly after the end of the Civil War and were situated in the context of a profoundly racist country. While admitted to the university, students of color were not included in the social organizations and activities of white students, and created their own (Kammen 2009).

The primary source of social and academic support at Cornell University in the early decades of its existence were secret societies, which provided members with social outlets, study groups, and even housing (Ross 200, 6). This form of support was all but closed off to students of color, which most likely contributed to the terrible retention rate of black students during the 1905-1906 academic year- 0% of the black students who had enrolled in the previous

year returned (Ross 2000, 6). The year 1906 is not known as the year zero black sophomores returned to Cornell in the black American community, however; it is known as the founding year of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., the first college black Greek letter organization in the country, which set the precedent for black fraternities and sororities to spread to predominately white and predominately black colleges across the nation and to become a permanent feature of American college life and the African American community.

Alpha Phi Alpha began in 1905 as a study and support group for the remaining black students at Cornell. In 1906, out of a desire to make those services a permanent feature for black men on Cornell's campus, seven men founded Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and the next year it began to spread to other predominately white universities as well as to Howard University and other predominately black institutions (Ross 2000, 7). The concept of private black Greek letter organizations took hold, first with the establishment of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in 1908 at Howard University, and continually over the next fifty five years until there were nine nationally recognized black sororities and fraternities each with chapters around the world and hundreds of thousands of members: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity.

Today, the chapters of these organizations that exist at predominately white institutions of higher education serve their members and the black collegiate community in much the same way as the Alpha Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha set out to serve the black men of Cornell University in 1906. They provide opportunities for students to engage in community service directed at the black community, spaces for the social expression of black students, personal support for members, and academic motivation across organizations and space- chapters of

different organizations on the same campus often compete to have the highest average GPA, and chapters of the same organization often compete regionally to hold that honor.

Black Greek letter organizations are not perfect- they are often more accessible for upper and middle income students than for lower income students (McClure 2006, 1041) and have a strong history of violent and degrading hazing that they are struggling to overcome. The overall impact of these organizations is debated, but a 1996 study showed that while fraternity membership for white male American college students “had a significant negative effect on all measured cognitive outcomes”, membership had a cumulative positive effect for male American college students of color (McClure 2006, 1038), who are usually the most academically vulnerable group on American college campuses. In a 2005 interview of a chapter of a historically black Greek letter organization on a predominately white campus, members expressed that the organization not only helped them feel a personal connection to black history and important black leaders of the past, but the existence of the organization helped them to feel more connected to the campus and less alienated, conditions which have been shown to increase the likelihood of academic success. The organizations essentially serve as “integrating mechanisms,” helping black students who are members as well as those who are not members participate in campus activities and connect to resources such as black faculty (McClure 2006, 1048).

The last of the nine nationally recognized black Greek letter organizations to be founded, Iota Phi Theta, was established in 1963, during a decade when the composition, experiences, and demands of black college students in America were rapidly changing. Because of the combined effects of the Civil Rights Movement, affirmative action policies, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, the number of African American students at PWIs increased dramatically during the late 1960s; the majority of black college students attended PWIs instead

of historically black institutions by 1970 (Williamson 1999, 94). When these students arrived on campus in the 1960s, they often encountered hostile professors and classmates, as well as racist and discriminatory college administrations and policies; with the racial tensions of America boiling over, in many cases, campuses during this time period were more hostile than Cornell University and other institutions had been half a century earlier.

Because of the rapid increase in the enrollment of black students into American higher education, the black Greek letter organizations, with selective membership and intensive initiation processes, could no longer provide support to the number of black students who needed it. Furthermore, the “Black Power” movement was sweeping the nation in the 1960s and early 1970s, providing black college students with a range of ideologies from black separatism and the establishment of separate social institutions to purposeful defense against racial oppression. Black students now not only wanted to support each other in the midst of racism on American college campuses, they were determined to *do* something about it, to eliminate that oppression with action. All of these forces combined created the need for a new type of support system for black college students- the black student union, which proliferated across the country in the 1960s.

There is limited literature written on the history of Latina college student organizations. However, what is known is that the number of Latino students in American colleges and universities also began to substantially increase in the early 1970s and throughout that decade. The increase came against the backdrop of the end of the Chicano movement and on the coattails of its success, and happened because of the same reasons that caused number of black college students started to increase. Chicano student groups began to form at many institutions; the Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@ de Aztlán (MECHA), now a nationwide Chicano student organization, was formed in 1969 by students at the University of California

Santa Barbara. The founders of MECHA worked to establish a Chicano studies program at the university and accomplish other sociopolitical goals that corresponded with the needs and wants of Chicano students there. Soon, MECHA began to spread to other states. Latino fraternities and sororities also began to blossom at institutions of higher education across the United States during this time. The 19 organizations that make up the National Association of Latino Fraternal organizations were founded between 1975- 1993, mostly in the state of New York, but also in Southwestern and Midwestern states.

Black and Latina Organizations and Resources at Wellesley College

Black and Latina student organizations have played a critical role in creating institutional change on American college campuses, and making them more hospitable places where underrepresented students of color could be more academically successful. Wellesley College is an ideal setting for studying the role these organizations have played because Wellesley students were forerunners when it came to providing this type of strong sociopolitical advocacy for the needs and desires of Latina students and students of African descent.

Black Greek letter organizations arrived at Wellesley College in 1977, with the founding of the Lambda Upsilon chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc, which was followed by the Xi Tau chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority in 1981 and the Kappa Nu chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority in 1984. Although Wellesley does not allow or officially recognize sororities on campus, Wellesley students can join the three previously mentioned Boston city-wide undergraduate chapters of black Greek letter organizations for sisterhood, community service opportunities, and academic support, and a small number do so.

Wellesley's first cultural organization was Ethos, founded by five black women in 1968, shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Like the founders of MECHA, the founders of Ethos were determined to achieve certain goals. Through the use of tactics such as

petitions, editorials, and hunger strikes, the organization accomplished the following goals within the first four years of its existence: the desegregation of the college rooming policy, the establishment of a Black Studies department and a physical space for black students on campus, the creation of an Advisor to Students of African Descent position, and an increase the number of black students admitted to Wellesley (though black students still do not make of the percentage of the student population that those women demanded). The founding class of Ethos was also able to impact the college as individuals- the first black Chief Justice, the first black College Government president, etc (WCAA, 2008).

These changes did not only benefit women of African descent at Wellesley. As the number of Wellesley students of African descent grew exponentially starting in the year Ethos was founded, they pushed harder and harder for the Board of Admissions to admit and track more students of color from *all* different races and ethnicities, leading to an increase in Latina students at Wellesley as well (Bonillas 2007, 140). In 1972, twenty-eight students founded an organization inspired by MECHA “for Chicanas, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians at Wellesley”, and named it Mezcla, which means ‘mixture’ in Spanish (Bonillas 2007, 145). Mezcla too, made demands on the Wellesley administration upon its founding, though in quieter ways. The organization negotiated important deals with the college regarding advising, recruitment and admission, housing options and transportation cost, financial aid packages, and eventually the use of a space they called La Casa. Mezcla also empowered its members to become engaged in the wider Wellesley community; in 1977 the first Latina was elected as College Government President (Bonillas 2007, 157). Just as racial and ethnic organizations helped move the entire country forward during this period in American history, Ethos and Mezcla pressed the Wellesley College administration and community to progress in beneficial ways.

Besides political advocacy, both black and Latino student organizations on American

college campuses also support students in a myriad of other ways- most have a large social component, hosting parties and mixers with other similar student unions and other college organizations. They offer a space for cultural expression- hosting culture shows or giving members space to cook and enjoy food from their ethnic background- and connect students with black and Latino alumni from the campus. The organizations also frequently have a cultural education component, both for members and the wider campus community, and sponsor lectures and discussion about black history, or important issues facing Latino students in the world. They also serve as a link between Black and Latino students and Black and Latino faculty and alumni. The services that these organizations provide continue to expand as the number and variety of black and Latino groups on college campuses grow- in addition to black and Latino Greek letter organizations, many campuses also now boast pre-professional organizations, religious organizations, and organizations for ethnic subgroups targeted towards black and Latino students. Wellesley College for example, boasts not only Ethos, Mezcla, and members of BGLOs, but also a Black Pre-Law Association, a chapter of the National Society for Black Engineers, Ministry to Black Women, Alianza (a group primarily for Latina women who identify with an ethnicity other than Mexican or Chincana), Fusion, (an organization for mixed-race students), and Women for Caribbean Development (an organization that primarily caters to women of Caribbean descent).

In addition to organizations, there are also cultural spaces and resources at Wellesley. The first to be established was Harambee House, the space that was won during the first years of Ethos, in 1970. The purpose of Harambee House is to “provide social, emotional, and academic support to students of African descent” and to “enlighten the community at large” (Wellesley College). The house serves as a home for the black cultural organizations on campus and the Advisor to Students of African Descent, a position that was created in 1972

(WAAD). The role of this position has varied in the years since, but it currently entails directing Harambee House, advising students of African descent on personal and academic matters, advising organizations for students of African descent, working with the Admissions Office in the summer, and serving as Assistant Dean of Intercultural Education for the entire campus.

Although there is no physical space specifically set aside as a resource for Latina students at Wellesley, there is Multicultural Lounge that is primarily used by Latina and Asian students. However, this space is very small; it consists of one table outside of the offices of the Advisor to Students of Asian Descent and the Advisor to Latina Students. These advisor positions were originally part-time and became full time as a result of a campus wide movement called Sisters Leading Action for Multiculturalism (SLAM) that swept Wellesley in 2001 (WAA). The Advisor to Latina Students personally advises students, advises organizations for Latina students, and is also a Assistant Dean of Multicultural Education for the entire campus.

Academic Achievement and Cultural Support at Wellesley College

Wellesley College is a highly selective liberal arts college for women located in Wellesley, Massachusetts. While the racial and ethnic makeup of the school does not match that of the United States population, it is nevertheless one of the most diverse colleges in the nation (Wellesley College 2004); eight percent of the student body is Black and nine percent is Latina. At Wellesley, as at most institutions of higher education in the United States, there is an academic achievement gap between Latina and Black students and White and Asian students. Grade point averages are only one way to measure success in college- there are other important factors one could consider, such as involvement and leadership in extracurricular activities or participation in research. However, even after acknowledging this, the grade point average differences between students must still be recognized as important. At Wellesley, the

estimated average grade point average (eGPA) of all students in 3.36, however the eGPA of white students is a 3.42 and the eGPA of Asian students is a 3.36. The eGPAs of Latina and Black students, however, are just 3.15 and 3.04, respectively (Wellesley College OIR 2011).

As previously discussed, Wellesley College is home to a wide variety of cultural organizations- from early groups like Mezcla to the more recent proliferation of professional cultural organizations and sub-cultural organizations- and Wellesley students can also join cultural sororities off campus. Among Black and Latina Wellesley students, there is a high rate of participation in these organizations; an institutional 2011 survey showed that 65% of Latina students and 78% of Black students are a member of at least one cultural organization (Wellesley College OIR 2011).

To investigate the relationship between academic achievement and involvement in a cultural organization in this paper, the Black and Latina student population of Wellesley College was surveyed. The survey asked students to select whether their GPA was in the A-, B+, B, B-, C+, or C and below range; select their race and ethnicity; rate the socioeconomic level of their family; identify themselves as LGBTQ or straight; identify themselves as an immigrant, a first generation American, a second generation American, or “other”; answer questions about the racial and ethnic composition of their high school and home community; select whether or not they are a member of cultural organization, rate the frequency with which they use cultural resources on campus, and answers questions about how they feel such organizations and resources affect their academic participation. Seventy-five students answered the survey; thirty participants ethnically identified themselves as Latina and forty-four racially identified as “Black/African American”, “Multiracial: Black and Latina”, or “Multiracial: Black and Other”. One student identified as non-Latina and White and two identified as non-Latina and “Other”; these participants were excluded from the survey results.

The survey participant pool is skewed towards students who are a member of cultural organizations. While 35% of Latina students are not members of at least one cultural organization, only 26.67% of Latina students who took the survey are not members of at least one; and while 22% of Black students are not members of at least one cultural organization, only 1% of the Black survey participants are not members of at least one. Therefore, because of the small data sets for students who are not members of cultural organizations and for students who do not use cultural resources on campus, none of the quantitative survey results are statistically significant. However, it is still interesting to look at the patterns that emerge from the data. Table 1 shows that for Black students who participated in the survey, those who are members of at least one cultural organization have an average eGPA that is 0.33 higher than those who are not; Black participants who use cultural spaces and resources “rarely”, “occasionally”, or “daily” have an average eGPA that is 0.17 higher than those who never use them. Similarly Latina participants who are in at least one cultural organization have an average eGPA that is 0.06 higher, and those who use cultural resources and space have an average eGPA that is 0.23 than those who do not.

Tab. 1 Grade Point Averages of Black And Latina Students According to Cultural Involvement

	Member of a cultural organization	Not a member of a cultural organization	Uses cultural spaces or resources	Does not use cultural spaces or resources
Black/African American	3.17	2.84	2.91	2.74
Latina/Hispanic	3.07	3.01	3.20	2.97

In addition to the survey, five Black Wellesley students and five Latina Wellesley students, of various backgrounds and various levels of involvement with cultural organizations, one cultural staff member, and one Black alumna were interviewed about their experiences with

and perceptions of Black and Latina cultural organizations at Wellesley. Both the survey and the student interviews provide insight into the way students view the impact that cultural organizations have on their academic experience. When asked if they perceive cultural organizations as having any positive impact on their academic success, the overwhelming majority of Black and Latina students responded yes (Table 2). When asked why they believe cultural organizations have a positive impact on their academic success, most respondents selected ‘They provide social support’, ‘They provide academic support’, and ‘They advocate on behalf of my needs.’ The student interviewees expanded upon these points “A lot of why I was so in love with Wellesley during prospie weekend, had a lot to do with Ethos,” reminisced one Black student. “It’s an amazing support group. It even supports me with internships and stuff because Irma (Center for Work and Service staff) sends us special internships to the conference.” Speaking on the impact of social support, a Latina students remarked, “I love that we (Mezcla) have parties and mixers and dinners... when I am feeling homesick or frustrated by classmates, that helps.”

Tab.2 Student Perceptions of the Personal Academic Impact of Cultural Organizations

	Cultural Organizations - Positive Effect	Cultural Organizations- Negative Effect
Black/African American	86.4%	25%
Latina	70%	26.7%

To obtain a faculty perspective, the Advisor to Latina Students, Mared Alicea-Westort, was interviewed. As the Advisor to Latina Students, Alicea Westort’s priority is to support students in whatever ways are necessary. She is available to students for personal support- “My office is like a safe space for students,” she says. “I provide a home away from home... someone they can talk to, they can relate to, who understands. I am their biggest cheerleader.”

In this role, she helps Latina student navigate the challenges of microaggression on campus and the resultant presence of stereotype threat. “Comments and assumptions like ‘I know you don’t speak English as your first language, so you should go to the PLTC for help’ cause them to doubt themselves, affect their grades,” says Alicea Westort. “They think ‘I have to prove myself’ and do double the work.” In addition to personal support she also helps Latina students by working to educate the campus on cultural issues and Latina culture. “(Latina students) think... people are gonna think I am not capable. They are gonna think I am here because of affirmative action. Students internalize the negative stereotypes and play into them.” By targeting the problem directly by educating students, staff, and faculty who are the source of microaggressions, Alicea-Westort hopes to mitigate the problems faced by her students. Says Alicea-Westort, “Minority students here carry a burden. They feel they are the only ones educating, so I try to lift that burden.”

Although she acknowledges that factors such as socioeconomic status, high school preparation, and being a first generation college student who is not familiar with how to take advantage of the institution’s resources explain a substantial portion of Wellesley’s achievement gap, Alicea-Westort also recognizes that much of the gap is caused by the college itself; this is consistent with Spenner and Buchanan’s findings on the relative importance of achievement gap factors at highly selective institutions. As a result, she believes that “...it is very important to have cultural organizations. Students need a safe space.” She believes that the safe spaces and cultural organizations help students integrate into the campus culture and become grounded, which makes them “more comfortable going out and mixing with other racial and religious groups and so on.” Alicea-Westort believes that cultural organizations help students to develop leadership skills, impart positive peer pressure to be academically successful, and connect with Black and Latina faculty, which makes them more likely to use those professors as

academic resources. She also asserts that the organizations and cultural resources make minority students happier in general, which is important because when they are not happy living at Wellesley they will not “engage in the learning experience” and “produce the (academic) results.”

Although Black and Latina students at Wellesley generally view Black and Latina cultural organizations as supportive environments that help to foster academic success, some students who participated in the survey and in interviews do not experience them as positive or feel that they actually negatively impact academic success. The three main reasons cited for the neutral and negative experiences are that the cultural organizations are time consuming, divisive, and homophobic. Being involved in a cultural organization at Wellesley as a leader, is indeed a time consuming activity. This is partly because of the scale of the organizations- Ethos, for example, is the largest student organization on campus and has one of the largest operating budgets, so running the organization or producing programming within it is a large task. For most students, however, the organizations are time consuming because being involved in them means being a student activist. Recent activist endeavors involving Black and Latina students include fighting to prevent the Advisor to Students of African Descent position from being reduced to part time in 2010, and pushing for student representation on the hiring committee for a new Associate Provost and Academic Director of Diversity and Inclusion in 2011. In the survey, 17.8% of Black and Latina students indicated that cultural organizations have a slight or moderate negative impact on their academic achievement because they are time consuming. Said one respondent, “If I wasn’t fighting the administration all the time I could be spending more time studying.”

Another reason Black and Latina students at Wellesley feel cultural organizations negatively impact academic success is that the organizations are divisive. Two students who responded to the survey indicated that the organizations are “divisive”, even though that was not

a provided option in the survey. This was also a thread that ran through some of the interviews; multiple students feel that the organizations only support certain “types” of Black and Latina students, or create divisiveness within those respective communities. “Ethos is catered toward a certain type of black person,” said one student. “I feel really out of place. The black people who (are members) are really strongly identified with being black. I am really into being (student’s name).” The experience of divisiveness is especially common of students who are mixed race or whose ethnicity makes them a minority within a minority at Wellesley. When discussing her attempts to “fit” into Ethos during firstyear, a student of Moroccan descent who was raised by White parents said, “I indirectly felt that there was an element of performance that took a lot of energy. I couldn’t be myself.” Multiple Latina interviewees discussed how Mezcla is primarily geared toward students who are Mexican, or from certain geographical areas. Expanded one student who was formerly a member of Mezcla, “I don’t speak Spanish, and Mezcla members made me feel like I’m not Latina enough.” In her interview, Alicea-Westort also discussed this problem, and noted that part of her job is not only combatting ignorance outside of the Latina community, but combatting it inside of the community as well. Presumably, students indicated that these problematic features of Black and Latina cultural organizations on campus have a negative or neutral impact on their academic success because the features prevent the organizations from being safe spaces or actually make the campus as a whole seem more hostile and less welcoming.

The third characteristic of cultural organizations that Black and Latina students indicated as having a neutral or negative impact on their academic achievement is homophobia. Again, this was a thread that ran through both the survey and the student interviews. Under the question, “Why do you think (cultural organizations) have that (negative impact)?”, one student simply entered, “Mezcla is homophobic.” During an interview, a Black student stated, “I picked

up a lot of homophobia when I initially came to Wellesley in 2009, and that was one of the biggest things that turned me away (from Ethos).” Homophobia has been a persistent problem in the Black and Latina communities at Wellesley. During an interview, a Black Wellesley alumna revealed that in 1998 a member of Ministry to Black Women was formally asked to leave by the organization after coming out as a lesbian, and was only allowed to remain because the college threatened to cease funding MBW due to discrimination. This alumna also revealed that as recently as 2000, a member of the Ethos Core Executive Board was “formally shunned” by the organization after coming out as queer. Like divisiveness, homophobia is most likely negatively affecting the academic achievement of Black and Latina students by making the campus climate more hostile for them than it would otherwise be, instead of more supportive.

Moving Forward

It is clear that cultural organizations and resources play an important role in supporting the academic achievement of Black and Latina students at Wellesley College. These organizations and resources, though not without faults, provide social and academic support and serve as a safe space for students living on a microaggressive campus. To ensure that cultural organizations and resources can have the most positive possible effect on Black and Latina achievement, there are steps that must be taken by both the Wellesley administration and members of cultural organizations on campus. According to Mared Alicea-Westort, the first step for the college administration should be working to understand the importance of these organizations and resources and the roles that they play. “They think we just want to seclude ourselves,” she believes. “They say, ‘We just have to mix it all up.’ I am all for meeting new people, but at the same time I recognize the needs and struggles of particular groups. They just have a lack of knowledge of what it means to be a member of particular groups.” The second step is to make cultural education and supporting cultural organizations a priority in order to

reduce the burdens of education and activism that Black and Latina cultural organizations currently bear. “We need things like (cultural) training not just for students, but for faculty,” insists Alicea-Westort. “...if we want to close the achievement gap, we must make it a priority.”

In addition to administrative support from the college, there is a need for Black and Latina organizations at Wellesley to be more welcoming and inclusive. This is a challenge that the members and leaders of these organizations should seek to meet. They should work to find a way to fully support black and Latina students of all ethnicities, family backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and sexualities. There has been a recent movement among Black and Latina organizations at Wellesley to achieve one of these goals. In 2010, blackOut, an affinity group within Ethos for LGBTQQ and gender-variant students of African descent, was founded; the organization now has over twenty members. Not only does blackOut function as a positive support group for Black and queer and gender-variant students, but the fact that it is a part of Ethos sends a powerful message about the efforts of the organization as a whole to be more inclusive and will hopefully make Ethos an organization that has a more positive impact on the academic achievement of queer students. A similar organization for LGBTQQ and genderqueer Latina students is in the development stage, although it is unclear whether or not the organization will be a part of Mezcla. The efforts of Ethos to become more welcoming of queer students can serve as a model for other organizations and for the inclusion of other disenfranchised groups of Black and Latina students.

Finally, to maximize the positive impact they have on student achievement, it is important for Black and Latina organizations to work together and support each other, especially in the case of advocating for Black and Latina student interests to the Wellesley administration. “We are all so busy that we don’t support each other,” notes Mared Alicia-Westort. This is especially a problem when various Black and Latina organizations are all working on the same advocacy

issue without communicating or collaborating with each other. This increases the total amount of work that is done, decreasing the effect of advocacy work that often positively impacts Black and Latina academic achievement and contributing to the number of hours students are spending advocating instead of studying. Encouragingly, the cultural organizations of Wellesley have recently begun to tackle this problem as well with the 2010 revival of the Multicultural President's Council. MPC serves as a forum for leaders from every cultural organization to share information, work together, support each other's efforts, and collectively support minority students on campus most effectively.

Black and Latina cultural organizations and resources at Wellesley College, as at most American institutions of higher education, have a long and rich history of advocating for students, supporting students in many different ways, and educating the entire campus about cultural issues. All of three of these activities provide academic support for Black and Latina Wellesley students by increasing college support of these students, providing social outlets in safe spaces with fewer microaggressions, providing positive academic encouragement from peers and staff, and improving the racial climate of Wellesley in and outside of the classroom. Although Wellesley's Black and Latina organizations have faults that need to be addressed by student leaders- namely excluding some Black and Latina students, creating divisions within the Black and Latina communities, and sometimes requiring students to spend excessive amounts of time that could be better spent on academic endeavors- they are generally perceived by the relevant communities as having a positive impact on academic success, and may very well have a tangible positive impact on Black and Latina grade point averages. Therefore, both Black and Latina cultural organizations and Black and Latina cultural resources such as space and advisors need the full financial and political support of the Wellesley College administration.

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