

Black Student-Athlete Perceptions of Academic Support Centers

Astin Steward, Texas A&M University

John Singer (Advisor), Texas A&M University

**Socio-cultural
Abstract 2013-245**

**Saturday, June 1, 2013
9:20 AM**

**Poster
(Ballroom)**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a collective of 1,281 member institutions with projected revenue of 777 million; intercollegiate sport as a whole will generate 6.1 billion dollars in revenue this year alone (NCAA, 2012). Although intercollegiate sport is a billion dollar industry, the mission of the NCAA and its member institutions is not to simply create star athletes or exciting competitions. The tenets of the NCAA highlight that their goal is to integrate itself into academia by supporting/facilitating the academic and social development of student-athletes (NCAA, 2010). Hence, the NCAA standards of academic progress have been put in place, and recently reformed, to hold schools accountable for student-athlete eligibility, retention, and graduation rates. Academic eligibility criteria have been enforced, with consequences that not only impact student-athletes, but the athletic department as well (e.g. sanctions). This is a key factor, as academic performance of student athletes not only affects the student-athlete, but also the athletic department as a whole. Thus, NCAA member institutions have a vested interest in the academic success and eligibility of student-athletes.

Increasing academic standards for eligibility has led to an upsurge in monies allocated for “learning centers” specifically for student-athletes. Seemingly, these athletic academic centers are a positive change, yet the potential for financial gain for some stakeholders (i.e. coaches, athletic departments) linked to student-athlete athletic performance has led some authors to regard these centers as “eligibility mills”, pushing student-athletes to the bare minimum academically, rather than a place to achieve academic excellence (Benford, 2007; Spigner, 1993). In particular, when academic support programs and learning centers for athletics were just emerging and becoming commonplace on major college campuses, Spigner (1993) questioned the role of these centers in supporting the overall development of student-athletes in general, and African American student-athletes in particular. He suggested that rather than being the beacons for student-athlete growth and development they were supposedly designed to be, these centers truly functioned as perpetrators of institutionalized racism.

Spigner’s sentiments have been supported by some research examining the experiences of African American athletes at predominantly White institutions of higher education (PWIHE). For example, Benson’s (2000) work with Black male football athletes revealed that their “academic inadequacy” was related to a myriad of factors, including some of the structural elements within the university and athletic department of which they were a part. More recently, other scholars have employed critical race theory (CRT) to examine and raise questions about the perception of academic and financial exploitation of Black student-athletes at PWIHE (Donnor, 2005; Singer, 2005; 2009). This current study attempts to build upon this earlier work by focusing specifically on Black student-athletes’ direct experiences and engagement with these academic learning centers at PWIHE and the staff within them.

This focus is important for several reasons. First, given the history of racism, discrimination, and segregation in higher education preceding the significant influx of Black athletes into PWIHE (particularly in revenue-generating sports) following the Civil Rights Movement, it is important to better understand and examine how this key stakeholder group’s interests are being addressed. Second, given of the reality that for most the career as an athlete will end with college enrollment, academic success and degree completion are just as important with this population as it is with all other students. However, the examination of the interaction between Black student-athletes and the learning center academic support staff becomes even more critical in light of the unique additional challenges athletes face as they are required to find an appropriate balance between the extensive time associated with preparation for performance as an athlete and the academic tasks required of all other students. Finally, research has suggested Black student-athletes are more likely to utilize the services that are offered within these academic support centers (Asim, 2006; Fountain & Finley, 2009) and this report of this over-representation of Black athletes in the learning centers alone raises questions regarding both recruitment and retention practices on PWIHE campuses.

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

This study will draw primarily from CRT, a framework which is rooted in the social missions and struggles of the 1960s and used by scholars in the field of education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997), to explain how structures and practices in educational institutions, which are purported to be race-neutral, extend and police the racial boundaries of racism against people of color (Roithmayr, 1999). As mentioned above, some scholars have begun incorporating CRT into the study of sport within the context of higher education. The current study will continue along this path and draw heavily from the tenet of CRT, which emphasizes the importance of the experiential knowledge and stories of people of color and other marginalized groups in the United States and its social institutions.

A qualitative design will be used in interviews with conducting interviews with NCAA Division I male and female student-athletes, who self-identify as Black or African American. Interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using the inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006) to reveal themes that are most prevalent to the experiences of Black student-athletes who utilize these academic support systems. The primary objective of this study is to address questions related to these athletes' perspectives of benefits related to the learning center, the goals of these centers, and their experiences with and perceptions of the staff members who work in them in this academic support setting. The proposal has been submitted and approval by the university's institutional review board (IRB) and the recruitment of participants for the study has begun.

As previously stated, the purported goal of collegiate sport is to facilitate academic as well as athletic excellence. Illuminating the experiences of Black student-athletes within academic systems will provide information that will assist in the creation of programs that are better able to serve them. This research may potentially serve as a model for other institutions to adopt, change or disband the current standard model of academic support systems within athletic departments. The practical implications of the findings for program development and staffing will be discussed and recommendations for future research presented.