Black coaches in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic programs continue to be underrepresented. This is most prominent in NCAA Division I athletics in the sports of basketball and football where black student-athletes are overrepresented (Lapchick, Agusta, Kinkopf, & McPhee, 2013). The research in this area indicates racial inequality in the coaching ranks is systemic and institutional, given the historical-to-contemporary unchanged reality (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Edwards, 1973; Regan, Carter-Francique, & Feagin, 2014). Blacks have been shown to be consistently passed up in the hiring process (e.g., Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Hill, 2004; Singer, Hammad, & Bukstein, 2010), directed into positions that have minimal chance of leading to a head coach job (e.g., Bopp & Sagas, 2012; Bozeman & Faye, 2013), and unsatisfied with their treatment and tend to leave the profession early (e.g., Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Cunningham & Sagas, 2007), patterns that have not gone unnoticed by black student-athletes who are quite aware they will face racial barriers and discrimination trying to enter or once in the coaching profession (Cunningham & Singer, 2010; Kamphoff & Gill; Singer, 2005).

Is there any way to justify the racially imbalanced coaching structure in NCAA Division I athletics, such as performance comparisons between the coaches? At this point, research has not taken this perspective in consideration in much detail. Thus, to better understand the racial inequality within NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football programs, performances between white and black head coaches were compared to determine if differences exist.

This study drew from multiple theoretical perspectives, systemic racism theory and expectation states theory, to formulate the study’s hypotheses. The theory of systemic racism (Feagin, 2006) is used as the overarching lens in this study, given a gathering of the research on the underrepresentation of black coaches in college sport demonstrates how the scholarship seemingly fits within each of the theory’s six primary tenets. (see Regan et al., 2014). According to expectation states theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zeldich, 1972), performance comparisons are made based on socially significant characteristics such as race, which influence the distribution of rewards and consistent patterns of behavior. Because it is important to maintain the stability of social hierarchies, the legitimacy of status structures is embraced by advantaged groups (e.g., whites) and double standards on performance are made toward disadvantaged groups (e.g., blacks). Research has supported this, where Madden (2004) found when black head coaches in the National Football League (NFL) outperformed or performed similarly compared to their white counterparts they were still the last hired and first fired.

In the current study, various performances were compared among FBS black and white head football coaches. Head coaches during the 2014 football season were compared based on their previous tenure as head coaches. Head coaches during the 2012 season were examined since this was the year black head coaches reached a numerical high of fifteen, and they were compared to both their head coach predecessors and successors. Based on the aforementioned literature, it is predicted that 2014 FBS black and white head football coaches’ performances will be no different in 2013 season wins, previous tenure wins, first-year wins, number of wins to reach a bowl game, and number of bowl games reached (Hypothesis 1); 2012 FBS black head football coaches’ performances will be no different compared to their white head coach predecessors in tenure wins, first-year wins, wins to reach a bowl game, and final year wins (Hypothesis 2); 2012 FBS black head football coaches who were terminated by the end of the 2013 season will have had shorter tenures compared to their white predecessors (Hypothesis 3); 2012 FBS black head football coaches who were terminated at the end of the 2012 season will have been replaced by white coaches (Hypothesis 4); and 2012 FBS black head football coaches who were terminated at the end of the 2012 season will show no difference in their last-year or first-year wins compared to the first-year wins of the coaches who replaced them (Hypothesis 5).
The NCAA website, Lapchick et al.’s (2013) Racial and Gender Report Card, and the university athletic websites associated with the 2014 and 2012 head coaches were utilized for the current study. While there were a total of 128 FBS athletic programs at the start 2014 football season, after eliminating schools that had not yet hired a head coach, schools in which the head coach did not serve as a head coach during his previous tenure, and schools where the head coach was neither white nor black, the final sample included 118 FBS programs; 106 were led by white head coaches and 12 by black head coaches. Independent-samples t tests were run to compare performances between white and black head coaches.

The fifteen 2012 FBS black coaches’ performances were compared to the fifteen white coaches who preceded them. For those black coaches who no longer had their jobs as of the end of the 2012 season, their last-year and first-year wins were compared to first-year wins of their successors who coached at the same institutions during the 2013 season; only the three black coaches who left involuntarily were examined. Independent-samples t tests were run to compare performances and length of tenure, as well as to compare last-year and first-year wins of terminated black coaches to the first-year wins of their successors.

Both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were supported, since there were no differences in performance found between white and black 2014 and 2012 FBS head coaches, respectively. Hypothesis 3 was also supported, since 2012 FBS black head coaches were found to have significantly shorter tenures compared to their white predecessors. Results also showed that all terminated 2012 FBS black head coaches were replaced by white head coaches, thus supporting Hypothesis 4. Finally, terminated 2012 FBS black head football coaches showed no difference in their last-year or first-year wins compared to the first-year wins of the coaches who replaced them, thus supporting Hypothesis 5.

Findings from this study demonstrate the numerical dominance of white head coaches is not justified since both black and white head coaches were found to perform similarly. What is most disturbing, though, is the fact that 2012 FBS black head coaches lost their jobs significantly sooner than their white predecessors who performed similarly and they were replaced by white coaches who did not perform any better. These findings are consistent with expectation states theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zeldich, 1972), which posits because there is a need to maintain status hierarchies, status characteristics influence performance expectations; those with low status characteristics (e.g., blacks) are judged by higher standards compared to those with high status characteristics (e.g., whites). From a practical perspective, an area for consideration would be to mandate diversity training for athletic leaders, especially those with hiring and firing authority, as a way to identify and remedy racial biases. Additionally, since researchers have stressed the importance of racially diverse hiring committees (e.g., Singer et al., 2010), perhaps allowing these committees to play a review role prior to firing could enhance and preserve racially diverse coaching number.