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Looking underneath the helmet: Understanding the academic expectations of African American male college athletes

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COLLEGE ATHLETES' Rights and Well-Being

Critical Perspectives on Policy and Practice



Edited by
EDDIE COMEAUX

COLLEGE ATHLETES'

Rights and Well-Being

Critical Perspectives on Policy and Practice

Edited by

EDDIE COMEAUX

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Looking underneath the Helmet

Learning How African American Football College Athletes Navigate Sports, Education, and Expectations

Jamel K. Donnor

Sports occupy a precarious space in the lives of African Americans. From the colonial slave masters' use of sport as an "oppressive instrument and diversionary device to occupy the minds and energies of slaves" (Sammons, 1994, p. 216) to African Americans' collective interpretation of individual African American athletic achievement as progress for the race as a whole during Jim Crow, Black peoples' relationship to sports is complex (Olsen, 1968). A particularly perplexing issue regarding African Americans' relationship to sports is the academic underachievement of African American males participating in major college football. Central to the disparities in the education of African American male college athletes is race. According to professor emeritus Harry Edwards (1984), once an African American male is identified as athletically talented, he is labeled as "something really special" (p. 9). Meaning, other than excellence in athletics, little else is expected of him (Edwards, 1984).

An often-used method of explanation for why African American college athletes in high-profile intercollegiate athletics are academically underachieving at a greater rate than White student-athletes is conflict theory (Donnor, 2005). Citing the hypercommercialization of the sport, conflict theorists argue that the sums of money associated with college football has created a programmatic culture that places greater emphasis on winning than academics. Specifically, highlighting the contradiction between the low graduation rates and sums of money involved in operating a major college football program, conflict theorists posit that African American males are exploited for their athletic prowess. Indeed, when one compares the "effective wage" of college athletes in major sports—that is, the value of (1) an athletic scholarship, (2) room and board, and (3) allowance to purchase books—to the revenue a solvent athletic program receives from merchandising, corporate

KEY TERMS

- ▶ African American male college athletes
- ▶ College football
- ▶ Critical race theory
- ▶ Academic achievement
- ▶ Academic advancement

sponsorship, and boosters, then assertions of exploitation possess more than a modicum of credibility (Brown, 1993, p. 671).

Although conflict theory has been useful for pointing out the contradictions of student involvement in intercollegiate athletics at a macrolevel, scant information exists on how African American male college athletes make sense of the relationship between low academic achievement and sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Singer, 2005). Hughes, Satterfield, and Giles (2007) point out that most studies on African American male college athletes contain “very little qualitative insight to help explain why an athlete’s academic performance may differ from a non-athlete’s academic performance” (p. 113). Similarly, Gaston-Gayles (2004) notes that “poor graduation rates and academic performance associated with various groups of college athletes warrant investigation that goes beyond merely examining the influence of traditional variables,” such as high school grade point average and standardized test scores (p. 75).

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how African American college football players at the Football Bowl Subdivision level (FBS) make sense of the interrelationship between athletics, academic achievement, and race using critical race theory (CRT) as an analytical lens. The goals of this chapter are twofold. The first is to present African American male college athletes’ capacity to think critically about sports, education, and race; the second is to illustrate how African American male student-athletes manage their postsecondary education in light of the pressure to compete athletically.

BLACK MALE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN MAJOR COLLEGE FOOTBALL: AN OVERVIEW

According to Benson (2000), the marginal academic performance of African American college athletes in major college football is a phenomenon created by a “series of interrelated practices” involving key education stakeholders, including coaches, academic advisors, and the student-athletes (p. 226). Structurally, many major college football programs are organized to “maximize the athlete role and minimize the academic role” (Eitzen, 2001, p. 203). Unlike, low-profile intercollegiate sports, such as golf, the athletic experiences of FBS college athletes consist of a system of formal mechanisms and informal practices that shape the basis of their existence during the season and off-season (Bilberry, 2000; Harris, 2000). For example, during the season an FBS college athlete spends approximately 12 hours in class, 24 hours preparing for class, and approximately 28 hours to his sport a week in the form of practice, weight training, team and position meetings, and/or travel (Eitzen, 2001). Conversely, during the off-season FBS college athletes are involved with voluntary strength and conditioning, programs and unsupervised practice in order to ensure the renewal of their athletic scholarship. In short, being an FBS college athlete is a year-round phenomenon.

As such, this particular group of college athletes is vulnerable to academic misconduct, such as cheating, in order to remain eligible to participate in athletics. Interestingly, African American college athletes are at the center of most academic misconduct scandals (Gragg, 2000). While the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) does not officially record the racial composition of college athletes involved in academic violations, anecdotally, many former NCAA employees indicate that the overwhelming majority of academic misconduct cases involve African American males (Gragg, 2000). Gragg suggests that when an African American male becomes an FBS college athlete, unlike with his White counterpart, his college education no longer solely serves his interests.

Instead, an African American FBS athlete's education converges with the interests of other individuals and his educational institution. For example, in addition to an annual base salary of "no less than \$270,000," Mark Richt, the former head football coach at the University of Georgia, is eligible to earn an academic bonus if the football team is ranked in the "top 33% of Southeastern Conference teams in both Graduation Success Rate (GSR) and Academic Rate of Progress (APR)" (Berkowitz, Bohn, & Upton, 2007). Interestingly, the overall GSR for the University of Georgia men's football team for the 2008–09 academic year was 48, while its APR was 965 (Lapchick, 2008, p. 4). A disaggregation of the statistics reveals that the graduation success rate for African American football college athletes at the University of Georgia was "38 percent" compared to "76 percent" for White football student-athletes (Lapchick, 2008, p. 4). Placing the football program's statistics in a broader context, the overall graduation percentage of White college athletes attending universities with programs at the Football Subdivision level (120 in all) was 76, while the percentage for African American male football college athletes was 59 (Lapchick, 2008, p. 1).

On the surface, the financial incentivizing of academic achievement for football coaches appears to be a win-win situation; however, this inducement negatively influences the educational experiences of FBS college athletes, because they are likely to be steered toward academic courses and majors that are less rigorous. In other words, participants of major college football, particularly African American males, may be tracked into undereducation or educational inequity under a statistical veneer of academic achievement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CRT challenges mainstream notions of race, racism, and racial inequality in America by rejecting the following entrenched positions on racism: "[color]'blindness' to race will eliminate racism . . . racism is a matter of individuals, not systems . . . one can fight racism without paying attention to sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression or injustice" (Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002, p. 1). Critical race theory situates race at the center of its critique through

the following analytical and methodological strategies: (1) history and context (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995), (2) rejecting paradigmatic notions of objectivity and neutrality, (3) acknowledging that racism is endemic (Bell, 1995), (4) utilizing an interdisciplinary perspective to provide a more complete understanding of experiences of people of color (Matsuda, Lawrence III, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993), and (5) incorporating “experiential knowledge” to articulate that reality is situational and socially constructed (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11).

In essence, race is more than differences in skin color, motivation, aptitude, or social class. Critical race theory treats race as a social construct that is situated in the lived experiences of a group of people with a common history of marginalization and oppression (Haney López, 1996). It is the reliance upon a group’s historical and current social standing that is central to explaining racial inequity collectively and individually. Finally, CRT provides an entrance into how large political and cultural institutions, such as schools, universities, and sports, influence opportunity without minimizing the role of individuals as important actors in the access and opportunity process (Tate, 2003).

RESEARCH METHOD

The data discussed in this chapter comes from a larger study exploring the educational experiences of 17 African American college athletes at three Midwestern universities with football programs at the FBS level. The young men in this study were asked a series of semistructured ethnographic interview questions focused on obtaining their understanding of the relationship between race and athletics on their secondary and collegiate education, respectively. By suggesting that the college education of African American FBS athletes is a convergence of interests, the author was interested in identifying a set of attitudes, interactions, and outcomes within a particular setting. Thus, the information discussed in this chapter addresses the extent to which football-related responsibilities, pressure from coaches, and actions by academic support staff led African American college athletes to select courses (and academic majors) more conducive to maintaining athletic eligibility than their expressed educational interests.

RESEARCH SITES

Fieldwork for this study was conducted at the following universities that met the NCAA’s institutional criteria to participate at the FBS level: Big State University (BSU), Crimson University (CU), and Tech University (TU).¹ Similar in academic reputation, research tradition, and level of athletic competition, these three institutions represent the proverbial ideal site to conduct a study on the impact of participation intercollegiate football on the education of African American male college athletes. For example, at the time of data collection, both Big State

University and Crimson University were ranked in the top 10 public national universities according to *U.S. News and World Report*, while Tech University, a private institution, ranked among the top 15 institutions of higher education for undergraduate students.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants were both purposely and randomly selected for this study. For example, first-year and sophomore participants were intentionally sought for their ability to render a rich description of the difference in athletic and academic expectations between high school and college, while second-year college athletes were selected for their ability to explain how advanced participation in FBS football has and has not shaped academic-related decisions. Conversely, senior college athletes were identified through snowball sampling. The information provided by these young men was particularly illuminating because of their advanced involvement with intercollegiate football, and they were best positioned to offer a comprehensive assessment of the attitudes, institutionalized practices, and actions on the part of education stakeholders and themselves.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

All interviews were conducted face to face and varied in length. While a formal interview protocol was used to interview participants, the questions were open ended in order to allow the participants to share additional information. In addition to the research literature and theoretical framework, the interview questions were shaped by three pilot studies. All three pilot studies were instrumental to the design, development, and refinement of the formal data-generating instrument used in the larger study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Three analytic strategies were used throughout the course of this study. The first data analysis method was pattern matching. The second data analysis method used in the study was triangulation. Three types of triangulation took place to address internal validity (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000). The first triangulation method used was member checking. Here, the data was presented to the interviewees through informal follow-up sessions to confirm their responses and findings. The second method of triangulation was peer examination (Merriam, 1998). The aim of this approach was to corroborate the emergence and convergence of data points. The third triangulation method used, and a corollary, was theoretical proposition. In utilizing a CRT perspective to frame this study, specifically its

context tenet, I was able to formulate a richer understanding of the rules, institutionalized behaviors, and practices that marginalize African American male athletes. In addition, the use of critical race theory helped to situate the findings as systematic. The third method of data analysis was analytical memo writing and analyzing field notes, which also occurred throughout the data collection process.

MAKING SENSE OF BLACK MALE COLLEGE ATHLETES IN FBS FOOTBALL

The literature on the academic experiences of African American college athletes frames their collegiate educational processes as static and linear and often positions them as passive participants. The findings from this study suggest the contrary. In fact, the findings reveal that there are two distinct competing sets of interests in the education of African American FBS athletes. The first set of interests, which are athletic and academic, belong to the football program. The football department is preoccupied, in terms of athletics, with its ability to compete regularly at the highest level and to appear in postseason bowl games. In contrast, the football program's academic interests are rooted not in student achievement but, according to the participants, in the coaches' interest in ensuring that student-athletes remain eligible to participate in the sport. Academic eligibility as defined by the NCAA is a requirement for participation in intercollegiate athletics. The data suggests that academic counselors in the athletic department encouraged college athletes to enroll in classes that were less likely to interfere with their eligibility to play football than in those that would advance their academic achievement.

The second set of interests belonged to the college athletes, whose interests are also athletic and academic. In terms of athletics, the participants had to balance sport-related responsibilities with personal aspirations of playing professional football and graduating from college. In terms of academics, these college athletes discussed how they negotiated the football program's expectations of retaining their eligibility in conjunction with their personal interests and intellectual desire to have a meaningful educational experience. More important, the findings revealed that a majority of African American football college athletes are interested in receiving a quality education and graduating from college. In many instances, the participants cited academic reputation as a factor in their decision to attend their particular university. The following section describes the 17 participants' involvement with major college football and its impact on their college education.

Learning to Work: Understanding the Football Program's Interests

When asked to describe a typical day during the football season, all of the participants used the word "work" to define the experience of being a college athlete

and to differentiate between high school and intercollegiate football in terms of athletic expectations and experiences. In fact, all of the participants reported that high school football was less structured than intercollegiate. In short, weight lifting, team practice, and team meetings composed the bulk of the participants' existence at the college level. When asked, "What does your morning consist of?" one participant remarked, "You have a 6:00 a.m. [weight] lift, which means you get up at 4:45 to get to the weight room by 5:00 a.m., because there is no telling what time the coaches are going to go in and check, [and] there is a 15-minute [late] rule. Then we go to class." When asked to distinguish the athletic experience at the collegiate level from the scholastic level, this individual stated that "in high school you practiced for two hours, and that was it. There wasn't film study, two-hour meetings before practice, meetings after practice and on weekends, like there is in college." The concept of work helps to debunk the widely held point of view that football college athletes in general, and African American college athletes in particular, receive preferential treatment because of their athletic status.

Work helped to contextualize the experience of the college athlete by giving the researcher an operational framework for thinking about how athletes and their lives are structured. Moreover, defining their involvement as work helped the college athletes to distinguish their experiences with major college football from those of traditional undergraduate students. Darryl explained the conundrum of being a scholarship college athlete:

People wouldn't have jobs if it wasn't for college football, whether it's the stadium workers or the coaches. They have their jobs, because people come to see us play. People want to be entertained by us. It's hard not to think about football the majority of the time because it is our job. That's the reason why we are here. People like to say that I get a free education, [and] to an extent I do and to an extent I don't. I got to pay for it by putting the majority of my time in college football. The coaches tell us to put the majority of time in education, but it's not true. The majority of time goes to college football because you are making money for other people.

Darryl's comments bring to light an implicit and complex message regarding participation in college football at the FBS level. Although the message does not convey an explicit directive to deemphasize education in favor of athletics, having to fulfill duties uncommon at the secondary level, such as film study, extra practices, and conditioning, does convey the fact that football-related activities are the focal point of the college experience for the student-athlete.

Remaining Eligible

When I inquired about the issue of race in their collegiate experiences, participants acknowledged that it was a factor, but it was subtle. According to the participants, African American college athletes are encouraged more than their White

counterparts to enroll in courses that are (1) more conducive to their athletic responsibilities, (2) intellectually less rigorous, and (3) divergent from personal and career interests. For instance, when I broached the topic of whether African American college athletes are steered toward courses they might not be interested in, Garland remarked that some of the academic advisors in athletics “don’t care, the main reason we are here is to play football, they want us to be able to play. And if the academic advisors do not think a college athlete is going to do the work, they are going to put them in something so they can stay eligible. I think they [athletic advisors] want to see us succeed, but they usually have a college athlete take a class they know he can make it in, instead of trying to push him.”

Julian, a senior, talked about how the culture of playing at a school with a strong football tradition, which his had, created a “system”:

The academic support staff [in the athletic department] has a system. They want what the coaches want. They know what they are doing. If we graduate, then it reflects positively on the head coach. He [head coach] has to say, “Get your degree,” [but] the truth is he does not care what you get your degree in, the staff could care less. It is more for his job’s sake that they preach graduating and things like that, because if he’s not graduating athletes then that does not look good on him. He is doing what he has to do. He is a football coach first.

Julian’s description of the influence the ethos of big-time college football has on the actions of some academic advisors also speaks to the experiences of the majority of participants at Big State University and Tech University.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a rich portrait of the educational experiences of African American males participating in college football at the FBS level. In doing so, it creates a conceptual space for rethinking the relationship between sports, educational opportunity, and academic achievement. Although the popular perception of intercollegiate athletics in the United States is that they foster higher academic aspirations and a positive self-conception, the empirical information presented in this chapter suggests otherwise. In fact, one might infer that, based on the accounts presented here, involvement in major college sports for the majority of African American male athletes is counterproductive for their educational interests.

Using critical race theory to understand the underlying motivations informing the academic choices of African American FBS athletes allows for a reevaluation of the factors informing their decisions. This approach includes viewing African American college athletes as active agents in the schooling process, which

suggests that they not only have the capacity to make sense of their experience as a highly structured phenomenon but also to develop and implement strategies for their educational advancement. Unlike more conventional theories used to examine the impact of intercollegiate sports on college athletes, this study, through critical race theory, affirms their agency as a resource for making meaning of the interrelationship between educational opportunity, sports, and academic advancement.

In demonstrating how African American, male college athletes navigate their college experience, new epistemologies and ways of thinking about them and their experiences are constructed. Thus, what might be construed as a fixation on the athletic achievement of African American male college athletes who “select” a less rigorous major might instead be a reflection of the accumulated obstacles in their particular situation. Therefore, it is important that future analyses consider how academic choices are influenced by institutionalized practices that can create divergent experiences. For instance, one policy recommendation derived from this study is for universities to develop formal mentoring programs for African American college athletes with African American faculty on campus as means of checks and balances. In addition to serving as potential role models for the college athletes, African American faculty serving in this capacity can also serve as advocates for this traditionally marginalized student population.

A second policy and practice recommendation is requiring college athletes to declare an academic major at the beginning of their sophomore year in college. Currently, the NCAA requires college athletes to declare a major by their third year in college, which makes them susceptible to “choosing” academic majors based on the classes completed, instead of unobstructedly following an outlined programmatic or departmental sequence in advance. Thus, declaring a major early would require football college athletes and their academic advisors to plan sooner, rather than later, by organizing and identifying academic options in advance. Also, this would allow college athletes to develop a contingency plan in the event that they change their area of study, as most undergraduates do.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Should college athletes be required to have an academic advisor outside the athletic department?
2. Are FBS college athletes exploited with universities now covering the full cost of attendance?
3. Should first-year college athletes be prohibited from participating in sanctioned activities in order to develop a strong academic foundation and acclimate to the culture of FBS football?

Note

1. The names of the institutions discussed in this chapter are pseudonyms.

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