#### CHAPTER

**13**

**CROSS-RACIAL INTERACTION of DIVISION I ATHLETES**

***The Campus Climate for Diversity***

**Eddie Comeaux and Marcia V. Fuentes**

###### KEY TERMS

 **college athletes**

 **cross-racial interaction ** **campus climate**

 **campus race relations ** **diversity**

Several recent demographic and social trends provide the stimulus for higher education institutions to prepare students to lead and compete in an increasingly complex and diverse society. First, the number of racial and ethnic “minority” individuals in the United States increased from 86.9 million to 111.9 million between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Second, the landmark Supreme Court decisions in *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gutter*

*v. Bollinger* (2003) provided incentives for colleges and universities to develop authentically responsive intervention strategies that could make the most effective use of diverse campus learning environments. Third, the business community has affirmed the need for cross-culturally competent college graduates with the ability to lead in a global society or a “plurality nation” (Bikson & Law, 1994). In light of these trends, it is clear that the extent to which college students who interact across diverse racial groups can develop cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills that prepare them to view the world from someone else’s perspective, tolerate others with different beliefs, and negotiate controversial issues with conviction will be critically important (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004).

Most diversity-related studies have focused primarily on students in the general population, which limits our understanding of the cross-racial interactions Division I athletes experience and the resulting benefits of diversity. It is important to have this discussion with Division I athletes as the population of interest because their college experiences typically differ in important ways from those of the general student population (Watt & Moore, 2001). This population of students is additionally of interest because of evidence that suggests intercollegiate athletic teams may provide an ideal environment for positive intergroup relations with diverse teammates. Extant research and anecdotal evidence suggest Division I athletes are likely to have more frequent interactions with diverse student groups than their nonathlete peers (Brown, Brown, Jackson, Sellers, & Manuel, 2003; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). In fact, athletes tend to constitute a unique and highly diverse subset of most student populations in the higher education community, which allows them contact with diverse teammates. They often live, eat, and socialize together and are sometimes even tracked into the same majors, all of which enhance their chances for cross-racial interaction with each other (Brown et al., 2003). Likewise, college coaches in team sports encourage their athletes to build team chemistry and cohesion, to focus on commonalities and shared goals, and to look beyond racial/ethnic differences in order to achieve desirable outcomes (Brown et al., 2003). Coaches may even go as far as to say that they will not tolerate the existence of a racially hostile team environment.

This chapter explores the cross-racial experiences of Division I athletes at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). A deeper understanding of their experiences can have a significant impact on the specific intervention strategies that can engage and re-engage athletes in racially diverse learning environments. In this chapter we assert that, beyond understanding the cross-racial experiences of athletes, it is important to comprehensively deduce

elements of the broad campus climate that can shape the quality of these experiences.

We begin by synthesizing the diversity-related research on college athletes and their nonathlete peers. Then, drawing from and expanding upon the work of Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1998), we discuss a framework for understanding the campus racial climate in order to explain how dimensions of the institutional context can influence the quality of college athletes’ experiences. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for concrete intervention strategies and co-curricular activities that, in light of the diversity-related research and campus climate framework, coaches and student affairs professionals can employ to foster interaction across diverse racial groups with the goal of promoting racial understanding for college athletes.

#### RESEARCH ON THE EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY

Only a few studies have sought to explore the impact of cross-racial interaction among college athletes. Brown et al. (2003), for example, used data provided by white athletes during their first semesters at 24 predominantly white colleges and universities and found a significant relationship between their contact with black teammates and racial attitudes. Importantly, the relationship varied by type of sport played; white athletes who played team sports with a higher percentage of black teammates reported more positive attitudes toward blacks in general, as compared to white athletes who played individual sports. Another study surveyed athletes from 18 Division I universities, in part to understand the extent to which they had rich multicultural experiences (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Overall, the research study indicated 60.5% of athletes reported their athletic participation had significantly contributed to their understanding of people of racial or ethnic backgrounds different from their own. Moreover, 79% reported their tolerance for people of other races or backgrounds was positive.

Building on the work of Jayakumar (2008), Comeaux (2013a) examined the extent to which cross-racial interaction influenced postcollege pluralistic orientation and leadership skills for Division I white athlete graduates, and the degree to which engagement effects were conditional on their precollege neighborhoods. The author surveyed 310 white athlete college graduates representing 16 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision conferences. The findings suggest cross-racial interaction during college had continuing benefits on pluralistic orientation and leadership skills for white athletes from racially diverse neighborhoods, and long-term effects on leadership skills for white athletes from segregated precollege neighborhoods.

While the literature examining the influence of cross-racial interaction specifically for college athletes may be incomplete, the growing body of research related to the general student population, inclusive of athletes, can provide additional insight. Scholars have found increasing the number of students of color on campus allows for higher levels of cross-racial interaction among college peers (e.g., Chang, 1999; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007), including interracial friendships (Antonio, 2001). Two decades of social science research have linked engagement with diverse peers, which racially diverse student bodies make possible, to a range of desirable college outcomes (e.g., Astin, 1993; Hurtado, 2001; Jayakumar, 2008).

Numerous studies demonstrate quality cross-racial interactions, both inside and outside the classroom, are associated with positive learning outcomes, including college satisfaction (Astin, 1993; Chang, 1999), leadership skills and cultural awareness (Antonio, 2001; Astin, 1993), critical thinking skills (Gurin, 1999), and higher levels of positive academic and social self-concept (Chang, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin 2002). Other studies have shown a positive relationship between higher levels of cross-racial interaction and civic interest (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001), cognitive development (Astin, 1993; Gurin et al., 2002), and pluralistic orientation or students’ thinking and social interaction skills in an increasingly diverse society (Jayakumar, 2008). Thus, as this body of literature continues to grow, it is becoming evident that there are important educational benefits associated with a racially diverse student body.

#### CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE FOR ATHLETES

Current studies are encouraging, but they also remind us, as Allport (1954) noted nearly six decades ago, that certain conditions facilitate the type of intergroup contact that can lessen racial prejudice. In other words, while it is increasingly evident that there are unique benefits associated with a racially diverse student body, these positive effects are contingent upon the specific nature of the interactions (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa 2006; Gurin et al., 2002). Therefore, in order to facilitate our understanding of the cross-racial experiences of Division I athletes, it is important to identify factors that contribute to a more positive campus climate. While increasing the proportion of nonwhite students on campus is necessary and important, scholars contend that it is insufficient for fostering a

supportive campus environment or for maximizing the benefits associated with diversity (Hurtado et al., 1998). There are interrelated challenges or forces that confront students in diverse learning environments, and these can influence the quality of campus experiences and educational outcomes. Thus, institutions that do not account for other aspects of the campus racial climate are likely to increase opposition and hostility among racial groups (Hurtado et al., 1998).

To understand these institutional forces, we draw from the empirical framework developed by Hurtado and colleagues (1998), which describes an institution’s climate for racial/ethnic diversity. Four interrelated elements shape the campus racial climate: compositional diversity,[1](#_bookmark159) the level of racial diversity in a student body; psychological climate, defined by perceptions and attitudes between groups; behavioral climate, the quantity and quality of intergroup relations; and the institution’s historical legacy of exclusion of racial/ethnic groups, history that continues to perpetuate inequity across racial lines (Hurtado et al., 1998). Later, Milem, Dey, and White (2004) included a fifth dimension of climate: organizational/structural, which “represents the organizational and structural aspects of colleges and the ways in which benefits for some groups become embedded into these organizational and structural processes” (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005, p. 18). For the purposes of this chapter, we primarily focus on three elements of the institution’s climate for racial/ethnic diversity—compositional diversity, organizational/structural aspects, and psychological climate. For this chapter, compositional diversity is conceptualized as the numerical representation of racial/ethnic minority athletes across team sports. In addition, the organizational/structural aspect is related to the limited access and underrepresentation of minority football coaches (or exclusionary hiring practices) at Football Bowl Subdivision schools. Finally, psychological climate involves the extent to which athletes tend to perceive group relation and discriminatory acts by members of the campus community, which can have a significant impact on the likelihood of diverse interactions.

#### Influence of Compositional Diversity

As described earlier in the chapter, it is well documented that increasing compositional diversity on college campuses is an important step in providing students with more opportunities for interracial interactions and improving the climate (e.g., Antonio, 2001; Chang et al., 2006). For example, Hurtado and colleagues (1998) asserted that when campuses lack diverse environments, the dominant or majority student group will likely shape various forms of interaction and limit its own chances of benefiting from interactions with students of different races. Hurtado and colleagues (1998) also reported that when campuses lack compositional diversity, underrepresented student groups tend to be viewed as tokens.

The relevance of these findings to athletes is evident when we consider the demographics of college athletics. According the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) race and ethnicity report (2010), white athletes constitute a disproportionate number of participants in certain team sports: lacrosse for men (90.2%) and women (90%); women’s field hockey (86.5%); baseball (83.4%); swimming/diving for men (83.7%) and women (85.8%); rowing for men (82.9%) and women (81.7%); and water polo for men (79.5%) and women (77%). As a result, these students have fewer opportunities in the athletic realm to exchange views with students of other races, particularly when they devote more than forty hours per week to sport-related activities (Wolverton, 2008). A lack of racial diversity can heighten racial tension among teammates, lending support to the aforementioned work of Brown and colleagues (2003). Thus, increasing the racial diversity of participants in certain team sports has the potential to enhance opportunity for intergroup contact and, importantly, for desirable outcomes.

#### Organizational/Structural Dimension of Climate

The racial and ethnic representation of head coaches in major college football has received public and scholarly attention (e.g., Lapchick, Anjorin, & Nickerson, 2012; Walker, 2005). Specifically, concerns have been raised about the low number of black football coaches. In the 2012 season, blacks made up roughly 46% of college football players at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools, yet they made up just 12% of head coaches in this sport. And, according to Lynch (2013), “only 312 of 1,018 of college football assistant coaches are Black, and only 31 of 255 offensive and defensive coordinators are African-American.” FBS schools have a historical legacy of exclusion, hiring a disproportionate number of white coaches while denying access and opportunities to deserving black coaches (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010; Sagas & Cunningham, 2005).

In large measure, coaches are central figures in the lives of athletes, and consequently shape their academic, social, and athletic priorities (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2011). It appears, then, that the college experiences of

nonwhite football athletes at FBS schools are influenced to a significant degree by white males (see Lapchick et al., 2012). Further, when racial/ethnic minority football coaches are not appropriately represented at these schools, it may give nonwhite athletes the impression that the campus climate is not supportive or inclusive of these racial/ethnic groups.

#### The Psychological Element of the Climate

The psychological element of the campus racial climate framework speaks to the importance of individual perceptions and attitudes. Evidence reveals students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds tend to view intergroup relations on campus and instances of racism differently (Hurtado et al., 1998). Studies affirm athletes experience the campus climate differently depending on their race/ethnicity, sex, and sport (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Comeaux, 2012). Perceptual differences can lead to varying levels of social integration and institutional commitment. For example, students who perceive a hostile and discriminatory campus racial climate are less likely to feel connected with the institution (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008).

While numerous studies have addressed general student perceptions of campus racial climate, there is a growing body of related work on athletes. Studies reveal that the campus climate can be perceived as quite hostile, particularly for black athletes (e.g., Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Comeaux, 2012; Simons et al., 2007; Singer, 2005). For example, Bruening et al. (2005) qualitatively examined the collective experiences of black female Division I students in the college community, and their findings indicated that collectively the mass media, coaches, athletic administrators, and other athletes all played a role in virtually ignoring the experiences of these participants, thereby silencing them. More recently, Comeaux (2012) used a qualitative survey to explore 122 athletes’ perceptions of discriminatory acts by professors and other students at a Division I university. The majority of respondents reported either positive or neutral experiences with other campus community members, but a small number described instances where professors and other students questioned their intellectual abilities, academic motivation, or treatment by the university. In short, it appears that for athletes generally—and black male and female athletes more specifically—the campus environment is, to a significant degree, unwelcoming, unsupportive, alienating, and racially hostile.

#### INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR COACHES AND STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

It is clear from the literature that athletes have particular experiences that can both improve and impede their ability to engage in positive cross-racial interactions. In this section, we propose several intervention strategies for coaches, student affairs professionals, and others who desire to improve the interaction and communication of athletes across racial groups. These proposed strategies are aligned with the ideas we have presented in the earlier sections of the chapter.

#### Assessment of Team, Athletic Department, and Campus Climate

An important first step in any effective intervention strategy designed to improve the cross-racial experiences of athletes is a comprehensive assessment of the climate of the athletic teams, athletic department, and broader campus community. Few, if any, athletic departments hire personnel or independent researchers to assess the climate, but there is no better time than now. Attention should be given to the framework developed by Hurtado and colleagues (1998), with a particular focus on the assessment of the compositional diversity, an athletic department’s organizational/structural dimension, and the psychological climate that sets the tone for the broader campus racial climate. A deeper understanding of these elements will help stakeholders within athletic departments make precise observations about and recommendations for athletic teams, the athletic department, the campus community, and individual stakeholders.

For example, through focus groups or targeted interviews with various campus stakeholders (including athletes), athletic department personnel can collect rich data that will identify strengths and problem areas as well as increase their own and others’ awareness about specific campus conditions that impact athletes. Likewise, such data will enable stakeholders in athletic departments to move beyond anecdotal evidence and to offer feedback and practical solutions that enhance athletes’ campus experience. Without proper assessment, practitioners in academic support centers are less likely to be fully aware of the types and magnitude of academic and personal issues that athletes

encounter. Moreover, they are less likely to respond to these issues in meaningful ways. In the absence of assessment data, practitioners generally rely on assumptions and in some cases develop internalized biases about athletes that too often present them through a deficit lens (Comeaux, 2013b). A deficit-minded perspective may include attributing differences in educational outcomes for athletes generally and black athletes specifically to cultural stereotypes, low cognitive ability, or a lack of motivation on their part (Simons et al., 2007).

###### STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE



**Kenny Donaldson, Assistant Director of Academic Services at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)**

From his perspective as coordinator of academic support services for the Bruins’ men’s and women’s basketball teams, Donaldson discussed the cross-racial interactions of these athletes. He explained that most 17-, 18-, and 19- year-olds seek a comfort zone in college with respect to their engagement with peers. What athletes deem comfortable in college is largely dictated by their high school experiences. In other words, the high school context matters; athletes who attended highly segregated high schools may have a hard time coming to UCLA where team compositions (compositional racial diversity) are different, whereas teammates who came from less segregated high schools are likely to have an easier transition.

The degree to which athletes feel comfortable in their new college peer group is reflected in their level of engagement with different-race peers off the court. For example, African American basketball players tend to find a community with African American athletes on other teams. Racial cliques, thus, form when there are enough numbers to have one; this dynamic is especially salient among African American athletes. The safe peer space and community African American athletes seek may also be linked to the extreme underrepresentation of African American undergraduate male students on the UCLA campus (3.33% incoming fall 2012) juxtaposed with a high representation of African American male athletes in the revenue-generating sports of basketball and football (48.8%, as cited in Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013), statistics that Donaldson has presented to his staff colleagues.

Thus, while basketball and football teams bring a racially diverse peer group together, this level of cross-racial interaction may not translate off the field. Donaldson theorizes that African American athletes (like different race peers) “have frequent interactions with racially diverse teammates because of shared experiences, i.e., athletics and often being together in close quarters. They often travel, shower and compete together so in a way, they are forced to interact with (each other). It’s not always genuine or deep, but (engagement) is necessary to build a bond as teammates. However, off the field, that shared experience isn’t necessarily there, many times because of prejudice or stereotypes that exist on both sides of the racial fence, whether real or assumed.”In order to address the cultivation of an environment that is welcoming and safe for everyone in the athletic department, students and staff, Donaldson led the creation of the Diversity Ad Hoc Committee at UCLA. Donaldson also coordinated with the Intergroup Relations Program at UCLA to provide a facilitated workshop, in the near future, for incoming Bruins’ men’s and women’s basketball teams. Donaldson believes more intergroup dialogue is needed inside and outside of the classroom, on and off the court, and the athletic staff needs to provide the environment and encouragement for this to occur.

Assessment data should be shared with key athletic leaders and the broader academic community. In this way, the athletic department can demonstrate transparency, which, in turn, leads to greater trust from stakeholders of the campus community and beyond. Further, this approach enables campus units to collectively strategize ways to optimize diverse learning environments for athletes and provide direction for future inquiry.

#### Developing Diversity Competency among Stakeholders

Colleges and universities have an obligation to prepare athletic leaders for the realities they will encounter. In the context of steady racial/ethnic demographic shifts over the past decade, coaches and student affairs professionals need ongoing professional training to develop knowledge and behavior competencies that allow them to effectively respond to the challenges and opportunities posed by the presence of sociocultural diversity (or lack thereof) within athletic organizations. With this focused preparation, they will be better equipped to engage and re-engage a racially diverse group of athletes in a way that leads to positive outcomes.

#### Increased Compositional Diversity

A critical step toward improving the campus racial climate is to increase the representation of athletes of color in certain team sports. As the statistics above make clear, there is a dearth of athletes of color in such team sports as baseball, field hockey, and swimming/diving. It would be prudent for coaches to find innovative ways to actively recruit more racially diverse athletes in these team sports.

One major obstacle to increasing the representation of athlete participants of color in these team sports is that there are not enough of them in the pipeline, in part because there are limited opportunities for athletes of color to participate in sports other than track and field, football, and basketball (Coakley, 2008). A long-term goal is to provide training grounds for the development of young athletes to increase the number of competitive athletes of color in certain team sports. These facilities would require professional sports leagues and private donors to support their operations.

#### Inclusion of Minority Football Coaches

The underrepresentation of black head football coaches at Football Bowl Subdivision schools has been an ongoing debate. Hence, NCAA policy must ensure head football coaching positions are available to more blacks and other racial/ethnic minorities. The NCAA should establish a policy similar to the Rooney Rule, which requires National Football League (NFL) teams to interview at least one racial/ethnic minority candidate for all vacant head coaching positions. The NFL has witnessed an increase in the number of black head coaches since the rule was implemented in 2003 (Harrison, 2013).

It would also be helpful for the NCAA to initiate comprehensive mentorship programs and other educational initiatives for aspiring racial/ethnic minority head football coaches. This approach would allow aspiring leaders not only to develop their talents but also to expand their social networks in the sports industry. Increasing the number of black head football coaches and athletes of color in certain team sports is important. This measure alone, however, is not likely to improve the campus racial climate of athletic organizations unless other elements of climate are addressed—in particular, the racial diversity of participants in certain team sports and the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes between groups.

#### Improving Psychological Climate

Several studies have documented that athletes generally, and black athletes specifically, attest to negative experiences on their campus community, which to a significant degree can impact their sense of belonging and overall satisfaction in college. Documenting the campus climate and giving voice to discriminatory practices are certainly important first steps in remedying this. In doing so, student affairs professionals can respond meaningfully to issues that affect the campus racial climate.

Interventions designed to combat these racial inequalities and to address the social significance of race and racism in the lives of black male athletes and other students of color is imperative, especially on predominantly white campuses. With this in mind, it would be instructive for student affairs professionals to work closely with scholars who study race and racism to initiate and design professional development trainings and workshops that include sessions on specific cultural groups, including black male and female collegians who have experienced some of the most detrimental stereotypes and negative labels by members of the campus community (Bruening et al., 2005; Comeaux, 2010; Edwards, 1984). An interactive and experiential session on racial stereotypes, for example, would facilitate intergroup dialogue and foster cross-cultural understanding of the types of conscious and unconscious prejudices and discriminatory attitudes that are directed toward certain student groups.

**CASE STUDY**

**Changing the Game: BCA Hiring Report Card**

The severe underrepresentation of African American and other racial or ethnic minority head football coaches at Division I colleges and universities has been interrogated intensely for several decades. Over the course of eight years, from 1996 to 2004, there were 142 openings for new head coaching positions in Division IA football, yet only one African American was hired each year (Hill, 2004). Richard Lapchick, professor and director of the DeVos

Sport Business Management program, called the head coaching position in football “the most segregated position in all of college sport” (Harrison, 2004).



Different theories exist to explain the lack of racial diversity of head college football coaches. Some scholars theorize that stakeholders in the affairs of athletics who make hiring decisions, such as athletic directors and boosters, conform to racist stereotypes, believing racial or ethnic minority football coaches do not have the intellectual capacity to lead teams, as compared to their white counterparts (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010). Others argue the racial or ethnic disparities in head coaching positions are related to institutional racism and likewise a lack of established professional networks among minorities in the sport industry (e.g., Sagas & Cunningham, 2005).

In response to inequities of hiring head football coaches in college, the Black Coaches and Administrators (BCA) initiated its first Hiring Report Card starting with the 2003–2004 academic year. The Report Card was created by Dr. C. Keith Harrison with the primary purpose to assure accountability in the hiring process and to study, over time, the methodological approach or process for hiring new head football coaches rather than solely focusing on the hiring outcome at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) schools. All schools with open coaching positions during the football hiring cycle are included in the Report Card and are graded based on a four tier model: number of communications with the executive director of the BCA or the chair of the Minority Opportunity Interest Committee; number of racial or ethnic minorities on the search or hiring committee; number of racial or ethnic minorities who received on-campus interviews; and length of time to hire a candidate. The BCA affirms that a more transparent and objective process will ultimately lead to more opportunities for racial or ethnic minority head coaches in college football.

Since the inaugural Report Card in 2003–2004, Harrison and Yee (2009) reported some enthusiasm for the hiring practices of new head football coaches largely because of the record number of coaches of color in the 2009 season. Nonetheless, this keen interest was tempered by the decline in both the percentage of people of color on search committees and the percentage of racial or ethnic minority candidates interviewed compared to previous years.

Recently, the 20l1–2012 Hiring Report Card revealed that coaches of color were selected in 10 of the 29 searches during the football hiring cycle for the 2012 season. As a result, there were a total of 28 racial or ethnic minority head football coaches in NCAA Division I football for this season, an all-time high. Since the initial 2003– 2004 BCA Hiring Report Card, “there has been a 600% increase in the number of FBS head football coaches” (Lapchick, Anjorin, & Nickerson, 2012).

According to Floyd Keith, BCA executive director, improvement in the ratio of racial or ethnic minority head football coaches stems from the accountability of the Hiring Report Card, NCAA football professional development academies for aspiring head coaches, and the passion of activists and scholars who want to effect change in college sports (Lapchick, Jackson, & Lilly, 2011).

Since the first Hiring Report Card, Keith has also recognized a positive change in the attitudes and behaviors of participating schools. Contrary to early Hiring Report Cards, there appears to be a greater level of comfort among participating schools, and as such, fewer issues have emerged because of their willingness to fully participate in the process.

#### Implementation of Co-Curricular Activities

It is imperative that college and universities create ideal conditions for quality cross-racial interaction and communication among a diverse student body. Several studies have revealed that co-curricular activities such as participation in leadership training and living and working on campus have the potential to foster interaction across diverse racial groups (Chang, 1996; Saenz et al., 2007). As such, initiatives facilitated by student affairs professionals to create optimal conditions for athletes to communicate across racial lines could include (but should not necessarily be limited to) studying with a racially diverse group of peers, including teammates and nonathletes; diversity workshops and structured leadership training during the offseason; and meaningful cross-racial exchanges that challenge students to think about their own and others’ worldviews through purposeful team activities and comprehensive educational programs initiated by personnel in academic support services for athletes.

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter described the cross-racial experiences of Division I athletes while accounting for dimensions of the broad campus racial climate that can shape the quality of these experiences. Considering the diversity-related

research on athletes, it seems that participation in intercollegiate athletics may not always foster ideal conditions for cross-racial interaction. Additionally, athletes tend to have diverse views of the campus climate owing to their varying positionalities and experiences with racism. Efforts aimed to promote a positive climate for all athletes should consider compositional diversity, the organizational/structural aspects of college as well as perceived racial conflict and discrimination on campus (i.e., the psychological dimension). The ability of institutions generally—and stakeholders in the affairs of athletics, specifically—to holistically assess the dynamic aspects of the campus racial climate will likely create optimal conditions and unique opportunities for higher levels of quality cross-racial interaction for all athletes.

While some progress has been made and insights have been gained about the nature and influence of campus racial climate for athletes, there is much that remains unknown. For example, few empirical studies (e.g., Brown et al., 2003; Comeaux, 2013a) have examined the behavioral dimension of racial climate or the nature of cross-racial interaction among athletes, and this must be explored in greater depth. In addition, future efforts should examine a wider spectrum of athletic stakeholders, including coaches and athletic administrators of various racial/ethnic groups, and the extent to which they view and experience the campus environment. In spite of limited extant empirical research, this chapter can serve as a foundation on which to build. A multidimensional understanding of the experiences of athletes and athletic stakeholders can offer a unique perspective on campus diversity that helps to prepare all students for life and work in a pluralistic society.

#### CHAPTER

**14**

**THE MISEDUCATION of AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE COLLEGE ATHLETES**

**John N. Singer**

###### KEY TERMS

 **African American males ** **college athletes**

 **critical race theory ** **miseducation**

 **schooling vs. education ** **white supremacy**

In this chapter, I draw primarily from critical race theory (CRT) and my experiences as a black male, former aspiring athlete, university summer bridge program advisor and academic mentor, college professor, and scholar to discuss how certain macro- (i.e., societal), meso- (i.e., organizational), and micro- (i.e., individual) level factors contribute to the miseducation of African American[1](#_bookmark173) male athletes at predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE) in the United States of America. By *miseducation* I am referring to a process that often occurs when one is given a wrong or faulty education and where, oftentimes, external forces restrict or impair students’ ability to explore the totality of who they are, what they are, and their options and possibilities in various life domains (Marks, 2000). In using CRT as the overarching framework to explore this issue, I focus first and foremost on what is “wrong” with American society and the educational and sports enterprises, as opposed to what is “wrong” with African American male athletes and their interactions with these social systems. Doing so allows me to keep the primary focus on the broader structural issues at the societal and organizational levels and, likewise, critically examine the role these athletes as individuals play in their own educational experiences and outcomes.

As an academic and activist movement that is rooted in the social missions and political struggles of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, CRT first emerged in the field of law/legal studies (see Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) and was eventually adopted by scholars in other fields such as education (see Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In general, CRT scholars have emphasized “the many ways that race and racism were fundamentally ingrained in American social structures and historical consciousness and hence shaped U.S. ideology, legal systems, and fundamental conceptions of law, property, and privilege” (Lynn & Adams, 2002, p. 88). CRT scholars view “race” as a category, identity, or designation that has been legally and socially constructed by human beings (particularly “white” elites) for the purposes of establishing permanent power and privileges for certain groups of people, and justifying the perpetual denigration and marginalization of the nonwhite, racialized “other” (see Haney Lopez, 1996). Given this reality, most CRT scholars are particularly concerned with *understanding* how a regime of white supremacy and the subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in American society, and *changing* the bond that exists between American social systems and racial power and privilege. The ultimate goal of the CRT movement is not only to understand and address race and racism but, in so doing, also to understand and address other forms of subordination based on gender, class, language, and other differences (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

Both African American male and female athletes at PWIHE have been encumbered by race and racism, as well as other challenges related to their various identities and diverse backgrounds. However, since the early pioneering work of noted scholar and activist Harry Edwards (1969, 1973), a great deal of the attention has been paid

specifically to the educational plight of African American males, who constitute a significant portion of the labor force in the high-profile, revenue-producing sports of Division I football and basketball at PWIHE (see Singer, 2013, for brief overview). In comparison to other subpopulations of students (athletes) in both the higher education context (see Harper, 2012; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013), as well as the pre-K–12 school context (see Howard, 2014), African American males are at the very bottom with respect to educational attainment and most indicators of academic performance (e.g., grade point average, graduation rates), and this group seems to be the most severely and disproportionately affected by the schooling process.

These points are not to suggest that all African American males are lagging behind or enter PWIHE underprepared academically or otherwise. In line with one of the major tenets of CRT, there are many counterstories or counternarratives to the dominant discourse that we typically see concerning the educational problems and challenges of African American male college students in general and African American male college athletes in particular (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012). Indeed, several African American male “scholar-ballers” (see Comeaux & Harrison, 2011) have accomplished great things not only on the playing field and court but also in the classroom and in their communities. These gifted and talented individuals graduate and advance to graduate or professional school and to successful careers (as professional athletes and other professionals) as well as productive lives as citizens in the United States and beyond. The story of Dr. Albert Bimper, a former college and professional football player turned college professor and athletic administrator at his college alma mater is a case in point (see Stakeholder Perspective on page 197).

###### CASE STUDY

**Reading Is Fundamental to the Education of African American Male Athletes**

In an article in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, “The James Brooks Illiteracy Scandal,” Downton (2000) discussed the story behind James Brooks, former National Football League (NFL) and University of Auburn running back, and his problems with illiteracy. Despite the fact he graduated from high school in 1977 and spent four years on a football scholarship at Auburn, this highly gifted and talented African American male athlete was functionally illiterate throughout his college career. He left the university for the NFL without having graduated, and his problems with illiteracy continued during his NFL playing career and into retirement. In a similar case, *Ebony* magazine highlighted the story of Dexter Manley, a former All-Pro, two-time Super Bowl champion in the NFL and standout at Oklahoma State University. Unlike James Brooks, Manley did receive a college degree; however, like Brooks, he too was illiterate during his college playing career and most of his playing days as an NFL player (see Randolph, 1989). Kevin Ross, a former basketball standout at Creighton University, was also functionally illiterate. And like the athletes highlighted here, Ross was admitted into the university and passed through the system because of his athletic gifts and talents (see Donnor, 2005). These three cases are just a few of the many examples where the educational interests of African American male athletes at predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE) have been manipulated in favor of the interests of other educational stakeholder groups (see Ganim, 2014, for more examples pertaining to the issue of illiteracy and the African American male athlete). Each case demonstrates how their experiences in the American educational system (i.e., elementary, secondary, higher education) have not necessarily served them well.

What is particularly interesting about these cases is that at the core of these African American male athletes’ educational challenges is the issue of literacy, which is the foundation of learning and knowledge production. In particular, reading is fundamental to the educational process. Historically, it was illegal during slavery for African Americans to learn how to read and write (Anderson, 1988; Woodson, 1919). White elites went to great lengths to keep slaves from learning to read and write because they realized “the more you cultivate the minds of slaves, the more unserviceable you make them” (Woodson, 1919, p. 9). In this regard, keeping slaves from learning how to read and write was the key to maintaining the system of white dominance and black subordination that had become institutionalized in American society. Forbidding the slave from reading was at the heart of the miseducation of black people in America; white elites realized that once the slaves learned how to read it would allow them to come into the knowledge of self, others, and the world, putting them on a path to take ownership of their destiny (see the autobiography of former slave, Frederick Douglass [1854], as an example).

In reflecting on the foregoing cases and the historical roots of the miseducation of black people in American society, there are some critical questions one could ponder in the examination the educational plight of the African American male college athlete today: Why do many of these African American male athletes struggle with reading



and writing today? What role has the American educational system played in the creation of this problem of illiteracy and the so-called black “dumb jock” (Edwards, 1984)? What role has the black male athlete played in his own miseducation? This chapter is concerned with these and many other questions.

But despite the many “success” stories we can point to and the potential benefits the African American male college athlete derives from his involvement and investment in intercollegiate athletics (Singer, 2008), there still remain many of these young men who continue to be negatively exploited during their time on campus and are leaving these PWIHE ill-equipped to fully function in life after their playing days have ended. Further, it is important to note that while I certainly acknowledge the potential value in the pursuit and attainment of a college degree, *graduation* from a college or university does not necessarily equate to receiving a true *education* (Edwards, 1984). The case study at the beginning of this chapter bears witness to this point and calls for further exploration of the miseducation of African American male athletes from a macro-, meso-, and microperspective. I draw from CRT and other relevant literature, and build on the work of scholars who have critically analyzed the educational plight of college athletes in general, and African American male college athletes in particular. In the sections that follow, I lay out the key components of this multilevel framework and discuss the implications for research, policy, and practice in higher education and intercollegiate athletics.

#### MACROLEVEL FACTORS: SYSTEMIC RACISM

In the foreword to Carter G. Woodson’s (1998) book, John Henrik Clarke notes, “Unfortunately, African people in the United States still have some prevailing misperceptions about their education and education in general. We were not brought to the United States or the so-called New World to be educated. We were brought as a massive labor supply … What the slave masters permitted was training and not education” (p. 1). Clarke’s quote captures the essence of this section on broad societal factors that impact the miseducation of African American male college athletes. In particular, a discussion of *systemic racism* and how it has become institutionalized in the American educational system and big-time college sports is particularly relevant.

One of the primary tenets of CRT is that racism is endemic in American society and has become entrenched in American law, culture, and social institutions. In discussing the permanence of racism in American society, CRT pioneer Derrick Bell (1992) describes black people in the United States as “faces at the bottom of the well,” and he discusses the unparalleled history of oppression and continuous struggle this racial minority group has faced in American society. Similarly, in his book, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*, sociologist Joe Feagin (2006) discussed the history and legacy of white-on-black oppression (e.g., chattel slavery, legal segregation, contemporary racism) and how systemic, institutionalized, covert forms of racism and white supremacy have been created and sustained across a broad array of institutions and social settings over time.

The American educational system is one such institution and social setting. Woodson’s (2000 [1933]) indictment of the American educational system provides a strong foundation for other scholars to discuss the negative, harmful impact this system has had on the black community in general and black males in particular. Shujaa (1994) makes the distinction between *schooling* and *education*, describing the former as “a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society’s existing power relations and institutional structures that support those arrangements” and the latter as “the process of transmitting from one generation to the next knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness” (p. 15). Shujaa’s distinction suggests, on the one hand, that when black people engage in the schooling process, they are being trained to acquiesce to the dominant social order, where they frequently amass the cultural orientations of elite whites, oftentimes to their own detriment. On the other hand, when black people are engaged in the process of education they are in learning environments that recognize their cultural history and heritage, facilitate the transmission of cultural knowledge, and affirm their cultural identity.

In his historical investigation into the political and ideological foundations of the “miseducation of the Negro” and how schooling, not true education, is often what black people have been subjected to in American society, William Watkins (2001) builds on the work of Woodson (2000 [1933}) in arguing that when slaves were “emancipated,” a system for “educating” them was put into place to discipline, exploit, and supposedly civilize them. He discusses how America’s colonization of black people employed the educational system as often as the bullet or other destructive tactics. Moreover, he highlighted and interrogated the prominent role that powerful, wealthy white men have played in the establishment of educational institutions (e.g., historically black colleges and universities) and vocational training for black people. Watkins’s critical analysis suggests that while these white power brokers

might appear to have been benevolent by providing “educational” opportunities for black people, they were particularly concerned with doing so in the interest of controlling and limiting the knowledge production and acquisition of black people. In this way, black people might continue to be serviceable to and manipulated by white elites.

###### STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE



**Countering the Miseducation of African American Male Athletes at PWIHE: Recognizing “Race Matters”**

Dr. Albert Bimper holds a joint appointment as an assistant professor of ethnic studies and senior associate athletic director of diversity and inclusion at his alma mater, Colorado State University, where he was a four-year starter at center for the football team. He also had a brief stint in the NFL, earning a Super Bowl ring as a member of the 2006 Indianapolis Colts. Dr. Bimper earned his Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction (with a cultural studies in education concentration) at the University of Texas and served as an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs and as an academic mentor to athletes at Kansas State University before returning to his alma mater.

As can be seen from his bio, Bimper has important experiences as a student, athlete, mentor, educator, administrator, and researcher. In reflecting on his initial experiences as a college athlete, Bimper indicated he was being led down the wrong path and it took the intervention of faculty and mentors outside athletics to help him tap into his inner gifts and talents beyond his athletic prowess. He began to acknowledge the significance of race and the impact it could have on his educational experiences and future success: “I was challenged to consider how issues of race were impacting my experience and development. I believe race had an impact on how my athlete experience was constructed. But I was also encouraged to develop a sense of awareness and agency that gave me the confidence and capital to create opportunities that could lead to success. Maybe more than anything, by considering the impact that race was having and would continue to have on my life, I actually broadened my definition of what success could mean for me.”

As Bimper’s statement implies, this recognition of race empowered him to expand his horizons and think more about who he was, what he could become, and the myriad possibilities for success in life beyond the playing field. This example certainly speaks to the important role that race consciousness plays in helping to counter and deal with issues of racism and its impact on the educational experiences of African American male athletes at predominantly white American institutions of higher education (PWIHE).

This sentiment is consistent with the interest-convergence principle tenet of CRT, which posits that white elites will often tolerate and even support potential opportunities for racially marginalized groups, particularly when it substantially and disproportionately supports their own self-interests (Bell, 1980, 2004). Scholars have utilized CRT and the interest convergence principle to discuss the integration of athletic departments at PWIHE and how these institutions have exploited the athletic prowess of African American male athletes often to this group’s detriment (see Davis, 1995; Donnor, 2005; Singer, 2009b, 2013). A central feature of CRT is the notion of race as a property interest (Harris, 1993). Ladson-Billings (1998) discusses how African Americans were historically constructed as property in the sense that they were owned, and although Africans Americans eventually were legally granted citizenship, they “represent a unique form of citizenship in the United States—property transformed into citizenship” (p. 16). Relatedly, some scholars have suggested African American male college athletes have been treated like valuable property on a metaphorical plantation (e.g., Hawkins, 2010). In revisiting the quote by John Henrik Clarke, this begs the rhetorical questions: Were African American male athletes brought to PWIHE to serve primarily as a “massive labor supply?” Are they being trained to serve the interests of the NCAA, member institutions, and other powerful stakeholders as opposed to being properly educated to serve their own interests and the interests of their communities?

#### MESOLEVEL FACTORS: ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, STRUCTURE, AND PRACTICES

According to Chesler, Lewis, and Crowfoot (2005), “Organizations are the key intermediaries between the larger society and the lives of individuals and groups. They typically mirror the larger society and are in the position of

either passing on or sometimes challenging dominant patterns and their effects … While the people and groups in an organization work together for overarching goals and purposes, they also have different interests—based on their identity, role, functional unit—and these interest groups often compete for limited resources” (p. 47). Their words capture the essence of this section because it allows for a critical reflection on how institutions and organizations (e.g., universities and their athletic departments) subordinate low-status groups (e.g., college athletes) by erecting barriers to their access to resources, opportunities, and full participation in certain processes. In particular, by focusing on aspects of the culture, structure, and practices of athletic departments at PWIHE, we can better understand how the miseducation of African American male athletes unfolds at the organizational level of analysis.

Unfortunately, college sport organizations have, for the most part, been in the business of passing on dominant societal patterns and their effects. Chesler and colleagues (2005) mentioned the competing visions athletic departments and academic units within colleges and universities often have about how athletes should spend their time, energy, and efforts. Interestingly, Frey (1994) described the athletic department as a “deviant subunit” of the larger university culture and structure and discussed how its relationship with and dependence on resources from external stakeholder groups (e.g., boosters, media, corporations) allows it to effectively resist control by internal university mechanisms. In this regard, it can be viewed as an organization on campus that has a unique culture focused on commercial development, which is oftentimes in direct conflict with the educational values and academic mission of the broader university (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

In discussing the inherent contradictions between the cultures of universities and their athletic departments, Comeaux (2007) argues that athletes are entering into a “culture of academic disengagement” beginning with the recruitment process: the neglect of academic and other educational matters and the overemphasis on athletics perpetuate a culture of low academic expectations. While this athletics subculture creates a myriad of challenges for athletes from all backgrounds, these challenges may be even more pronounced for African Americans in football and men’s basketball, particularly those highly touted prize recruits who come to PWIHE from disadvantaged economic backgrounds and pre-K–12 educational environments that lack resources to fully prepare them for the academic rigors and challenges of higher education (Kozol, 2005). Indeed, research reveals how and why so many African American male college athletes in particular, while thoroughly immersed in the athlete role, have become detached from the academic role, often to their own detriment (Adler & Adler, 1991; Benson, 2000; Hawkins, 2010).

In addition, my formal research (see Singer, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2013), general observations, and several conversations with African American male athletes (and other athletic department stakeholders) have allowed me to glean insight into how the culture, structure, and practices in these athletic departments can negatively impact this group. For example, I served as a summer graduate advisor and was primarily responsible for working with highly recruited, academically “at-risk” African American male football and basketball players in a ten-week transition bridge program. During one particular summer, the head football coach, according to one of the players, told these athletes in a meeting during their first day on campus that “school and academics come first [as he held up two fingers], and football comes second [as he held up one finger].” When highly paid powerful coaches communicate these types of contradictory messages, it can often create cognitive dissonance and difficult challenges for athletes who might be truly interested in a holistic educational experience during their time on campus.

As big-time college sports has continued to grow and PWIHE have continued to recruit athletes from various backgrounds, colleges and universities have invested in state-of-the-art academic support centers and intensified the scope and services these centers offer over the years (Pickeral, 2012). However, the role and effectiveness of these centers in addressing the unique needs of black athletes have been questioned. Spigner (1993) asserts these centers might be “aiding and abetting a racial status-quo by emphasizing more of a social desire for sports entertainment” (p. 144). More than two decades later, these same concerns still exist but are even more pronounced, given how drastic the commercialism in college sports has become. My research with African American male athletes and other experiences as an academic mentor and college professor reveal that, while African American male athletes have garnered some benefits from these support programs, many of the academic support personnel in these programs have (un)wittingly assisted in perpetuating racism and reproducing the status quo. The pressures often put on academic support personnel to keep athletes eligible to play encourages many of these individuals to engage in practices that are often detrimental to athletes’ overall educational development.

Comeaux and Harrison (2011) discuss various forces and processes confronting Division I college athletes’ academic success and other educational outcomes. One aspect of these scholars’ conceptual model particularly relevant here is the academic and social integration of these athletes into the organizational (school) environment, which involves activities such as interactions with faculty and nonathlete peers in and out of class, community service work, and engagement in extracurricular campus activities besides athletics. While these activities are often

facilitated through academic support programs and affiliated staff members, Comeaux and Harrison caution that these activities and opportunities have been severely limited for black athletes because of “a hostile campus racial climate and reinforcement of low academic expectations by significant members of the campus community” (p. 241).

Unfortunately, many of these significant members of the campus community have included faculty, coaches, student peers, administrators, academic advisors and learning specialists or tutors, and the athletes themselves.

#### MICROLEVEL FACTORS

Individual level factors can also impact the miseducation of the African American male athlete. Harry Edwards (1984) points out, “It is the black student-athletes themselves who must shoulder a substantial portion of the responsibility for improving their own circumstances. Education is an activist pursuit and cannot in reality be ‘given.’ It must be obtained ‘the old fashion way’—one must earn it … the bottom line here is that if black student- athletes fail to take an active role in establishing and legitimizing a priority upon academic achievement, nothing done by any other party to this American sports tragedy will matter—if for no other reason than the fact that a slave cannot be freed against his will” (p. 13). In this section, my focus is on identity development and personal ethics.

#### Identity Development

Harry Edwards (2000) notes that for decades he has contended “that the dynamics of black sports involvement, and the blind faith of black youths and their families in sport as a prime vehicle for self-realization and socio-economic advancement, have combined to generate a complex of critical problems for black society” (p. 9). Edwards has long argued black students’ aspirations and motivation to pursue athletic careers and identities has too often been at the expense of other critically important areas of personal and cultural development. Several scholars have studied the career aspirations and identity development of African American males in particular and found that this group, in comparison to other groups, is more likely to play sports in school with the goal of it leading to a college athletic scholarship or professional football or basketball career (see Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011).

Unfortunately, while the pursuit of fame and fortune as a professional athlete is not necessarily something that should be discouraged, in far too many instances African American male athletes’ “aspirational capital”[2](#_bookmark174) prevents them from developing a more realistic, holistic identity profile as human beings (Singer & May, 2011).

Scholars have also discussed the effect negative stereotypes can have on the identity development and educational experiences of African American male athletes at PWIHE (Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008; Sailes, 1993). Historically, these individuals have been stereotyped as athletically superior but intellectually inferior to other racial groups (Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008), and as Hughes, Satterfield, and Giles (2007) explained, they have been “athleticized” as dumb jocks and campus entertainment, not as serious students. Steele and Aronson (1995) described this outcome of stereotyping as a stereotype threat, which involves “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (p. 797). Self-stereotyping most certainly can have an adverse effect on the self-esteem and motivation of black male athletes to pursue other important identities and developmental experiences outside of sports excellence.

#### Personal Ethics

DeSensi and Rosenburg (2003) describe *personal ethics* as a set of morals and values that an individual brings to a particular organization or situation, and *social responsibility* as the legal and moral responsibility we have to ourselves and other human beings. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) discuss the importance of precollege characteristics and how the commitments (i.e., goal, institutional, and sport) of Division I college athletes impact their academic success and educational experiences. In discussing the miseducation of African American male athletes it is certainly important to understand how their precollege lived experiences in the home, school, and other contexts could impact the educational goals they set for themselves, and their commitments to sporting endeavors and the educational institution.

What is it about the personal ethical profiles of former black male college athletes at PWIHE such as Isaiah Thomas, Robert Smith, Myron Rolle, Albert Bimper, and several others who have been able to struggle through their individual circumstances and successfully traverse the educational terrain while challenging a flawed educational system and corrupt athletic enterprise? As Harry Edwards suggests, these athletes viewed their education as an activist pursuit, and they took an active role in establishing and legitimizing a priority upon academic achievement

and other aspects of their education outside of their athletic identities. From a CRT perspective, these black male athletes, in many ways, serve as that counternarrative to the all-too-familiar stereotypic image of the black male “dumb jock” that Edwards (1984) has always insisted is not born but rather has been systematically created in American society and the educational system.

#### CONCLUSION

In his book, *Race Matters*, Cornell West (1993) argued that when discussing issues of race in America it is imperative that we begin not with the “problems of black people” but with “the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in the historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes” (p. 6). I began this chapter with a case study that highlighted historic flaws of American society, and suggested these flaws and deep-seated injustices against black people have contributed greatly to some of the contemporary problems and issues we have observed regarding the educational plight and miseducation of African American male college athletes. While the case study focuses specifically on the issue of illiteracy and its negative impact on the African American male athletes, the focal point of this chapter is on the role that certain macrolevel, mesolevel, and microlevel factors can play in understanding this complex, multifaceted educational problem. While other scholars have certainly offered provocative insights into the educational plight of African American male athletes at PWIHE, I have attempted to add to this body of work by focusing on the relationship between and among societal, organizational, and individual factors contributing to the miseducation of this important stakeholder group.

There are significant implications for research, policy, and practice. From a research perspective, there is a need for critical race-based, participatory action research (PAR) projects conducted with African American male athletes in institutions of higher education of all types. This approach would allow researchers to help empower and give “voice” to African American male athletes at each step of the research process, from the identification of the research problem to the write-up and dissemination of the results. These athletes’ participation in such an educational process, although time-consuming and potentially difficult, can be a liberating experience for this group. It could allow African American males to define for themselves the kinds of issues and concerns that are likely to impact their educational experience. Moreover, athletes’ active engagement in this research process could set the tone for further pursuit of knowledge and ambitions beyond the playing fields and courts and give them a better appreciation for the true purpose of higher education, which according to Clarke (1991) is to prepare the student to handle power responsibly.

Indeed, African American male athletes’ (and other athlete groups) participation in PAR and other qualitative research projects (e.g., case studies, ethnographies) related to their educational experiences could certainly enhance their understanding of the power dynamics at play in big-time college sports. Although college athletes have certain privileges and perks that are not afforded to many of their nonathlete peers, college athletes today have very little voice in determining policies that directly affect them. Athletes often subjugate themselves to the rules, regulations, and directives that have been established by powerful governing bodies and organizations, and they are ostracized if they refuse to conform. From a social reproduction perspective, athletes in general, and black male athletes in particular, have been relegated to the bottom of a social class order that in many ways is diametrically opposed to their economic, academic, and other educational interests. Interestingly, in the early days of college athletics the athlete played a significant role in the control and administration of this enterprise (Covell & Barr, 2010); but today, outside of the involvement of a few athletes on advisory committees at the NCAA and member institution levels, this type of power has been severely limited. This lack of voice for athletes in general and black male athletes in particular is certainly a policy issue that should be addressed.

Finally, from a practical standpoint, faculty, coaches, administrators, and other educational stakeholders of higher education and intercollegiate athletics must do more to implement and fully support (financially and otherwise) programs and learning opportunities that help empower college athletes in general to engage more in the process of self-discovery (e.g., “scholar-baller paradigm”; see Comeaux & Harrison, 2011); and in the case of African American male athletes at PWIHE, there is a need for a focus on culturally relevant programs (Singer, 2013). But, perhaps more important, athletes must take it upon themselves to seek higher learning opportunities by aligning themselves with programs, coalitions, alliances, and people (particularly outside of athletics) who will serve to enlighten them and provide support for their educational experiences beyond the athletics playing court and field



