fewer academic opportunities as compared with men at that time. After earning her doctorate, Mueller distinguished herself again by joining the University of Minnesota faculty in 1929 (Coomes et al., 1987). This was another remarkable achievement for this era, as only 18% of women earned doctorates and women represented only 27% of faculty members (Solomon, 1985).

In The Shadow of Her Husband

While at Minnesota, Mueller spent a fateful summer researching aesthetics at the University of Oregon and met her future husband, John Mueller, a sociologist and musician (Coomes et al., 1987). Like other White women of the Interwar Generation, marriage dramatically altered her career (Glazer & Slater, 1987). She resigned from Minnesota in 1935 after six years of service and joined Mueller at Indiana University (IU) for his appointment as an Associate Professor. Two years after arriving in Indiana, Mueller became the Dean of Women, an unintended consequence of being the best choice when the position was vacant (Mueller, personal memoir, 1971). In her memoir, Mueller described how Agnes Well, the then Dean of Women, coordinated this serendipitous appointment:

In 1937 Miss Wells was requested by her physician to give up her position as Dean of Women, and she called one day to tell me that she had recommended me as her successor. Although I knew nothing about the functions of the Dean of Women, I saw no reason why I could not do as well as the deans I had known in action ... My argument then, as always, was that when a woman married she would have to take any old job that came her way and make the best of it (as cited in Coomes et al., 1987, p. 411).

One might question how, after attaining a doctoral degree from a prestigious research institution and becoming a faculty member at another well-reputed university, Mueller took “any old job” simply because she married. Although incredulous by current standards, this reaction was commonplace in that era. Chafe (1991) reported that only 12% of married White women worked in 1930, as compared to more than 70% of unmarried White women. A 1936 Gallup poll highlighted public disapproval of married women’s employment when 82% of respondents opposed women working if they were married and their husbands had jobs (Chafe, 1991). America’s slow recovery from the Depression in the 1930s accentuated the traditional male role of breadwinner and the supposed threat that women’s employment posed (Chafe, 1977). More specifically in Mueller’s field of higher education, women typically stopped working when married, even if this meant ending a promising academic career (Glazer & Slater, 1987). As a consequence of women’s temporary employment status, female academicians posed an
economic risk (Solomon, 1985).

As such, Mueller fit the prototype of Interwar Generation White women who did not question the underlying assumption that matrimony would, and should, eliminate their professional ambitions (Chafe, 1977). Only relatively few women thought work should lead to career advancement or self-fulfillment. Working White women considered their employment experimental and tentative (Solomon, 1985). If White women had careers after marriage, their status and traditional gender definitions would significantly change. This social revolution would alter women’s exclusive association with marriage and motherhood and men’s identification as economic competitors and providers of material success in the outside world (Chafe, 1991). This conventional standard of men as primary financial providers justified lower wages for women, rationalized discriminatory hiring practices (particularly for married women), and limited female career aspirations (Hartmann, 1982).

Mueller’s recount of why she was hired supports the contention that men’s careers were most prominent in families and that wives achieved vicariously through them. In her memoir, Mueller recorded:

I well remember my interview with Herman B. Wells [no relation to Dean Agnes Wells], the new president of Indiana University, who began by telling me that Agnes Wells had briefed him as follows, “She has a good husband and a PhD, and psychology is the new thing for these jobs, and also she has ten years experience at five different places”… We talked for a while about my work in Psychology, and I offered to have the Columbia and Chicago placement files sent to him for his official records. He inquired about my salary, and when I told him it was $2,700 at Minnesota he allowed him to meet that. We did not talk of specific programs or plans, which was not surprising because neither of us could have had too much to say on the subject (as cited in Coomes et al., 1987, p. 411).

This passage displays that Mueller’s education and professional experience were secondary to her husband’s career. Thus, she became Dean of Women with little investigation of her experience or consideration of the position’s responsibilities. The minimal job description provided by Wells was consistent with Nidiffer’s (2000) findings that Progressive Era women deans had limited guidance and pioneered their way through their positions.

A Guardian of Women’s Welfare and Morality

Once hired, Mueller received a letter from her predecessor, Agnes Wells, that provided a scant position description as planning for female students’ development “through good housing, good management of housing, good social conditions, good direction of social conditions” (letter to K.H. Mueller, June 27, 1938). These brief comments demonstrated archetypal values for Deans of Women who guarded women’s moral, physical, and social lives after coeducation (Nidiffer & Bashaw, 2001; Schwartz, 1997b; Tuttle, 1996). Acting as such guardians embodied the early American college philosophy of “in loco parentis” (acting in place of parents) that equally emphasized students’ intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual development as supervised by the college (Delworth & Hanson, 1989).

Evidence of “in loco parentis” was apparent in administrative practices during Mueller’s tenure as dean. Mueller often worked directly with parents, as exemplified by securing parental approval prior to issuing students’ loans to guarantee repayment (letter from W.G. Biddle to K.H. Mueller, May 29, 1939). At one semester’s end, Mueller wrote to parents, rather than students, congratulating them on their daughters’ ‘fine attitude and good citizenship displayed” (letter from K.H. Mueller, February 8, 1945).

Stemming from changing gender relations, women of the 1930s experienced greater scrutiny about their morality (Solomon, 1985). As a result, college administrators of this era focused particular attention on regulating undergraduate women’s behaviors (Mueller, 1949). Occasionally, the obligation to regulate students’ behaviors caused exasperation, particularly when administrators disapproved of students’ choices. Mueller, for instance, complained about retrieving a student at midnight because the girl could not “manage her affairs with ordinary prudence,” and got “into very bad company” (letter from K.H. Mueller, March 8, 1940). Likewise, President Wells remarked feeling greatly embarrassed to observe senior women smoking during Commencement, declaring, “this must not occur again under any circumstances,” and called for increased courteousness and proper conduct (letter from H.B Wells, June 19, 1939).

Administrators also sought control over students’ access to automobiles to limit perceived misconduct (Solomon, 1985). Mueller recommended that car permits become a special senior privilege because of the “greatly increased hazard to proper student conduct when large groups of students have free use of their cars” (letter from K.H. Mueller, May 3, 1939). While Mueller did not outline specifically how cars endangered student behavior, her concerns may have been “with the growing popularity and availability of automobiles, the ‘back seat’ provided a place for intimacy beyond the purview of chaperones” (Solomon, 1985, p. 161). Mueller’s later correspondence criticized the slack enforcement of driving regulations, noting that this transportation allowed students access to drinking and dancing establishments in neighboring towns (letter from K.H. Mueller, October 12, 1939).

During Mueller’s tenure as dean, IU had gender-specific campus regulations. Women’s rules, as outlined in “The Chimes for 1947,” explained curfew hours and the implementation of a sign-out book to indicate evening
destinations, men’s limited visiting hours, women’s prohibited entrance to men’s residence rooms and fraternity houses, and weekend away restrictions. Additionally, women could not smoke, wear shorts, sunbathe, or consume alcohol (“The Chimes for 1947”). Comparatively, the men’s rules imposed no limitations on curfews, weekends away, or nighttime destinations, but forbade firearms or other weapons, soliciting, pets, gambling, and alcohol. Curiously, only the men’s handbook outlined regulations prohibiting women from attending dances in town or without proper chaperones, perhaps a reflection of the customary practice that men invited women to dances (“Official Handbook 1947-48”).

As Dean of Women, Mueller did more than regulate undergraduates’ behavior, since she managed all aspects of student services for women. She coordinated student loans and scholarships, hired residence life staff, inspected housing, planned annual career conferences, advised sororities, and represented women’s interests on various student service committees (Mueller, personal memoir, 1971). Additionally, during Mueller’s tenure, two female residence halls opened, the IU’s Board of Trustees mandated on-campus residence for all first-year women, and women’s enrollment grew by almost 50% (Indiana University Archives General Reference Files, n.d.).

Mueller also distinguished herself among the women dean scholar-practitioners, a select group of professionals who anchored their work in rigorous research (Schwartz, 1997b). She completed three empirical studies, noting that she preferred research to “hearsay and anecdotal methods, which are not only unfair to the worker, but detrimental to the success of personnel work” (letter from K.H. Mueller, June 3, 1941). To compare various learning environments, one of her studies evaluated the academic performance of first-year women living in residence halls, sororities, and boarding rooms (letter from H.B. Wells, November 8, 1940). A separate investigation responded to President Wells’ written complaints about noise in the women’s residence halls. For this, Mueller and her staff designed a qualitative study of 100 women’s perceptions of residential life (Residence Hall Study, 1941-42). Following a proposal from the Committee on Women’s Education, Mueller completed a quantitative study of all graduates and 1000 non-graduates to ascertain women’s work history, marriage and family status, and appraisals of the college curriculum (Report on Women Graduates, 1942-43).

Conservative and Conformist Regarding Racial and Gender Issues

Socially and politically conservative, Mueller supported the “separate but equal” policy regarding African American students. As segregation prevented African American women from living in the new residence halls, they resided in the Dargan House, a substandard boarding house that Mueller described as:

Students must go through each other’s rooms to bathrooms, or to the hall. There are curtains instead of doors. Closets are not properly located. The furniture is drab. The furnace smokes. Also the repairs surveyed and
general upkeep and supervision are sub-standard (letter from K.H. Mueller, February 15, 1940).

Rather than object to these conditions, Mueller instead sought to renegotiate a $50 reduction in the weekly fees. She also sought another African American boarding house, noting the overcrowded conditions of Dargan House, reporting that one student slept on a hallway couch (letter from K.H. Mueller, December 2, 1940).

Yet, during the same year, Mueller discouraged an initiative to create a new African American student residence, as proposed by a professor from Prairie View State College, a historically Black college (letter from H.L. Owen, May 6, 1940). Mueller questioned whether the professor could endorse this project and why the professor would give up “such a good position ... in the Foods Department of Prairie View College for such a precarious and unremunerative project” (letter from K.H. Mueller, May 27, 1940). Defending the Dargan House, Mueller described it as comparable to other rooming houses that charged similar fees, as well as clean and supervised by University-funded counselors. She further explained that the University was negotiating for an improved boarding house with accommodations and costs equivalent to the residence halls, but doubted whether there were “no more than three girls who could afford to pay more than the present price of $2.50 per week for their rooms” (letter from K.H. Mueller, May 27, 1940). Unfortunately, Mueller accurately depicted the financial challenges facing African Americans at that time. A study of Black collegians at Howard University in 1929 found that African American students’ median income was only about half that of White students at comparable institutions (Solomon, 1985). In addition to legal segregation that prevented African American women from living on campus, financial challenges created another impasse.

Further evidence suggests that Mueller was noncommittal about equity in female employment. When considering University labor problems, she noted, “In the University, girls get $.25 an hour and men get $.30 an hour for general housework and other unskilled labor.” Mueller also remarked that Bloomington labor was less costly, which diminished students’ opportunities because, “A woman will do general housework all day ... for a dollar” (letter from K.H. Mueller, n.d.). Unfortunately, at that time, conservative opinions about gender issues were widespread (Chafe, 1977). Rossiter’s (1995) study of women scientists noted that before Affirmative Action White professional women “lacked the vocabulary ... and the civil rights concepts to recognize systematic patterns, identify the responsible parties, and plan how to correct the situations,” and because “they were either grateful for their current status or desperate not to lose even that, they were reluctant to criticize the powerful and successful” (p. xvii).

Women’s Opportunities at IU Grow during World War II

It would take the onset of World War II and the ensuing labor needs for women to achieve, although temporarily, equal remuneration and career opportunities (Hartmann, 1982). The beginning of World War II also brought unique academic and career opportunities for IU female students, as demonstrated in changes to the women’s career conference and curricular options from 1938 to 1944. In spring of 1939, Mueller received $200 for the first women’s career conference that featured nine professionals (letter from K.H. Mueller, April 3, 1939). By comparison, the 1942 women’s career conference received $1000, featured twenty speakers, distributed 7400 career booklets, and announced a shortened wartime curriculum for women (letter from W.G. Biddle, November 3, 1942). Mueller coordinated this highly vocational curriculum that offered training for thirty different careers. Career fields for which women could receive training included eight in civil service, five in hard sciences (Chemistry, Engineering, Laboratory Technician, Meteorology, and Physics), three in war-related fields (Map Making, Social Statistics, and Languages), and three in business careers, plus the more female-associated employment of teaching, nursing, and child care (“Careers for Women,” 1942).

IU’s educational campaign for women to enter male-dominated professions was not unique. In the early 1940s Vassar College for women also saw the proportion of students majoring in sciences rise to 26% (Hartmann, 1982; Solomon, 1985). Shortages in the male-dominated field of engineering resulted in twenty-nine engineering schools enrolling women between 1940 and 1945. These institutions included Carnegie Institute of Technology, Columbia University, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (Rossiter, 1995).

These new opportunities for women stemmed from an unprecedented demand for workers generated by the war (Hartmann, 1982). From 1940 to 1944, six million women joined the work force, increasing the female labor market by 50%, and decreasing the nationwide female college enrollment (Chafe, 1991; Solomon, 1985). Faced with declining student enrollments from the war effort, IU sought to stabilize its enrollment by attracting and retaining female students and by developing cooperative educational arrangements with local industries (letter from K.H. Mueller, February 12, 1943). Propaganda was evident in the women’s career booklets that encouraged women to complete degree programs. The booklet posed a question about whether students should work in factories. The booklet’s reply indicated:

If you have those talents plus an intellectual interest and skill, you owe it both to your country and yourself to develop your ability to meet the pressing demands for laboratory technicians, for laboratory teachers and supervisors ... you fail to do your whole duty if you drop out of school.
now for a job which demands of you less than you are capable of doing” (“Careers for Women,” 1942-43).

However much women’s employment opportunities grew during World War II, the career booklet also foreshadowed the temporary nature of these changes. One question posed in the booklet inquired whether college women should sacrifice cultural subjects for the war effort. The booklet’s reply cemented women’s domestic and cultural responsibilities:

The men of this college generation are receiving education and training in very limited and technical fields … The burden of responsibility placed on women now in college is therefore doubled … Men will provide the business enterprise and the income of the American high standards of living, but they will expect their women folk to maintain those home standards and to promote the cultural values of the community (“Careers for Women,” 1942-43).

This reminded women students that their familiar roles would take precedence at the war’s end (Hartmann, 1982).

The 1942-43 “Report of the Dean of Women” underscored the apparent maric state of the university during World War II. During the summer, soldiers occupied the White women’s residence hall and their departure prior to the start of school was uncertain. In response, Mueller and her staff canvassed the Bloomington community to secure prospective boarding houses, although many out-of-town defense workers had obtained the available rooms. In desperation, White women students lived on two converted floors of the Union Building. These uncertainties created significant challenges for the residence life staff, which struggled to secure employees, as women previously attracted to this field pursued new work opportunities. During this very intense year, Mueller nevertheless supervised two research studies, published predictions of women’s enrollment in The New York Times, and received an appointment to the state and national divisions of the National Association of Women Deans (“Report of the Dean of Women,” 1942-43). These accomplishments demonstrated how Mueller, like many women, recognized her leadership potential during World War II (Eisemann, 2002).

After Japan’s surrender in August 1945, Americans rejoiced at the war’s end and families prepared for loved ones to return (Chafe, 1991). In light of closing munitions factories and eleven million soldiers returning home, many experts questioned whether there were enough jobs for both women and the returning veterans (Rossiter, 1995). Fearing a recession and massive unemployment, there was a desire to restore gender-based economic and social patterns of responsibility (Eiseman, 2002). For example, Frederick Crawford, from the National Association of Manufacturers, who supported women’s war efforts, afterwards declared, “from a humanitarian point of view, too many women should not stay in the labor force; The home is the basic American institution” (as cited in Chafe, 1991, p. 156).

Apprehension of widespread unemployment also motivated the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Eisemann, 1998). This program allowed numerous veterans to attend college; at its peak, veterans represented 50% of the nationwide college population (Tuttle, 1996). More specifically, for IU in 1945, the male enrollment increased by 5,332 students and the total student enrollment more than doubled the previous year’s (Indiana University Archives General Reference Files, n.d.).

The Student Personnel Movement and Reorganization at IU

World War II and its aftermath precipitated institutional reorganizations among many colleges and universities, as high-level administrators, in response to surging enrollments, sought to streamline student personnel functions and increase efficiency (Tuttle, 1996). The personnel movement stemmed from Walter Dill Scott’s “personnel psychology,” established at Northwestern University as a battery of vocational tests to support development (Schwartz, 1997a). These student personnel functions united with an efficiency movement that resulted in a single director, coordinating different personnel offices, and eliminating duplicate efforts in different offices (Nidiffer, 2000). Accordingly, IU’s plan for efficiency recommended consolidating the offices of Dean of Women and Men and centralizing first-year advising (Tuttle, 1996). Mueller opposed both initiatives, as she did not want to separate students’ academic and personal experiences and she feared losing supervision of the women’s residence halls, sororities, and leadership groups to the newly created Dean of Students office (letter from K.H. Mueller, September 19, 1945).

Yet in 1946, IU centralized student personnel functions and dissolved the Dean of Women’s office (memorandum from R.H. Shaffer, September 18, 1946). President Wells appointed Colonel Shoemaker as Dean of Students because Wells perceived Shoemaker capable of responding to the housing and enrollment demands from the veterans’ return to campus. Reportedly the “right man for that era,” Shoemaker knew the University as a previous Professor of Military Science and Tactics and as the Commandant of the Army Specialized Training Program (Tuttle, 1996).

As Mueller described the reorganization, Shoemaker convened the student personnel staff and distributed a new organizational chart, already endorsed by the Board of Trustees. Like a military order, he directed the staff to relocate to their new offices and dismissed them without discussion (letter from K.H. Mueller, January 14, 1947). After the reorganization, Mueller’s title changed to Assistant Dean of Students – Educational Advisor
for Women, and she advised women students and taught graduate student personnel classes (Rossiter, 1995). To Eunice Hilton, Dean of Women at Syracuse University, Mueller complained that no one sought her opinion, and that she no longer served on any committees, even those she previously chaired. More personally, she lamented that Shoemaker never asked for her opinion regarding reorganizing the division, women students’ needs, or strengths and weaknesses of her staff. Although she considered resignation or protest, Mueller acquiesced to her new situation, as she feared being conspicuous in the University community and embarrassing Shoemaker (letter from K.H. Mueller, January 14, 1947).

The Phenomena of Disappearing Deans of Women

Unfortunately, Mueller was not alone in her demotion. By the mid-1940s, more male deans became Deans of Students, steadily removing or displacing female deans (Nidiffer, 2000). Schwartz (1997a) confirmed this widespread phenomenon as campuses adopted the student personnel movement and “the Deans of Men were realigned into such positions as Dean for Student Personnel, Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Personnel Services,” and “Deans of Women were given lesser positions, dismissed, or allowed to retire quietly” (p. 434). Hartmann (1982) observed that through such reorganizations, women deans lost direct access to institutional leaders, control over their budgets, and a voice in institutional leadership and policymaking. In 1946, Alice Lloyd, Dean of Women for University of Michigan, summed up the problem succinctly:

Still more disquieting has been a trend on many coeducational campuses to abolish the office of the Dean of Women in favor of a Dean of Students (always a man) with a Counselor of Women under him. In every instance where this has occurred and there have been many, the position of the women has diminished in salary and in prestige. There are not many women on university faculties and in university administration to defend the position of women (Nidiffer, 2000).

Not only did women deans lose their positions and leadership roles on campus, but women students lost their advocates (Tuttle, 1996).

As World War II ended, working women in the general populace, like Deans of Women, also experienced a dilemma of diminishing employment. Chafe (1991) documented that after the war, women made up 60% of all workers released from positions and were laid off at a rate of 75% more frequently than men.

Retrospective Analysis of Gender Identity and Societal Expectations

Clearly, Mueller experienced a devastating professional and personal blow, as she dedicated eight years to IU’s Dean of Women’s office, gained a national reputation, and excelled throughout the challenges of World War II. Additionally, Rossiter (1995) observed that Mueller possessed superior credentials in comparison to Shoemaker, as she had a doctorate in Psychology and a diploma in counseling from the American Board of Examiners in Psychology. Mueller acknowledged the personal injury and feelings of helplessness to her colleague, Hilton:

Sometimes I wish that there would be just one person, anyone, anywhere, who would say to the President that it is too bad to lose my services! But as I have often looked at all my friends, colleagues, acquaintances, I have been forced to realize that there will never be anybody to do that (letter from K.H. Mueller, January 14, 1947).

In light of Mueller’s many accomplishments, one could rightly question why she did not speak for herself to protest the demotion. However, for Mueller to question the reorganization and her removal would involve confronting the conventional norm of men as natural leaders and women as categorically less assertive. Recall that Mueller observed that President Wells offered her the Dean of Women’s positions because of her husband. It was also Mueller’s belief that married women should sacrifice career ambitions for their husband’s success (Coomes et al., 1987).

Rossiter (1995) discovered that during and after World War II, women scientists, like Mueller, struggled to believe in their potential and articulate their professional ambitions. She observed that these women considered themselves less capable than men, and doubted whether to advocate for themselves. These women scientists were often female academicians, who succeeded in a conservative profession and tended to be more cautious. These academicians saw little value or possible gain in political activism and believed that, to measure up, women should work harder, with more discipline and achievement (Rossiter, 1995).

Mueller fit this depiction of such a conservative and cautious leader, as evidenced in her ambivalence towards racial and gender equity. Moreover, for Mueller to outwardly object to her demotion would require combating and abandoning her strongly internalized gender identity, which conceived female success as deeply embedded in social relationships, attractiveness, and manners. She strongly believed that society would “eventually sit in judgment on her personal qualifications and determine her future success” (Mueller, 1954, p. 528). Thus, a public confrontation appeared too great a challenge to her female identity, as it risked her ‘good morale’ and ‘high standards.’ Nevertheless, in 1947 Mueller privately articulated to Hilton her observations that working women formed a uniquely discriminated class:

Women (professional or career women) are a typical minority group, just
like Negroes or Jews. But they are in a much worse position really, because every housewife is on the husband’s side and against them. . . . she wants her husband to have the advantage in competition. She subscribes to the male superiority legend. She is the professional woman’s worst enemy (letter from K.H. Mueller, January 20, 1947).

Conclusion

Examining the professional and personal history of Kate Hevner Mueller and her role as Dean of Women from 1938 to 1947 provides insight to powerful forces that shaped White female identity at this time. From this history, one considers how White women’s career ambitions were limited so to augment men’s professional opportunities. As Mueller internalized societal expectations for White women, one understands how women maintained behavior patterns that deferred to men. In her role as an educator, one sees how Mueller socialized younger White women for success in a patriarchal system by maintaining the norms, values, and identities that limited women’s potential and unquestioningly accepted their secondary status. However, Mueller does not deserve blame for the larger patriarchal culture at this time. Mueller was a single actor among many that reinforced White women’s secondary status in American society. Furthermore, Mueller seemingly sought to assist younger White women to succeed in a society that did not perceive them as equally capable to make choices about employment, family, morality, and personal fulfillment (Chafe, 1991).

Notes

1 Nidiffer reported that when the University of Michigan contemplated coeducation the Board of Trustees sought recommendations from Charles Grandison Finney, president of Oberlin College, the first institution to enroll women. Reportedly, Finney indicated, “You will need a wise and pious matron with such lady assistants as to keep up supervision.” Schwartz claimed as coeducation became more common in the late nineteenth century, many college presidents appointed female faculty members as Deans of Women to advise, assist, and counsel women students, as a new minority population on campus.

2 “The Chimes for 1947,” indicated that the Association of Women Students created women’s visitation hours. Women’s housing units closed at 10:30pm except on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights. On Wednesday, women’s housing units closed at 11:30pm, and on Friday and Saturday nights they closed at 12:30pm. Men were limited to visit women on Wednesday and Friday from 4pm until closing and on Saturdays and Sundays from noon until closing. On other nights, men could be in women’s residences from 10pm to 10:30pm. No woman could go to a fraternity or men’s dorm without a chaperone approved by the Student Activities Office. Women were to utilize a sign-out book to indicate their nighttime destinations in case of an emergency. Women students needed to complete over-night slips with the house chaperone, and if a woman wanted to go out of town with a male student, the Dean of Women needed to grant permission. Women received five “out-in-town” permits per semester.

3 “Official Handbook of Procedures, Rules and Regulations 1947-48, Halls of Residence for Men,” indicated that sorority houses and women’s residence halls permitted dances with permission on limited days. Furthermore, it clarified that the university contacted parents about all disciplinary cases involving any student under 21, as “. . .such student is a “ward” of the Halls of Residence when away from home.”

References

Asian Pacific Americans in Predominantly White Sororities: Perceptions of Racial Climate

Michelle Bernstein, Jackie Jones, Marianne Scott, Tara Sherwin

This qualitative study examines the experiences of Asian Pacific American (APA) women in predominantly White sororities at a large, public, predominantly White institution. It reveals the racial and ethnic identity development of APAs in these organizations, as well as their perceptions of racial climate in both their sororities and on the campus at large.

Introduction

The Asian Pacific American (APA) student population is both the largest and the fastest growing minority group in higher education today. In 1998, the APAs represented 5.8% of all college students, an 83.8% rise in population since 1986 (Escueta & O’Brien, 1995). Yet, in spite of their significant representation on college and university campuses, APAs receive considerably less attention as a racial/ethnic group compared to existing research on other minorities (Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002). Much of the research that does exist focuses on the “model minority” myth, which depicts APA students as both highly achieved academically and easily assimilated into the White American culture (Kawaguchi, 2003). Few studies actually examine the conception of easy assimilation to determine if APAs really do blend in seamlessly with their White peers.

As a significant means of student involvement in many campus environments, Greek organizations can play a major role in shaping the social and academic experiences of their members (Anson & Marchesani, 1991; Hayek, Carini, O’Day, & Kuh, 2002; Kuh & Lyons, 1990; Malaney, 1990; McKee, 1987; Winston & Saunders, 1987). While they maintain a long history of exclusionary practices against non-White students, fraternities and sororities claim to be incorporating more diversity in their memberships (Chang, 1996). As a part of higher education culture, which more and more endorses the importance of diverse representation in student enrollments, Greek organizations’ assertions of diversity could be a reflection of the influence of their respective institutions (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

Because of the perception that APAs easily assimilate into White American culture and the importance of Greek life to university culture, the researchers chose to study APA women in predominantly White sororities. Specifically, they hoped to answer the following questions: Why would an APA woman choose to join a predominantly White sorority? What, if