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## Gillon explores issues of race in the history of fraternity, sorority life

Casey Kelly

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## UMaine News

### Gillon explores issues of race in the history of fraternity, sorority life

April 3, 2019

Historically, fraternities and sororities on college campuses have mirrored broader social and cultural patterns when it comes to issues of race and racism. That includes patterns of oppression and exclusion, as well as racial uplift and cultural validation.

University of Maine assistant professor of higher education Kathleen Gillon analyzes these themes in the latest issue of *New Directions for Student Services*, for which she also served as lead editor.

“This journal is read widely by practicing student services professionals and higher education leaders,” Gillon says. “So the goal was to start conversations about issues related to equity and inclusion, specifically around race, ethnicity and culture in sororities and fraternities on college campuses.”

Gillon co-wrote a pair of articles in the collection. She was lead author, with Florida State University assistant professor Cameron Beatty and Florida Atlantic University assistant professor Cristobal Salinas, on “Race and Racism in Fraternity and Sorority Life: A Historical Overview.” Gillon was second author with Salinas and Trace Camacho, California State University, Long Beach director of student life and development, on “Reproduction of Oppression Through Fraternity and Sorority Recruitment and Socialization.”

In the historical overview, Gillon and her co-authors write the earliest Greek-letter organizations in the U.S., established predominantly during the 19th century, “reflected the broader collegiate student population of the time.” Students of color were excluded from these groups, just as official and unofficial policies of segregation restricted which institutions they could attend.

In the early 20th century, students of color at some colleges and universities began forming their own fraternity and sorority groups in response to issues such as housing and academic discrimination.

“While these organizations provided some protection against racism at an individual level,” Gillon, Beatty and Salinas write, “they were greatly affected by racism at an institutional level.” They cite the example of a Japanese American sorority at the University of California, Los Angeles that fought for decades to get a house on sorority row, only to be blocked by discriminatory laws and racism from property owners.

According to the article, Black Greek Letter Organizations “included a principle of service to the community” that differentiated them from the more socially oriented fraternities and sororities established by white students. Gillon and colleagues say this theme of racial uplift continues in many black fraternities and sororities today.

In addition, as diversity improved in higher education, they write that multicultural fraternities and sororities started to appear on college campuses to help “create a sense of validation and cultural relevance in light of the oppression and marginalization” students of color have historically experienced.

Gillon says these histories are important to acknowledge because individuals who work in higher education can use them to inform contemporary practice.

It had been nearly 20 years since *New Directions for Student Services* published an issue dedicated to fraternity and sorority life, and that issue only included one article on diversity.

The spring 2019 issue of the journal is online.

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