Becoming the "Ultimate Competitor": African American Male Student Athletes' Resolution for Academic Success in the Face of Adversity at NCAA Division I Predominantly White Institutions

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This study investigated the academic experiences of nine African American male student athletes' college experiences focusing on prior academic preparation and faculty expectations. Findings in this study illustrate significant heterogeneity and complexity among African American male student athletes, which challenges the current, over-simplified portrayal of their academic experience in higher education. Furthermore, this study highlights that facing racial stereotypes, African American student athletes found it essential to take charge of academic decisions (i.e. academic advising and facilitation of support services initiatives) and to build a team that supported their academic success.

Keywords: African American students, student athletes, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The educational well-being of intercollegiate student athletes is a conversation that continues to reign in the halls of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its member institutions (NCAA Bylaw 1.3.1, 2017, p.1). Universities acknowledge the importance of upholding the highest quality of educational standards for their student athletes, yet a significant gap remains between African American student athletes and White student athletes (Cooper, 2016). Sato, Hodge, and Eckert (2017) asserted that African American (AA) student athletes are often portrayed as individuals whose only goal is to sign up for courses that they can make effortless A's. Singer (2009), in his study of four AA student athletes from a large NCAA Division-I (NCAA D1) institution, found that these athletes felt that their educational interests were being overlooked in favor of the financial interests of those who manage high profile (large majority institutions that sponsor NCAA D-I sports) intercollegiate athletics. These students conveyed that they need to have a voice on the issues that they face in high profile athletics.

The purpose of this study was to explore African American male student athletes' college experiences, and especially how their academic preparation in K-12 schools and university faculty and staff's expectations on campus shaped their academic experience and supported, or failed to support, their academic success at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly literature indicates that PWI's environments are prone to repressing and discriminating against AA student-athletes (Rankin & Reason, 2005). The constant attacks on the intellectual ability of AA student-athletes have made it difficult for these students to succeed academically, and limit their opportunities to learn and become socially integrated into the university environment (Davis, 1995; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). From a historical standpoint, Hamilton (1997) and Wilson (2000) affirmed that a lack of acceptance and assimilation of AA students at PWIs cause them to struggle academically.

Scholars such as Martin et al. (2010) and Sato et al (2017) discovered that AA student athletes feel the need to keep proving to their instructors and classmates that they belong at their respective universities. In essence, African American student athletes generally feel that they are penalized twice, once for being a student athlete and again for being African American (Comeaux, 2010; Engstrom et al., 1995; Harrison, 2008; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Martin et al., 2010; Person & LeNoir, 1997; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). Bimper (2014) explained that the matriculation process (including team travel, practice, and workouts) for student athletes is very different than that of the average student, whose primary focus is academics. Not surprisingly, Grayson and Grayson (2003) found that African American student athletes who are void of social support systems, confidence, and/or community connections are more likely to quit school.

In contrast, a good number of studies show that when social support systems are in place, AA student athletes tend to excel athletically and academically (Carter-Francique et al., 2015). Simms (1997) found that prosperous African American student athletes took charge of their lives, set high educational goals, comprehended and survived racial marginalization, took part in community service ventures, and received strong support from family and friends. Benson (2000), Hall (2002), Spigner (1993), and Horton (2011) all suggest that institutions of higher education must build a culture of high educational expectations for AA student athletes that provides the support and direction they need to realize their full academic potential.

Baker and Hawkins (2016) asserted that academic mentoring is an effective way to help African American student athletes improve their academic performance. Academic mentoring is a viable way to build stronger bonds between faculty members and African American student athletes. Carter and Hart (2010) found that mentoring programs can cater to the educational, athletic, and socialization needs of African American student athletes. Comeaux (2010), in his piloted study of a professor-student athlete mentorship program at an NCAA Division-I institution, found that African American student athletes became more focused on their college studies, developed a positive outlook on future job prospects, and genuinely felt that they had a bright future ahead of them. These feelings of affirmation developed as a result of the mentoring program. In short, programs like this are strongly recommended because they provide significant benefits to the African American student athlete population (Comeaux, 2010).

Comeaux (2008) and Comeaux and Harrison (2007) assert that AA student athletes tend to gravitate to mentors and advisors, as opposed to dealing with White faculty members who comprise 89% or more of the faculty at PWIs. Beamon's study (2014) found that AA student athletes anticipated facing issues of racism at PWIs. Steele and Aronson (1995) conveyed that negative stereotypes motivate AA student athletes to show their antagonists that they can achieve academically. Perlmutter (2003) confirmed that White professors shun AA student athletes when they try to engage with them in the classroom. African American student athletes are often overlooked, or not included in classroom dialogues, contributions to discussions are typically not valued, and their assignments are examined more harshly than other students. White professors tend to check the clock when AA student athletes are afforded opportunities to talk in class. These types of actions only expand the wedge between AA student athletes and White professors, which validates the student athletes' dissatisfaction with the classroom experience.

Murty and Roebuck (2015) argued that the drive for colleges to win games negatively affects AA student athletes because they tend to focus less on academics. In environments like this, institutions are more prone to lowering their admissions standards to secure top-notch athletes. In doing so, AA student athletes' chances of passing greatly diminishes because they are being setup to receive bad grades,

dropout, or fail out (Murty & Roebuck, 2015). Hodge et al. (2008) and Melendez (2008)) asserted that university officials must look beyond traditional cognitive indicators (i.e. GPA, exams, sports performance outcomes) to help AA student athletes build a healthy athletic identity that centers on educational success, psychological stability, and athletic success. This will help them adjust better to the college environment (Melendez, 2008).

Harrison and Mottley (2012) explained that academically engaged AA student athletes who take an active interest in their education perform better than AA student athletes who are disengaged and do not make education a priority. Academically engaged AA student athletes generally find success through their ability to edify their academic identity (the level to which they identify with their academic role) more so than their athletic identity (the level to which they identify with their athlete role). Likewise, Valentine and Taub (1999) posit that student athletes will learn how to take ownership of their learning processes and make educated decisions with the support of a partnering industry professional or supervisor. Singer (2005) asserts that athletic advisors should design programs for AA student athletes that are geared towards meeting their special academic and developmental needs. In doing so, advisors can provide opportunities for AA student athletes to (a) attend seminars, (b) participate in leadership programs, (c) partner with industry professionals and companies, and (d) receive scholarships to advance their educational, personal, and professional development. Likewise, from an internal standpoint, athletic administrators can allow AA student athletes to gain pre-career training experiences through learning first-hand how athletic departments conduct business (Singer, 2005). This would be reasonable support given the fact that AA student athletes generate significant revenue for PWIs in football and basketball (Singer, 2005).

Melendez (2008) further posited that listening to the voices of AA student athletes would better prepare college administrators to offer them effective support services. In doing so, the administrators would be able to provide academic programs and initiatives that effectively counteract racial and discriminatory issues experienced by AA student athletes on campus. Since AA student athletes encounter numerous challenges in navigating the academic setting and college environment, it is imperative that PWIs find effective ways to make their campuses more accessible, warm, and inviting for these student athletes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) which sheds light on race and racial injustices in American society (Parker & Lynn, 2002). In particular, the centrality of experiential knowledge tenet of CRT explains that having a voice is an act of liberation for socially and culturally marginalized groups of people; by having their own voices, the oppressed people can challenge the misconstrued thoughts and racial prejudices deeply embedded in American society and institutions (Closson, 2010; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billing, 1998; Tate, 1997). Singer (2005) and Donnor (2005) acknowledged that CRT has been beneficial in telling the story of racial injustices that AA student athletes face in higher education. This study uses CRT to illuminate significant heterogeneity among AA student athletes' academic experiences and, therefore, challenges the sweeping and over-simplified understanding of this unique group of students, which is prevalent in both existing literature and society.

METHOD

A qualitative research method was used to elicit rich narrative data from nine AA male former student athletes concerning their academic preparedness and faculty/staff expectations at PWIs and how the two factors shaped their academic experiences and success during college years. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted for this study to highlight the meaning-making process of AA male former student athletes situated in a specific cultural and institutional environment at a PWI (Smith et al, 2009).

Participants were recruited through the primary researcher's personal contact, referrals, and word of mouth advertising at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sporting events. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the nine former AA student athletes who played sports at a NCAA Division-I Predominantly White Institution (PWI). All interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes per session and were recorded for verbatim transcription later. The data analysis followed the general guidelines of IPA (e.g., careful reading, coding, and theme identification) (Smith et al., 2009). The Atlas TI qualitative software program was used to ensure the analysis was consistent and transparent so that final interpretations are well grounded in rich empirical evidence (Creswell, 2013).

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Years Played	Sport	Academic Major
Terrence	30	2008-2012	Football	Sociology
Chris	28	2009-2013	Football	Sport Management
Rico	36	2000-2004	Football	Sociology
Jerome	35	2000-2004	Football	Management
Thomas	36	2001-2005	Football	Business
Kevin	25	2011-2015	Football	Kinesiology
Lance	37	2000-2004	Football	Sport Management
Jim	37	2000-2004	Football	Management
Craig	37	2000-2004	Football	Accounting

FINDINGS

Academic Dispositions and Experiences

The academic dispositions and experiences theme provided insights into the participants' priorities, academic preparedness, and expectations, as well as their challenges and persistent effort to find an ideal balance between two competing goals—academics and athletics—within the educational corridors of a NCAA Division-I PWI. This theme produced mixed results based on each student's primary reason for attending college. Some placed obtaining a degree and academic success as their top priority, while others were more concerned with being drafted to the professional leagues. The participants placing education as their first priority were less likely to struggle in the college classroom, yet those who chose to pursue a career in the professional leagues and used college as a means to advance to the leagues struggled in their endeavors. Rico, a first-generation college student who grew up in the inner-city community in the north, proclaimed, "My mindset was there to play football and academics came in second." He further stated:

> Well academics… It was not really a big factor because everyone knew you got to pass. You do what you have to do to go through. And even if you did the bare minimum you would get passed through. So, you know there is not that much pressure to be successful in the classroom. I had a teammate who was focused on trying to make the school and degree work for him, and he wanted to finish first in academics. My mindset was there to play football and academics came in second. That is how the programs are. You are there to play sports first, and academics come second. The media never say academics when it comes to athletes. It is all about athletics.

Most participants considering academics as their priority were also well-prepared for the rigor of college work during their K-12 school years. However, even some students from a disadvantaged background showed extraordinary commitment to academic success. Jim, despite being a first-generation student from a single parent home, showed remarkable resilience and determination for academic success.

To him, facing faculty's blatant racial prejudice at a PWI was a much harder and more emotional hit than the rigor of academic work itself. He said:

> I always was a good student, so I never really worried about that part. My main thing was, "Can I play here?" "Will I be able to play here?" I knew I would make it through school because I was not going to come back home without that degree to my grandmother. That wasn't going to happen. So, I knew I was going to make it through school. But I didn't think I would run into the things that I ran into at a big university with ... you got faculty that say they hate athletes. I never thought it would happen at a big university. I never thought it would be an option at any university. If you are part of the university, I thought you would want everybody in that university to succeed. But it's not like that all the time.

Jerome, a former SSU football player, said, "I think as an African American student athlete, there's a lot of stereotypes that 'hey this guy's only here because he can play football,' and for me, school has never been a challenge." This statement provided evidence that AA male student athletes value education and are concerned with life outside of sports. This is true even to those who entered college without adequate academic preparation. Thomas, despite not feeling academically prepared when he entered college had a broader perspective about life and persevered to do well in the classroom. "I think my expectation was to get a degree, better my life, come out of college better than I came in, and being able to have options to do something with my life." Kevin, a former football player from NNU, expounded on how he prided himself on not needing academic support services because he was so far advanced entering college. He came in with a roadmap already drawn so he rarely needed help from academic advisors.

> My academic experiences were pretty good. A lot of my teammates, they struggled as far as academics and staying in the study hall and having to have help from tutors and academic advisors and whatnot, but I saw early freshman year that it was very time-consuming, and it would take away a lot of time from what I wanted to do in college, so after freshman year, which we had a mandatory study hall, I made it a point to have my GPA to a level and my grades to a level to where I didn't have to be involved with academic advisors. So, basically, a lot I did on my own as far as class scheduling and what classes to take. When I needed help, I asked my advisors, but a lot of it was self-dependent.

Traveling added another layer of challenge for them. Craig, a former SSU football player, gave sharp insights into how traveling for athletic competitions sometimes caused him to miss classes. This was problematic at times because the support structures (e.g. academic advisors, study hall, and tutors) that were put in place often fell short of meeting his needs. This is a challenge that many student athletes face because intercollegiate academic enrichment programs in some cases focus more on attendance than academic skills development.

> Knowing that you get out of practice on Thursday, you go home, pack your bags and you may travel that whole day Friday. You on the road all day Saturday and you play your game that night, then you fly back and you already missed all of your Friday classes. You miss exams, assignments, and you try to get excuses again to make them up. Schedule wise it was just, until I got out of the mandatory study hall to where I got a chance to go and work with people in my major, and study with them a little more, it felt like a waste of time sitting in a computer lab with people who did not know much about my major or I am just sitting there trying to work with someone who just wants $20.00 an hour to come help me when they do not know anything about accounting or what I am doing.

Many of the participants entered college with a mindset that academics was their first priority while athletics was the priority for others. Nonetheless they all experienced the growing pains of having to balance their academic schedule against their athletic schedule. This made their academic journeys quite difficult at times. However, the next theme explores how the AA student athletes were able to succeed through challenging the system and taking hold of their own academic destiny.

Challenge the System and Taking the Initiative
This second theme revealed that AA male student athletes developed different types of resilience and strategies based on what they considered as the primary goal of their college education. Those who put their priority on athletic success preferred to work with professors "who will probably figure out what type of background a person comes from" and navigated their academic program with a strong sense of camaraderie and collective pride with other AA student athletes. Other participants whose priority was academic success excelled when they stood up for themselves, showed interest in the educational process, and most importantly, took control of their own educational pursuits. Chris, a former intercollegiate football player and first-generation college student, avidly talked about his resolve to win in all that he does in life.

> I hate losing at anything in life. I just hate losing. I'm just that ultimate competitor, I just want to win at all costs, and just that persistence just always kept driving me. I got to get through this, whatever it takes, I will get through it, and I will keep going. Because I already know, once I get through it, there's an end goal, whether it be that final grade or me walking across the stage and shaking the president's hand and you know, being able to say, hey, I did it. But that's what really drove me.

These participants had critical awareness about how college sports could work for and against them. Terrence explained, "All these universities, they sell you on getting playing time, they sell you on getting exposure, and playing on ESPN. They're always selling the school and the product, but they're not selling you as a man, and that's what you need to know. It's like hey, how can I benefit from this, when the helmet and shoulder pads are not on anymore?" As a result, they emphasized the need to "balance" and protect their identity (i.e. who they really are) and not to allow any system or anyone redefine who they are.

Grounded in their keen awareness of negative stereotypes against their academic capability and a desire to negate such stereotypes that are prevalent on college campuses, Jerome and Jim further elaborated on the points that were expressed by Thomas and Kevin in the previous section. Their success was possible through their determination to work hard in the classroom regardless of the unfair educational systems (i.e. K-12 schools, college experiences) and negative stereotypes that pervaded their academic environments. Jerome stated:

> When I got to college, we had mandatory study halls, we had people checking behind us, and different things like that, but also, too, as people looking from the outside in, saying hey this guy, or these guys, and I'm speaking to the African Americans, themselves, on the team. These guys are just football players, they're not academic ... they're not student athletes, they're really athletes. I always felt like I wanted to prove those people wrong, but also, too, again, I always had that dream of wanting to do well in school, period.

Lance, a former SSU football player, challenged himself to take more course hours than were needed so he could get an early start on his master's degree. This was an extraordinary decision because most student athletes understand that participating in NCAA sports is very time consuming and could take twenty or more of their weekly hours outside of the classroom. This aligns with the internal drive of most participants who were excited about the prospects of completing their degrees above honing their athletic abilities. Lance said:

Educational experience was pretty good, I was supported. When I say it's pretty good, I mean I think it's just like with any university. You can go as deep as you want it to, or it can be as shallow as you want it to. Definitely try to challenge myself and do a lot of different things. I try to always take a full course load. I always try to take summer school classes. Not just one session but both summer sessions. Try to just really get as many credits as I could and knock out as much as I could especially with sports. But even in the fall, I was a little ambitious and most times guys would be taking 9, 10 hours in the fall with sports, but I'd be taking a full course load, and just try to really get that degree as quickly as I can because I wanted to try to work towards getting a master's degree or something at that time. But that changed after a couple of years.

Chris, Terrence, Thomas, Kevin, Jerome, and Lance showed courage by challenging themselves to exceed the norms of what is generally expected from AA male student athletes in the classroom. They entered college knowing that getting an education was most important to them. The participants' strong conviction that they were just as valuable in the classroom as they were on the field of play was pivotal to their success as it prompted them to be in charge of their academic path and holistic professional development.

DISCUSSION

While we presented the two most important and compelling themes derived from this study, the entire study generated three noteworthy findings about the participants' academic experiences and their ability to persist through school and graduate. Firstly, African American male student athletes who made education their priority performed better in the classroom, and generally entered college prepared to handle the rigors of college assignments. In contrast, those AA male student athletes who focused their attention on athletics were often unprepared to handle the complexities of college-level assignments. These two paradigms, coupled with having to balance life and athletics, made it difficult for AA male student athletes to succeed in college.

Secondly, faculty members had preconceived notions (stereotypical prejudices) about AA male student athletes, which prohibited them from seeing their true academic potential. Thus, these AA male student athletes were only celebrated based on what they could offer the university on the field of play. Faculty members' expectations of AA male student athletes were low because they largely did not feel that the student athletes could handle the rigors of college coursework. This way of thinking was often left unchallenged because faculty members did not take time to get to know their AA male student athletes. Thereby, faculty members could not relate to the student athletes' needs or appreciate the cultural background of AA male student athletes. Finally, African American male student athletes gained strength when they stood up for themselves and set the direction for how their academic journey should be managed. Some AA male student athletes defied the odds of not being academically prepared by entering college with their extraordinary determination, hard work, growing skillsets, and confidence that made academic success possible.

This study provides strong empirical ground encouraging AA male student athletes to pride themselves on reaching their academic goals and challenging negative social prejudices that remain pervasive in higher education. It also confirmed the structural inequality that plagues the quality of K-12 public education in many impoverished urban and rural communities. The relatively lower academic performance of African American student athletes, as compared to their white counterparts, was well-documented in some early studies (Sellers, 1992). Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found that white student-athletes enter college with an academic advantage over AA student athletes. This is due in part to the poor educational and instructional systems AA student athletes matriculated through in grades K-12 (Eitzen, 2000; Gaston-Galyes, 2004; Harrison et al., 2006; Reynolds et al., 2012; Sellers, 1992).

Giving voices to AA student athletes concerning their lived experiences with negative stereotypes is paramount to bringing awareness to their institutions' status quo approach that often plagues the

American higher education system (Martin et al., 2010). The effects of stereotypical thinking have serious implications because they have the potential to undermine the ability of AA student-athletes to function effectively in the classroom (Martin et al., 2010). This study is significant because it calls for raising the critical consciousness of faculty members and university administrators that AA male student athletes are capable of learning in inclusive environments where they are valued and accepted for who they are.

CONCLUSIONS

This study illuminates several important insights, including the last theme—challenging the system and taking the initiative—which has been subtly alluded to in seminal pieces of literature on AA male student athletes; however, there is no definitive literature that explicitly articulates this unique and critical point. Findings from this study also illustrate significant heterogeneity and complexity among African American male student athletes and challenge the current, over-simplified portrayal of their academic experience in higher education. It should be noted that AA student athletes do not want to be prejudged, but desire to excel in academics and graduate just like their peers on campus. Findings in this study demonstrate how AA male student athletes use their voice as a trumpet for change and transformation in environments where oppressive practices are commonplace and even normalized.

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