



Rodney Gore (left), the executive director of the Chicago Kappa League and the assistant director, Derek Robinson.

A PREEMINENT KAPPA LEAGUE

Chicago's Leadership Institute a Hit in the Hood

Are our young black men failing because we're failing them? That's the question some members of Kappa Alpha Psi's Chicago Alumni Chapter were asking nearly seven years ago.

By Rick Christie

Black males in the Windy City's public school system were in a "horrific" situation, according to Rodney Gore, executive director of the Kappa Leadership Institute-Chicago. Guns, crime and absentee fathers led to high dropout rates and a school system too overwhelmed to tackle the problem on its own.

The situation was unacceptable, especially for Brother Gore, a 1987 initiate of Chicago Alumni, and more importantly, the father of a high school-aged son.

"What we saw was the need for a program that didn't just help with studying," Gore said. "There were nuances that needed to be addressed, such as test-taking, the right courses and even family issues."

It's hard to argue with the results: a 70-75% graduation rate; a 100% placement rate at their "first choice" college; 56% have received full scholarships; and 83% score 28 or higher on the ACT exam. And 98% of the Kappa Leaguers are also leaders and/or student-athletes at their school.

Bottom line: If the Kappa men of the Chicago Alumni Chapter wanted to begin making a dent in one of the most intractable issues facing black communities across the country, they had to approach it in a way that would not only develop good students, but "strong leaders and achievers."

Preeminent Program

The result is a one of the country's preeminent programs of its type for minority males. A Kappa Leadership institute currently ranked #1 nationally amongst 344 other Kappa Leadership Institutes in the nation. And a "Kappa League" program that helped earn Chicago Alumni "Large Chapter of the Year" honors at the fraternity's Centennial celebration in Indianapolis.

But Gore is quick to add that such accolades are secondary, and even tertiary, to the goals of the Chicago Alumni's Kappa League program. "We want to expand that pipeline of minority males — especially African-American males — going to American colleges and universities," he said.

The program's own literature states that: "The primary purpose of the Kappa Leadership Institute – Chicago is to help these disenfranchised young men, referred to as 'Kappa Leaguers', achieve their goals and become constructive contributors to their communities by developing their leadership skills while monitoring, encouraging, enhancing, and rewarding their outstanding academic performance."

In short, Gore said: "We want to produce achievers."

College Readiness Boot Camp

The Chicago Alumni incarnation of the Kappa League program, which started with one public high school, has expanded to 38 different high schools in the Chicago-land area.

The program's success, Gore said, has even brought inquiries from some of Chicago's private schools.

From the selection process to taking their college ACTs, the young men are exposed to a rigorous program that challenges them every step of the way.

The program expects each young man to be "adamant about the fact that they plan to attend college and will pursue a professional career that will be rewarding and vital to themselves and to their community," according to its website.

And, to embrace the motto: "Achievers...It's who we are...It's what we do."

Gore said the program holds two, two-hour informational sessions a year — one each in September and late January — that are attended by up to 400 Chicago-land freshman, sophomores and juniors.

The Kappa Leadership Institute-Chicago, which currently manages about 95 young men out of the roughly 300 that apply every year, incorporates a 16-month college-readiness boot camp.

During that period, each young man is expected to complete a 6-8 week study abroad component during the summer prior to his senior year in high school. The \$10,000-per-student price tag is picked up by program partners such as the New York-based American Field Service (part of the AFS Intercultural Programs).

"This summer, we had several young

men travel to Hungary, Germany, Costa Rica and Panama," Gore said.

Each young man must also participate in:

- an extensive 12-week ACT & SAT prep session;
- a 6-month college application preparation and college application essay writing component;
- must chart his academic course of study;
- prepare a profile of his career;
- write an autobiography;
- and organize his procedures for post-high school education.

Among other skills, the students are also taught to "hone their individual writing styles and unique narrative" by writing essays at the bimonthly Kappa League meetings and learning 1,000 new vocabulary words a year.

Meanwhile, mentors also make sure that each student is "exemplary of each area of the 'Kappa League Phases' as denotes good leadership characteristics."

From Japanese to Physics and Calculus

And because each Kappa Leaguer is required to maintain a 3.2 G.P.A. per academic semester, they're not left on their own academically.

The Chicago Alumni Chapter holds academic tutoring sessions with the young men every Saturday morning in a variety of subjects, from Japanese to Physics to AP Calculus.

"And the high schools work with us by providing biweekly updates on individual Kappa Leaguer's progress for the semester,"

Gore said, “so that if they’re having a problem in a particular academic area, we can hopefully catch it early and help them.”

It’s hard to argue with the results: a 70-75 percent graduation rate; a 100 percent placement rate at their Kappa Leaguers’ Tier 1 “first choice” college; 56 percent have received full scholarships; and 83 percent score 28 or higher on the ACT exam.

Further, 98 percent of the Kappa Leaguers are also leaders and/or student-athletes at their school.

A result, Gore said, of the program’s efforts to make sure that the young men are well-rounded.

For example, they participate in bi-monthly training meetings, and are required to feed the homeless and tutor elementary school kids twice a month to complete at least 40 hours of community service work per year.

They are also required to attend three college tours per/year, and numerous cultural events to broaden their exposure to the local and global world around them. Gore not only credits the work of the Chicago Alumni’s 12-member program staff and Brother Derek Robinson, the program’s associate executive director, but the program’s partners for its success.

Brother Robinson, who is National Achievement Academy Chairman for the fraternity and claims the 31st Grand Polemarch Dwayne M. Murray, Esq. as a mentor, has primary responsibility for helping the Kappa Leaguers make the successful transition from high school senior to college freshman.

“Any program like this requires dedicated partners to make it happen,” Gore said.

He said backers like American Field Service, the Crystal Fund in Chicago, Internet giant Google, and certainly the public school system, are integral to the Kappa Leadership Institute’s continued progress.

Asked whether that progress could include developing an MOIP pipeline into Kappa Alpha Psi, Brother Gore would only say, “Well, that’s not a stated goal of the program... But we are developing achievers, after all.”



Onetime Los Angeles Kappa Leaguer Now Helping Run Program

Jaron Davis is the quintessential Kappa Leaguer

While a high school student at the Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies, he was a devoted member of the Kappa League program that met weekends and other special occasions at the Los Angeles Alumni Chapter’s historic house on Crenshaw Boulevard.

The experience made such an impression on him that he would ultimately join the fraternity and, upon graduation, become immersed in the very Kappa League program in which he had earlier participated.

Brother Davis is now co-chairman of the chapter’s Kappa League program, laying out the agenda and program for the 50 high school students who are participating in this current academic year.

Of course, the purpose of Kappa League is to inspire, encourage and develop leadership and responsibility in young men. But Davis’ experience – coupled with his decision to join the fraternity and become actively involved in Kappa League – represents the by-products of a successful Kappa League program, fraternity leaders contend.

“The primary reason I joined Kappa was because of my introduction and familiarity with the organization through my involvement in Kappa League,” said Davis, who was initiated into the fraternity at the Upsilon Chapter at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Kappa League is also a family affair. Davis’ two brothers, both members of Kappa Alpha Psi and onetime Kappa Leaguers, are also involved in the Los Angeles Kappa League program (Jarrell Davis was initiated at Upsilon in 2004 and Janard Davis, at the Epsilon Kappa Chapter at the California State University at Long Beach, in 2003).

In his years as Kappa Leaguer, he was not only exposed to the members of the alumni chapter, but to achievers in Southern California who came to speak to the young men, discussing everything from civic involvement to the tenets of being a man. And it’s an experience that had an impact on him.

“I got to meet so many successful black men,” he added. “When I joined Kappa, I wanted to give back. And the best way to give back was to work with the program that had such an impact on me.”