

## BENEFITS AND DETRIMENTS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ATHLETES' PARTICIPATION IN A BIG-TIME COLLEGE FOOTBALL PROGRAM

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**Abstract** The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the nature and status of four African American male athletes' educational experiences as participants in a big-time college football program at a predominantly white institution of higher education (PWIHE) in the United States of America. A focus group and individual interviews revealed that although these African American males felt that they derived certain tangible and intangible benefits from being participants in this football program, the term 'student-athlete' was an inaccurate description of who they are, especially given the expectations and tremendous time demands their participation in football related activities placed on them. These general findings are discussed in terms of their implications for future research in college sport.

**Key words** • African American athletes • college sport • psychosocial benefits • psychosocial detriments

Since the integration of African American (used interchangeably with Black) male athletes into big-time college football and basketball programs (i.e. highly visible and commercialized with large athletic budgets) at predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE) in the USA, several scholars and educators have examined racial differences in the educational experiences and outcomes of athletes in these programs (Adler and Adler, 1991; Comeaux and Harrison, 2007; Edwards, 1973; Hawkins et al., 2007; Hyatt, 2003; Parham, 1993; Purdy et al., 1982; Sellers, 1992; Siegel, 1994; Uptegrove et al., 1999). In general, this literature has suggested that given the historical racial discrimination in American society in general, and PWIHE in particular, African American athletes experience academic, social, career transition, and financial challenges that, in many cases, their white counterparts do not experience.

Sellers (2000) discussed the different perspectives that are out there concerning the educational impact that college sport participation has on African American athletes. On the one hand, it has been argued that intercollegiate athletics provide educational and career opportunities to these athletes, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds (i.e. low socioeconomic status, inadequate academic preparation). On the other hand, some have argued that the

college sport enterprise exploits the athletic prowess of these athletes and ignores their academic and social development. Research on the educational impact of athletic participation has rendered mixed results (see, for more details, Howard-Hamilton and Sina, 2001; Pascarella and Smart, 1991). For example, Pascarella and Smart's (1991) research on African American and Caucasian athletes revealed that intercollegiate athletic participation had a positive impact on social involvement during college, satisfaction with college, interpersonal and leadership skills, motivation to complete degree, and in the case of African American males in particular, their early occupational status. Conversely, much of the literature has suggested that African American athletes have been academically and economically exploited and the structure, functions, and activities of these programs has compromised these athletes' ability to fully reap the positive educational benefits of athletic participation (Adler and Adler, 1991; American Institute for Research, 1989; Benson, 2000; Daniels, 1987; Hawkins, 1999).

A great deal of the research that has focused on the educational experiences and outcomes of African American males participating in college athletics has involved a focus on the secondary analysis of large national data sets on college athletes, and has been conducted prior to the 21st century. The commercialization of college sport has further escalated since this time, and clearly, the demarcation between professional sport and intercollegiate athletics has been called into question. Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study was to begin exploring the nature and status of the educational experiences of African American male athletes in the current context of big-time college sport (i.e. post-20th century).

It is important to note that this study represents a smaller portion of a larger study that focused on African American male athletes' perspectives on racism (see Singer, 2005) and their insights into potential strategies for combating the racial discrimination and exploitation that African American athletes face at PWIHE (see Singer, in press). The primary goal of this particular study with four African American football athletes was to provide a preliminary assessment of some of the psychosocial benefits and detriments associated with this group's athletic participation. This study is framed as exploring the benefits/detriments binary because the narratives that emerged from the interviews with these athletes speak directly to the major themes of 'benefits' and 'detriment'. The discussion below of the methods used to carry out this study provides a bit more insight into the inductive nature of the research process.

## Methods

This research is a qualitative case study (Stake, 2000) of four African American male athletes who were participants in a big-time college football program at a major university in the Midwestern portion of the United States during the 2001–02 academic year. Table 1 provides a brief description of these participants. After receiving human subjects approval from the university and athletic department and having each participant sign a consent to participate form, data were collected via an approximately 90 minute single focus group and hour-long individual, semi-structured interviews with each of the participants during March and

**Table 1** Description of the Four African American Male Athletes

Position	Year	Age	Major	Post-college/playing status
Running Back	FR	19	Communications	Master's student and athletic department intern
Defensive Back	SO	20	Childhood Development	Completed Degree and plays professional football in the American Indoor Football Association (AIFA)
Wide Receiver	JR	20	Education	Plays professional football in the National Football League (NFL)
Defensive Back	JR	21	Communications	Plays professional football in the National Football League (NFL)

*Note:* These athletes' post-playing status is as of 2007; it is unknown whether or not the two players who are in the NFL ever earned their college degrees.

April. Participants were asked to comment on the experiences of the Black athlete at PWIHE and the relationship between athletics (sport) and higher education during the focus group interview. Each was asked to elaborate on their educational and developmental experiences during their individual interviews.

After completing the focus group interview and individual interviews, the researcher listened to the audio-taped focus group and individual interviews on multiple occasions, took notes, and made preliminary assessments of the data. The interview tapes were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher and a professional secretarial service. The initial stage of organizing the data involved the researcher reading through the transcripts multiple times (Marshall and Rossman, 1995), and coding and categorizing the data during the initial reading. As the categories and themes begin to emerge during subsequent readings and scanning of the transcripts, the researcher was able to begin writing and making sense of the data. In efforts to ensure credibility the researcher attempted to conduct member checks by providing each of the participants with copies of the transcript for their review, and modification if need be. In addition, the researcher engaged in the process of peer debriefing by allowing peers from a writing group to provide constructive feedback of his initial interpretations and write-up of the data. This process assisted the researcher in checking his biases, and allowed for the exploration of themes that might have gone beyond the benefits/detriments framework.

## Findings

Based on the analysis of the data, this study focused specifically on the psychosocial benefits and detriments of four African American male athletes' participation in a big-time college football program. Some interesting findings related to

the nature and status of these African American males' experiences as participants in college sport emerged. Findings reveal that although these African American males felt that they derived certain benefits from being sport participants in intercollegiate athletics, these athletes, like Staurowsky and Sack (2005), viewed the term, 'student-athlete', as an inappropriate label and inaccurate description of who they are, especially given that the inordinate amount of time that they were expected to devote to football served as a detriment to their overall educational development. These general findings are briefly discussed below.

### *Psychosocial Benefits*

According to Zimbalist (1999), there is a 'fine line' that exists between the psychosocial benefits and detriments of college sport participation and the commercialized sports of football and basketball threaten to make the balance between these benefits and detriments a negative one. The African American males in this study acknowledged that their participation in college football had some positive benefits. These athletes felt that their participation in football was great preparation for some of the challenges that they will face in life. For example, when asked if his participation in college football had any impact on his development as a total human being, one participant remarked:

As a human being you have to learn about life; you have to just learn about the ups and downs that you're gonna go through and that's what pretty much being a (student)-athlete is about too . . . You're not always gonna win, of course, and you're always gonna have ups and downs in your sport. Where you might have a great game one game and then the next game you come back and you're just terrible, and you just gotta live with that defeat in you – just grow and get better. And that's pretty much the same thing you have to do in life, because everything's not gonna go your way.

This same athlete further discussed how participation in college football has parallels to one's life experiences:

Football . . . it causes a lot of thinking. You have to think and react very quickly. So you know, it helps you in life I think because you know, you have to think things through about everything, pretty much in life and that's how you have to think in football. You know, somebody who is right here and somebody is right there so you know if they do this, you gotta do that, and that's how it is in life, pretty much. You know that something, if this goes wrong, then you got this to fall back on, pretty much so. It is just about being prepared I think.

Another participant echoed the sentiments of his teammate when he contended that being a college athlete helps you learn the 'techniques to survive on the field and off the field'. Essentially, these African American males felt that their participation in the game of college football has helped them in the 'game of life'.

These athletes also discussed how their participation in college football provided them with access to opportunities that they might otherwise have not been given. One participant stated:

Playing football has opened a lot of doors for me, because without, without football I wouldn't even be here because I mean my parents are not as fortunate as other people to send their people to school so I feel hey, I can play sports and get me a free education also you know.

This quote speaks to the financial benefits that an athletic scholarship provides for some African American male athletes who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Once these athletes are on scholarship as participants in these big-time college sport programs they are also afforded the opportunity to gain valuable experiences through their travel with the team. As another participant revealed:

With this whole sport thing, I got to see a lot I wouldn't see in the world. I traveled, and just seen different parts of the world. Where with sports that kind of connection to other things around the country . . . you might just travel out here and see like different people, how different people live . . .

The quotes above indicate that the African American males in this study are cognizant of some of the psychological, social, and financial benefits associated with their participation in big-time college sport.

### *Psychosocial Detriments*

Although these African American males acknowledged that college sport participation does have some very important benefits, the time demands and expectations associated with big-time college football participation seemed to create that negative balance that Zimbalist (1999) discussed. Throughout the focus group and the individual interviews these athletes discussed the 'struggle' associated with trying to balance the student and athlete roles. In fact, the expectations and time demands placed on these athletes by their coaches in particular were so great that these athletes refused to refer to themselves as 'student-athletes'. At one point during the focus group discussion these athletes corrected the researcher when he referred to them as 'student-athletes'; they insisted that terms such as 'athlete-student' and 'scholarship athlete' were more appropriate to describe themselves. And although one of these athletes chose, during the individual interview with the researcher, to describe himself as a 'student first' and an 'athlete second', he acknowledged that he intentionally chose to identify himself in that way 'because a lot of people don't see me as a student first . . . they see me as an athlete first'. This athlete's comments suggest that their coaches and others stakeholder groups of intercollegiate athletics expect these African American males to identify first and foremost with the athlete role. Furthermore, during the individual interview with another one of the athletes in this study, this athlete commented, 'we are here to play a sport, but we also go to school so they try to collaborate those two and try to say student-athlete; we want to be students first, but more, we're athletes first because times so demanding and what not'.

When asked during the individual interview what the term 'student-athlete' meant to him one of the participants responded,

I just think about student-athletes being through a lot of struggle like school wise, academic wise, and sport wise. And they have to overcome and become a different class. Like I think student-athletes in some aspects are um, I don't know about smarter, but like, have it a lot more together than uh, some regular college students.

He defended this statement by suggesting that athletes have to do a lot more than 'regular college students':

You got to study; you got practice; you are tired and the average college student is you know, two classes a day and maybe has a job. But after about, I don't know, depends on what time their classes are, but if they have classes in the morning then they are done for the rest of the day. They have time to do their homework. Their body is not tired.

This quote highlights not only the time demands, but also the physical demands placed on athletes in comparison to their non-athlete counterparts. Two other athletes in this study echoed the sentiments of their teammate in comparing athletes to non-athletes during their respective individual interviews:

They don't put in the time that we put in. I'll say that if most student-athletes had a scholarship and was just a student they would have a 3.0 and 4.0 'cause they know what it takes, you know what I'm saying, from all that time they do with athletics, you know what I'm saying. If we took maybe half the time for athletics and put that more into the school work then guys, the graduation rate would be higher, you know what I'm saying.

I feel like a lot of (student)-athletes, even if we didn't play sports, you know, we could be better than, I think anybody because sports is so time demanding. So mentally, you know, just taking you out. Where you know, regular students all they got to do is worry about books and you know learning what they need to learn. But we have to, we got all this time on our sport and then we have to come back to education, to learn, you know.

These athletes' contention that, if it were not for the time constraints and physical demands that are associated with big-time college sport participation, they could perform as well, if not better, than their non-athlete peers is an interesting finding. These athletes made the assumption that 'regular college students' do not have similar time and physical demands placed on them during their college experiences. This subtheme from the study should be explored by sport sociologists in future research.

The African American males in this study also discussed how the time demands placed on them during the football season diminished their opportunities to enjoy some of the other benefits that should be a major part of being college students. One of the participants described a typical day during the football season:

You wake up and it's already like 7 or 8 o'clock; then you got class from 9 to 1; then you put six hours straight to football – six to seven hours straight to football, because they want you to lift and run to get better; you want to watch film and study and learn the plays because you have to go out there and practice it.

These participants expressed how this rigorous schedule during the season makes it extremely difficult to do anything else. One of the participants stated, 'We put more time into football than we actually do in school'. Another one of these ath-

letes further explained, 'It's harder in season because you want to concentrate on your athletics and be successful in that so you put more time into that, and that kind of hurts your school a little bit because you want to push athletics'. And yet another participant shed light on the struggle that these African American males face in terms of choosing between athletics and academics and other areas of development during the season. In particular, he discussed the '20-hour rule' (i.e. programs are only supposed to conduct practices and football-related activities with their athletes for a maximum of 20 hours per week and no more than four hours per day during the season) that the NCAA has imposed on big-time college sport programs, and how this rule is never really taken seriously or enforced by the coaches:

They got that 20-hour rule and I remember so and so coach was like we got to sign a thing saying that we did 20-hours; but everybody was laughing . . . even though we were breaking the rule we were not going to say anything because we would not get on the field.

This quote above implies that it was a common practice for the coaching staff to violate the NCAA's 20-hour rule, and it was an unspoken rule that these athletes should ignore the NCAA's rule if they desired to 'get on the field' and earn playing time during the season. The African American males in this study felt that they were constantly being put into positions where they had to make a choice between devoting their time to football or other educational experiences. Similar to the research of Young and Sowa (1992), this research revealed that Black athletes did indeed spend more sport-related hours per week in season than academic time.

These athletes did acknowledge that the time demands are not as great during the off-season as they are during the season. However, they did insist that it is an expectation that they devote a great deal of time to football throughout the entire 12-month calendar year. As one participant expressed, 'You practice nine months for three months of games. Basically, that's what we are doing.' Even when these athletes are officially out of season (i.e. January–August) heavy demands are placed on their time, and this makes it difficult for them to engage in other developmentally useful activities outside of football. This very point was illustrated during the process of scheduling an individual interview with one of the participants. The researcher had a difficult time scheduling this interview because these research participants were on the verge of beginning spring football (i.e. a series of 14 to 15 practice sessions over roughly a three-week period in April that culminates into an intra-squad scrimmage). The interview with this particular participant actually occurred on the first official day of spring football, and this athlete arrived late for the scheduled interview time because he had just come from morning football meetings. He had been up since 7 am and it was evident that he was not well rested.

The current structure and practices of big-time college sport has made it more about business and less about the fun of the recreational games that these African American males grew up playing. The time demands and expectations of college football in the context in which this study was situated seemed to have diminished the inherent fun of the sport for these African American males. One of them affirmed this during his individual interview:

I'm spending all of this time over here at football you know, 'cause like I think like when you, when you come to college, I think part of the fun, part of the fun of football has been taken out of it because you spend all of this time to do it. But I think that's the only way, you know what I'm saying, that you're going to get better at it. But, but its, its still I think there's a limit on how much you're gonna, how, how much football you can take in.

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.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Nearly two decades ago the publishers of *Black Issues in Higher Education* aired a (via satellite) program entitled, *The Black Athlete: Winners or Losers in Academia?* (1990). During the panel discussion two of the panelist, Thomas Hearn (President of Wake Forest University) and Harry Edwards (activist and sociology professor), offered contradictory views on the state of the Black athlete in big-time college sport. Hearn embraced a functionalist perspective by defending the virtues of college sport participation and suggesting that the opportunities that young Black athletes are given to play college sport are of great benefit to the Black community; furthermore, he insisted that the sport participation experiences of Black athletes in the context of big-time college sport are 'healthy and wholesome'. Edwards embraced a conflict perspective in responding to Hearn's comments by boldly asserting that the great majority of Black athletes who are recruited out of the Black community are exploited and 'ripped off and dumped' once their playing eligibility has expired, and this is a problem with which the Black community must deal.

In some regards, both Hearn's and Edward's perspectives are reflective of the realities of the African American males who participated in this current study. On the one hand, these athletes revealed that there were indeed some psychological, social, and financial benefits associated with their recruitment to and participation in this big-time college sport program. On the other hand, they revealed that there were some structural constraints in place that limited and inhibited their ability to fully reap the benefits that are associated with being members of the student body. The findings from this preliminary study suggest that during the 2001–02 academic year in which these African American males competed in football at this university the psychosocial detriments were greater than the psychosocial benefits. That is, their football-related responsibilities counteracted their ability to take full advantage of the 'free education' that they supposedly are in a position to receive as college sport participants on an athletic scholarship.

Interestingly, however, despite this seemingly negative balance between the psychosocial benefits and detriments during their actual participation in college sport, the four young African American males in this study, it appears, have experienced 'successful' transitions to their lives and careers after their college playing days (see Table 1). The fact that one chose to be a graduate student and intern in athletics administration for the athletic department where he once was a football athlete, and the other three were talented and motivated enough to now be

playing professional football supports Pascarella and Smart's (1991) research findings that one of the positive outcomes of African American males' participation in college sport is a high occupational status early in their careers. Although this certainly is a noteworthy point, a longitudinal case study of this particular group of athletes would have allowed the researcher to not only garner a better understanding of the educational impact that sport participation had on these athletes during their playing days, but also, the impact it has had (or is having) on their lives post-college sport participation. This certainly is a limitation of the current study, and scholars desiring to study this issue in the future should take this into consideration.

In conclusion, this preliminary study with four African American football athletes revealed that – despite the racial discrimination that has existed in society and intercollegiate athletics, and the structural constraints imposed on these athletes during their playing days – they were still able to navigate their way through the many challenges encountered in big-time college sport and become what many observers might consider to be 'success stories'. But what about the countless other African American male athletes whose experiences might be different and whose transitions might not have been as 'successful' as the ones in this current study? This question is very important to ask, especially given that it could be strongly argued that the commercialization of college sport in the past decade or so may have changed the college sport landscape to such a degree that it warrants a more thorough, in-depth study into the lives of this important stakeholder group. Future research should build on the earlier work of scholars who studied the educational experiences and outcomes of African American athletes, and begin to investigate their perspectives, insights, and experiences pertaining to a myriad of issues (e.g. athlete compensation, impact of athlete academic support programs and services, athlete activism, 'white privilege' in athletic departments, recruitment of athletes from underprivileged backgrounds, career transition) that African American male athletes face in the complex world of big-time college sport today.

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