

Experiences and Perceptions of Fat-bodied Students who are Affiliated with or Who
Intend to Affiliate with National Pan-Hellenic Council Fraternities and Sororities

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ABSTRACT

Students at institutions of higher education desire to feel a part of campus. However, for fat-bodied students, their experiences are often lost in the influx of opinions from students, staff, faculty, and university administrators. The literature on the experiences of fat-bodied students in higher education, in general, is limited, with the literature on fat-bodied students participating in fraternity and sorority life being even more limited. The publications and sources that do exist with slightly more frequency tend to be blog posts or personal websites addressing the topic. This research serves to highlight the emerging findings of a research study exploring the lived experiences and preconceived ideas of fat-bodied students' engagement with NPHC fraternities and sororities, and the professional perspective of higher education professionals.

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Lastly, to myself, Mya, you did it, girl! Not every one that entered your life is getting to witness this moment, but it is okay. When life gets tough, remember that you are important in this world. You did it, but the journey is not over. You are stronger than your fears. You are stronger than your struggles. You are stronger than you would have ever imagined. You never give yourself credit for the things you accomplish, but now is your time to be proud of yourself.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to any student who feels that their voice is not heard. Who feel that their opinion and perspectives are not validated. Who may suffer in silence or are used to being the last to feel change. You matter! Your voices are being heard! Keep being you!

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Located in Southeast, USA, the identity and identifying characteristics of the researched institution will remain anonymous to protect the students, faculty, staff, and integrity of the institution and the community that uses its resources. However, as a reference to the demographics, dynamics, and population of this institution, a pseudonym has been created in place of the actual name. For the purpose and confidentiality of this research, this institution will be referred to as Strong Mind University (SMU). At the time I conducted the research, and the last available institutional report released by the enrollment team from Fall 2022¹, SMU is a mid-sized comprehensive public university that strives to offer an inclusive and diverse education to all students and community partners.

The students who attended SMU represent nearly every county within the state, all fifty states within the United States of America, three United States territories, and over sixty countries. The student-to-teacher ratio is around one teacher for every twenty students for most classroom structures; SMU also offers larger student-number style lectures for several courses as well. SMU has seven different colleges that comprise its

¹ All information regarding SMU is from publicly accessible sources. Due to the nature of the study and the need to protect the anonymity of the study participants, references to the specific sources are not included in this thesis. Should any interested parties wish for verification of this information, please contact the author of this thesis. At their sole discretion, they may be willing to share this information with interested parties.

academic disciplines and offers over a hundred degree-earning programs including postbaccalaureate degrees such as specialist and doctoral programs. Public institutional data indicates there are just over 10,000 students enrolled across undergraduate and graduate degree programs. As can be said within higher education institutions across the country (Knox, 2022), student enrollment has seen a steady decline in the number of students, in general, seeking post-secondary education. In fact, the 2022 overall enrollment of students at SMU was the lowest recorded number over several years starting from 2018 to the present. Of those roughly ten thousand students registered at SMU, the three largest ethnicity demographics are 49.4% identify as White or Caucasian, 34.7% identify as Black or African American, and 9.5% as Hispanic, with Multiracial, Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and unidentified each accounting for about 5.7 percent of the total student population. This data finding does not include students who do not identify specifically within the male or female gender stereotypes. Specifically for the mission and awareness of the research being discussed within this study, the focus was on undergraduate students specifically which was approximately 7,600 students.

For an undergraduate student taking twelve credit hours and lives on campus, the average cost to attend is about \$21,831.00 before any financial aid, scholarships, grants, waivers, or out-of-pocket expenses are calculated. Of course, depending on the style, room type, number of roommates, meal plan, parking, or other individualized student needs which may result in an added fee, the price will vary amongst those extremities. Considering the cost of attending college, many students may rely on financial aid, scholarships, or assistance from family and friends to offset some of the costs.

The US higher education system traditionally relies on considerable family contributions to college tuition, but it also includes a combination of grant aid and student loans at the federal and state level to facilitate college attendance for students who could otherwise not enroll. (Witteveen, 2023, p. 1259)

While the purpose of this study was not to discuss student finances, it is important to understand that membership in any social Greek-lettered organization does come with added costs that are not included in student activity fees.

At SMU, one of the major emphases is student engagement and involvement. With over 100 student clubs and organizations, there is a notion and understood idea that there is something for everyone to be involved in. For this study, the focus will be on social Greek-lettered organizations and more specifically, the National Pan-Hellenic Council. SMU Greek Life hosts four different Greek councils, which include the College Panhellenic Council (CPC), the Interfraternity Council (IFC), the Multicultural Greek Council (MGC), and the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). The NPHC is comprised of nine organizations, five of the organizations are fraternities, and four of the organizations are sororities. Within NPHC at SMU, there are currently eight of the nine nationally recognized organizations (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.) that are active on the campus. Each of these organizations within this council has different missions and goals but all are centered around education, service, and siblinghood.

Each of the nine (9) NPHC organizations evolved during a period when African Americans were being denied essential rights and privileges afforded others...With the realization of such a need, the African American (Black) Greek-lettered organization movement took on the persona of a haven and outlet, which could foster brotherhood and sister-hood in the pursuit to bring about social change through the development of social programs that would create positive change for Blacks and the country. Today the need remains the same. (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2024)

However, some organizations have specific stereotypes connected to them, even though all of these stereotypes are not completely true for all its membership population. What makes NPHC unique from other collegiate Greek-lettered organizations is that membership within this council is lifelong.

“This is a Lifetime Commitment!” The individual member is expected to align with a graduate/alumni chapter, following graduation from college, with the expectation that he/she will attend regular chapter meetings, regional conferences and national conventions, and take an active part in matters concerning and affecting the community in which he or she lives. (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2024)

The individual is classified as an active and financial member if all chapter, regional, and national fees are paid by the beginning of a new fraternity or sorority year. Other exceptions to this membership status may include if a person decides to personally discontinue their membership or is expelled from their organization. In browsing the website of NPHC on SMU’s webpage, there are several images of members representing

their organizations. However, as can be seen from the website, there are few, if any, fat-bodied students represented in these advertisements. While these organizations are open to students, the ability to afford to participate and reach membership may be challenging financially, which may also influence the decision to join if the student does not feel accepted based on physical appearance.

The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) is referred to by a variety of different acronyms depending on the region and time at which membership was gained. Some of those may include but are not limited to D9, Divine Nine, Divine 9, and Greeks, just to name a few of the many names associated with these social groups.

The purpose of the NPHC shall be to foster cooperative actions of its members in dealing with matters of mutual concern. Thus, NPHC promotes the well-being of its affiliate fraternities and sororities, facilitates the establishment and development of local councils of the NPHC, and provides leadership training for its constituents. (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2024).

As of February 2024, there are currently 63 collegiate NPHC councils (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2024), similar to that of SMU; however, the number of active organizations may vary depending on that chapter's status nationally or within their institution's regulations. Joining one of the nine NPHC organizations automatically allows you to hold membership within the NPHC. Although each organization functions under its own rules and regulations, the council objectives are similar across all nine organizations.

This research highlights students whose opinions would otherwise be ignored. Working in various capacities as an undergraduate, it is evident that plus-size, which is

often used in place of fat, fat-bodied, or overweight, is not equally represented in advertisements from admissions through graduation. For many school officials, this issue may not seem to be of much concern, which may be because other students with more severe disabilities must be considered to avoid disciplinary action or discrimination toward the university. In most cases, if students do not advocate for themselves and demand change, change is less likely to occur. The goal is that this research will open the minds of college officials to see how fat-bodied students are not represented equally compared to other student demographic groups, which may influence their decision to join a fraternity or sorority. While there are more avenues to explore as it relates to body image, the topic of being fat-bodied is met with many challenges and setbacks.

The examination of fat-bodied student acceptance is a topic that has not been explored in great detail; however, scholars are bringing more attention to the experiences and perceptions of fat-bodied students. Stewart (2018) writes,

I invite you to reflect on your own attitudes about fatness and fat bodies. If I am to believe that, as educators, we want to center the learning of all students in our work and through our practice then we must render the experiences of fat students visible. (p. 33)

While being a fat-bodied student may not be an area of major concern or issue in higher education now, there are some levels of biases and negligence when accommodating students of larger body mass or stature. While it may seem more efficient to have standard seating, clothing, and structural elements at an institution, this act is not fair to students who are required to pay the same student fees and tuition as other students, but in return, are forced to be uncomfortable physically which could impact their emotional

wellbeing. The limitations and restrictions of seating not only apply to fat-bodied students but can affect others in various situations. These limitations can affect the students' academic progress and success, and in some cases, will influence the students' self-esteem and ability to find an area on campus where they feel that they can be their authentic selves.

The importance of fit should not be ignored, though research on its application to higher education settings is missing. When individuals cannot physically fit comfortably in the environment, there is an important message that the needs of heavier people are not valid and that they do not belong in the seats that do not contain them adequately. (Creppezzi, 2007, p. 65)

Again, while there is little known research about fat-bodied students in Greek-lettered organizations, this research may offer suggestions and insight into the daily struggles of fat-bodied students and the effects these factors can have on their success rate in college and beyond. The "beyond" can affect involvement in extracurricular activities the fat-bodied students choose to participate in. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms are used. For current NPHC members, organizational affiliation is included. The initial targeted audience for research was traditional college students ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-three years old. However, due to limited responses or participation, the research was extended to students over the age of twenty-three who fit with the participant's qualifications. One of the responses, however, yielded an outlier but served as a reminder that all students, regardless of their ages want to feel accepted. As mentioned previously, these additional opportunities may come with additional fees and monetary commitments. A fat-bodied student, just like any student,

would appreciate the opportunity to feel accepted across all areas of campus, especially when a cost for membership is required.

Purpose and Rationale for Study

When exploring and understanding the reasons why people decided to join social Greek-lettered organizations during their undergraduate education the reasonings and commitments are different and range among preference, experience, understandings, misunderstandings, prior involvement and knowledge, and money as a few of the many explanations for joining these organizations. As society's standards of acceptance continue to change, so does the demographic of student-based organizations. However, being a fat-bodied student, there is still a desire to feel accepted amongst peers just like any other group of people. Through social Greek-lettered organizations, people can make connections personally and professionally all while building lasting friendships. Mish (2020) shares personal experiences and bonds that came from students joining Greek-lettered organizations. "Another bonus of being in a fraternity, Malik mentioned, was the support from many of his brothers having the same course work. Being around other people with the same schedule and classes is nice because they understand the stress and workload in your life" (Mish, 2020, para. 9).

In addition, finding genuine and meaningful connections in these organizations could impact students' interest in joining Greek-lettered organizations, especially sororities and fraternities that are a part of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) in which membership is a lifelong commitment. With all these perspectives and opinions about the college experience of fat-bodied students, it is important to introduce and present research that will provide the audience with as much insight into the lives of these

students as possible. For an audience that has never been overweight, especially during a critical time in development such as college, the challenges and obstacles may seem minor but have a large impact on the experiences of students. As noted previously, the research on fat-bodied students, in general, is a relatively new topic. In some respects, it is challenging to categorize a fat-bodied student based solely on physical characteristics. While they may have elements and characteristics of able-bodied students, certain accommodations are necessary for the academic and social success of these students.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before beginning the formal portion of the literature review, attention must be paid to the relevance of the topic being discussed. Through the research process and exploring the topic of fat-bodied students interested in NPHC or current members of NPHC organizations, there were few articles available that were related to the experiences of fat students in general or, let alone existing literature related to joining social Greek-lettered organizations. Most of the existing information presented used qualitative data (Holcomb, 2022; Long, 2020; Selzer, 2013). Like many other research topics that seek insight based on participant experiences, depending on the location of the institution, a student might have a different experience. Due to the limited existing research on this topic, most of the existing literature comes from personal blogs, interviews, or diaries of fat-bodied students and their experiences. The topic of fat-bodied students has been full of controversy and mixed emotions over the last several years. In general, there is little information and scholarly articles about fat-bodied students and their desire to feel accepted as a student on campus, let alone as potential members of social Greek-lettered organizations. It is the goal that this literature review will provide evidence for more research to be performed on how institutions of higher education can be more aware of the perceptions of fat-bodied students and work toward possible solutions or helping this demographic of future alumni be more successful and prepared as they journey throughout their college years.

In reviewing the literature on this topic, other experts in the literature have tried to define and set parameters on how plus-size students are defined. These parameters can be difficult to set due to every person having their own definition of what it means to be overweight. With such a broad definition that could potentially result in either an overabundance of responses or the incorrect demographic of students being targeted, experts have placed guidelines on what it means to be a fat student on a college campus. Stevens (2018) discusses the attitudes and experiences of fat-bodied students. Like many controversial topics, there can be reservations about using specific terminology. However, the Stevens (2018) article uses the terms fat or person of size interchangeably. This choice of wording is not meant to degrade or insult any of the participants or even cause unsettling feelings in the people reading. The term serves not as a negative connotation but to take back the true meaning of the words without judgment.

More than one third of, or 78.6 million, U.S. adults, are obese,¹ which has been linked to grave health consequences. Despite the importance of physical activity for health and obesity prevention, less than one third of U.S. adults participate in regular physical activity. College students are also an at-risk population, with 3 out of 10 either overweight or obese. (Ickes et al., 2016, p. 47)

For example, to define someone as fat, attention needs to be paid to trauma, experiences, preexisting conditions, or even pregnancy which could modify a person's behavior, eating habits, or ability to lose weight after weight gain. In addition, it is important to understand that the perception and experiences of fat students can differ based on gender and sexual identification.

The word and descriptor of being fat is a relative term. “Feeling fat” is not simply enough to justify some of the physical, mental, and emotional restraints of being overweight and the effects it can have on college success. “Obesity can diminish the overall quality of life. You may not be able to do physical activities that you used to enjoy. You may avoid public places. People with obesity may even encounter discrimination” (Mayo Clinic, 2023, para. 12). For a college student, this fear is only amplified when campus, the environment in which preparation for professionalism, is now the issue when spaces are not accommodating or fitting for someone of larger stature. The experience of these fat-bodied students in college makes their lived experiences unique (Stewart et al., 2023). Many suggest that seating, access to elevators, the location of classes and offices, as well as the distance between buildings make the experience harder for students of size (Stewart et al., 2023). However, the list of inconveniences is far more extensive. For fat-bodied college students, there is a reoccurring fear that is only amplified when campus, the environment in which preparation for professionalism, is now the issue when spaces are not accommodating for someone of larger stature (Stevens, 2018). Examples of how fat-bodied students can feel excluded have been noted in recent emerging research (Holcomb, 2022). Desks, for example, are beneficial seating options for a majority of students (Stewart et al., 2023). Fat-bodied students often have difficulty fitting or remaining comfortable in these seats over an extended amount of time. In addition, fat-bodied students are less likely to be shown and featured in school advertisements or interviews (Stevens, 2018). This lack of visibility in various mediums contributes to the hyper-invisibility of fat-bodied students in the perception of campus (Stevens, 2018).

Campus involvement is another major component of student success. Data shows that the more students are involved the more likely they will be to return to the campus and graduate from that institution (Strayhorn, 2008). Being a plus-size woman, a plus-size man, or a plus-size individual has different complications and different effects on different people. By extension, these different complications and effects impact the sense of belonging for these individuals. While experiences may vary based on overall student acceptance at each higher education institution, all people may face similar feelings of insecurities and disparities about their bodies or physical characteristics just as overweight students. The way students express, or in some cases, do not express their emotions varies from person to person. In considerations of body size and queerness, the everyday materiality of race, gender, class, and ability is vital in understanding how a person of size might experience their larger body differently within broader societal and interpersonal contexts (Long, 2020). The discrepancies with just gender and sexual orientation alone can already make college a more challenging time for these individuals, but the addition of being classified as an overweight student may put an even greater emotional strain on these individuals.

Pessimistic points of view about the obese population seem to be prevalent throughout the college experience. In a study of 96 undergraduates, perceptions regarding the obese were examined and found that most believed the obese were less sexually attractive, skilled, and responsive (Irwin et al., 2009). The study also noted that male college students were more likely to agree with anti-fat attitudes compared to female college students that were featured in the research (Irwin et al., 2009). In addition, a fat-bodied student who is interested in becoming a member of one of these

organizations must compete with a variety of emotions and adjustments such as reputation, and newly formed identity, which does not simply vanish after graduating from college. A fat-bodied student, and any student for that matter, would like to see themselves represented in an organization. However, it can be intimidating to join these organizations, especially when trying to show interest and attend various events to become a top interest for membership.

Most sorority studies have not acknowledged the homogeneity of the population in the research design nor as a limitation of the study. Several did not acknowledge the racial composition of the participants, thereby inferring that White sorority women represent all sorority women. (Selzer, 2013, p. 19)

This also speaks to misunderstandings and inaccurate representations of Greek-lettered organizations in the media. Within the community of social Greek organizations, there are several different groupings and ways these organizations are grouped. For this research, these organizations have similar founding and historical backgrounds which puts them into a unique category to be studied. Membership in these organizations is not merely restricted to college years, but one maintains membership for a lifetime as has already been stated. This characteristic makes individuals interested in these organizations think well beyond their undergraduate experience to see what they can give and gain from being members of that organization.

With these organizations having a mission to lead and serve the community, there are several stereotypes associated with current and interested members of these organizations that could make it challenging for individuals to express interest. Bryant

(2013) best describes some of the stereotypes that follow members of the Divine Nine organizations.

Zetas (Zeta Phi Beta Sorority) are supposed to be dark and fat while Kappas (Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity) are supposed to be light skin with a nice grade of hair. AKAs are supposed to be light skin, pretty, with long nice hair and Alphas are supposed to be light skin, with a nice grade of hair but nerdy looking. Sigmas (Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity) are supposed to be country, nice, maybe a little dirty, not well dressed while Omegas are supposed to be super buff, wild, and dark. DST (Delta Sigma Theta) women are supposed to brown skin and either big and butch looking or slim with the Delta bob haircut. If you do not fall into those ideas of what those members look like your membership is often questions and sometimes you will not be allowed to join the organizations. (Bryant, 2013, p. 97)

Despite Bryant providing information about some of the physical stereotypes of several NPHC organizations, two organizations are excluded from this information, both of which were the last sorority and fraternity founded within the NPHC. The researcher was unsure of the reason these organizations were excluded, but one can assume that Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity are not as important as the other organizations or that the stereotypes are irrelevant due to fewer members. Additionally, body image is not everything, but it does have some effects and potential reservations that may discourage people from wanting to join these organizations. With a limited amount of people being accepted into these organizations, there could be a great concern and even fear, from fat-bodied students who are interested in these organizations about

their likelihood of being accepted or welcomed if they do not feel represented within that organization.

Chapter III

METHODS

Justification of Method Used

Once approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Strong Mind University (SMU), the researcher was able to gather participants. For the purpose and focus of this research, participants self-identified and provided an estimate of their weight at the time the research began. The study focused on female SMU students who weighed over two hundred pounds and male SMU students who weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds. More specifically, identifying as fat or fat-bodied is not simply a preference but there has to be some concrete representation, justification, and shared experience among the people who identify with this characteristic. Once the exemption was obtained from IRB at SMU, the researcher began the research (see Appendix A).

The initial inclusion criteria for the participants included undergraduate men and women between the ages of eighteen to twenty-three who currently weigh over two hundred pounds and are enrolled at SMU during the study. Additionally, these students must be either current members of an NPHC organization interested in joining one or interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas on Greek Life as a fat-bodied student, while earning a bachelor's degree. The researcher used a variety of tools and instruments to collect data, including a questionnaire, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each participant. The researcher had the goal to enroll between six and ten participants in the study, in accordance with the number of participants typically needed in order to

effectively utilize narrative inquiry in qualitative research (Beitin, 2012; Kim, 2016). With this topic, the researcher targeted students at Strong Mind University (SMU) who self-identified as women and between the ages of eighteen to twenty-three, weighing over two hundred pounds. Similarly, the researcher targeted men weighing over two hundred and fifty pounds. The researcher selected potential participants from those who completed the interest survey in its entirety. In addition, while the researcher had the goal to gather participants who are current members of NPHC organizations, it also drew interest from interested members and those just with little knowledge of Greek-lettered organizations but an interest in sharing their perspective as a fat-bodied student.

The researcher collected data via a questionnaire and interviews. Firstly, the researcher targeted participants based on a short questionnaire sent to all students at Strong Mind University that mentioned basic information such as the topic and focus of this research, a school-associated email address, an approximation of the participant's weight, which must be over two hundred pounds at minimum, the participant is a current member or interested in joining an NPHC organization, the person is curious about Greek-lettered organizations as a fat-bodied student in general. Once selected based on responses from the interest survey, the participants met individually to further discuss their feelings about their weight and acceptance on campus. While each of these methods is different in ways, each is critical in understanding the experiences of this student demographic, each is working together to help explain the life of a fat-bodied student and if they feel accepted on campus.

Study Design

The researcher selected participants in this qualitative study on two criteria. Firstly, the researcher sent out a mass email to all SMU students through the student distribution email services. The researcher's goal of gaining participation focused and captured students using a platform that would be familiar to all students whether they were fully online, fully face-to-face in a traditional classroom setting, or a combination of the two. Strong Mind University (SMU)'s email services range from classroom announcements from professors if they chose that method of communication, to information from academic advisors or other campus personnel to emergency alerts concerning weather or campus crises that would result in the closure of facilities or services. The researcher read a participant agreement statement to the participants (see Appendix B), and a list of questions posed to the participants can be found in Appendix C. From the questions, the researcher sorted the participants based on sex, which resulted in varied data between people who identify as male, female, or nonbinary. The initial survey email received one hundred and seventeen unique responses; however, many of the participants did not qualify due to uncompleted responses to participate. Their results are not included in the data findings.

Next, of those who completed the initial survey of interest, eight people met the previously established minimum weight requirements. The researcher contacted all eight individuals via the email they provided, and the researcher invited them to share their experiences in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview. Of those eight people, five were interested in moving forward to the interview portion of the research. The researcher proposed two location options that the participants could choose to complete the study.

On the first option, the researcher offered in-person interviews on the campus of SMU, in which three participants chose that option. On the second option, the researcher offered interviews through Microsoft Teams. After being sent a meeting invite link through the email platform, the remaining participants chose the virtual option. Interviews occurred over several months due to the unique schedules of the participants. A point that should be noted is that during the one-on-one interview, the researcher asked more questions based on the responses of the participants. This aligned with the norms of an interview guide approach in which all participants are asked a series of questions, but depending on how the participant responded, can be asked additional questions to gain clarity or more insight into a particular experience.

The interviewer enters the interview session with a plan to explore specific topics and to ask specific open-ended questions of the interviewee. These topics and questions are provided on an interview protocol written by the researcher before the interview session. The interviewer, however, does not have to follow these topics and questions during the interview in any particular order. The interviewer can also change the wording of any questions listed in the interview protocol.

(Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 194)

A list of questions posed to the participants can be found in Appendix D. Many of the questions the researcher asked participants were sensitized and unlocked a range of emotions and feelings that the participant has previously overcome or is not ready to address at that time would be ready to help these participants through their emotions and stressors at any point during the interview process. At any time, the participants could withdraw their participation from this study, and their information would be deleted.

Lastly, after interviewing all interested student participants, the researcher performed a faculty and staff search, and the researcher identified individuals based on their job titles and descriptions at SMU. The researcher sought participants based on their involvement with diverse student groups or recommendations from other practitioners based on experiences in their field. The researcher sent an email of interest to two professionals explaining the purpose and goal of the research and asking if they would be interested in sharing their professional perspectives after years of service at SMU, higher education, or within their areas of expertise. The researcher contacted two employees, and both agreed to participate in the study. These participants did not have to self-identify as fat-bodied people but had to know this community based on their experience working with students who have physical disabilities. The researcher conducted interviews in person within several weeks of each other.

Qualitative Analysis

The researcher utilized and implemented an analysis that best fit the type and style of information presented; in the case of fat-bodied students, this information provided the audiences with more insight into the lives and experiences of fat-bodied students. “Qualitative researchers view human behavior as dynamic and changing, and they advocate studying phenomena in depth and over an extended period of time” (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 398). With the research on fat-bodied students being less discussed, organizing and displaying the perspectives of students who must face the daily challenges of being overweight makes the story more relatable to a reader with little experience or opinion about the topic. “There are some benefits of using qualitative research approaches and methods. Firstly, the qualitative research approach produces the

thick (detailed) description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences; and interprets the meanings of their actions" (Rahman, 2016, p. 104). While there are a few major differences between quantitative and qualitative research, a qualitative research method makes the information more rich. Using narrative qualitative inquiry as the exploratory research method for this study, this approach made the easier for readers to understand and find similarities within their own lives. "In narrative inquiry, participants tell stories of their lived experiences, and then, in relational ways, researchers inquire into and about the experiences. Researchers might share with a participant similar experiences that they have had" (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 48). It is the goal that the information gathered during the research method served as an introduction to what it means to be fully immersed into the culture of the campus and feel accepted physically, mentally, and emotionally despite outer appearance.

Impact and Limitations of Participants

One of the downsides to qualitative research is that sometimes subjects, particularly concerning sensitive topics such as weight and experiences, can lead to a wide range of emotions for the interviewee. Johnson and Christensen (2019) discuss a term referred to as Multiple Stakeholder Legitimation in which a researcher can directly focus on the values, viewpoints, and interests of those participating in the study.

For example, in an evaluation study, you would need to understand the key stakeholder groups, to examine the issues of concern to each group, and to provide data with sufficient explanation to be defensible and responsive to their needs. You should be extra sensitive to the needs of stakeholders with minimal

power and voice and attempt to give them voice. (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 292)

As someone of size, personal biases and experiences can impact the experiences of people surveyed and interviewed. When the researcher conducted the interviews, the researcher encouraged the participants not to speak out on issues or things they had not experienced firsthand. For example, the experiences of friends would not be acceptable at this time. These assumptions could cause skewing of the data if the experiences are not completely engaged and focused during the interview of these participants, especially because it is all-encompassing of those of similar weight and experiences.

Another point to consider is that there are potentially a small number of students who classify within the constraints of the research question study. This factor may have limited the number of initial responses causing a significantly lower surveyable participant group. One of the more common disadvantages of qualitative research, in general, is typically the constraints in the population being surveyed. Especially for topics which had not been as explored as much as others, a sample will represent the group (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Since population sizes are often low, the researcher relied greatly on the sample to help provide a general understanding of what those in a particular subgroup may experience.

When we sample, we study the characteristics of a subset (called the sample) selected from a larger group (called the population) to understand the characteristics of the larger group. After researchers determine the characteristics of the sample, they generalize from the sample to the population; that is, researchers make statements about the population based on their study of the

sample. A sample is usually much smaller in size than a population; hence, sampling can save time and money. (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 239)

Despite these limitations, the information from this study is vital to multiple aspects of higher education. Various studies have predicted that enrollment would decline significantly. “College and university enrollment has declined for the third straight year, according to a new national report, with the undergraduate count now about 7 percent lower than it was in fall 2019 before the coronavirus pandemic rocked higher education” (Anderson, 2022, para. 1). The gap that could be created is, or was not, directly impacted by the experiences of fat-bodied students but their feeling of being accepted on campus could impact where these students choose to attend.

In general terms, it could be defined as students that wear a certain shirt or pants size, however, factors outside of weight could influence the participants surveyed; however, clothing brands and sizes fit different people depending on how their bodies are proportioned. More specifically, identifying as fat or fat-bodied is not simply a preference but there has to be some concrete representation justification and shared experience among the people who identify with this characteristic.

Additionally, “Feeling fat” is not simply enough to justify some of the physical, mental, and emotional restraints of being overweight and the effects it can have on college success. The experience of these fat-bodied students in college makes it unique compared to any other level of school. With the massive amount of freedom that comes with attending college, there is an even greater responsibility for the university to offer the best and most satisfying experience for students regardless of size. These fat-bodied students have the disadvantage because, in some ways that are explained further, are not

able or get the opportunity to enjoy all the amenities that the university could offer.

Some argue that seating, access to elevators, location of classes and offices, as well as the distance between buildings make the experience harder for students of size. In addition, these students have to deal with the social aspects outside of college which could be challenging for them.

Chapter IV

RESULTS AND PARTICIPANT DATA

Participant demographic

Of those who completed the study and qualified to participate in the interview portion, three of the participants were students who self-identified as African American. Two of the three people are currently members of organizations within NPHC, and the other person is interested in becoming a member. The remaining two student participants self-identified as White and were not interested in NPHC specifically but in social Greek-lettered organizations in total. It is important to note that NPHC organizations, while historically African American in founding, are not exclusive to only African American individuals. The two white students' motivations for participating came from a desire to have their voices heard as fat-bodied students and as students who have concerns about joining a Greek-lettered organization in general. While these two participants were hesitant about joining an NPHC organization initially, they mentioned that with further research or connections from current NPHC members, they may be more interested in exploring membership in the future. In addition to speaking with students about their perspectives, one faculty and one staff member were also interviewed and were able to share their opinions from a professional standpoint. Although these individuals do not identify as fat-bodied specifically, their career history of working with diverse student

groups allowed for opportunities to make connections between students they have worked with while at SMU and the students interviewed within this research.

Student Participant Profiles

This section discusses the important information about the SMU students who participated in the one-on-one interview portion of the research. The names below are pseudonyms the participants were asked to create to ensure their true identity would remain anonymous. Remaining anonymous allows the participants to speak freely to the researcher about their experiences, observations, insights, and desires with regards to the researcher's questions.

Amber

Amber weighs approximately two hundred and twenty-five pounds. She started face-to-face classes but switched to online after her first year. As expressed in her interview, she had not always been overweight but contributed most of her weight gain accumulated once she started at SMU. At the time of the interview, she was a fully online student. As she pursues her degree, she uses the online college platform to work around her business that she started in college and continues to do for extra money. "So, for one, it's [being an in-person college student] challenging because when I was on campus, it was way more expensive. Now that I'm online, I'm able to focus more on my business."

Since the ability to attend college is already a privilege, many are not always aware that attending classes still comes with financial hardship. In addition, there are extra costs associated with joining any social Greek-lettered organization. While she was interested in joining a Greek-lettered organization, she was not sure if she would be able

to become a member since she is an online student. However, her curiosity and interest in these organizations remain. When asked what made her interested in joining a social Greek-lettered organization, she replied, “The sisterhood. I feel like there is a genuine connection.” Her response further explains how potential members seek to feel connected to other students through the aspect of siblinghood, one of the three important pillars across all organizations within the NPHC. Seeing heavier students around campus, in any capacity, is encouraging. Amber explained she saw many plus-sized students in the band program. “I mean, I was impressed because they [fat-bodied students] would be out there moving and marching.” Amber, like many of the other participants, has a few concerns about how she will be treated or if she will be accepted as a fat-bodied student. In addition to concerns as a fat-bodied student with Greek-life acceptance, she shared her concerns about not seeing other fat-bodied students on campus advertisements. “Marketing-wise, I don’t know because I had seen their [SMU] Instagram. I don’t remember seeing too many [fat-bodied students].” Amber’s desire to join an NPHC organization, despite being an online student, further justifies the importance of seeking feedback from all students regardless of how they are classified with enrollment.

Frank

Frank, who weighed approximately two hundred and sixty pounds, is in his second semester of graduate school. He is a member of a fraternity within the NPHC. He received his bachelor’s degree from SMU and works as a full-time employee with the local public school system. Although Frank is currently employed, he still expresses that money is limited. Obtaining a degree does not automatically contribute to having more income. However, Frank has learned to manage his money better since graduating from

college. He expresses, “I would say money is not a major issue for me because I do have a job, so I can't sustain myself. But also, I'm very financially literate. While being in college, I made it my due diligence to build my credit so that when I did graduate and got my first big boy job.”

Since Frank has been a member of his organization for nearly two years, he reflected on his reason for joining his organization. He mentioned one of the main reasons being mentorship.

I was able to do some research to understand what this organization was about.

What does this organization stand for? I started to realize a lot of the core values of my organization. They resonated with me as an individual. They spoke to my morals and some of my values. I've seen a whole lot of educators. I've seen a lot of strong leaders become members like Martin Luther King and Thurgood

Marshall.

Some of the more challenging parts, as Frank expressed, of being in these organizations come during their neophyte presentation, which is the introduction of its new members.

“I would say a neophyte presentation is a ceremony that reveals yourself saying that, hey, I've joined this organization. This is my showcase. This is what I want to show you what I have learned.” His concern and connection from this event were to not bring embarrassment to the organization being a heavier member. For Frank, the clothing fit appropriately, but his endurance needed to be high to keep up with the fast-paced movements.

KC

KC weighs approximately two hundred and seventy pounds and is a junior at SMU. She is a sorority member within the NPHC and is actively involved in other campus organizations and roles. KC's classes are all in-person, and she is very familiar with campus operations and functions. In the past, she served on a student leadership team helping to welcome nearly eight hundred new students to SMU over the summer. Her influence on student populations did not stop there. She also volunteers with local community outreach programs to volunteer. Unlike the other participants, she is not the only person in her family who is a member of the NPHC. She shares her experiences with several immediate family members. As the research was created based on the researcher's own experiences with Greek life, KC is also a member of the same organization and has encouraged her sister and mother to become members while preparing her younger sister to join once she can attend college.

While she expressed that she does not feel equally represented compared to other student populations, she mentioned one moment of recognition she received. KC mentioned,

Let's talk about it [if she feels equally represented on campus advertisements].

Me and my sister were posted on two advertisements and were on the front of a back-to-school student calendar at a campus event. They had inflatables, bouncy houses, and face painting. We got face paint drawings on our arms. We were taking a picture to send to our mom, and we were posted on Instagram. We did not know, but someone sent the pictures from [SMU] to our mom, and she sent the pictures back to us. It was definitely a surprise.

KC was unsure of the motivation behind this picture, but she did express that it was quite a surprise in her comparison to some of her initial concerns about being fat-bodied, joining a sorority, and feeling accepted. However, this one photo opportunity does not elevate her and the other participants' feelings of acceptance on a daily basis. This opportunity, whether intentional or not, does not erase some of the struggles she and other participants may have felt over the last several years. This moment lends itself to the fact that if it is possible to photograph a fat-bodied student for one advertisement, then it should be equally possible to advertise more fat-bodied students on a more consistent basis across other advertisement platforms, including Greek Life.

NS

NS is a nonbinary first-year student at SMU and uses they/them pronouns. They weigh approximately three hundred pounds. With being a new college student, they are already aware of the financial burden that comes with being a student. They have been looking for jobs or other ways to make money but have not been very successful in their findings. They rely heavily on the support of their family which is their main source of income.

He [grandfather] is my main source of money as far as I know. I don't have a college fund or anything, but he supplies me with money when I need it.

However, I can't, you know, just go crazy and get anything that I want.

Like NS, many of the other participants mentioned the cost associated with joining these organizations in addition to the cost of attending college.

While NS is not a current or interested person interested in becoming a member of an NPHC organization currently, they share their perspective on diversity as a whole

across the institution. “I think there's a lot of diversity at this school [SMU], and I come from half Black school, followed by Hispanic or more, and then White was least.” In addition, NS was not too familiar with NPHC but shared,

No, no. I'm not too familiar with the Greek letter organizations, but all I think is skinny white guys. Like I said, I'm not too much with the Greek letter organizations, but I would assume it would be a lot of white people. I feel like it's important to have space for others. I consider myself White, but my mother's half Filipino. I would say most of my friends are people of color and you know, as an LGBT member. I kind of understand to a certain degree.

Although they are not as familiar with NPHC organizations, it further shows that all students are not aware of the differences and uniqueness of each Greek-lettered council at SMU. While NPHC organizations or historically Black, they, again, are not exclusive to only Black people.

While some students who were surveyed initially shared that they did not always feel comfortable or accepted on campus, NS felt that their weight had no direct impact on their experiences in college so far. At SMU student fees help purchase promotional items that are often given away to students. However, some of the clothing is not always available or can fit fat-bodied students. NS shared, “I have not bought anything from the bookstore, but the few times that they give us free T-shirts, I've been able to get them in my size but there are often not many in numbers.” The addition of being able to wear and find free merchandise that is size-specific also relates to the overall feeling of acceptance from students.

NS shared their thoughts on some improvements that would make SMU more accommodating for students with size constraints or physical disabilities.

I think it would be better for accessibility if there was a ramp there [near one of SMU's residence halls]. The stairs aren't really an issue, it's the fact that the stairs are there. It's always nice to have some sort of ramp or something for those people who aren't able to walk upstairs like. Also, maybe an idea would be if a person in a wheelchair doesn't want to wheel themselves, the campus could hire someone to wheel them all the way around, but it would be easier to just go directly there.

NS's concern for other students only further shows the sense of community and personal commitment that has been created at SMU and is brought by the students who attend this institution.

Starfish (Star)

Although not a traditional-aged college student, Starfish (Star) brings a unique perspective to the study. She is a fully online student majoring in American Sign Language (ASL). She weighs approximately two hundred and seven pounds and is over the age of forty. Star associates much of her weight gain with having children and was never really able to keep the weight off from that point forward. However, age and experience do not negate the fact that attending college is expensive and a big commitment. Starfish shared,

When I first started college. I would say that I was middle class. Then since I've been in college, my husband is sick, and neither one of us is working. So, I would say that it's [personal finances] on the lower end because neither one of us has a

job. Yes, there are times that I want to drop out because I have no income at all. I mean, I don't have disability, I don't have Social Security, I don't have. I anything. My husband is completely 100% disabled and is fighting stage 4 cancer and the only income we have coming in is his Social Security and his disability, which all goes towards his cancer. When I first came to SMU, I almost dropped out because of it because they were counting his income towards my education.

Through interviewing Star, she shared her disappointment in not feeling accepted as a fat-bodied student or a nontraditional student. Though local advertisements displayed happy students, as a current student, she is unhappy with the treatment she has received. Upon completion of her interview, Starfish expressed much gratitude for allowing her voice to be heard. In comparison to many of the other participants, Star's age and experiences can further justify that all students desire to feel accepted on campus regardless of age and personal obligations. Although she was not actively looking to join an NPHC organization, Starfish was included due to her perspective of being a nontraditional student and how feeling accepted as a fat-bodied student is just as important to her as the younger participants.

Professional Profiles

This section discusses important information about the SMU professionals who participated in the one-on-one interview portion of the research to share their perspectives from their current work with students at SMU. The names below are pseudonyms created for the professional participants to ensure their true identity would remain anonymous.

Bobbie

Bobbie is a professor of art and design with specialty areas in interior design. For those not as familiar with the area of study, it is not just about fabric and patterns as one would imagine. Bobbie explains,

So interior design is not decorating from that perspective. Interior design focuses on the context of understanding the built environment through [safety] codes because that's a necessity. The codes are like fire codes, building codes, and other things required to ensure a building is safe for its users. Then, we have to take into consideration culture and the needs and wants of the client in regard to public space versus private space and accessibility and inclusivity...So, think about the topic [fat-bodied students], but also people in wheelchairs, people that may be visually impaired, or hearing impaired.

Bobbie shares his eagerness to encourage students to get out of their rooms, participate in social action groups, enjoy living in the residence hall, participate in the resident hall activities, and other activities that are occurring on campus. However, this connection is not always felt among fat-bodied students.

In connection with the information shared by Bobbie, Starfish expressed her concern about having to feel comfortable in an environment that is not always comforting to be in. She shares,

I do feel it [accepted]. I have not been happy with the issue, and I don't want to bash anyone. I feel like there have been opportunities for people to help people. As an online student, I've reached out and asked for help, and asked for help, and asked for help. But I see signs up that show advertisements on the side of the

road that says ‘SMU, the number one school’. I’ve seen them and that’s what made me reach out to SMU to begin. With, but I don’t have the connection now.

The connection is lost.

KC also shares that although being in an NPHC organization, there is still a disconnect with feeling accepted regarding her weight. Activities designed to show unity may present challenges with body size and mobility.

The NPHC [council] had a dodgeball game coming up. I decided I was going to play dodgeball. I haven’t played dodgeball since middle school. I’m not active. Who picked this assignment? Who did this? I get it. It’s a bonding event, but I don’t think they thought that went through for the people who might not physically be able to play or who might be disabled. I know I could have chosen not to play but 50% of your chapter must attend. I did not want to let my sisters down.

While Bobbie can only physically control the environments in his classroom, fat-bodied students should not feel that their size will only be accepted in one environment. The opportunity to feel accepted should occur simultaneously across the entire campus.

Alex

With over forty years of experience working with individuals with disabilities, ten of which specifically has been at SMU, Alex has used her experiences to advocate and assist students in getting the extra resources they need to be successful in the collegiate environment. The support students may receive under disability services at SMU can range from housing, dining, classroom, or emotional support animal services. In speaking with Alex further, she explained,

The role of [disability services] provides students with their accommodations and to remove and address any barriers that there may be in the classroom, on the physical campus, and with that, we may consult with professors. We work closely with professors, housing, dining, and anything on campus that may create a barrier for a student with a disability.

Alex is approaching the end of her professional career and looking forward to retirement. As she transitioned out of the higher education field, she shared some advice with the next generation of higher education professionals, faculty, staff, and community partners. One of the biggest themes Alex mentioned was that people who care about students and their well-being must be willing to put in the work to ensure students feel as comfortable as possible and are successful.

Maybe not having the answer for that student when they first come to see you— learning to be okay with letting them know that I am not sure about that. Let me do some investigating. Let me check and see and let us revisit that in a week. Let me gather some information.

Even with several decades of experience, Alex acknowledges that there are still great efforts that need to be made to ensure that all students feel accepted on campus. People's interpretations of fat-bodied students, unlike students who may have more severe physical limitations, may not always consider how restrictive certain spaces on campus may feel to these students.

Throughout all of the interviews conducted, each student and staff participant shared real life accounts of situations experienced as a fat-bodied student or one that works with fat-bodied students. Their personal feelings, reactions, and emotions further

express the importance of this research and the opinions of this student demographic group. Their experiences bring further justification of issues that students in similar situations may be facing when it comes to campus acceptance and comfortability.

Chapter V

FINDINGS

Pushback and Conflict

While each of the student participants shared their perspectives on the topic of being fat-bodied and Greek-lettered organizations, several trends began to emerge. Of those findings, many of the interpretations were met with information received from various social media and films. A trend noticed amongst all participants was that social Greek-lettered organizations, especially as can be interpreted through social media, television platforms, film, and radio is the negative connotation that being a member is often associated with. Starfish (Star) shared, “Because what I have seen on TV, it honestly has only ever been negative. You know, it's like when I see things on TV about sororities and all of that. It's sad,” NS furthermore agreed with her findings by sharing,

It's not something I feel like I should necessarily speak on, but if you're asking me, I think it's good to let white people into these spaces or, you know, people of other things or people of other groups into these spaces. I think it would help them learn how the alienated groups or subsidized groups feel about how society treats them because I feel like a big part of it [the division] would cause a culture war.

Though both NS and Starfish had concerns about Greek-lettered organizations in general, they admitted that knew very little about NPHC organizations or their missions. Due to limited participation from the initial target group of current NPHC members, the

research was approved to continue with their interviews as they were both interested and eager to share their experiences as fat-bodied students. The researcher introduced NPHC organizations to them using the phrase “historically Black organizations.” Within both of their interviews, the connotation of historically Black may have been misinterpreted as exclusively black, which is not true of NPHC organizations. Both individuals mentioned that if they knew people personally who were members, they may be able to gain a better understanding and may have an interest in joining in the future.

In conducting the original research and sharing information about the purpose of this study, the researcher was met with many conflicts. This included resistance even from administrators and students at SMU. One of the more discouraging components of sharing research on student experiences is that even individuals who should be able to relate to the experiences of students seem to not engage or promote freedom of speech or expression about various topics. For example, the senior administrator over sending campus-wide emails to the student body rejected the initial flyer for including the words “fat-bodied” as they felt students would be offended by the terminology and that it was not a good look for the school with the already heated climate of recent allegations of discrimination from a separate incident just weeks prior. The recommendation was that alternative terms to fat-bodied be included in place of the original wording which included plus-sized, wide-statured, big-boned, or large framed as just a few of the many options given. However, each of those words seemed to deflect from the main topic and theme of the research. Fat-bodied is not used as an offensive term but to take back a once mocked and degrading form of the word. Being fat-bodied does not mean the mind or body is incapable but means simply that the body itself is fat. In this search of finding a

different term to send to students, the senior administrator never consulted with the researcher specifically, who was in charge of the research and whose own battle with weight and acceptance sparked an interest in carrying out this topic, but went instead, to SMU faculty committee members whose sole responsibility was to provide guidance through the process of research but have no direct influence on the successful, failures, and shortcomings of what is being studied. Not once, even at the time of writing, collecting, organizing, or interpreting data and responses has the senior administrator approached the researcher about the concerns and their understanding of using the word fat bodied. The senior administrator has final approval of all emails sent to students via the student announcement distribution alias. Both online and in-person students receive these messages and notifications. There was ultimately a delay in getting the initial email sent out to students due to a weather-related event that caused Strong Mind University (SMU) to be closed for several days and resulted in damage to roads, buildings, and houses in the community. This also affected several students, whose information is not directly related to these findings as well.

While initially there were over one hundred responses to the survey, nearly ninety-six percent of those who started the survey did not complete it and stopped at various points throughout the survey. It can be assumed that there are many reasons those individuals did not finish sharing their interests, but one of the major points is the lack of participation from students in general, particularly students who are current members of NPHC organizations. However, due to limited participation from the initial target audience, the focus switched to consulting fat-bodied students who had preconceived opinions of Greek-lettered organizations in general. NS and Star's

engagement with this study is where this idea is derived. In comparison, individuals who are current members of sororities and fraternities within the NPHC were interviewed and shared completely different findings when it came to their initial interest in the council and their organization.

In response to the original survey and flyer sent out to students, a response was given critiquing the design and graphics that were presented on the flyer. Unprompted by the researcher, the student decided to reorganize and redesign the flyer in a way that they felt was more attractive given their backgrounds and majors. Unfortunately, their attention was on the layout of the flyer rather than focusing on content and awareness that the flyer was aiming to raise for fat-bodied students. Regardless of whether the person agreed with the style and design choice, the choice to dispute the design was a personal concern and was not mentioned by any other participant of the interest survey or the people interviewed.

In addition to the unwanted edits of the promotion and interest flyer, one of the participants in the initial interest survey response commented on all parts of the survey by stating, "Just lose some weight fatass." This participant's data was deleted. To know that one of those responses came from a student at SMU, further only highlights the bigotry and disrespect for student feelings and opinions that lie on this campus. If this survey only focuses on the weight of current or potential members of one Greek council, it is hard to fathom what the result or backlash would be quite remarkable.

Emerging Findings

Amongst some of the more positive findings and shared experiences of the individuals interviewed, while they did not feel equally represented on campus

advertisements, they felt comfortable around university employees. Amongst faculty and staff, overall, there was a positive response on how the students felt their weight was or was not a hindrance to their classroom performance. Frank expressed,

Based on my weight, I feel like it [professors treating me differently based on weight] wasn't based on my weight at all. It was based on my personality and the way that I interacted with these individuals. I did my due diligence to make sure I built a rapport with people on campus. That was one of my main goals coming into college, and that I left college a whole lot better than I came and that I made my mark on this campus.

Every participant specifically mentioned one person who was either faculty, staff, or student who has encouraged and helped them feel accepted across campus despite their weight. These similarities only further showed the support all students should be receiving. The commonality among the participants feeling accepted beyond their weight by at least one other person at SMU shows the potential to create a fully aware campus.

All participants shared similar experiences as being fat-bodied students on campus. It was important to pay attention to the reason and explanations for why these students may experience these particular experiences. In searching for those who would understand the reasons things occur the researcher sought guidance from people who actively work with students or have influence on the way policy and procedure can affect students. Throughout the proportion of thing professor's insight, I refer to these individuals as experts in their field. Being at a smaller institution compared to most large public flagship institutions, there is much collaboration amongst officers to best fit the needs of the student body, of course in many areas other than physically. One of those

experts was a professor of interior design in the College of Arts at this institution. In speaking with Bobbie originally, he was hesitant about accepting the invitation to share his perspective as an educator on the topic. His hesitancy was linked to his lack of experience being a fat-bodied individual or a member of a Greek-lettered organization. He felt that the information he would be able to share may not directly align with the objective of the research. However, he ultimately agreed to participate because he felt there may be similarities between the goal of this research and assignments he created for his students that focused on accommodating students with physical limitations.

One important feature and turning point of higher education is the way administration, faculty, and staff encourage an authentic experience. In most respects, students select and choose to attend a specific university to grow and develop into professionals. In return, higher education institutions are tasked with providing that student with opportunities to develop interpersonally through clubs and organizations, campus involvement, sports, internship opportunities, and a variety of other skills that will enhance that student's professional career. With students who are overweight, however, their ultimate experience is hindered by the physical restraints of university seating options in classrooms, theaters, lecture halls, residence halls, athletic events, and a wide variety of other constraints. As professionals in higher education, students must have a fulfilling experience, however, students are not able to take advantage of everything, due to the issues of size and fitting comfortably.

Universities strive to offer many opportunities for students to engage with one another, sometimes setting aside hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to fund student events, organizations, and sports. These opportunities are valuable

to practitioners because students who find a sense of belonging have a stronger resistance to departure from their university than students without. (Holcomb, 2022, p. 10)

The question then arose that if the basic needs of the fat-bodied students are not met, how could they be required and tasked with the responsibility to learn? There is a major connection between students' comfortability and their sense of belonging that may influence their abilities to graduate. "Tinto's theory suggests that students' ability to conform to or integrate into the social and intellectual membership of the university is pivotal to their ability to persevere through graduation" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 63). If the environment is not fitting to the student, and in this case fat-bodied students that are often overlooked when structuring and considering flexible classroom seating options, how can the students feel that they belong on campus? This experience is based on each generation and class of students. However, the process of becoming a member is often challenging and expensive. In another blog post writes,

It's true; campus Greek life is expensive. You spend a lot of money joining a sorority or fraternity. The costs of joining a fraternity or sorority can vary by campus, but here are some average costs to get you started. There are application fees and rushing fees, depending on the type of organization. Registration fees can vary from \$50 to \$200. Once your desired organization chooses you, costs continue to go up. New member fees can average from \$600 to \$1,000, covering just the membership. (Powell, 2021, para. 26-28)

Again, while organizations strive to create an inclusive experience for potential members, a welcoming image, one that typically includes a person of size, is what will keep the

organizations interesting to students as they enroll in college. As mentioned previously, students thrive on feeling like they belong on campus. One of the major reasons schools are so competitive and focus on retention is based on how the students feel after each academic year on campus. Higher education professionals spend countless hours researching ways to keep students returning to campus and potentially graduating from that institution. Ideally, thousands of dollars can be spent on equipment, activities, merchandise, and a list of other benefits and rewards for students, but if a student does not feel comfortable and accommodated, they may be more likely to attend another institution.

Body Image and Greek Life

It was further confirmed when I went to fill out the form to get my rush shirt. For the first two nights, every girl is required to wear the same shirt as a way to even the playing field (making it harder for girls to show off wealth). When I opened the form, the options were XS, S, M, L, and XL. My stomach dropped when I didn't see my size as an option. I had to go to my recruitment counselor and request they expand the sizes offered, already feeling like this wasn't a space where I was welcome. (Oxnam, 2021, p. XX)

As mentioned previously, there is little research about fat-bodied students in Greek Life. However, there are several blogs written by fat-bodied students and their processes through Greek Life. Body image has become a great topic for people wanting to join Greek organizations. There are movements and statements from NPHC as a whole several organizations that encourage interested candidates and current members to be

their authentic selves., however, some organizations may value body appearance over the candidate's personality traits.

In comparison to this ideal, SMU does offer free apparel to students at various campus events. However, many of the participants mentioned not being able to find these materials in their size. Even the option to buy merchandise from the campus bookstore is not accommodating to someone of size. Frank used to work in the campus bookstore and shared his experience with size-specific clothing and the options that were available for purchase.

I would say for me because I do have experience working in the bookstore, I don't know if we carried many [fat-bodied clothing] of every style or piece of clothing. In most things, we did carry sizes up to a 3XL. We didn't have a whole lot. Maybe two or three 3X shirts, maybe three or four 2X shirts, and the rest of them were small, medium, or large.

This trend amongst campus clothing only further adds to some added stress for members of the NPHC to afford clothing to represent their organization that fits comfortably.

Frank mentioned that one shirt with the Greek lettering of his organization could cost, on average, thirty dollars, which does not include upcharges for larger-sized shirts or customizations. In connection to this topic, KC shared,

I'll be going through that [sorority clothing website], and I don't know what size to pick because of course, as a female, a lot of the items are sold in ladies' fit and not unisex, so there's that aspect and you have to convert your size to a man's size. Then you can't even try it on because there's no dressing room, then you'll have to purchase it first. They were tripping [mad] bad it. I had to fight tooth and nail for

it [change of size]. I don't know what their policy was, but they were not trying to let me return it.

While data collection for this study is complete, there are still things yet to be discovered about fat-bodied student experiences that will continue to come about as time progresses. Even with this limitation, some findings have begun to emerge. For students who are both members of a Greek organization and a fat-bodied person, student affairs professionals can serve as an ally to students who experience these same feelings of physical discomfort and not feeling accepted on their college campuses. Additionally, fat-bodied students rarely see themselves represented in recruitment materials and other literature regarding NPHC organizations. This research is already giving an often-forgotten group of students a voice and opportunity to share their lived experiences, with the hope of improving the sense of belonging and inclusion for students like themselves.

As students become interested in college and begin to learn more information about what college has to offer outside of the classroom, many students seek acceptance through Greek Life. One of the more rewarding experiences is the connections students can make with others with similar interests.

After one of her friends got involved, though, she decided to join and now says that Greek life was one of the best decisions of her undergrad. She said she initially decided to join the community but later realized the connections she gained from her organization would be vital during and after college. (Mish, 2020)

Amongst NPHC organizations, and through social media, some friendly competitions occur between the organizations, which best be classified as the best organization will

have a specific set of characteristics. This is often a friendly, yet prideful occurrence, often leading the way to manufacturers procedure clothing in support of specific organizations.

Some organizations receive more manufacturing approvals which results in more paraphernalia (organization-based clothing) being created. KC shared,

I was somebody who emphasized my sorority's mottos. We [her sorority] were the last of the Divine 9 sororities. I was watching TikTok, and this video [about Greek-lettered merchandise for NPHC organizations] made so much sense to me. There was a trending eyeshadow palette, and one of the colors was named Howard [Howard University], and then when she was just expressing how vendors don't give enough love to SGRHO [Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc], I felt her explanation. We were not even founded at Howard University. They should have researched our sorority more. When it comes to vendors, you see all this nalia [paraphernalia] for the AKAs (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.) and Deltas (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.). I feel like between SGRHOs (Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.) and Zetas (Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.), we don't get enough love.

Stereotypes associated with current and interested members of these organizations could make it challenging for individuals to express interest. Amber also shared, "Oh, I think those are it. Yeah, that [AKAs] were the only ones that I knew about when I was a student at SMU" During the time frame the student is referring to, there was another NPHC present on campus. This leads the way to show not all organizations are equally known or represented.

Relevance of Topic

From the experiences of the researcher, there were few people available to share their experiences as a fat-bodied young woman interested in joining an NPHC organization. The lack of influence is what many other young people must deal with to figure out if such a commitment will be accommodating to them. When asked if she felt comfortable approaching current members of organizations she is interested in, Amber shared, “No. You got to know people [in these organizations]. With certain organizations, it seems you can only make the effort to approach these people. They’re not going to come to you.” When students decide to join these organizations, many decisions have to be made. Since these organizations are lifelong commitments, the students must know if the organization will fit their needs physically, mentally, and most importantly, socially, since these organizations are social and have some form of required social interactions embedded within the organizations. Frank shared, “Like there seems to be a rise of heavier members joining NPHC organizations, and I love to see that because it does show more inclusion and shows that you don’t have to be a certain size to be able to do these things.” As Stewart (2018) writes,

I invite you to reflect on your own attitudes about fatness and fat bodies. If I am to believe that, as educators, we want to center the learning of all students in our work and through our practice then we must render the experiences of fat students visible (p. 33).

The opinions and perceptions of plus-size students must not be merely considered but enforced just as any other evaluation of student experience on campus.

The stigma of the overweight is somewhat unique in that many of those in the stigmatized group consider their status temporary. is no reason for them to develop group consciousness or attempt to change the way society views their weight because most members believe that they will be able to leave the group through weight loss. Therefore, a person may profess great dislike and disgust toward overweight others even though he or she may be overweight. (Creppezzi, 2007, pp. 64-65)

The overall perspective and opinions of these students and staff members interviewed and surveyed only further speak to the importance of campus acceptance and comfortability. As higher education continues to evolve, so will the demographic of the students who attend these institutions. Of course, not every student will be fat-bodied, but every student will have a desire for their needs to be met and opinions to be heard.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

While it may seem easy to just encourage someone to lose weight to feel more physically comfortable, feeling accepted goes beyond weight. There is no one reason why a student can be overweight. However, the growing trend is that the opinions of fat-bodied students are often overlooked and ignored. College campuses can serve as an opportunity for students to share their experiences and struggles so that they do not have to define one's future. Progress is not always visible nor is it a cure-all for any emotional and physical constraints of a person. However, fat-bodied students should have the ability and opportunity to be equally respected as part of the demographic of the campus.

Discussion

Highlighted by the limited existing literature available, there is a need for more research about the lived experiences of fat-bodied students in general. This demographic of students is often combined with other visible or even emotional characteristics, but it needs more specific and intentional attention to help bridge the gap between an inclusive campus experience and one that leaves students feeling underrepresented. As described throughout the review of the literature, a higher education institution cannot offer an individualized experience to every student simply because there is a limited amount of money and time available to achieve everything that needs to be done. However, institutions can focus on encouraging feedback from subgroups that are reflective of the entire student body. "Recent literature typically frames student representatives as agents

of quality assurance who gather, analyse, and report on feedback from peers on the quality of learning experiences or the student experience through formal university governance structures” (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023, p. 560). However, considering the accessibility and comfortability of locations on campus to students of all sizes, this idea may encourage more students to be involved around campus. In turn, this likely would increase the retention rate of students attending these universities. Showing more diverse sides of campus engagement through Greek Life may provide plus-size students with more genuine experiences that can prepare them for their futures beyond college. Overall, fat-bodied students are frequently forced to adapt to an environment that does not fit their needs on a variety of levels.

Many of the results and findings from the participants align with a majority of the literature presented. In total, many of the participants did not feel equally represented in campus advertisements, spaces, and during student-based events when size-specific clothing is given or for purchase. However, the dynamic between the participants was different for those who were already members of an NPHC organization in comparison to those who were not. With each participant, there was a desire to not only raise awareness about student experiences from their standpoint as fat-bodied students but overall, all with different student subgroups. The faculty and staff participants also shared the same commitment to empowering students beyond their adversities.

Originally, the intention was to enroll six to ten participants who were current members of NPHC organizations and identified within the criteria of being a fat-bodied student. The interest survey remained open for several weeks to allow students to complete the form at their convenience. In addition, given the demographic of current

NPHC members at SMU, many of them did not fit within the weight classification for the research, which resulted in not being invited to the one-on-one interview as it could have skewed the data of fat-bodied students specifically. However, after multiple rounds of recruitment and follow-ups with potential interviewees, the research only yielded five student participants. The lack of responses from students further encouraged the researcher to seek the professional opinions of SMU faculty and staff. Despite some of the challenges faced, there are examples of narrative inquiry that can draw on the experiences of less than five participants if the pool is limited. “While a target sample size was selected, data collection was done until data saturation was obtained” (Smith et al., 2023, p. 154). With all of the efforts to ensure the researcher had enough participants to successfully engage in the study, the researcher consulted with the committee members and was able to move forward with the five student participants and two staff interviews.

Implications for Practice

Institutions of higher education must be considerate and willing to listen to the needs of fat-bodied students before they can break down barriers of why some students feel like outcasts compared to others. Throughout the exploration of methods of research, and through the limited information available about the experiences of fat-bodied students, it is beneficial for higher education practitioners and Greek Life personnel to read this article with the focus on the students in mind. This narrative-based research serves as a story that can be modified and applied to different student populations. This research method and approach can be applied to various demographic groups and adjusted to best fit the needs of the students being researched.

SMU is only one of the many institutions across the world that may not always consider the opinions of fat-bodied students and their interest in joining or current membership in an NPHC Greek-lettered organization. This research is not all-encompassing of every fat-bodied student or even every NPHC council. The experiences of the students, faculty, and staff members, and the overall acceptance of students on campus are important to the growth of higher education. As previously mentioned, this research may assist in sharing some of the opinions of fat-bodied students and their feelings of acceptance on campus but will also serve as a reminder that there is still progress to be made within higher education. While this research focused on fat-bodied students, many other student demographic groups may want to ensure that their voices are heard and acknowledged across their campuses.

Implications for Future Research

This research is not exhaustive of the total experiences and perspectives of fat-bodied students interested in NPHC organizations. Further studies could be conducted to develop a deeper understanding of how other Greek councils view body image and its influences on potential members. In future research, it would also be interesting to see how this same topic of fat-bodied individuals and NPHC could relate to graduate-level members and with a greater number of participants who consented to be interviewed. Membership in NPHC organizations at the graduate level typically consists of college-graduated members, who have either already joined a fraternity or sorority within the NPHC during their undergraduate education. Graduate-level membership can also be extended to those who were not members of NPHC organizations in college but chose to join for various reasons after a bachelor's degree. Graduate-level members are often

more established in their careers, connections, and community partnerships, which may affect the overall feeling of acceptance among NPHC alumni councils. Another question that arose from this research is how other marginalized people may feel about their experience as students. Specifically, this question comes from talking with Alex about her experience working with students with disabilities, in which many policies and procedures do not come from the institution directly but from government and university system offices. Overall, through this research, there was a great desire and yearning for all students to express their concerns and acceptance on college campuses and it is the goal that this research will help others unlock the interest and passions of other marginalized groups.

Final Thoughts

While this research is closing, the experiences of fat-bodied students continue daily. As with many popular television shows, movies, and documentaries, and with the opportunity to speak with fat-bodied students and raise awareness for the physical hindrances of campus facilities and furnishings, this research will serve as a voice to many students. The opinions and perspectives of students are less about changing the function and daily operations of these offices but aims to bring awareness that the voices of all students are important to the life, legacy, and success of all higher education institutions.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Protocol Exemption Report



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04430-2023

Responsible Researcher: Mya Curry

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Matthew Smith

Co-Investigator: n/a

Project Title: *Experiences and Perceptions of Fat-bodied Students who are Members of or are Interested in Participating in the National Pan-Hellenic Council Fraternities and Sororities at a Higher Education Institution in Southeast Georgia, USA.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, category 2. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of the research study, collected data must be securely maintained and accessible only by the researcher(s) for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
 - *Exempt protocol guidelines permit the recording of interview sessions provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted immediately from recording and storage devices.*
 - *As part of the informed consent process, recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant understanding, and establishing their willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be provided with a copy of the research statement.*
 - *To ensure confidentiality of participants, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding name lists, email addresses, etc.*
- Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

Elizabeth W. Olphie

08.10.2023

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

APPENDIX B
Research Statement

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled “Experiences and Perceptions of Plus-Sized Students who are Members of or are Interested in Participating in the National Pan-Hellenic Council Fraternities and Sororities at a Higher Education Institution in Southeast Georgia, USA”, which is being conducted by Mya Curry, a graduate student at Valdosta State University, and is being supervised by Dr. Matthew Smith for LEAD7999 Thesis Course. The purpose of the study is to discuss the experiences and perceptions of plus-sized students and their interest or current membership in an organization within the National Pan-Hellenic Council. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about some of the challenges that plus-sized students experience in their daily lives and when joining social Greek-lettered organizations. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete. This survey and your participation are confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Disclaimer: Participant data will be deleted upon participation withdrawal.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Mya Curry (mjcurry@valdosta.edu). This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX C

Interest Survey Questions

Below is a list of questions asked to interest survey participants about their interest in participating in the sharing of their opinions in the interview portion of the study.

1. What best describes your gender and sex?
2. What are your preferred pronouns?
3. What is your current age?
4. To the best of your knowledge, how much do you currently weigh?
5. What is your current classification in college?
6. What is your declared academic major?
7. The following questions are for members of an organization within the National Pan-Hellenic Council. If you are not a member of these organizations, please leave the following questions blank.
 - a. What organization, within NPHC, do you hold membership in?
 - b. What year and semester were you inducted into your organization?
 - c. What offices/positions do you hold within your organization? If you hold more than one, please list them all.
 - d. Are you a first-generation Greek (you are the only one in your family that has joined a Greek-lettered organization, note: this does not refer to being a first-generation college student), 2nd generation (your parents, siblings, grandparents, or immediate family [aunts, uncles, or cousins] are members of NPHC organization but you are not a part of their organization), or a legacy (you and your parent are members of the same organization)?
 - e. Other than being a member of NPHC, what other organizations are you involved with on campus?

8. The following questions are for individuals who are NOT current members of an organization within the National Pan-Hellenic Council. If you are a member of an organization with the National Pan-Hellenic Council, please leave the following questions blank.
 - a. Although you are not a member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, what other organizations are you involved in on campus?
 - b. What are some of the reasons you are interested in joining an organization within NPHC?
 - c. From your experience on campus, how diverse do the organizations within the National Pan-Hellenic Council look based on physical looks?
9. This question will serve as a participant agreement. By clicking "yes", you agree and are interested in moving forward to participate in the interview portion of this study. By clicking "no", you would not like to move forward with the interview portion of this study.

APPENDIX D

Individual Interview Questions

Below is a list of questions asked to interviewees about their knowledge or current membership in an NPHC organization. Some of the questions may be pending the participant's responses.

1. What is your classification and major?
2. What best describes your sex and gender?
3. Approximately, how much do you weigh?
4. How would you describe your social class?
5. Is money a major area of concern for your family? Approximately, how much financial support from family or friends for academic and/or personal use?
6. Are you a member of a Greek-lettered organization within the NPHC? If not, have you been interested in joining a Greek-lettered organization?
7. Other than finances, what are some reasons you have not pursued the organization of your interest?
8. Are there certain stereotypes associated with the organization you are currently in or interested in
9. How accepted do you feel on campus amongst faculty, staff, peers, and campus guests?
10. Physically, where is it the hardest to feel comfortable?
11. Do you feel equally represented on campus, specifically with your size?
12. Are you able to purchase apparel on campus that is size-specific? For example, purchasing a shirt last minute for a pep rally.
13. In what ways, if any, do you believe that faculty and staff have not been understanding about weight when it comes to various activities on campus?

14. Do you believe that your college experience thus far would have been different if you were not overweight?