THE ACADEMIC AND ATHLETIC EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES

IN A DIVISION I (FBS) FOOTBALL PROGRAM

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This study investigated the academic and athletic experiences of African-American males in a Division I football bowl subdivision football program. Critical race theory, identity development model, and social learning model were the theoretical frameworks used as the critical lenses in a qualitative design to examine the participants. The participants’ responses were analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis. A qualitative research design, which included individual interviews with 10 second year African-American male football players, was used to address this research problem. The goal was to bring together both the psychological and sociological perspectives and to challenge participants to candidly describe their academic and athletic experiences and attitudes toward obtaining an undergraduate degree.

Four themes were determined in the data analysis: differential treatment and determining oneself, time management, relationships, and career aspirations. In relation to the theoretical frameworks, the development of self-confidence and knowledge of balancing their academic and athletic schedules was critical for all participants. The sense of feeling different and challenged because of the differences in culture and experience was evident.

From this study, university and collegiate athletics administrators may better understand the backgrounds, challenges, and learning needs of this population. As a result, higher education personnel may improve the services they provide these young men in hopes of educating and developing whole persons—physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually—to become well-rounded and functional in contemporary society.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## I. INTRODUCTION

- Statement of the Problem .................................................................................................. 8
- Purpose of the Study ........................................................................................................... 9
- Significance of the Study ..................................................................................................... 9
- Definition of Terms ............................................................................................................. 9
- Theoretical Framework ..................................................................................................... 10
- Research Questions .......................................................................................................... 12
- Limitations ......................................................................................................................... 12
- Delimitations ..................................................................................................................... 12

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- Critical Race Theory .......................................................................................................... 14
- Identity Development Model ............................................................................................ 21
- Social Learning Model ....................................................................................................... 26

## III. METHODS

- Research Questions .......................................................................................................... 29
- Research Design ................................................................................................................ 29
- Participants ....................................................................................................................... 31
- Data Collection .................................................................................................................. 32
- Data Measures and Analysis ............................................................................................. 34
- Bias of the Researcher ...................................................................................................... 35
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Education has been a principal value among Americans, because it has served as the most important avenue for success in the world of adult occupational achievement (Sage, 2007). American higher education was in existence more than 230 years before the first intercollegiate football contest between Rutgers and Princeton (Gerdy, 1997). Athletics was incorporated into the structure of higher education, because academic leaders believed a successful athletic team could serve an important public relations role for the university and perhaps result in increased financial support (Gerdy, 1997). The programs of an organization reveal something about the nature of the organization, and the sports of a school reveal something about the character of the social institution of higher education in America (Chu, Segrave, & Becker, 1985). The investment in intercollegiate athletics can also be justified as being a useful tool to promote racial integration and tolerance (Gerdy, 2000). Intercollegiate athletics has become an avenue of access to higher education for many African-American (used interchangeably with Black) students. Although athletics opens doors of opportunity, particularly for Blacks, to realize upward mobility through education, Black student athletes buy into the dream of becoming financially successful, famous, talented athletes more readily, because society expects less of African-American students academically and socially (Gerdy, 2000).

As a result, Division I football and basketball continues to be more about exploiting Black athletic talent to drive television ratings and advertising rates than it is about developing academic potential and the abilities and talents to ensure successful integration into the high-tech, information-based global economy of the future. (Gerdy, 2000, p. 59)
The notion that athletics is the educational vehicle through which young Black males can achieve equality, opportunity, upward mobility, and a better life has been engrained in the minds of impressionable youth. The message instead should be that college athletics is simply one chapter in building a productive and fulfilling life, not the only chapter (Gerdy, 2000).

Historically, opportunities for African Americans in higher education have been linked to the social, political, economical, and cultural ties of the American society (Singer, 2009). The impact of World War II, the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, and the massive commercialization of sports contributed to the desire for universities to recruit athletically talented African-American athletes to produce competitive teams (Sage, 2007). Even with these events in American history and the push for desegregation in America, African Americans continued to feel tension and trepidation in higher education institutions, and athletics was one realm of the university that allowed African Americans to break through the barriers to their inclusion in higher education.

During the period that followed the Civil War, specialized colleges and junior colleges were formed for particular student interest, ability, and ethnicity due to the increasing enrollments (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The search for resources and the growing interest in athletics gave higher education administrators reason to consider formally incorporating athletics into the structure of the university (Gerdy, 2006). “In the case of higher education, it was believed that athletics could contribute to institutional mission through resource acquisition in the form of money, widespread visibility, increased student enrollment, and enhanced alumni support” (Gerdy, 2006, p. 12). Since then and with the vested interest from its fans have come the mass media attention and commercialization of intercollegiate athletics
and the desire for universities to produce highly competitive athletics programs. Once school administrators within the athletics programs realized and acknowledged that excluding African Americans from participation in the revenue-producing sports of football and basketball was incompatible with good financial policy, they began heavily recruiting African-American athletes (Singer, 2009).

Efforts must come from both the institution and students themselves, regardless of race, in order for students to achieve their maximum potential and ultimately receive a college degree. The intention of students on athletic scholarships is questionable. For some, achieving a professional contract with the National Football League (NFL) or the National Basketball Association (NBA) is the ultimate dream, and intercollegiate athletics is the stepping-stone to achieving that goal. Others take advantage of the opportunity of a free education and use their athletic scholarship as a means to earn a college degree.

Higher education institutions faced challenges with changes in enrollment, demographics, and the highly marketed business of intercollegiate athletics including academic challenges for athletes, in particular, African-American athletes in the revenue-producing sports (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Much of the literature on African-American male athletes in revenue-producing sports of football and basketball reveals negative results regarding their academic experiences and the effects of sport participation on graduation rates and social and intellectual maturity. To collaborate with higher education institutions and make attempts to curtail these issues, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) tightened its requirements for eligibility for athletic participation. In 1983, the NCAA adopted Proposition 48 that required prospective student-athletes to enter college with a minimum of 2.0 grade-point
average (GPA), a score of 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and 11 earned core courses for Division I eligibility (NCAA, 2010). Later, Propositions 42 and 16 were passed with even more restrictions on admission requirements for athletics participation (NCAA, 2010).

There was a wide range of debate against the requirements placed on student-athletes by the NCAA with Proposition 48, 42, and 16, raising issues on how these standards affected African-American students (Lapchick, 2003). “Black students matriculate from high schools and environments with inferior academic resources and tend to be less academically prepared” (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007, p. 207; Sellers, 1992). Because many (higher education officials) felt African-American students were at a disadvantage in having to meet eligibility standards set by the NCAA, some universities admitted these students who failed to meet the requirements under “special admittance” (Lapchick, 2003, p. 305). Colleges and universities must ensure that all students, including athletes have the same qualifications for admission and that their admission requirements are not sacrificed to admit the high profile athletes solely for rewards of having a “big time” athletics program (Duderstadt, 2003). “According to the NCAA, about 3 percent of all students enter as ‘special admits’, yet more than 20 percent of football and basketball players enter under such programs” (Lapchick, 2003, p. 305). Many African Americans enter with the academic odds stacked against them, which puts them at a disadvantage for academic success in college (Lapchick, 2003). Athletes deserve special treatment, but not through the exemption from academic preparation (Lapchick, 1989). Instead, institutions should deliver assurance of academic preparation and support with socially adjusting to college life through various programs for athletes who are challenged with handling the demands placed on them academically and athletically (Lapchick, 1989). “Thus the
fact that Black male student athletes enter college with lower academic credentials suggests the need for effective intervention aimed at Black male experiences while on campus” (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007, p. 207).

Currently, students seeking Division I eligibility must graduate from high school, complete 16 core courses, earn a minimum required GPA in core courses, and earn a combined SAT or ACT score that matches your core-course GPA and test score (NCAA.org, 2010). “Institutions recruit athletes who are not prepared for college work and then place athletic demands upon them that allow little time for academics. Many are placed in ‘crib’ courses and/or ‘bogus’ majors” (Gerdy, 2006, p. 16). The academic potential of the African-American students, particularly student-athletes is assumed to be substandard, having been admitted to colleges and universities because admission requirements were lowered to accommodate them (Scales, 1991).

The academic expectations for student-athletes are the same as for other students, though the demands placed on student-athletes from their participation in athletics is challenging to most, particularly African-American males in the revenue producing sports of football and basketball. Universities bring athletes to campus expecting them to give 20-60 hours per week to their sport, because of the impact the sports business has on the university (Lapchick, 1989). “Their performances as athletes provide excitement, entertainment, student interest, and increased revenue from ticket sales, television rights, licensing, and alumni donations. This is especially true of the black male athlete, who is overrepresented in revenue sports” (Lapchick, 1989, p. 35). With such demands placed on athletes, it is the responsibility of the institutions to develop programs and pedagogy to ensure student-athletes are receiving
assistance academically. The standard of expectations for student-athletes should be equal to what is asked of all of its students. The results of the academic expectations of the no pass/no play rules in high schools and Prop 48 in college prove that the athletes will rise to the level of set expectations if more is expected of them academically (Lapchick, 1989).

Much has changed since the time African-American students were first allowed to enroll in institutions of higher education.

Current undergraduates are more diverse demographically than their predecessors; they grew up in a nation in which many of the historic glass ceilings that existed for women, people of color, and gays have cracked; they believe the country has made real progress in race, ethnic, and gender issues; and they are more comfortable than past students with multiculturalism and diversity. (Levine & Dean, 2012, p. xii)

The need for educational institutions to make changes technologically and pedagogically is imperative not only to educate African-American student-athletes, but also to educate current undergraduates in the existing world.

The challenges faced by African-American male college athletes are multifaceted. According to Eitzen (2000), poverty, unemployment, and education are factors that prove African-American males are disadvantaged in the United States. “From two to three million poor African Americans are locked in an ‘underclass’ of extreme and long-term deprivation” (Eitzen, 2000, p. 294). African Americans experience discrimination in getting, keeping, or advancing in jobs, as the unemployment rate for African Americans is twice that for Whites (Eitzen, 2000). Forty percent of minority children attend urban schools in poor, African-American neighborhoods that are often saturated with drugs, crime, and dysfunctional schools, where more than half of the students are poor and fail to reach the “basic” achievement levels (Eitzen, 2000, p. 294). “Many economically, socially, and educationally disadvantaged African-
American males are recruited to play football and basketball in big-time university athletic programs out of this societal environment” (Eitzen, 2000, p. 295). Athletics provides educational and career opportunities for African-American males from underprivileged backgrounds and some argue that many who do not benefit from sports participation are being exploited (Duderstadt, 2003; Sellers, 2000; Shulman & Bowen, 2001).

Community and family structure for most African-American males can be the most influential in regard to their education and overall development. “The African-American family and their community tend to reward athletic achievement much more and much earlier than any other activity” (Scales, 1991, p. 74). This message has clouded the minds of many young Black males aspiring to reach their ultimate goal of professional sports.

We have led these youngsters, mostly Black, to believe that shooting or dunking the rock at the Final Four is a more meaningful and desirable life experience than earning a college degree and landing a challenging and rewarding job that will last a lifetime. (Gerdy, 2000, p. 59)

Edwards (1984) describes the manipulation of African-American athletes in higher education institutions regarding intercollegiate athletics: “We have in effect set up our own children for academic victimization and athletic exploitation by our encouragement of, if not insistence upon, the primacy of sports achievement over all else” (p. 13).

The issues that have risen from the opportunities given to African-American males in intercollegiate athletics, particularly the revenue producing sports of football and basketball have conjured questions on the overall development of these students. African-American males are now the dominant majority participants in Division I football and basketball (NCAA, 2010). Research studies have been conducted on athletes of this demographic in regards to race, identity, and social learning, though few have put the three together when examining these
students. There are a variety of studies, which revealed the need to continue to focus on these students. The changes in the business of college sports and society in general with social media, marketing, and high dollar television contracts has made it a more critical issue to examine so as not to jeopardize the educational opportunities of these young men. The importance of understanding the issue of the challenges faced by this group of student athletes is necessary for improving their experiences academically and athletically and perhaps for refocusing their purpose of undergraduate students and future contributing citizens of society.

Statement of the Problem

Individual studies on critical race theory, identity development model, and social learning model have described and developed critical perspectives on African-American males in intercollegiate athletics, though few studies bring together both the psychological and sociological perspectives when attempting to understand and interpret the experiences of these students in the current state of higher education and the NCAA. Furthermore, many of the previous studies involve the experiences of African-American male intercollegiate athletes and their experiences in academics and athletics within the former policies of the NCAA. As recently as 1990, the NCAA has revamped the academic policies and expectations for student athletes and in regard to academic success and graduation rates. Because African Americans now comprise the majority in both Division I football and men’s basketball, It is important to continue to examine the development of African-American male athletes and their experiences in academics and athletics with new policies (NCAA, 2010). Students’ increased usage of social media and changes made by higher education institutions in pedagogy and classroom
instruction, including online curriculum, has created educational and social changes in the experiences as undergraduate students (Levine & Dean, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover and assess the nature and current status of African-American male student-athletes’ academic and athletic experiences as participants in a Division I (FBS) football program to determine their points of view and need for improving their overall experiences.

The Significance of the Study

This study could contribute valuable insight into the athletic and academic experiences of African-American males in a Division I football program. The theoretical framework utilized in this study will enable these students to describe their experiences and express their purpose and intentions of attending an institution for higher learning. The results of this study will reveal the athletes’ perspectives on the NCAA athletic eligibility requirements and its effects. It will give administrators, coaches, and faculty, insight on prospective changes in teaching methods, faculty and student mentoring programs, and the university environment to improve these students’ experiences and maximize their opportunities. “College sport does not own these problems. They belong to higher education in general and its inheritance of the near bankruptcy of secondary education in some communities” (Lapchick, 2000, p. 17).

Definition of Terms

African-American (Black) male. In this study, the term African-American male (used interchangeably with Black) is considered to be a male born in the United States of America and of African descent.
Football bowl subdivision (FBS). The football bowl subdivision (FBS), formerly called Division I-A refers to how the post-season schedule in football is comprised. FBS institutions compete in “Bowl” games in football during post-season, as opposed to single-elimination playoff series. FBS schools are also regulated by game attendance.

Football championship subdivision (FCS). The football championship subdivision (FCS), formerly called Division I-AA refers to how the post-season schedule in football is comprised. FCS institutions compete in a single-elimination playoff series to determine a champion.

Redshirt freshman. A redshirt freshman is an athlete who is enrolled full-time at the university and who is categorized as athletically inactive in order to lengthen his period of eligibility. A redshirt freshman can practice with the team, but cannot play until he is moved from redshirt to active status. Typically, a student’s athletic eligibility in a given sport is four seasons. A student offered the opportunity to redshirt allows the student to spread the four years of eligibility over five or six years.

Student-athlete. The term student-athlete is defined by a student enrolled at an institution of higher education that is participating in an athletics program governed by the NCAA.

True freshman. A true freshman is an athlete who did not redshirt.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) was one instrument used in this study for examining African-American male athletes in a Division I (FBS) football program. CRT includes the following views: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and White privilege and supremacy perpetuating the marginalization of African Americans (Bell, 1980). Counter-
storytelling “help[s] understand what life is like for others, and invite[s] the reader into a new and unfamiliar world” (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004, p. 27). “African Americans may be influenced by the oral or verbal tradition of story-telling and sharing of family history that is characteristic of the African worldview and perspective” (Howard-Hamilton, 1997, p. 28). Primarily, counter-storytelling will be the method used with the participants to engage them in dialogue and express their perceptions and experiences in regards to racism as it relates to higher education. CRT is an appropriate tool for studying racism in college sport, because it provides a context for the research process (Singer, 2005, p. 371).

Erikson’s (1980) identity development model was used to examine the participants’ self-perceptions and self-worth. Most traditional student development theories do not reflect the sociocultural perspectives and reality of a multicultural society (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). The principle of Erikson’s work is psychological, biological, environmental, and age-related growth that occurs when people encounter serious choices and difficult challenges (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). The eight stages Erikson posits in this model include: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity development versus identity diffusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus self-absorption, and integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1980). Howard-Hamilton (1997) suggests that the early stages of Erikson’s model should be revisited and explored when working with African-American men. Primarily, this study focused on stages 1 through 5, as it relates to African-American males in a Division I (FBS) college football program.

Bandura’s (1977) social learning model is another lens for interpreting the experiences of African-American male student-athletes. For strengthening efficacy outcomes and
expectations, Bandura uses four primary sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal accomplishments, and physiological states (Bandura, 1977). All aspects of this model were considered, though focus on the vicarious experience with these subjects is stressed.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do African-American male student-athletes perceive their academic and athletic experiences?

2. How are African-American male student-athletes affected by their academic and athletic experiences?

Limitations

This study has the following limitations:

1. A case study performed by a female researcher of Hispanic decent on male participants of African descent could be an issue. Some participants may not feel comfortable completely disclosing personal experiences to me.

2. The sample of participants will be drawn from a predominately White institution (PWI) in the southwest region of the United States and may not be generalized to the entire population of African-American football players who participate in Division I (FBS) programs.

3. The participants may or may not be forthright in their responses to questions regarding career aspirations and may respond only to fall suit with company line.

Delimitations

This study has the following delimitations:
1. The participants in this study are African-American male student-athletes from a Division I (FBS) institution. This group has been found to encounter challenges in regard to college admission, academic progress and graduation, racism, and identity development more than any other group.

2. The participants of this study are African-American male athletes in a Division I (FBS) college football program, a revenue-producing sport.

3. The participants in this study consist of sophomore students on athletic scholarships. This group of students has more challenges in establishing their identities, being involved in their academic development, and engaging in social situations outside of athletics (Adler & Adler, 1985).
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is conducted on three theoretical frameworks: critical race theory, identity development model, and social learning model. Much research has been done utilizing each of these theories, though few have put together the three as they relate to the development of African-American males and their experiences in higher education and the business of intercollegiate athletics. Critical race theory has been used to examine this demographic, though the importance of examining this demographic from both the psychological and sociological perspectives is essential in understanding the overall development of this group of students. Because of the changing environment and culture in which these students emerge, it is important for educators to understand how these students learn, how they think and function, and why, in order to develop programs and pedagogy that is most effective.

Critical Race Theory

Singer (2005) utilized critical race theory (CRT) as an epistemological and theoretical tool to understand African-American male student-athletes’ perceptions of racism and the potential impact racism may have on their educational experiences and overall development (p. 365). A focus group of four African-American male football players in a big-time college sport program at a predominately White institution of higher education (PWI) in the Midwestern United States were interviewed for this qualitative case study to understand their perceptions of racism and the potential impact it may have on their educational experiences and overall development (Singer, 2005).
The themes supported in Singer’s 2005 study were that these student-athletes felt that racism manifested itself in terms of African Americans being denied access to leadership and major decision-making opportunities in college and professional sport, and in being treated differently than their White counterparts (p. 365). Singer states that academic support programs are a critical component to the overall development of African-American students and that having personnel in leadership positions that are representative of the diverse groups is essential (p. 379).

It is suggested that athletic administrators support programs that offer workshops, networking opportunities, and leadership opportunities by mentoring and exposing African-American student-athletes to these types of encounters in the sport industry to help improve their academic, career, social, and personal development (Singer, 2005). It should also be a concern for the university academic support personnel to not treat African-American male student-athletes unfairly in comparison to their peers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Zimbalist (1999) and Singer and Armstrong (2001) (as cited in Singer, 2005), determined that “there has been a shift in the institution of college sport from a focus in the mind, body, and spirit of student-athletes to an emphasis on the physical excellence or performance, and in many cases, this has been to the detriment of student-athletes in general, and African-American student-athletes in particular” (pp. 380-381).

An additional principle of CRT is interest convergence (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). According to Bell (1980), there was no conflict of interest between Blacks and Whites and the interests of the races converged to make the Brown decision inevitable. Only basic civil rights were provided for African Americans and Bell considered these superficial opportunities
because they were basic tenets of U.S. democracy (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Bell (1980) contends that these basic rights came only because they converged with the self-interests of Whites.

Changes in the social, legal, and economic climate of American society and higher education during the Civil Rights Movement caused many PWIs to actively recruit African-American students in general and African-American male athletes in particular (Singer, 2009). The impact of World War II, the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, the massive commercialization of collegiate sports, and the desire of universities to benefit from talented African-American athletes in building commercialized athletic programs resulted in more and more universities searching for talented African Americans to strengthen their teams (Sage, 2007).

In their experiment with the African-American students at Wells Academy, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) discover the ways in which interest convergence manifested in the school’s desire to raise the competitiveness of its athletic teams by recruiting more athletically talented African-American students (p. 29). “While the African-American student-athletes would theoretically have access to a high-quality education by attending Wells Academy, many of the same African-American athletes, however, rarely participated in honors or advanced placement courses” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29). Whites support racial justice only to the extent that there is something in it for them and only when there is a “convergence” between the interests of the Whites and racial justice (Bell, 1980). The school’s interest in making the athletics programs more competitive converged with some African-American families’ desires to provide a “rigorous” education for their children (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29).
Harper (2009) describes his findings from the National Black Male College Achievement Study, a qualitative study that focused on the understanding and describing the “lived experiences” of actively engaged Black male college achievers at PWIs (p. 702). The sampling identified Black male undergraduates who had earned cumulative GPAs above 3.0, established lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations, developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, and earned merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their college achievements (Harper, 2009). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicate that those who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities on college and university campuses are more satisfied with their experiences, have a higher likelihood of navigating institutional obstacles with success, and come to enjoy a more robust set of educational outcomes than do their peers who approach the college experience more passively.

The subjects of this study were able to meet and reflect on their experiences. The consensus was that the experience was empowering, though most agreed that a unidirectional placement of institutional emphasis on failure only exacerbated the racist culture of low expectation that had long existed for Black male students (Harper, 2009). “But as indicated in the counternarrative, their experiences are often overshadowed by the master narrative that amplifies Black male underachievement, disengagement, and attrition” (Harper, 2009, p. 708). The study participants who were also on intercollegiate sports teams made clear that their opportunities to learn and obtain an undergraduate degree were the same opportunities as other students. The subjects of this study challenged scholars conducting future studies to counterbalance popular negative dispositions with achievement-oriented pursuits like what
compels them to be engaged and take advantage of the institutional resources or what personal and institutional factors led their academic successes (Harper, 2009).

In his 2009 study, Singer used tenets of CRT with a single focus group of four African-American football athletes in an effort to bring the voices of this group into the dialogue on issues concerning institutional integrity in college sport. Institutional integrity involves the commitment of an athletics program to the educational interests of college athletes as expressed through their structures, functions, and activities (Singer, 2009). The interest convergence principle is a powerful interpretive and explanatory tool that provides great insight into how the integration of African-American male football players into PWIs have served more in the best interests of the institutions themselves than in the interests of these students (Singer, 2009).

Because college sport has provided opportunities to many African-American males to earn a college degree or a professional sports contract, some authors suggest that African-American men in these programs are victims of academic and economic exploitation, particularly because many come to these campuses with inadequate academic preparation and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Singer, 2009). It is suggested that the structure and functions of athletics programs has compromised athletes’ ability to fully reap the positive educational benefits because profit driven motives and interest in athletic abilities overshadow the concern for their academic success and that African-American athletes have been academically and economically exploited (Adler and Adler, 1991; American Institute for Research, 1989; Benson, 2000; Daniels, 1987; Hawkins, 2010; Singer, 2008). Expressing concern for students’ overall development through mission statements and program goals is deceitful.
Some have argued that the college sport enterprise exploits the athletic prowess of athletes, particularly African-American male athletes and ignores their academic and social development (Singer, 2008). “For a few African-American males, a way to advance is through athletic accomplishment, which will, at a minimum, provide a college education” (Eitzen, 2000, p. 297). According to Eitzen (2000), only about one fourth of African-American males who play in big-time college sports programs graduate and many of the three fourths who do not, are victims of exploitation by universities who used their athletic skills for economic gain.

Daniels (1987) discussed the need to nurture the overall development of African-American college athletes to form consistency between the rhetoric and the behavior of institutions in regard to the students’ intellectual and social development (p. 155). The mission of the athletic department in this study expressed as one of their goals to provide each student athlete with quality educational opportunities for personal growth and the ability to engage with a diverse and changing society (Singer, 2009). The experiences expressed by the subjects of this study lead the reader to believe these goals as hypocritical. In portions of a larger study in regard to the development issues of African-American male football players, the findings state that the student athletes felt that the tremendous expectations and time demands that were placed on them had a negative impact on their overall educational development (Singer, 2009). They labeled themselves as “athlete-students and scholarship athletes” and felt that racism manifested itself in various ways and perceived that their educational interests were being ignored in favor of the economic interests of those who manage big-time college sport (Singer, 2009, p. 108).
The findings of Singer’s 2008 study on the psychosocial benefits and detriments of four African-American male collegiate football players revealed that the psychosocial detriments were greater than the psychosocial benefits (p. 406). The subjects’ football-related responsibilities counteracted their ability to take full advantage of the ‘free education’ that they supposedly were in a position to receive as college sport participants on athletic scholarship (Singer, 2008, p. 406). “The comments of these athletes speak to the inordinate amount of time that they are expected to devote to the football program to the detriment of their academic and social development” (Singer, 2008, p. 406).

It is important to utilize CRT in studying African-American students to develop a better understanding of their experiences and more importantly, to understand what impact current educational practices have on these students and what educational administrators and policy makers can do to improve such practices. “Given the insidious and often subtle way in which race and racism operate, it is imperative that educational researchers explore the role of race when examining the educational experiences of African-American students” (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004, p. 26).

CRT, in particular interest convergence may be a useful tool to analyze policy and practice in teacher education (Milner, 2008). “In particular, because the issues of race and racism are deeply rooted in U.S. society (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993), they also are ingrained and deeply imbedded in the policies, practices, procedures, and institutionalized systems of teacher education” (Milner, 2008, p. 332). Future considerations suggested by Singer (2005) encourage further qualitative research using CRT and adopting research practices that allow African-
American student-athletes opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings regarding their experiences and development academically and athletically.

Identity Development Model

Adler and Adler (1985) find that college athletes become detached from academic goals, despite their optimistic aspirations upon entering college. Through participant observation of a major men’s college basketball program, Adler and Adler (1985) determine that most athletes enter college with the optimistic and idealistic goals and attitudes, but their athletic, social, and classroom experiences lead them to become progressively detached from their academics. They observed that the orientation and aspirations of most of their athletes in their study were idealistic and came from cultural messages reinforced by their families that a college education would equate to success in society. College coaches reinforced their beliefs during recruitment and stressed the importance of a college degree, though the athletes never really considered what a college education entailed (Adler & Adler, 1985). Their assumptions were naïve, thinking that attending college for four years would automatically lead to a college degree (Adler & Adler, 1985). The amount of work and effort it takes to earn a college degree was not anticipated and they expected if they “put in the time” they would graduate and get a degree (Adler & Adler, 1985, p. 243). “Either these individuals were such highly touted high school players that they entered college expecting to turn professional before their athletic eligibility expired, or they were uninterested in academics but had no other plans” (Adler & Adler, 1985, p. 243).

Adler and Adler (1985) conclude that the participants became uninterested in their academic careers, because of their classroom, athletic, and social environments. The students
became uninterested and bored in their classes. They were not actively involved in planning their degrees and coursework and did not interact with professors, academic counselors, or academic administrators (Adler & Adler, 1985). Being isolated from the rest of the student body by being housed in the athletes’ dorm did not give them opportunities to socialize and develop relationships with the rest of the student body (non-athletes). The only dynamic in which these athletes could identify was athletics. Because their commitment to the athletic program brought about identity and popularity within their peers, the student body, and the community, their interest in academics and social experiences became obsolete.

Adler and Adler (1985) also find that “college athletes’ academic performance is multifaceted and is determined less by demographic characteristics and high school experiences than by the structure of their college experiences” (p. 249). The transformation of these athletes from idealism about impending academic experiences to a state of pragmatic detachment suggests that there is something endemic to universities with big-time athletic programs that affects students’ orientations and behavior (Adler & Adler, 1985).

There are a variety of theories and developmental models used to help better understand the psychosocial development of students. Using Erikson’s identity development model will help in better understanding the growth and development of these student athletes and the issues they encounter. Erikson’s work on identity development is a useful framework in enhancing the development of African-American males on college campuses (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). Erikson’s theory is comprised of eight stages of development where at each stage of a person’s life, there are changes that occur psychologically, emotionally, environmentally, and biologically which cause the person to change and develop (Erikson,
Evaluation of these factors on participants of this study is necessary in determining their maturity, intellect, and intention.

Basic trust versus mistrust is the first stage which people encounter during infancy (Erikson, 1980). “Trust” means what is commonly implied as reasonable trustfulness as far as others are concerned and the trustworthiness as far as oneself is concerned (Erikson, 1980, p. 57). “Successful resolution of this stage leads to a sense of hope as to whether or not society is basically trustworthy” (Howard-Hamilton, 1997, pp. 24-25). The early childhood stage is autonomy versus shame and doubt, where the person moves toward independence from self-consciousness and inferiority.

From a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem comes a lasting sense of autonomy and pride; from a sense of muscular and anal impotence, of loss of self-control, and of parental over control comes a lasting sense of doubt and shame. (Erikson, 1980, pp. 70-71)

Stage 3 is initiative versus guilt, where the person determines whether or not he has confidence or feel guilty about making his own choices. Erikson (1980) determines that the feeling of guilt can be compensated by a sense of accomplishment. Industry versus inferiority is the fourth stage, which the person compares himself to others in his ability to accomplish certain tasks resulting in a sense of competence. Stage 5 is identity development versus identity diffusion. During this stage, the person is determining himself and what kind of person he wants to become, although confusion sets-in when others try to push their own views on him. Intimacy and isolation is the sixth stage during young adulthood, between the ages of 20 to 24. In this stage, a person should be able to form lasting relationships and experience love and intimacy. Failing to form lasting relationships can lead to isolation and loneliness. The last two stages from Erikson’s model include generativity versus self-absorption and integrity versus
despair, which occurs at ages 25 to death. For the subjects in this study, it is the early stages of Erikson’s model that will be explored. The development of these athletes during the stages of childhood and adolescence is of concern and how it has affected their decisions as young adults. “Black males are often prevented from mastering both these crucial universal and race-specific developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence. In turn, this lack of mastery retards their academic, career, and social success in the later stages of life” (Lee, 1996, p. 17).

According to Howard-Hamilton, the fourth and fifth stages are most consistent with the issues faced by college-age students and student-athletes (Howard-Hamilton, 2001). Because of their athletic prowess and athletic success, most athletes have established a sense of industry and might have formed an ego identity (Howard-Hamilton, 2001). The problem arises when recognition comes only from their athletic success and their entire sense of self-worth comes only from athletic competence, making big plays and winning the game (Howard-Hamilton, 2001). “Ego identity can become fragile when society defines a developing personality based on superficial values” (Howard-Hamilton, 2001, p. 37). In Erikson’s fourth stage, the adolescent develops a sense of industry develops a need to be useful and win recognition by being able to produces things well (Erikson, 1980). “He develops the pleasure of work completion by steady attention and preserving diligence” (Erikson, 1980, p. 91). The danger at this stage is the development of inadequacy and inferiority (Erikson, 1980). In the athletic context, athletes can develop a sense of belonging and accomplishment, because of the strong emotional connection with their coaches and teammates, because of their day-to-day communication and interaction. This connection can inhibit interactions outside the team and athletic context, because there is so little time available for extracurricular activities and socializing (Howard-Hamilton, 2001).
“Also, the skills of listening, cooperating, and communicating are needed in these settings, but conversations may focus on activities that are not part of the athlete’s frame of reference” (Howard-Hamilton, 2001, p. 37). Those outside the athletic context may not acknowledge the accomplishments earned on the athletic field and the athlete may then reach a sense of inadequacy where nothing he has learned to do well already seems to count (Erikson, 1980).

When a child begins to feel that it is the color of his skin, the background of his parents, or the cost of his clothes rather than his wish and his will to learn which will decide his social worth, lasting harm may ensue for the sense of identity. (Erikson, 1980, p. 93)

Concerns with social roles become apparent in the fifth stage where all sameness and continuities relied on in earlier stages are questioned again, because of the changes and growth during the adolescent years (Erikson, 1980). Because of the need to readdress the crises of the earlier years, some adolescents are not ready to install lasting idols and ideals as guardians of a final identity (Erikson, 1980). “It is the inner capital accrued from all those experiences of each successive stage, when meaningful identification led to a successful alignment of the individual’s basic drives with his endowment and his opportunities” (Erikson, 1980, p. 94).

Strong pervious doubt of one’s ethnic and sexual identity creates confusion and the defense leads adolescents to run away, leaving schools and jobs or withdrawing into bizarre and inaccessible moods (Erikson, 1980). For student-athletes, the bonds with their coaches and teammates created by their participation in athletics creates a comfort zone or place of familiarity, whereas interpersonal competencies may be more challenging in settings with students who are not athletes (Howard-Hamilton, 2001). Their lives outside of athletics may bring socialization issues or identity diffusion.
The findings of Pope’s (2000) study revealed that both race and racial identity are related to the tasks of psychosocial development. Pope found significant relationships between racial identity development and the individual tasks of establishing and clarifying purpose, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and academic autonomy (Pope, 2000). The findings revealed that as the scores progressed in the status of racial identity development, they also increased on each of the tasks of psychosocial development, which suggests that racial identity and psychosocial development are equally important and concurrent developmental concerns for students of color (Pope, 2000). There is a need to further explore the cultural, experimental, and environmental constructs that may affect the psychosocial development of students of color.

Social Learning Model

The environments African-American athletes find themselves at Division I PWIs can be overwhelming and very different from the environments from which they come. Bandura’s social learning model is another psychosocial theoretical framework that will be used to evaluate the participants of this study. He posits that people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling and introduces an integrative theoretical framework, which states that psychological procedures alter the level and strength of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). “Expectations of personal efficacy are derived from four principal sources: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states” (Bandura, 1977, p. 191). Bandura (1977) states that expectations of personal self-efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated and sustained in the face of obstacles and adversity.
He states that there are a number of factors that influence the cognitive processing of efficacy the findings report from microanalyses of enactive, vicarious, and emotive modes of treatment support the relationship of self-efficacy and behavioral change (Bandura, 1977). According to Howard-Hamilton (1997), Bandura’s social learning model is useful when designing interventions to enhance the development of African-American men on college campuses. “The social learning model has direct application to African-American men because it is the importance of having role models and learning experiences relevant to men’s lives that empowers this group” (Howard-Hamilton, 1997, p. 28). Howard-Hamilton (1997) supports that if African-American men are diligent in activities they view as intimidating, they may find themselves enhancing in their own belief that they can achieve against the odds.

Performance accomplishments are based on personal mastery of experiences where successes raise mastery expectations and repeated failures lower them (Bandura, 1977). Self-motivation is strengthened when one finds through experience that difficult tasks can be mastered and occasional failures can be overcome (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy can be stimulated through vicarious experiences. “Seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts” (Bandura, 1977, p. 197). It is critical for African-American males to have the role models whom they can observe mastering tasks and achieving goals that are outside of the athletics realm. Lapchick (1989) points out that for a black male athlete, the environmental change from high school to college can effect how he perceives himself. “If he lives on campus or goes to school away from home, he leaves behind whatever positive support network existed in his home community, and
leaves behind possible black role models who weren’t athletes” (Lapchick, 1989, p. 32). Black student-athletes develop a feeling of isolation on campus, because of the lack of black role models. The lack of black Americans in head coaching positions, managerial positions, or director positions reveals a root cause of the isolation black student-athletes feel on college campuses (Lapchick, 1989). Singer (2005) suggests that having African Americans in positions of leadership (i.e., head coach, athletic director) is one way to help prevent these athletes from being ‘exploited’ by the current system of college sport.

Efficacy expectations can be affected also by verbal persuasion, though are likely to be weaker than expectations that arise from one’s own accomplishments (Bandura, 1977). People can be led through suggestion or persuasion into believing they can successfully cope with what has overwhelmed them, though it is more effective that they experience the success rather than telling them what to expect (Bandura, 1977).

Emotional arousal is another source that can affect self-efficacy in coping with negative situations (Bandura, 1977). “Because high arousal usually debilitates performance, individuals are more likely to expect success when they are not beset by aversive arousal than if they are tense and viscerally agitated” (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). How individuals cope with adverse situations can affect self-efficacy. “Avoidance of stressful activities impedes development of coping skills, and the resulting lack of competency provides a realistic basis for fear” (Bandura, 1977, p. 199). Individuals cannot avoid every adverse situation. Controlling one’s behavior is important in conquering adversity and enhancing self-efficacy.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this research is to examine the academic and athletic experiences of African-American males in a Division I (FBS) program using theories perceived to be important to understanding the psychological and sociological development of this demographic. Specifically, the study seeks to understand whether or not the academic experiences are positive and influential in the participants’ attitudes toward obtaining an undergraduate degree and whether or not they use this opportunity specifically to advance their possibility of playing in The National Football League (NFL). Understanding their points of view is important and needed for understanding and improving their overall experiences. This research is a qualitative study of 10 sophomores, African-American male athletes who are participants in a Division I (FBS) football program at a predominately White institution (PWI) of higher education.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided my dissertation.

1. How do African-American male student-athletes perceive their academic and athletic experiences?

2. How are African-American male student-athletes affected by their academic and athletic experiences?

Research Design

This study is based on psychological and sociological theories: Bell’s critical race theory (CRT), Erikson’s identity development model, and Bandura’s social learning theory. Critical race theory (CRT) is a body of legal scholarship focused primarily on the historical centrality and
complicity of law in upholding white supremacy (Taylor, 1998). The CRT movement is a
collection of scholars and activists ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, and
transforming the relationship between race and power in various contexts and settings
(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). “Critical race theory writing and lecturing is characterized by
frequent use of the first person, storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of
law, and the unapologetic use of creativity” (Bell, 1995, p. 899).

Erikson’s identity development model is utilized to evaluate the identity and personality
development of the subjects. The analysis of an individual’s ego should include that of the
individual’s ego identity in relation to the historical changes that dominated one’s childhood
milieu (Erikson, 1980). Erikson’s stages of a healthy personality are critical in understanding
human development. “Different capacities use different opportunities to become full-grown
components of the ever-new configuration that is the growing personality” (Erikson, 1980, p.
57).

Bandura’s social learning model is another psychosocial theoretical framework that will
be used to evaluate the participants of this study. Bandura (1977) posits that people learn from
one another through observation, imitation, and modeling and introduces an integrative
theoretical framework, whereby psychological procedures alter the level and strength of self-
efficacy. “Expectations of personal efficacy are derived from four principal sources:
performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological
states” (Bandura, 1977, p. 191). Bandura (1977) states that expectations of personal self-
efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated and sustained in the face of
obstacles and adversity.
Thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method, will be used for this study. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). “Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Thematic analysis is used to report experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants as well as examine the way in which events, realities, meanings, and experiences are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is characterized by critical realism, which acknowledges the way individuals make meaning of their experiences and the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

The participants in this study are second-year African-American male football players on athletic scholarship during the 2012-2013 academic year at a Division I (FBS), predominately White institution (PWI) in the southwest region of the United States. The selection will be limited to the first 10 volunteers. Participants include true sophomores and can include red-shirt freshmen. After receiving approval from the university and athletics department on utilizing human subjects for this study, each participant will sign a consent form prior to their participation. The selection of these athletes in particular will ensure they have had some
experience in the intercollegiate academic and athletic cultures and have some level of maturity that would allow them to discuss their experiences in a meaningful way.

The university is located in a suburban community with well over 500,000 in the town’s population. My contact was made with one of the campus athletic directors who allowed me access to the athletes. Based on the students’ schedules and availability, I met them individually in their athletic academic center. Since the students visited the academic center for assistance and check-ups with their advisors, it was a convenient opportunity for me to access them there. I introduced myself to each of the students and asked if they would participate in my study. Each kindly accepted. No incentives cash or otherwise were offered to any of the research subjects to compensate them for their participation. All one-on-one meetings took place at the academic center.

Data Collection

The research design employed in this study utilized in depth 30-minute individual semi-structured interviews as well as a concluding focus group to discuss findings and confirmations. Approval was obtained for the investigation involving the use of human subjects from The University of North Texas Institutional Review Board before interviews were scheduled. Data was collected via tape recording and note-taking during the interview process. The interviews were up to 30-minutes in length. The recordings were transcribed and annotated with the interview notes.

In the interviews, participants were asked to describe their academic and athletic experiences during the 2011-2013 academic-years as well as their experiences in transitioning from high school to college. During their individual interviews, they were asked to elaborate on
their experiences and express whether or not their attitudes and aspirations changed in regard to completing their undergraduate degree. Some sample interview questions follow:

1. Describe your background and upbringing.

2. What was the primary reason you chose this university?

3. What is your major/minor?

4. What factors contributed to making your decision to attend college at this university?

5. If any individuals contributed to your decision to continue your education and football career, who were they and how did they contribute?

6. What challenges did you face in transitioning from high school to college?

7. Do you feel comfortable talking to your professors?

8. If any additional programs in which you are involved have helped you with adjustments to the university environment, what are and how did they help?

9. Do you have aspirations to play in the NFL? What are your aspirations about playing football beyond the college level?

10. Do you have plans on utilizing your undergraduate degree? How likely are you to complete your undergraduate degree, and if you complete it, how do you plan to use it?

11. What (if anything) would you change about your experiences (academic or athletic) at this university in the last two years?

12. What advice would you give to an incoming freshman who wants to play college football?
Data Measures and Analysis

Participants’ responses were analyzed and interpreted verbatim using thematic analysis to identify themes within the data set. “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The ‘keyness’ of a theme is whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was used to identify and analyze data. In an inductive approach in thematic analysis, the themes are strongly linked to the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The specific research question can evolve through the coding process through this approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified at that latent or interpretive level to identify the underlying features, ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that give form and meaning to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A six-step approach on conducting thematic analysis guided the method of data measures and analysis. The six steps include: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clark, 2007). The responses of each of the participants will be viewed from the perspectives of the critical race theory, identity development model, and social learning model to determine whether race or individual identity or social issues affected the experiences of the subjects. Analysis and findings were confirmed with follow-up email exchanges to
determine whether or not the responses were interpreted accurately and to provide suggested
revisions.

Bias of the Researcher

For the past eight years, I have been an assistant athletics director for the eighth largest
urban, public K-12 school district in the United States. Our department manages the athletics
programs for 54 public inner-city schools. My educational history includes a bachelor’s degree
in exercise and sports science and mathematics and a master’s degree in athletics
administration. I was a mathematics teacher and track and field and cross-country coach for ten
years prior to my career move to athletics administration.

I have an earnest intention and devotion to the experiences of athletes in higher
education, particularly African-American males because of the challenges they have faced since
being allowed enrollment in institutions of higher education. Previous studies explore the
experiences of African-American males in higher education, though I would like to explore their
experiences during the current trends in modern society as well as with the changes in the
university structure.

My passions for academics and athletics are somewhat equal, though I value
tremendously my academic degrees and education primarily, because of the opportunities and
freedom it has afforded me. I am curious to know what the next generation values and why and
what influenced them to develop their feelings.
CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study investigated the academic and athletic experiences of African-American male football players at a major NCAA Division I university. This chapter introduces study participants and provides insight about their academic and athletic experiences in transitioning from high school to college. The findings of this study will be presented and organized in this chapter as follows: an overview of the research process, a brief overview of the participants’ personal and educational experiences, familial, peer, and school influences, the prevalent themes that emerged from the data, a brief overview of the research theories, and the presentation of the narratives and conversations of the participants and how they relate to the theories and research questions.

Because this study sought to learn more about the participants’ academic and athletic experiences, the use of open-ended questions for the interviews were most appropriate to elicit the descriptions of their lived experiences. Individual semi-structured interviews were used, allowing the participants to speak freely about their experiences. The interviews became conversational and more in-depth as I became more comfortable with the process. My experiences as a teacher and coach helped me develop a rapport with the participants very quickly and most became very comfortable opening-up and sharing their experiences with me. Follow-up emails were exchanged in an attempt of clearing up any ambiguity generated during each of the original sessions. Each of the in-person interviews were audio taped and notes were taken throughout including comments regarding body language or voice inflection. After the data was collected, I completed the transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews as
accurately as possible. The transcriptions were emailed to each of the participants individually for review. Corrections to the transcribed interviews were exchanged and recorded via email with three participants. The other seven chose not to respond.

An informed consent notice with a brief synopsis of the study was given and explained to each of the participants prior to their interviews. All participants were assured their identities would be protected. The names used throughout the dissertation are pseudonyms.

In subsequent readings of the transcripts and listening to the audio-recordings, I began coding, categorizing, and organizing the data around some major themes as they related to my research questions. Developing an understanding of the experiences of the participants allowed me to develop the following themes that emerged during this process: differential treatment and determining oneself; time management; relationships; and career aspirations. The bulk of Chapter 4 outlines these themes and how they relate to Bell’s critical race theory, Erikson’s identity development model, and Bandura’s social learning theory and the research questions (a) How do African-American male student-athletes perceive their academic and athletic experiences? (b) How are African-American male student-athletes affected by their academic and athletic experiences?

Participants and Highlights of Responses

In line with Bell’s critical race theory, Erikson’s identity development model, and Bandura’s social learning model, the participants’ narratives were included in this chapter to help explain and support my identification of the aforementioned themes. Direct quotes from the participants’ responses will be shared in attempt to relate them to the theories and address
the research questions. Relevant data was obtained through the interviews and follow-up email confirmations.

Alex

Alex is a true freshman in his second year at this institution. He is a local student. His hometown is about 40 miles from the campus. He chose this school because of the scholarship opportunity and because it was close to home. “I had a few football scholarships. I selected this school, because it was close and because of the academics.”

Alex’s parents are married. He states his participation in honors classes at his high school helped prepare him for college. His father encouraged him to keep-up with his grades and stay focused on school and made sure his education came before athletics. Alex is a Social Work major and plans to minor in business. He chose this major, because he wants to help people and his sister recently earned a degree in social work, so the field was familiar to him.

Alex aspires to be in the National Football League (NFL), but knows his chances are slim and will find employment with his social work degree, because he wants to help people. “I am prepared for it (NFL) not to work out so I don’t want to get flustered about it.” He plans on completing his undergraduate degree in four years and would like to continue his education to earn his master’s degree.

His advice to incoming freshmen and those still in high school would be to put-in more effort in your schoolwork. “You have to find a way to go out and have fun, but know you are still here for school and do your class work first.” He also recommends networking and meeting new people to help new students adjust to college life.
Blake

Blake is a local student, a true freshman. His parents were never married and Blake lived and grew up with his mother and stepfather. As far as male role models, his peewee league coaches helped him throughout his life.

Blake had offers from numerous Division I schools, but chose this institution because they showed more interest. He felt that “the school that looked at you the most was the school that wanted you the most.” He made a connection with a coach prior to having played football at the varsity level and maintained dialogue and interest and chose this institution because of that. Blake chose this institution primarily because his football scholarship gave him the opportunity to attend. His interest in the academic programs came second.

I kind of looked online at the academic programs and talked to friends who were already here. It was kind of like football first, but at the same time I was like if football didn’t work, I’d have to put academics first.

Blake is a criminal justice major, changed from Radio Broadcasting, because he enjoys criminal minds and is intrigued by the investigations portrayed on television shows such as First 48. “I would hate to see women and children killed, so I am going into criminal justice to become a police officer and then go into homicide.” Blake, a wide receiver, stated that being in the NFL has always been a dream, but stressed the significance of having a back-up plan incase it (NFL) did not work out. “That is always a dream, but you just have to have a back-up plan, because you know like they say, it’s only 1%” (that make the NFL).

When asked about the challenges he faced transitioning from high school to college, Blake stated the “study thing” was the most challenging in which to adjust.
When I came from high school, you are like the stud doing stuff and like the teachers didn’t make you do much, like some teachers would tell me to bring them food and I didn’t have to come to class and they’d give me grades and I was like ok. But that was my senior year, but through high school I had to do work, but my senior year, it starts coming down to the end and they want you to graduate too. Coming to college, you have like the papers, and you have to study, cause if you don’t study you will fail it and it’s like the study thing.

Blake also states that time management was challenging in his transition from high school to college. In high school, his class schedule and practice schedule were set each week. In college, he was challenged with having to balance his football with school and having a son. Blake’s son used to live with him while he was attending college, but does not live with him anymore.

Blake’s advice to incoming freshmen would be to take high school seriously when it comes to writing papers and learning formats.

   Study for yourself, get used to using your own mind. They are not going to let you do what you did in high school. They (other students) are not going to let you cheat. Use your own mind and study for yourself, cause they study, why should they let you cheat when you’re not studying.

Clay

Clay is a redshirt freshman, from a town out-of-state about 200 miles from this institution. Clay’s parents were never married and his mother and stepfather raised him. He chose this institution because it was far enough away, but still close enough to come home if he needed. Football was the primary reason he is at this institution. He is a Psychology major with no minor. He wanted to major in “being a teacher,” but chose not to, so he would not have to lose hours and play catch-up with credits. He chose Psychology, with no minor, so he could do social work and after that he could work with kids, because he is trying to help inner-city kids, because that is the background from which he came.
Clay states that he never really had a male role model, but would say his coaches were probably the only people who encouraged him to attend college. He says high school was too easy and that basically, he just “got passed.” When he began attending college, he was challenged mostly with balancing his time.

You have to figure out you have to do this for this class and this class, but when I first got here, I was like, I’ll just get it all in and cram it all in, but you can’t do that. In high school, you don’t do an assignment, you can turn it in later, but you can’t do that here. You have to turn it in on time or it’s late. I almost got kicked out last year, because of grades.

He credits his academic advisor for assisting him with learning to manage his time and balance his schedules. Clay is doing much better in that regard and would advise incoming freshmen to learn how to manage their time.

When asked if there was anyone else outside of athletics who assisted him in learning how to balance his schedules and workload, Clay stated at first he did not feel comfortable approaching his professors for help, but after having gone through those challenges, he gained the courage to address them directly.

When I first got here, I was scared to go talk to the professors. What I think I felt was like if I asked a question, they’d be like ‘oh he’s stupid.’ I kind of felt like that a little bit, but now I’m like I don’t care. If I need some help, I’m gonna get some help.

Clay has considered playing in the NFL, but understands that anything can happen that may hurt his chances. He follows the advice his grandfather gave him, “You use football, don’t let it use you.” Clay says he is using football to get his degree and believes it can take him further than football could take him.

And I always said if I get drafted, I’m not going to go until I get my degree, cause anything can happen you know, like one year, you’re hurt and they’re like we don’t want you no more cause you’re worthless, but at least you have something to fall back on.
Clay would like to be a counselor someday, but has aspirations to take a chance on a business opportunity being a shrimper for a year, then perhaps use his degree to pursue counseling.

Derick

Derick, a redshirt freshman, comes from a small football town about 130 miles from this institution. His parents are divorced and he primarily stayed with his mother. Derick stated that getting an education from this institution was “a big deal” and playing football at this institution was “a big deal” because of their successes and how its head football coach stresses academics and the importance of graduating. Derick’s father influenced him academically and athletically. His mother was the first in their family to attend college, but did not finish. Derick is the first to attend college, remain in college, and potentially be the first to graduate from college. Derick’s high school coaches were role models for Derick who looked up to them and their career paths.

My position coach in high school played football in college. He majored in business management. He went off to play in the NFL for a few years and came back to help at the high school and that’s when I made it there. That was a big plus, cause he’s from where I’m from, from the same neighborhood and I basically looked up to him.

Derick, a criminal justice major, with a minor in social work and communications is on a 3 ½ to 4-year plan to complete his degree. He aspires to make it to the NFL, but as a sophomore is focusing on his grades and trying to finish his degree. His goal is to follow in his uncle’s footsteps in the field of criminal justice either as a sheriff or FBI agent should his chances for the NFL not pan out.

Derick’s biggest challenge in his transition from high school to college was time management. He states he has more free time in college and learned to manage his time with football obligations and classroom obligations.
Edward

Edward is a redshirt freshman from a large urban city. He attended a private high school and had offers from a few Division I schools. His parents are still married and he is a first-generation college student.

Out of high school, Edward was looking for a school that offered the best balance between academics and athletics. He is majoring in sociology and communications. This institution was large enough but intimate where he could be challenged academically without being “just a number” at a large state school and where he was fulfilled athletically in a well-established Division I football program.

Edward aspires to be a motivational speaker or a high school football coach. He wants to work with kids. Currently, he is not thinking about the NFL, because he has three more years of eligibility. He will think about NFL during his fifth season. He states that the NFL can be taken away in a split second, by an injury or accident and it is important to worry about his time in his current situation.

When asked about the challenges from high school to college, Edward states that being on his own and attending a school that is a lot different from where he lived was his biggest challenge.

There’s not a lot of people that look like me. There’s very few people that look like me, besides the athletes. I had to get adjusted to a whole new way of life. It’s a different culture here. There are things that are acceptable here that are not acceptable at home and there are things that are acceptable at home that are not acceptable here.

The adjustment to college and to his new environment was uncomfortable at first for Edward, but he managed to get through it with his faith and with his outgoing personality, he was able to meet people from different backgrounds.
The first question I am always asked is ‘so what sport do you play’? Maybe I look athletic or maybe I just have the right skin color. Take it as you will. I have always felt like that was a big deal…the fact that I was an athlete. It kind of made me uncomfortable my first year, but since then I’ve learned to embrace it.

When asked if he was offended by that question, Edward answered yes. He stated he was an honor student in high school and could have received an academic scholarship and it bothered him to have the stereotype that “just cause we’re Black that we have to be the dumb jock. I look at it like this: I’m not a football player. I’m just a student that happens to play football.”

When asked what he would change academically or athletically in his experiences at this institution the last couple of years, Edwards admitted that he would have applied himself more right from the beginning. He was young and “scared to be different” his first year.

I didn’t want to be smart. I just wanted to be a football player. I was like, well, if everyone thinks this way, I might as well. You can be the smartest kid in the world, but if you grow up and your parents tell you you’re stupid everyday, eventually, you start to believe you’re stupid.

As I inquired about his statements, Edward assured me his parents emphasized education and pushed him to excel in the classroom as to not to waste “the gift” that was given him. I asked why he felt afraid of being smart and different now that he was on his own when he was a freshman in college.

Cause it’s not cool. For a young Caucasian growing up, his influences are the Bill Gates, the Steve Jobs of the world, sophisticated, educated, wealthy men. For Black males, half of us don’t have father figures. We grew up, our role models are rappers who it’s cool to degrade women, it’s cool to not be smart. It’s cool to do illegal things to make money. It’s two different ends of the spectrum. So for me, coming from a two-parent home, I felt like I had to dumb myself down to fit in. I was too Black for the White kids and too White for the Black kids.
Jordan

Jordan is a transfer student who grew-up in the same town as this institution. His parents are divorced. His mother who has since remarried raised him. Jordan went to an out-of-state college right out of high school. He accepted a full scholarship for football at another Division I university where he had playing time his freshman year. He stayed at the school for one semester and transferred to his this institution during the spring. He felt that taking the scholarship helped his family financially and felt like he wanted to try moving away from home. His reason for returning to his hometown, because he felt the environment and the culture was too different than what he was used to. He was allowed a reduced tuition at this institution, because his mother works at the university.

Jordan grew-up playing basketball and tried football, because a lot of his friends played football. He came to love the sport and received more scholarship offers in football than basketball, so he chose the football route.

His mother was his mentor and always pushed education and his brother is his male role model. His brother excelled in school and sports and followed along those lines. His stepfather was a strong supporter of him and looked-up to him for advice he was unable to get from his mother or brother. He credits his summer football league coaches for keeping him interested in football. Their experiences in this league and team outings and get-togethers were bonding experiences he says helped him stay focused.

The challenge Jordan faced as a freshman was balancing his schedule. Like every other freshman away from home, he had to learn to do laundry and make sure he studied before playing video games. He brought this knowledge with him when he transferred in that he was
on his own balancing his schedule without seeking assistance from his mother. He says school is much more difficult at this institution and he learned he needed to study harder to meet those challenges.

Jordan is a film/television and digital media major with a minor in communications. His advice to incoming freshmen players is to take advantage of the services offered and opportunities given: the tutors and academic centers, living on campus and having everything you need in close proximity, and “the education, cause it’s free.” “If you don’t make the grades, you won’t be here. You have to have a good GPA to stay here and some of us figure that out the hard way, but there are a lot of us that understand that.”

Gerald

Gerald is a true freshman and a transfer from an out-of-state Division I university. Gerald’s parents were never married and he went to college, because he received a football scholarship. He did not think he would ever go to college, because his parents did not have the money. He played peewee football and football at the middle school and high school levels and began receiving scholarship offers his junior year in high school, which is when he first considered going to college. He was an undecided major his freshman year, then transferred to this institution where he is a criminal justice major. The reason for his transfer was because of the instability of the football program due to a coaching change at his first institution. He had a friend who attended this university and felt it was a “good fit” because this football program threw the ball a lot.

During his ninth grade year, Jordan lived with his uncle who was a teacher and a coach at the high school he attended. Gerald’s uncle encouraged him to get to school on time and
made sure he stayed out of trouble. The challenges Jordan faced, as a freshman in college was time management. After being used to his uncle waking him, taking him to school, and getting him there on time, Gerald had to adjust to taking on those responsibilities himself. “I didn’t know how to manage my time. Be on time, do what you want to.”

Gerald is unsure of his timeline for graduation. “I haven’t really looked at it yet. Since I transferred, there are some of the credits that didn’t transfer over so I have to get back on track.” In regards to his aspirations after college, Gerald is determined to get his degree, but thinks also about playing in the NFL. “Hopefully I do go to the NFL, but if not, I just hope to do something with my degree in the criminal justice field.”

If he could, the experiences he would change would be to strive for better grades. “I would try to get all As and Bs instead of Bs and Cs. It actually makes a difference. I have bad study habits, so I would study more and study more effectively.”

Louis

As a freshman, Louis went to an out-of-state institution on a football scholarship. He is a redshirt freshman and transferred to this institution after one year. His parents are divorced and lived with both parents, alternating weeks throughout his secondary education. His father is his role model who was also a Division I athlete. His father stressed that academics was most important over football and athletics. There are multiple members of this family who were college athletes and who have earned college degrees, so growing-up, Louis always knew he was college-bound. “I’ve always wanted to go to college and get a higher education and get a better chance of having a better opportunity of having better pay and a better living.”
Louis felt going out-of-state was “the best fit” for him after going through the recruiting process. His reason for the transfer after one year was because he “didn’t like the offense they were running”. “It wasn’t best suitable for my talents.” I asked if they threw the ball a lot and he said, “No, they actually ran a lot with the quarterback.”

He is a communications major with no minor and wants to go in to sports broadcasting or public speaking. He aspires to play in the NFL and thinks if he does what he knows he can do, he may have a chance, though he is not stressing on it and considers it a back-up plan. He has three more years of eligibility left and may consider starting a master’s degree if he still has eligibility.

His biggest challenge from high school to college is time management.

There is so much free time, so you had to tell yourself to study or do this homework or I need to go here, because I mean it is a huge difference getting done with class at 12:00 than getting done with high school at 4:30, so you have all the time in the world to do what you want to do.

Marcus

Marcus moved to this state during his sophomore year in high school. Marcus redshirted his freshman year while he attended an out-of-state school with a powerhouse football program. He transferred to this institution at the end of his freshman year. Marcus states the reason for his transfer was because he felt that institution “was too exposed and too big” for him. “I’m not a loud guy. I am a mellow guy. I fell off with my grades, because it was too much for me and I decided I needed to leave.” He feels the classrooms at his previous institution are much larger and could not get one-on-one attention from his professors. The classrooms at this institution are much smaller and says he has a better chance at knowing his teachers, instead of “being one of 300 in my class” he is “one of 45.”
Marcus’ parents were never married. His mother raised him. His dad fathered fifteen additional kids. Both did everything they could to ensure everyone was happy. Marcus’ role model was his sister’s boyfriend, now husband. He babysat Marcus and taught him things that helped Marcus “mature into a man.”

Marcus feels like having his teammates as friends help him with adapting to campus life and college. Although reluctant at first, he has approached his coaches for help and guidance.

You may not feel comfortable talking to them at first, because that’s your coach, but at the end of the day, they want the best for you. That is the point you have to get to, where you can trust your coaches. When you get to trust your coaches, you begin to talk to them about anything.

Marcus feels like his professors are also there for his best interests, but feels like their job is to teach what he has to learn in class. “As far as life and things it’s not really their job to be concerned with what happens outside the classroom.”

Marcus states the biggest challenge transitioning from high school to college was adjusting to the amount of “freedom” he has and how to handle it and control it. “All your friends are going to the party and you want to go, but you have a test and that’s when you have to outweigh your options and you have to go study instead of go to this party.”

Marcus is a criminal justice major, with no minor. He aspires to play in the NFL, but know the importance of having a back-up plan should that not work out. He stated that he knew he was going to college his junior year in high school. “I knew I was never going to afford college. I could have taken out loans, but didn’t want to put that stress on my family.” He was going to get a job and make what he could, but started playing football his junior year. “Turns out, I was pretty good and got a scholarship.” He chose this institution over others who offered, because he wanted to be close to his sister and new brother-in-law.
The advice Marcus would give an incoming freshman player would be to strive harder academically. “These programs are set-up to make you succeed in life. They’re not here to make you fail and there’s no one here that wants you to fail." He would stress to them that only a select few make the NFL. “Only 7 rounds, 32 teams. There are a lot of players in the world that are trying to make it to the NFL, so I would say that college and that degree will take you farther.”

Marcus stated that adjusting to the environment at this institution was a challenge, because it was much different than the environment in which he grew-up. He relates it to having to make new friends.

You have your teammates, but you have to meet other people. Here you have to find certain people you can relate to. Everyone comes from different places and backgrounds and not everyone is going to have the same ideas. You have to find the ones you can relate to and when you do that, you can find a good crowd and when you find a good crowd, your experience here will be much better.

Joseph

Joseph is a true freshman from a town out-of-state about 300 miles from this institution. He had several scholarship offers for football and chose this over the others, because his recruiting process with this institution “felt like family.” His father and aunt live in this town as well. His reason for attending college was basically for football. “They (this institution) were just there through everything. Basically, I didn’t have the ACT score, but they still stuck with their offer. I kept taking it (the test) and it went up to a 20. They didn’t give up on me.”
Joseph is a criminal justice major, with no minor. He wants to be a probation officer. He aspires to be in the NFL, but knows that most people “they don’t really get the chance.” “I’m going to stay all four years and get my education just in case the NFL doesn’t work out.”

Joseph points out the differences between the environment in which he grew-up and his current institution. He stresses that he had to separate himself from “the other guys that aren’t doing anything in their lives.” He maintains his friendships with those from his hometown neighborhood, but he chose to “make his life serious and do something successful” with his life. He met a girl his freshman year who he credits with changing his life. His parents were never married. His mother died when he was 9 years old and he was “angry at the world.” Football and his “homeboys” were the only things that made him happy. Some of his family members had drug and alcohol problems and it was easy for him to walk into that life, but he learned the right things to do and the wrong things to do he was taught by his mother. After his mother died, he lived with his grandparents, but while he was “in the streets and everything, I remembered what my mom taught me.”

Joseph wanted to transfer when he first came to this campus. It was different and new and he did not want to be there. His girlfriend helped him adjust to his new environment. “I just recognized that I would get used to it. All attention doesn’t have to be on you. From high school, being a four-star prospect, I had to learn to be calm and chill. It’s a new country out here.”

Joseph’s male role models are his grandfather and an assistant principal at his high school. He felt comfortable talking about anything to his assistant principal who helped him with the college applications and testing processes.
Joseph aspires to play in the NFL, but will use his Criminal Justice degree should he not make the cut. His advice to incoming freshmen would be to learn to use the resources that are available. “Don’t come in and just think that they’re all against you. Come in with a loving heart. There are some people that will hurt you, but some people that really have your true interest in mind.”

Emergent Themes

Qualitative themes were derived from participants’ responses to the interview questions previously mentioned. The four major themes that emerged from the participants’ experiences include: (a) differential treatment and determining oneself, (b) time management, (c) relationships, and (d) career aspirations.

Differential Treatment and Determining Oneself

The theme differential treatment and determining oneself involved participants who felt that treatment between athletes and non-athletes at the high school level and determining oneself in recognizing their identity played significant roles in their experiences academically and athletically. Edward best described this experience:

I feel like I didn’t apply myself my first year. I was scared to be different. It’s a different culture here. There are things that are acceptable here that are not acceptable at home and things that are acceptable at home that are not acceptable here. I didn’t want to be smart. It (being smart) is not cool. Black males, half of us don’t have father figures. We grew up, our role models are rappers who it’s cool to degrade women. It’s cool to not be smart. It’s cool to do illegal things to make money. For me, coming from a two-parent home, I felt like I had to dumb myself down to fit in. I was too Black for the White kids and too White for the Black kids.

There are few people that looked like me, besides the athletes. The first question I am always asked is ‘what sport do you play?’ Maybe I look athletic or maybe I just have the right skin color. I was an honor student in high school. I could have gotten an academic scholarship. I’m a smart kid. It bothers me when we have the stereotype that just cause we’re Black that we have to be the dumb jock.
For some, the differential treatment was much more so revealed in their high school experiences than in college. “My high school was too easy. Basically, you just got passed.” (Clay)

In high school, some of my teachers would tell me to bring them food and I didn’t have to come to class and they’d give me grades. They’re (college professors) not going to let you do what you did in high school. They’re not going to look at you and say oh there’s Blake, he plays football and let you get away with stuff. Use your own mind and study for yourself, cause they study, so why should they let you (cheat) when you’re not studying. (Blake)

Other participants felt challenged coming to this institution and adjusting and felt their experiences in high school were detrimental to their transition and adapting to the demands of college academe.

I didn’t want to be here. I wanted to transfer to be honest with you. I didn’t like it at all, because it was something new. From high school, being a four-star prospect, cause I was just like everywhere. I was the big guy on campus. It’s a new country out here. I just recognized that I would get used to it. It taught me, cause I used to be a wild man, it taught me to just be calm and chill. All the attention doesn’t have to be on you, you know. (Joseph)

When I came from high school, you are like a stud doing stuff and like the teachers didn’t make you do much. Like some of my teachers would tell me to bring them food and I didn’t have to come to class and they’d give me grades and I was like ok. But then coming to college, you have like papers, and you have to study, cause if you don’t study, you will fail and it’s like the study thing. (Blake)

Many of the participants were challenged by the changes in culture and academic expectations. The adjustments made were critical in their survival at this campus. Having to adapt to a new environment, new people, new coaches, new teachers, and new expectations was a great deal to handle as incoming freshmen. “See, my high school was too easy. Basically, you just got passed. When I got to college, I was like...wow.” (Clay)
Time Management

Each of the participants consistently reported that time management was a major factor in their transition from high school to college and lead to their ability to manage their challenges. Academically successful student-athletes are required to manage schedules and prioritize responsibilities. The participants were challenged with this their freshman year and learned that being able to manage their time made their academic and athletic experiences much more enjoyable.

When I first got here, I was like, I’ll just get it all in and cram it all in, but you can’t do that. In high school, you don’t do an assignment; you’re like can I turn it in later? But you can’t do that here. You have to turn it in on time or it’s late. (Clay)

The biggest challenge in his transition for Derick was having a lot of “free time.”

Back home, we were on a set time and up here, you have to use your time wisely. Cause if you look up, it will be 1:00 in the morning if you don’t use it wisely. Cause of football, workouts, studying, going to class, and also getting sleep, which is most important, not being too tired when you have to get up and go to class. (Derick)

Most of the participants determined that after getting through their freshman year, their ability to adapt to the challenges of college life and academics as well as balance their responsibilities with football greatly improved.

My sophomore year, I knew what to expect. You’re not homesick anymore. As a freshman you’re homesick, you really don’t know what to expect. It’s a different world when you get there. You just see all the bright lights and it’s like wow, this is college. But now you know what to expect. You know what the teachers are going to do. You know what you have to do to make a good grade. You know how the teacher is going to react if you miss an assignment and that they don’t really care if you go to class. You know all of these things so now you are better prepared your sophomore year. (Louis)

Collectively, the participants viewed their overall time management as a process of learning from their experiences balancing their academic, athletic, and social lives to become successful student-athletes.
Relationships

This theme focuses on the participants’ interactions and relationships with their coaches, peers, and professors and how it impacts their experiences as student-athletes. A critical aspect of human development is the interactions and relationships with others. The participants’ acknowledged the importance of the relationships they developed with their coaches and professors, as well as their non-athletic peers.

When I first got here, I was scared to talk to professors. I kind of felt like if I asked a question, they’d be like “oh, he’s stupid,” but now I’m like I don’t care if I need some help, I’m gonna get some help. Now I talk to them. They like help like you need to do this and I’m like what can I do to study better or get a better grade. You just figure it out as it goes. (Clay)

The following was Edward’s response when asked whether or not he felt comfortable going class and having interaction with his professors:

For me, it took a while. The first question I am always asked is “so what sport do you play.” Maybe I look athletic or maybe I just have the right skin color. I always felt that it was a big deal, being an athlete. It kind of made me uncomfortable my first year. This year, I’ve learned to embrace it. I was an honor student in high school. I could have gotten an academic scholarship. I’m a smart kid. It bothers me when we have the stereotype that just cause we’re Black that we have to be the dumb jock. (Edward)

For some, interacting with professors was somewhat challenging. If the students did not feel comfortable or trusting of them, they avoided one-on-one interaction when at all possible. Joseph found it much easier to email his professors, so that he did not have to face them.

I used to just email them. Now I’m starting to man-up and just go talk to them in person. I really just wanted to avoid conversation really cause I avoided a lot of things you know, so I had to face it where I had to just man-up and just know that I had to do this. (Joseph)

One of the biggest challenges the participants faced in establishing relationships is developing a sense of trust. It is difficult to form trusting relationships when there is uncommon
or unfamiliar ground. Once that is established, it is easier to begin to develop a trusting relationship.

You have your teammates, but you have to meet different people. You have to find certain people you can relate to. Everyone comes from different backgrounds, everyone comes from different places and areas and not everyone is going to have the same ideas that you have. You have to find the ones you can relate to and when you do that, you can find a good crowd and when you find a good crowd, your experience here will be much better. At the end of the day, your professors and coaches want what is best for you. Not all teachers are concerned with what happens outside the classroom. Some may tell you that is what counselors are for. You have to get to where you can trust your coaches; not just on the football field, but off. When you can get to trust your coaches, you begin to talk to them about anything. (Marcus)

The relationships developed by the participants and their coaches, professors, teammates, and non-athletic peers are relevant to their overall growth and development. Developing an understanding of this is crucial in adapting to new environments and to their academic and athletic successes.

Career Aspirations

During the interviews, I asked the participants about their career aspirations. The majority responded strongly that they felt they would finish their degree and use it to obtain employment in criminal justice, sociology, communications, and one in film, television, and digital media. Contradictory to some assumptions, many of the participants’ primary focus were to give back and help people after earning a college degree. Although playing in the NFL was a “dream” or for some a “goal,” all of the participants expressed their desire to earn their college degrees whether or not there were opportunities to play in the NFL.

Playing in the NFL is a goal, but if it doesn’t happen, then I will find something to do with my social work degree, because I like to help people and make them smile. It makes me feel better about myself. I am prepared for it (NFL) not to work and not get flustered about it. (Alex)
“The NFL is always a dream, but you have to have a back-up plan, because you know like they say, it’s only 1%. I was to go into the police force then eventually go into homicide.”

(Blake)

I’ll work to get there (NFL), but anything can happen you know like injuries and all that stuff. My grandpa always told me ‘you use football, don’t let it use you,’ so I am using football to get this degree and it can take me way further than football, cause then you have to stop playing that. (Clay)

Almost all of the participants were focused on obtaining a college degree, some a master’s degree and using the opportunity of playing football as a vehicle for this as well as for discipline, personal growth, and for networking advantages for possible business and career opportunities in their future. “I want to get a degree in social work and after that I can help with kids, cause I’m trying to help with inner-city kids cause I came from that background.” (Clay)

After college, I want to see where this major takes me. I feel like I’m in love with this major, before I’ve even started it. I look forward to finding things through my major before any kind of football. Football is just there for different aspects, like working hard and being on time and stuff. It’s growing me so that is basically what football is doing for me right now. It’s like a $300K education and it’s free. It’s crazy. Coach brings people back that didn’t even play a down here and they’re like millionaires. That to me is like wow. It’s crazy. And that’s from the education they got here: alumni, of course. (Jordan)

I have a one-in-a-million chance to be a pro football player. I have a one-in-one chance to get a degree and a job. I’m not looking for a job that will bring me a lot of money, because I don’t think that will bring me happiness. I want to do something that helps people, maybe becoming a motivational speaker. (Edward)

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded in the following theories: critical Race theory, identity development model, and social learning model. The theories are used to describe and develop critical perspectives on African-American males in intercollegiate athletics, bringing together both the psychological and sociological perspectives when attempting to understand and
interpret the experiences of these students in the current state of higher education and the NCAA.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) asserts that racism is a permanent part of American life. CRT identifies that existing power structures are based on white supremacy and white privilege, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color (Bell, 1980). CRT includes the following views: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and White privilege and supremacy perpetuating the marginalization of African-Americans (Bell, 1980). Through counter-storytelling, the participants were able to share their stories without restriction or hesitation. “The research process has the potential to empower participants because it may enable them to critically reflect upon their social conditions and provide them with a voice that challenges the dominant discourse and stories that have been on White norms and privileges” (Singer, 2009, p. 105). In asking the participants to share their experiences in the transitioning from high school to college, all seem to be very receptive and engaging when being able to express their honest experiences. First, they gave opinions on their backgrounds and how and where they grew up and why they chose this university. Their candidness revealed differences in their home environment compared to the university environment and differences in how they dealt with the changes.

Comparing those who moved-in from different states with those who came from towns within close proximity to this institution, some had bigger adjustments to make than others. They were more “untrusting of others” coming in and had more anxiety having to adapt to the new environment as well as having to adjust from high school schedules to their time
demanding schedules as collegiate athletes. “I didn’t want to be here. I wanted to transfer to be honest with you. I didn’t like it at all, because it was something new” (Joseph).

“It was a challenge, but it was like making new friends. You have your teammates, but you have to meet other people” (Marcus). “It’s a different culture here” (Edward).

Although the differences in culture were a challenge, the participants expressed the importance of adapting to the changes and continuing to excel in football and academics. The alternative was not an option.

It’s new country out here. I just didn’t want to mingle with a lot of people. I avoided a lot of things you know, so now I like have to stay here, because I live here now, so I had to face it where I had to just man-up and just know I had to do this (Joseph).

The permanence of racism asserts that race and racism are so deeply ingrained in the fabric of American society that they have become normalized (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2007; Singer, 2009). “Individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds may find it difficult to even recognize the salience, permanence, effects, and outcomes of racism because race and racism are so deeply rooted and embedded in our ways and systems of knowing and experiencing life” (Milner, 2007, p. 390).

African-Americans have participated in intercollegiate sports at predominantly white institutions since the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The impact of World War II, the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision striking down separate educational facilities, the massive commercialization of collegiate sports, and the desire of universities to benefit from talented African-American athletes in building commercialized athletic programs resulted in more and more universities searching for talented African-Americans to bolster their teams (Sage, 2007, p.8).

The notion that athletics is the educational vehicle through which young Black males can achieve equality, opportunity, upward mobility, and a better life has been engrained in the
minds of impressionable youth. The message instead should be that college athletics is simply one chapter in building a productive and fulfilling life, not the only chapter (Gerdy, 2000). With these concerns, policies and practices were developed and implemented to protect these men from exploitation. The idea of exploitation and permanence is apparent; though as Milner states “it may be difficult to even recognize the salience, permanence, effects, and outcomes of racism because race and racism are so deeply rooted and embedded in our ways and systems of knowing and experiencing life” (p. 390).

Although, the environment in which they grew up and the fact they are athletes are variables that could have resulted in differential treatment, racism did not significantly reveal itself in our conversations, though as an underlying issue embedded in our ways and systems. It was more acceptable and something with which they dealt with regularly that it almost became an issue they chose not to recognize or address.

Other features of CRT are Bell’s interest-convergence principle and White privilege and supremacy (Bell, 1980). In previous research, this tool provided insight into how the integration of African-American male athletes into PWIs served more in the best interests of the institutions than in the interests of the African-American males involved (Bell, 1980; Singer, 2009).

Although the existence of interest convergence and White privilege and supremacy may exist, it was not confirmed in the data. In our conversation, Marcus stated that he did feel like the professors and coaches were there for his best interests.

They’re here to teach you what you need to know. As far as life and things, it’s not really their (professors) job to be concerned with what happens outside the classroom. You may not feel comfortable talking to them (coaches) at first, because that’s your coach, but at the end of the day, they want what’s best for you. (Marcus)
Most of the other participants felt the same. “Don’t come in just think that they’re all
against you. Come in with a loving heart. There are some people that will hurt you, but some
people that really have your true interests at heart” (Joseph). Whether or not there is the
existence of interest convergence and White supremacy, the participants did not seem to be
aware or concerned with this and seemed to take a handle on what their purpose was of being
students and athletes and all seemed to have a goal of graduating and receiving a college
education through football. Football being the avenue they chose to give them this
opportunity, but not necessarily the only driving force for their existence and their future.
“These programs are set-up to make you succeed in life. They’re not here to make you fail and
there’s no one here that wants you to fail” (Marcus).

The participants seemed determined and focused on their futures and professional
careers. They viewed their passion and participation in football as an opportunity to earn a
college degree and having it paid for through their participation in football. They have set goals
of graduating and earning their college degrees and see themselves in professional careers
aside from playing football. If the opportunity of playing in the NFL presented itself, they would
definitely consider it, but for most, it was not their primary reason for attending college. They
all expressed the importance of having a back up plan should the NFL option not come through.

The African-American community and their talented youth viewed the participation in
PWI intercollegiate athletics as an opportunity for their sons and daughters to use their athletic
talent to access college education and improvement in their social and economic status
(Njororai, 2012). “For a few African-American males, a way to advance is through athletic
accomplishment, which will, at a minimum, provide a college education” (Eitzen, 2000, p. 297).
"At a minimum," their athletic talents can provide them with a college education, which could possibly put them in a situation of having a successful, prosperous life outside of football.

Identity Development Model

Erikson’s identity development model is utilized to evaluate the identity and personality development of the participants. Using Erikson’s identity development model will help in better understanding the growth and development of these student athletes and the issues they encounter. Erikson’s work on identity development is a useful framework in enhancing the development of African-American males on college campuses (Howard-Hamilton, 1997).

Erikson’s theory is comprised of eight stages of development where at each stage of a person’s life, there are changes that occur psychologically, emotionally, environmentally, and biologically which cause the person to change and develop (Erikson, 1980). Evaluation of these factors on participants of this study is necessary in determining their maturity, intellect, and intention. The eight stages Erikson posits in this model include: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity development versus identity diffusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus self-absorption, and integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1980). Howard-Hamilton (1997) suggests that the early stages of Erikson’s model should be revisited and explored when working with African-American men. Primarily, this study will focus on stages one through five, as it relates to African-American males in a Division I (FBS) college football program.

Trust Versus Mistrust

The personality at this stage crystallizes around the conviction of “I am what I am given” (Bell, 1980, p. 87). “By ‘trust’ I mean what is commonly implied in reasonable trustfulness as far
as others are concerned and a simple sense of trustworthiness as far as oneself is concerned” (Erikson, 1980, p. 57). The sense of trust is twofold: being able to trust others and being trustworthy. The participants shared their experiences with this in how they struggled with it and overcame their issues with trust.

Blake chose this institution, because he felt “the school that looked at you the most, I feel like that was the school that wanted you the most”. There was a sense of “trust” in him choosing this institution over the others. “You have to get where you can trust your coaches, not just on the football field, but off. When you get to trust your coaches, you begin to talk to them about anything” (Marcus). Joseph had offers from a few Division I schools, but did not have the ACT score. This institution “stuck by him” and never pulled their offer. Joseph took the exam multiple times and eventually scored a 20. “They didn’t give up on me” (Joseph).

Through our conversations, the participants revealed their trust in me as the researcher by sharing their experiences candidly. Some expressed they come into new situations, guarded, when meeting new people and entering new environments. I would not think that would be exclusive to this group, though it was apparent with every participant upon meeting them. I asked Joseph whether he thought the coaches and professors were there for his best interests.

At first, I knew some of them were, but I didn’t trust them. It takes a lot for me to trust people. I am starting to man-up and just go talk to them (professors) in person, but I used to just email them. I avoid a conversation really cause I avoided a lot of things you know, so I had to face it where I had to just man-up and just know I had to do this. (Joseph)

The responses revealed experiences about trusting others and not much in regard as to whether or not the participants view themselves as being trustworthy.
Autonomy Versus Shame and Doubt

The overall significance of this stage lies in the maturation of the muscle system, the consequent ability (and doubly felt inability) to coordinate a number of highly conflicting action patterns such as ‘holding on’ and ‘letting go,’ and the enormous value with which the still highly dependent child begins to endow the autonomous will (Erikson, 1980, p. 68).

At this stage, the person must move beyond self-consciousness and inferiority toward independence and pride (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). The personality crystallizes around the conviction of “I am what I will” (Bell, 1980, p. 87). Developing a sense of mastery for a job well done and autonomy of choice or making his or her own decisions are key components to this stage which falls between the ages of 18 months to 3 ½ years (Muuss, 2006). Pride, control, self-assurance, autonomy, self-certainty, and the will to be oneself are attributes gained during this stage that contribute to the formation of an identity during adolescence (Muuss, 2006).

Most all of the participants each had characteristics of confidence, self-assurance, and ability to be oneself. Taking advanced placement (AP) classes in high school helped Alex better prepare for college. “Academics at my high school helped prepare me for college. I took AP classes and it was similar to how classes are here. I was already used to the environment and schedule. My dad pretty much helped me” (Alex).

Others, like Joseph, struggled somewhat in adjusting to the new environment and trusting others.

I met a girlfriend here that changed me, really. At first, before when I came here, I was really mean. I lost my mom when I was 9 years old and I was mad at the world. The only thing that made me happy was really football. Really, like my homeboys and I used to like to fight a lot and get into it and do things that wasn’t good. (Joseph)

“Adolescents may become so self-conscious and lacking in autonomy that they are afraid of being seen in an exposed and vulnerable situation” (Muuss, 2006, p. 49). There is a
sense of vulnerability when transitioning from high school to college or in change in general. Having to adapt to new schedules, new environments, new rules is challenging in itself. The participants shared their struggles with the transition, but most had a sense of confidence in their abilities to adapt to the changes.

Initiative versus Guilt

The third stage is the psychosocial conflict of a sense of initiative versus a sense of guilt where personality crystallizes the conviction of “I am what I can imagine I will be” (Bell, 1980, p. 87). “A conflict arises now between an aggressive intrusion into the world by way of activity, curiosity, and exploration or an immobilization of fear and guilt” (Muuss, 2006, p. 49). At this stage, the child is being firmly convinced that he is a person and must now find out what kind of person he is going to be (Erikson, 1980).

Joseph showed signs of this struggle after losing his mother, he became “angry at the world” and had to learn to adjust and redirect his hurt so he was not fighting with others and was able to focus on school and football. “I had recognized that that is my past, but that I have to change for the better, because I know if I had a child, I don’t want him to act the same way I did” (Joseph). His uncle and friends were into drug dealing and alcohol. He did not want to be a part of that and had to make a choice.

It was easy for me to not just be a drug dealer, cause my uncle is still out there doing such and such things he’s not supposed to be doing. I see things like that and still hung around my homeboys. I still have with them to this day, but I just know the right things to do and the wrong things to do and like when I come home, it’s like they see me as a big brother. I guess they see me as a person they just want to hang with, cause they know I wasn’t doing nothing. (Joseph)

“In the process of developing initiative, goal setting emerges and activities become increasingly guided by a purpose” (Muuss, 2006, p. 49). From about 3½ to 6 years of age, the
child is experiencing a feeling of power, curiosity, and a high level of activity and energy (Muuss, 2006). If his curiosity is misinterpreted negatively and punished and made to feel guilty, initiative may wane (Muuss, 2006). Social criticism and punishment in regards to their curiosity and exploratory phase may foster the development of guilt feelings.

If the child’s exploration and initiative encounter severe reprimand and punishment, the result may be a more permanent immobilization by guilt, inhibition by fear, role inhibition, role fixation, and over-dependence on adults. Since these attributes interfere with identity formation during adolescence, a negative outcome at this stage would contribute to the emergence of identity diffusion in adolescence (Muuss, 2006, p. 50).

The fear of not being accepted or judged for taking initiative is common with the participants.

When I first got here, I was scared to talk to my professors. What I think it was is I kind of felt like if I asked a question, they’d be like ‘oh, he’s stupid’. I kind of feel like that a little bit, but I’m like I don’t care, if I need some help, I’m gonna get some help (Clay). My parents were always pushing education in my house. If it was a C, it should have been a B. If it was a B, it should have been an A. If it was an A, it should have been 100. They really tried to push me, not to waste that gift. It bothers me when we have the stereotype that just cause we’re Black that we have to be the “dumb jock”. It’s not cool to be smart. I had to dumb myself down to fit in. I was too Black for the White kids and too White for the Black kids. (Edward)

Wininger and White (2008) state that athletes have faced the negative stereotype of “dumb jock,” the belief that athletes are not as capable of performing well academically as their non-athlete counterparts. In a Sailes’ 1993 study, 869 undergraduate and graduate students were surveyed about their views on student-athletes. “The perceptions/expectations that students reported are consistent with the ‘dumb jock’ stereotype and may have a significant impact on how an athlete feels about him/herself in and out of the classroom” (Wininger & White, 2008, p. 227). Although there is some sense of confidence within the participants, there is still some uneasiness on how they are perceived and how others see them.
Industry versus Inferiority

At this stage, the personality crystallizes around the conviction of “I am what I learn” (Bell, 1980, p. 87). Children at this stage want to watch how things are done and try doing them. Boys learn to become potential providers so eventually, they will become husbands with their own sexual partners, which becomes a period of learning and mastering the more basic skills needed in society (Muuss, 2006). At this stage, the child develops a sense of duty and an attitude of wanting to do well and feel a sense of accomplishment. The contribution that this stage makes to identity formation is learning how to be a person capable of identifying a task ahead and having willingness to learn and master it (Muuss, 2006).

Having a sense of accomplishment is important in the development of the participants. Many shared more of their athletic accomplishments more so than their academic accomplishments, perhaps because athletics is a topic with which they feel most comfortable or with which they can most confidently identify.

Having a better work ethic with both football and school and me just breaking down and studying, like with football, I do more of studying film and work on catching more balls than what I’m supposed to or just with that have a better aspect with everything in just working. (Blake)

There are specific contributions which previous stages make directly to the development of identity, namely, the primitive trust in mutual recognition; rudiments of a will to be oneself; the anticipation of what one might become; and the capacity to learn how to be, with skill, what one is in the process of becoming (Erikson, 1968, p. 180).

The participants in this study gain confidence in their mastery of academic and athletic accomplishments. Being able to manage their schedules and continue to make academic progress toward degree attainment brings a sense of accomplishment and confidence for them.
My sophomore year, I knew what to expect. You know what the teachers are going to
do and know what you have to do to make a good grade. You know all of these things
now, so you are better prepared. (Louis)

Although it may be challenging for them at first, the participants seem to be resilient to
change in environment, their culture, and their focus in life. They have become more
independent, more assure of themselves, and more assertive in taking active roles
academically, athletically, and socially.

Identity versus Identity Diffusion

At this stage, youth begins and in puberty and adolescence all sameness and
continuities relied on earlier are questioned again, because of their body changes and
physiological revolution within them and a psychological crisis that revolves around issues of
identity and self-definition (Erikson, 1980). “Identity achievement implies that the individual
assesses strengths and weaknesses and determines how he or she wants to deal with them”
(Muuss, 2006, p. 51). There were a myriad of challenges faced by the participants in their
transition to college including challenges with the change in environment and culture,
managing their time and schedules, and expectations in the classroom as well as the football
program. “Identity must be acquired through sustained individual effort” (Muuss, 2006, p. 51).
Without effort on one’s identity formation, role diffusion and identity confusion occurs (Muuss,
2006).

The upbringing of these individuals and the environments in which they were raised has
molded and developed them as they are today in how they respond to adversity, change, and
relationships.

Really just have to man-up. Do what I’ve been doing the rest of my life, just starting
when I was 10 or 11 just manning-up really. I don’t have time to be sad or time to be
you know. Sometimes I breakdown in privacy cause I have that tough heart, you know, so I just got to get through it sometimes. (Joseph)

Here you have to find certain people you can relate to. Everyone comes from different backgrounds, everyone comes from different places and areas and not everyone is going to have the same ideas that you have. You have to find the ones you can relate to and when you do that, you can find a good crowd and when you find a good crowd, your experience here will be much better. (Marcus)

“Identity must be acquired through sustained individual effort” (Muuss, 2006, p. 51).

The formation of one’s identity includes willingness to work at bringing past, present, and future together to form a unified whole (Muuss, 2006). Having to manage the challenges from their childhood and environment along with his physical and physiological changes, many of the participants had to work through adverse situations to make it to where they are today. Particularly when their bodies are changing and genital maturation stimulates sexual fantasies, and intimacy with the opposite sex appears as a possibility with positive and negative valences, adolescents typically rely on peers for advice, comfort, and companionship (Muuss, 2006). In doing so, they begin to feel a sense of “knowing where one is going” and an inner assuredness from those who matter (Erikson, 1959, p. 118). “Once you’re on the football team, you have your teammates and you all bond. That bond you have is past football. They’re the ones you can go talk to” (Marcus). “The successful way of coping with the challenges of adolescence (academic mastery, dating, individuation, renegotiating relationships with parents, wholesome health habits, etc.) all seem to build on earlier experiences of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industriousness” (Muuss, 2006, p. 53).

Another component of this step is the issue of developing a vocational identity. “In a period of rapid social change, the older generation is no longer able to provide adequate role models for the younger generation” (Muuss, 2006, p. 51). If they do, adolescents may either
reject them or follow them as a “foreclosed fashion”, seeking to fulfill their parents’ aspirations for them, without appreciating the search for an identity as a personal opportunity (Muuss, 2006, p. 52). This can be confusing for adolescents who often hold highly glamorized, idealized, and often unrealistic conceptions of the vocational roles they dream about (Muuss, 2006). Goal aspirations are much higher than the individual’s skill level or ability (Muuss, 2006). Frequently, the adolescent is attracted to vocational goals such as models, actors, athletic champions, or other socially glamorized “heroes” that are attainable only by a very few and in some cases overidentify with and idolize their heroes to the extent that they forsake their own identity to imitate their heroes (Muuss, 2006, p. 53).

My position coach and head coach in high school played a big part of my decision to come to college and continue to play football. As a young kid, my position coach went off to college and played at a Division I college and his major was business management and he went on to play in the NFL for a few years and then came back to help at the high school and that’s when I made it there. That was a big plus, cause he’s from where I’m from, from the same neighborhood and basically, I looked up to him. (Derick)

The role models and mentors of these participants were folks they knew: parents, coaches, administrators, aunts, uncles, and siblings. Many of their role models were people who inspired them, encouraged them, and kept up with their progress and guided them away from negative influences. Although each of them probably has an NFL player who inspires them, not one identified an NFL player or actor, or model, as their “hero”.

The participants of this study touched little on the idea of becoming a player in the NFL. Most, if not all, felt it was a personal goal, but all were humbled of the fact that the opportunity to play in the NFL was very slim. All stressed the importance of finishing their education and understood that they needed to finish their degree should their dream of playing at the next level not transpire.
Playing in the NFL is my goal, but if it doesn’t happen, I will find something to do with my social work degree, because I like to help people. I am prepared for it not to work out and not get flustered about it. (Alex)

I’ll work to get there, but anything can happen; you know injuries and all that stuff. My grandpa always told me ‘you use football, don’t let it use you”, so I’m using football to get this degree. It can take me further than football. (Clay)

Social Learning Model

Bandura’s social learning model is another psychosocial theoretical framework used to evaluate the participants of this study. Bandura (1977) posits that people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling and introduces an integrative theoretical framework, which states that psychological procedures alter the level and strength of self-efficacy and expectations of personal self-efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated and sustained in the face of obstacles and adversity. “Expectations of personal efficacy are derived from four principal sources: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states” (Bandura, 1977, p. 191). Performance accomplishments and vicarious experiences are the components used in understanding the experiences and development of each of the participants.

Performance Accomplishments

This source of efficacy is based on personal mastery experiences and is influential with repeated successes (Bandura, 1977). “Personal accomplishments are successful personal completion of a set of activities or experiences” (Howard-Hamilton, 1997, p. 26). Motivation is strengthened when crises are encountered and mastered by sustained effort (Bandura, 1977). Participants of this study experienced successes their freshman year and gained the confidence to return and face new and more challenging obstacles their sophomore years. “My sophomore
year, I knew what to expect. You’re not homesick anymore. Now you know what to expect” (Louis). When asked how he handled adverse situations, Joseph stated the following, “Really, just have to man-up. I don’t have time to be sad. I just learned to be tough and just go and do things. I just got to get through it sometimes.”

Clay improved tremendously from his freshman to sophomore year.

I am doing way better. I figured out how to manage my time. Cause eventually, you got to learn that you got to do this for this class or sometimes you write stuff down and check it off like a week ahead.

Vicarious Experiences

People rely on experienced mastery as well as vicarious experiences in their development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). “Seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts” (Bandura, 1977, p. 197). Participants of this study identified their fathers, mothers, coaches, brothers, and sisters as their role models. They stated that these people are the ones who led them to college and pushed them to utilize their football talents as the vehicle to attain a college education. “My father stayed on top of me and made sure I stayed on top of my grades. He made sure it came first before sports” (Alex). Derick’s high school position coach influenced him to attending college and continuing his football career. Jordan’s brother and high school friends encouraged him to play football and when he discovered he was good at it, he continued playing at the college level after only having played football for a couple of years. “My dream was to play here. I was a bleacher creature and I used to run the field and I looked forward to running the field and actually staying on the field in a uniform.” (Jordan)
Once in college, their teammates and academic advisors were most influential in the development of self-efficacy. The successes of their teammates and assistance from their academic advisors give the participants self-confidence that they too can accomplish their academic and athletic goals.

We have a writing specialist, like you write your paper, but they like help correct it and that like helps you just learn how to do your own stuff once you see what they do then you kind of put some of those words and as you are progressing, you can learn on your own. (Blake)

“Once you’re on a football team, of course you have your teammates and you all bond. That bond you have is past football, like a brotherhood. They’re the ones you can go talk to.” (Marcus)

Environmental changes, meeting people, and schedule changes were the most common challenges faced by the participants. Three of the ten participants grew up in the local area and felt comfortable within the environment. They were familiar with this institution and its traditions. Others were challenged with leaving home, being on their own, and having to adapt to a different culture from which they came. “It’s a different culture here. You have to adjust to a whole new way of life. There are things that are acceptable here that are not acceptable at home and things that are acceptable at home that are not acceptable here” (Edward). Edward grew up with both parents who instilled a good work ethic and responsibilities. The differences for him are that he does not have his parents here to continually guide him and discipline him. Instead, he has to think and discipline for himself. He decides when he will study. He decides if he goes to class. He decides if he will attend social events. It is not the responsibility of his professors or his coaches to make him attend class or make him study.
When he got to college, Blake faced a much different experience with his professors than he did with his high school teachers.

My senior year, some of my teachers would tell me to bring them food and I didn’t have to come to class and they’d give me grades and I was like ok. But that was my senior year, but through high school, I had to do work. But them coming to college, you have like papers and you have to study, cause if you don’t study, you will fail it. They’re not going to let you do what you did in high school. (Blake)

It is a different ball game, going to college. You have to manage your time. There is so much free time, getting done with class at 12:00 than getting done with high school at 4:30. You have all the time in the world. As a freshman, you’re homesick. You really don’t know what to expect. But now, you know what to expect. You know what the teachers are going to do. You know what to do to make a good grade. You know how the teacher is going to react if you miss an assignment and that they don’t really care if you go to class. You know all of these things now so you are better prepared your sophomore year. (Louis)

The participants not only have to make adjustments from high school to college, they also have to adjust to the fast-paced time demanding schedules that come with Division I collegiate athletics, as well as having to adapt to the differences in culture.

Research Questions

Two questions served as the basis for this study: (a) How do African-American male student-athletes perceive their academic and athletic experiences? (b) How are African-American male student-athletes affected by their academic and athletic experiences?

Understanding the participants’ experiences helped me understand the themes and patterns in the data. The participants in this study perceive their academic and athletic experiences as challenging yet positive. Collectively, they seem to understand that with change, comes challenges and obstacles such as adapting to a new schedule, learning how to study, meeting new people, and adjusting to demands and obligations of academics and athletics. In order to overcome the obstacles, they need to be open-minded, be willing, and take initiative. These are
critical components of their intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development and growth.

The participants developed a sense of identity, confidence, responsibility, and growth with their participation in athletics. As they became familiar with the expectations and teaching and grading processes, they adjusted, sought out assistance, and utilized the resources that assisted them in their successes in the classroom. For some, this process was a bigger adjustment, though all of the participants understand this is an ongoing process and it changes with every semester, with every class, and with every professor, but they are better prepared to make the necessary adjustments, because they now have the confidence and ability to make them.
The purpose of this study was to discover and assess the nature and current status of African-American male student-athletes’ academic and athletic experiences as participants in a Division I (FBS) football program, to determine their points of view and need for improving their overall experiences. The themes presented in this study elucidated a better understanding about their experiences. As a group, the theme of differential treatment and determining oneself has shown to be prevalent in the shared experiences of the participants. Previous research has shown that this demographic, particularly those in the revenue-producing sports of football and basketball, face challenges with racism, fitting-in, and finding oneself during this stage of their academic and athletic careers. Some have argued that the college sport enterprise exploits the athletic prowess of athletes, particularly African-American male athletes and ignores their academic and social development (Singer, 2008). It is suggested that the structure and functions of athletics programs has compromised athletes’ ability to fully reap the positive educational benefits because profit driven motives and interest in athletic abilities overshadow the concern for their academic success and that African-American athletes have been academically and economically exploited (Adler and Adler, 1991; American Institute for Research, 1989; Benson, 2000; Daniels, 1987; Hawkins, 2010; Singer, 2008).

The interview questions guided the direction of the participants’ responses and the direction of the conversation; therefore, the sense of “exploitation” was not as apparent in the results of my interviews. As the researcher, had I asked more in-depth questions in regards to race and exploitation, perhaps a more realistic view on this topic would have surfaced. The
existence of racism embedded in the system and ways of knowing and experiencing life was not as apparent to me as the researcher and was brought out in only a few of the participants’ responses. The sense was more toward their own contributions to their experiences and success like learning to manage their time and taking initiative to get to know others who are not from the same backgrounds. Although, it was not particularly stated outright, the sense of feeling different and challenged because of the differences in culture and experience was evident. Racism was not an overt factor, as some may have feared. As a group, the participants had similar responses in regards to time management and forming relationships. As a consensus, they felt that time management and establishing relationships were the two things with which they were challenged upon transitioning from high school to college. Most felt a struggle with this as freshmen, but gained a better sense of how to balance the demands of the classroom and athletics and felt more comfortable and confident going into their second year.

In regards to career aspirations, the participants stressed the importance of earning their degree, although the responses received when asked why they chose this university almost all were in regards to the football program. My thoughts on these responses are mixed. I am unsure whether or not the responses are a reflection of true feeling or a feeling with sticking with company line. Understandably, earning an athletics scholarship is the only reason most of the participants were able to afford to attend college. A few stated that they were not considering attending college, because they did not want to put their families in a financial bind. If they had not received a scholarship to play football, they would have probably not attended.
Their intentions for playing in the NFL were secondary to earning their degrees. Many stated they were aware that there are very few who make it, but all had the same glimmer of hope that one day they would. I do not fault them for having a dream and a goal to play in the NFL. At their age and positions in life, if they have the ability and opportunity to try, they should. I believe their comments on having to finish college and earn their degrees before considering a chance at the NFL were somewhat honest and truthful. At the very least it is realistic given the probability of going pro. Whatever the true reason they became students at this institution, they are there and they have the opportunity to earn a college degree and play college football. These young me believe that education is an opportunity for upward mobility and a better quality of living. It should not matter how they got the opportunity. What should matter is what they do with that opportunity. They should take advantage of it and make the most of it. The notion that athletics is the educational vehicle through which young Black males can achieve equality, opportunity, upward mobility, and a better life has been engrained in the minds of impressionable youth. The message instead should be that college athletics is simply one chapter in building a productive and fulfilling life, not the only chapter (Gerdy, 2000).

This study was conducted with ten individuals at one institution. The data may not reflect the voices of all Division I football players at all colleges and universities. More students in the study and additional, more in-depth interviews might have obtained more relevant data. The research would also benefit from a longitudinal study, where participants are revisited in a year or two when they have gained more experience and different perspectives on their academic and athletic careers to see whether or not they have been successful in their pursuits.
Previous research in this subject was helpful in sharing the experiences from the student-athletes’ perspective. This study sought to discover and construct an account of their experiences from their point of view in the current state of society and education in general. Current undergraduates are more comfortable than past students with multiculturalism and diversity (Levine & Dean, 2012). “Undergraduates are global in orientation but have little knowledge about the world. These findings present colleges and universities with an opportunity to translate their rhetoric about multiculturalism and diversity into reality and the need to internationalize their programs” (Levine & Dean, 2012, p. xii). It is important that administrators of higher education institutions and collegiate athletics programs understand this in order to improve the services they provide their student athletes, particularly African-American males in the big time athletics programs who not only face the typical challenges of attending university but also the demands brought on by their participation in collegiate athletics programs.

A combination of three theoretical frameworks was utilized in this study, because I felt that the utility of the theories were linkable and each had explanatory power for this topic and participant group. Singularity, not one was sufficient to be in consideration for this phenomenon. In the future, I want to look at this subject with more specific questions as they pertain to these theories to determine specifically whether or not they felt racism was apparent in their daily lives both academically and athletically. Implications for further research would be to look at this topic thoroughly through one theory.

Although previous research was helpful and has revealed issues and presented suggestions for improvement in educating this demographic, suggestions for future research
include ongoing assessment for this demographic as it pertains to the issues that are apparent in the current state of higher education. As Levine & Dean (2012) stated, “today’s college students are the most diverse generation in higher education history” (p. xii). It is important that research is continuous and the psychological and sociological theories are applied to today’s students.

Today’s college students arrive on campus poorly prepared for this world, lacking in skills, knowledge, and attitudes that it will require though they bring strengths their predecessors lacked. Today’s college students will need a very different education than the undergraduates who came before them, an education that prepares them for the twenty-first century. The colleges and universities that educate them are ill equipped to offer that education today and will have to make major changes to provide it. (Levine & Dean, 2012, p. xvi)

Research into this population as it relates to those in the non-revenue producing sports should be examined. Differences in the academic and athletics experiences of African-American males in the non-revenue producing sports or those involved in the non-televised sports programs could help identify patterns. The media attention that collegiate sports of football and men’s basketball is the factor which drives attention to this particular demographic, because of the financial factors involved.

Research on this topic at smaller institutions should be considered. With less media attention, the goals and experiences of this population could reveal an entirely different perspective. Studies conducted at institutions in other divisions would be productive and could reveal areas of similarity or variation.

Currently, African-American males are the majority in NCAA Division I football programs (NCAA, 2011b). Findings show a second consecutive year of African-American student-athletes constituting most of the participants in Division I football (including the Football Bowl
Subdivision and the Football Championship Subdivision), (NCAA, 2011b). In 2009-10, African Americans were the dominant demographic in all of Division I football for the first time (NCAA, 2011b). That trend continued in 2010-11 (NCAA, 2011b). Because of this trend, it is important for educators to understand the challenges these young men face when transitioning into a college or university in which the environments are culturally unfamiliar. To provide these students the best opportunity for academic and athletics success, higher education administrators, faculty, and athletics staff must come together to develop support groups and curricula that are realistic, rigorous, and engaging.

“Televised games, as higher education’s most visible attribute, must be used to further the general goals of colleges and universities rather than the specific goals of particular athletics programs” (Gerdy, 1994, p. A52). If higher education is to meet the many challenges that it faces, it must utilize more effectively each of the resources at its disposal, including its highly visible athletics programs. Conversely, if athletics are to be viewed as more than just the entertainment arm of higher education, they must demonstrate how they can contribute more fully to improving the public’s perception of higher education (Gerdy, 1994, p. A52). Higher education institutions, collegiate athletics programs, as well as the student-athletes involved all have a vested interest in this phenomenon that is collegiate athletics. All parties must come together to provide the most effective experiences for these students, so they can be successful in what they aspire to accomplish as an undergraduate student. All have a hand in the overall success of the institution, the athletics programs, and in the student-athletes’ success itself. Regardless if these students gain the opportunity to attend college through athletics scholarships, they are still worthy of the education that is promised them in exchange for their
participation in athletics programs. The students must understand their purpose for attending an institution of higher education and take full advantage of the opportunity to earn an undergraduate degree. The future depends on how well today’s college students are prepared to meet the challenges ahead---living as engaged citizens in a diverse global society and a digital age in a time of profound and relentless change (Levine & Dean, 2012).
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