Making Sense of Amateurism: Juxtaposing NCAA Rhetoric and Black Male Athlete Realities

Collin D. Williams, Jr., University of Pennsylvania

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MAKING SENSE OF AMATEURISM: JUXTAPOSING NCAA RHETORIC AND BLACK MALE ATHLETE REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) passed several eligibility rules to address concerns about the academic and personal development of its participants (Gaston-Gayles, 2009). Despite garnering publicity, fostering school pride, providing entertainment, and generating billions of dollars in revenue for the Division I-affiliated institutions they attend (Sylwester, M., & Witosky, T. (2004). Athletic spending grows as academic funds dry up. USAToday.com, February 18. Retrieved from http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/2004-02-18-athletic-spending-cover_x.htm), student-athletes are prevented from receiving compensation beyond athletic scholarships by the NCAA’s amateurism principle. Consequently, the ethical question at the center of college sports is: how do participants benefit from the college experience relative to their non-sport peers? While the NCAA typically reports benefits, research that disaggregates the data by sport, division,
race, and sex reveals long-standing and pervasive inequities (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). Accordingly, this chapter juxtaposes NCAA’s rhetoric, principles, and espoused goals with the lived realities of the most populous demographic group within high revenue-generating collegiate sports, Black male student-athletes.

Keywords: Amateurism; student-athlete; exploitation; NCAA; intercollegiate athletics

INTRODUCTION

Former University of Connecticut’s Men’s Basketball Team student-athlete, Shabazz Napier exclaimed,

As student-athletes, we get utilized for what we do well. We’re definitely blessed to get a scholarship to our universities, but at the end of the day, that doesn’t cover everything. We do have hungry nights where we don’t have enough money to get food and sometimes, money is needed. You know, I don’t think you should stretch it out to hundreds of thousands of dollars for players, [because] a lot of the times, guys don’t know how to handle themselves with money, but I think Northwestern has an idea, and we’ll see where it goes. I just feel like a student-athlete, and sometimes, like I said, there’s hungry nights and I’m not able to eat and I still got to play up to my capabilities … When you see your jersey getting sold – it may not have your last name on it – but when you see your jersey getting sold and things like that, you feel like you want something in return. Sometimes it feels that way. I don’t feel student-athletes should get hundreds of thousands of dollars, but like I said, there are hungry nights that I go to bed and I’m starving. Something can change. Something should change. (Ganim, 2014, p. 1)

In 2010, CBS Sports and Turner Sports entered into a 14-year, $11 billion contract with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to broadcast one of the biggest annual sporting events in the United States (U.S.), the men’s Division I (DI) basketball tournament. Held each year beginning in March, “March Madness” features 68 elite DI college basketball teams competing in a single elimination tournament to determine a national champion. The last two rounds, the Final Four, are second in viewership only to the National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl. The 2014 Men’s Basketball Championship Game, for example, pitted the University of Connecticut (UConn) Huskies against the University of Kentucky Wildcats at the AT&T Center in Arlington, Texas, with approximately 100,000 people in attendance, 20 million watching live on television, and many more viewing the free stream online at NCAA.org. In
conjunction with the millions of Americans watching the game, the $2 million and $5 million dollar salaries of the participating coaches, Kevin Ollie and John Calipari, are evidence that the enterprise of college sport is not just wildly popular, but also incredibly lucrative, at least for some. Meanwhile, in the quote aforementioned, Shabazz Napier, the star guard who led the Huskies to a national championship and received the Most Outstanding Player of Tournament award, spoke out about nights where he went to bed hungry. In June 2014, just a month after he graduated from UConn, the Miami Heat picked Napier 24th overall in the first round of the NBA draft. Few players accomplish both graduation and playing professionally. Despite his successes, the sentiments expressed in the postgame interview indicate that even among those who procure their college degrees, actualize their aspirations as professional athletes, and/or do both, some of the participants in intercollegiate athletics perceive the exchange between the institutions (colleges, universities, the NCAA, and athletic conferences) and the individual (student-athlete) to be unfair. Interestingly enough, the Napier interview came just a couple days after a Northwestern University (NU) football player made a similar claim. This further signaled to America that something is awry in college sports (Ganim, 2014).

Kain Colter embodies the student-athlete ideal. As an undergraduate, the NU pre-medicine psychology major maintained a 3.1 grade point average (GPA) and spent the summer after his junior year analyzing portfolios as a private wealth management intern at Goldman Sachs (Nocera, 2014). While his long-term goals include attending medical school en route to becoming an orthopedic surgeon, the Wildcat’s football team’s two-time co-captain aspired to gain some professional experience in the NFL (Greenstein, 2013). In only 40 career games, the option quarterback (QB) and 2013 Wildcat Warrior Award recipient ranks among NU’s all-time leaders in several statistical categories: (a) second in career passing efficiency rating (139.0), (b) eighth in career rushing yards (2,180), (c) fifth in career rushing touchdowns (TDs) (28), and (d) first in career (2,180) and single-season (891) rushing yards by a QB. He was also two-time honorable mention All Big Ten Conference (B1G) while playing multiple positions. For much of his tenure at NU, Colter was a leader on the field. When a professor of his modern workplace course lamented that student-athletes don’t have the kinds of protections unions can negotiate, Kain would go on to demonstrate his leadership off the field (Nocera, 2014).

On Wednesday, March 26, 2014, the Chicago district of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) rattled college sports when its director, Peter Sung Ohr, ruled football players at Northwestern University (NU)
could vote to unionize because they were in fact university employees (Bennett, 2014). Through collaborative efforts with the College Athletes Players Association (CAPA) and their president Ramogi Huga, as well as the United Steelworkers union, Colter amassed an exhaustive description of the responsibilities and time-consuming demands of NU football players to convince Ohr that they were not primarily students (Munson, 2014).

Wildcat football players are expected to arrive on campus before their peers for training camp and spend 50–60 hours per week on football-related activities, following strict schedules that often include 16-hour days (Vint, 2014). The 40–50 hours per week devoted to football during the regular season are more than twice the NCAA’s mandated weekly limit of 20 hours. In the offseason, players are expected to spend 15–20 hours per week on football-related activities and 20–25 hours per week during spring practices (Vint, 2014). Hectic schedules aside, Northwestern players are: (a) bound by housing restrictions; (b) required to give the athletic department detailed information about their cars; (c) restricted and closely monitored on the internet and social media; (d) prohibited from profiting off of their likeness or image; and (e) required to sign a release that allows NU and the B1G to use their name, likeness, or image (Vint, 2014).

Still, what remained most salient to Ohr was the blatant prioritization of football over academics. While football is suppose to be the supplementary portion of their educational experience, NU student-athletes spend as much time working at their sport as a typical full-time employee spends at her or his job, drastically limiting their ability to perform in the classroom. Not only are players prohibited from taking classes that conflict with practice, but also scholarship athletes are not allowed to leave practice to make it to class. According to common-law rules, an employee is someone who, under contract, performs services in exchange for compensation, while their employer controls the services performed and how they are performed (Vint, 2014). The 24-page ruling explains (1) the letter of intent and scholarship offer is the employment contract, (2) the hours of practice and play that generate millions of dollars of revenue for the school are the employer’s benefits, (3) the coach’s rules are the control, and (4) the scholarship itself is the pay (Vint, 2014). Thus, Ohr found that scholarship student-athletes are employees, as they are recruited and brought to school primarily for their athletic abilities.

For several reasons, the analysis in this chapter is restricted to Black undergraduate men on revenue-generating NCAA DI men’s basketball and football teams at predominantly White institutions. First, football and
men’s basketball are responsible for the majority of revenues generated by intercollegiate athletics and have a unique relationship with their lucrative professional counterparts. Because neither the NBA nor the NFL has an expansive minor league to develop top talent, they are distinctively reliant on college players and vice versa. Second, Black males are the most populous demographic group within DI football and men’s basketball teams as well as in the NFL and the NBA. As research disaggregating the data reveals long-standing and pervasive racial inequities, intentional focus on Black male athletes is warranted (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). Accordingly, this chapter juxtaposes the NCAA’s rhetoric, principles, and espoused goals with their racially nuanced experiences as participants in intercollegiate athletics.

NCAA RHETORIC, PRINCIPLES AND ESPoused GOALS

Article 2 of the Manual lists 16 Principles for Conduct of Intercollegiate Athletics. The Principle of Amateurism, or Bylaw 2.9, states:

Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises. (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2013, p.4)

Students who participate in intercollegiate athletics do so solely for its intrinsic value and functional purpose, such as learning the value of hard work and working within a team setting. An institution cannot “award financial aid to a student-athlete that exceeds the cost of attendance that normally is incurred by students enrolled in a comparable program at the institution” and “is an amount calculated by an institutional financial aid office…” (NCAA, 2013, p. 192). Thus, the NCAA forbids student-athletes from receiving compensation for participation in college athletics beyond the cost of attending college. Nonetheless, participation in intercollegiate athletics has its benefits (NCAA, n.d.).

As a part of its Behind the Blue Disk series, a collection of questions and answers (Q&As) explaining their position on issues in college sport, the NCAA released a one page document called Student-Athlete Benefits that details both the immediate and lifelong benefits of participating in
intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, n.d.). Student-athletes are afforded additional pathways to a college education through athletic scholarships; receive academic support and tutoring services; graduate at rates higher than their non-sport peers; have access to elite training opportunities, a healthy diet, and $70 million in emergency resources through the NCAA’s Student Assistance Fund; are provided medical insurance through their schools; gain exposure and have new experiences as they travel for competition; and are prepared for life after college having learned transferable skills such as time management, leadership, and teamwork. In the rest of this chapter, I debunk the myth of the amateur ideal, synthesize the literature on the experiences of Black male student-athletes in big time college sports, and finally, offer recommendations to improve academic and professional outcomes.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMATEUR IDEAL

Prominent among British aristocracy, the amateur ideal was more of an exclusionary ruse than a noble principle (Veblen, 1953). Based on genetics alone, the aristocracy was believed to be qualitatively superior to the working classes (Moore, 1966). Similarly, leisure activities were believed to be qualitatively superior to professional ones (Veblen, 1953). Unconcerned with material gain, the gentlemen-aristocrat participated in sports merely for the love of the game. Though he tried to do everything well, investing too much time, effort, or energy into a single activity to individually acquire merit was considered plebeian (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Hence, the elite avoided professional drill and methodical instruction to distance themselves from even highly trained professionals. In The Theory of the Leisure Class, Veblen (1953) explains that abstention from labor, excess effort, and training was a status indicator derived from Ancient Greece. Meant only for those born into considerable privilege, amateur sports were reserved for the aristocracy (Veblen, 1953).

Though few American colonists were aristocrats in England, they adopted many of the landed gentry’s customs. By the onset of the Revolutionary War in 1776, 27 English sports had been adapted, becoming an intricate part of American life (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Recreationally motivated and organized and governed by students, campus athletics continued in the amateur spirit. Viewing it as an increasingly integral component of the curriculum, most Northeastern colleges erected
departments dedicated entirely to physical activity (Smith, 1988). As physical education became a discipline, competitive sports grew into an obsession (Suggs, 2006).

The circumstances surrounding the very first intercollegiate contest suggest college sports have been problematic and in need of greater regulation since at least 1852 (Smith, 2000). To promote a new resort hotel built along his powerful Boston, Concord, and Montreal railroad line, James Elkins offered to sponsor a lavish regatta between Harvard and Yale (Smith, 1991). Desperate to best its academic rival Yale in this eight-day boat race, Harvard hired and fielded a professional coxswain disguised as a student.

Out of these concerns came the shift from student controlled athletic teams to faculty oversight (Duderstadt, 2009). By the turn of the century, Harvard faculty had attempted to abolish football twice. In 1903, their president at the time, Charles Eliot, critiqued that the profitability of cheating and brutality was more troubling than the deaths and injuries it caused (Branch, 2011). After 21 deaths and 200 injuries in the 1904 season, newspapers and other editorials condemned the brutality and corruption in college football, bringing national attention to the issue (Moore, 1966).

To restore ethical conduct, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt invited select college football leaders to a White House conference in 1905. At this meeting, President Roosevelt, an avid outdoorsman, admirer of football, and strong believer in amateurism, declared no student who has ever been compensated in any way for their athletic ability is allowed to participate in intercollegiate athletics (Byers & Hammer, 1997). As death, injuries, and corruption continued, a larger national conference was convened by New York University’s (NYU) Chancellor Henry MacCracken to decide whether football could be reformed or if it would have to be eradicated altogether, resulting in the creation of a Rules Committee (Sperber, 2009). Later that year, when representatives from both conferences met to reform college football rules, the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (IAA) — renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1910 — was formed as a regulatory body to ensure both fairness and safety (Smith, 1988). Among its founding principles was the amateur ideal adopted from the British aristocracy.

In 1929, American College Athletics made national headlines and exposed 81 of 112 schools surveyed for recruiting athletes and paying them in a variety of prohibited ways, from disguised booster funds and illegal athletic scholarships called “subsidies” to no-show jobs (Savage, Bentley,
McGovern, & Smiley, 1929). The Carnegie Foundation’s report launched the debate, onto the national stage, of whether or not college athletes should be paid (Savage et al., 1929). The discussion would return to the forefront in 1939, when first-year athletes at the University of Pittsburgh went on strike because their upperclassmen teammates were getting paid more than them (Smith, 2000). By 1946, the NCAA had grown so embarrassed of its inability to alleviate exploitative recruitment practices, bribery, and rampant gambling scandals that it convened with conference officials from across the country to develop a 12-point code of ethics to restore sanity in college athletics (Sperber, 2009). Seeking to reach a compromise between the Southern schools in favor of full athletic scholarships and schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton that advocated for all students be treated the same, the “Sanity Code” prohibited schools from compensating athletes beyond free tuition and meals (Smith, 2000). Enacted in 1948, it set a momentous precedent. By authorizing the awarding of financial aid on the basis of athletic ability, the Sanity Code officially relinquished the NCAA’s commitment to the amateur ideal (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

The appointment of Walter Byers as the NCAA’s first Executive Director in 1951 was pivotal, as he was instrumental in setting several precedents that would strengthen the Association and its enforcement division (Smith, 2000). Perhaps his most salient win came in the legal battle *State Compensation Insurance Fund v. Industrial Commission* (1957) that led to the creation of the term “student-athlete.” When Ray Dennison, a Fort Lewis A&M Aggies football player, died of a head injury, his wife filed for workmen’s compensation death benefits (Sperber, 2009). In a rapid yet calculated response to “the dreaded notion that athletes could be identified as employees by state industrial commissions and the courts,” Byers “crafted the term student-athlete, and soon it was embedded in all NCAA rules and interpretations as a mandated substitute for words such as players and athletes” (Byers & Hammer, 1997, p. 69). Placing the word “student” in front of “athlete,” the NCAA tactically emphasized players’ statuses as students, prevented them from being identified as employees, and promoted the amateur ideal of academics over athletics. Since then, the ambiguous term has been an exclusive shield for the NCAA, serving as an effective legal defense (Branch, 2011). Another dangerous precedent was set when the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that neither Dennison nor his wife was eligible for benefits because the college was not in the football business. The next section presents evidence contradictory to this claim.
“PROTECTED FROM EXPLOITATION”

There were plenty of times where throughout the month that I didn’t have enough for food. Our stadium had something like 107,000 seats, 107,000 people buying a ticket to come watch us play. It’s tough just knowing that, being aware of that. We had just won, and I had a good game. You know, 100 yards … whatever. You go outside and there are hundreds of kids waiting for you in the tunnel. You’re signing autographs, taking pictures and then I walk back, and reality sets in. I go to my dorm room and I open my fridge, and there’s nothing in my fridge. Hold up man! What just happened? Why don’t I have anything to show for what I just did? There was a point where we had no food, no money, so I called my coach and I said, “Coach, we don’t have no food and we don’t have no money and I’m hungry. Either you give us some food or I’m gonna go do something stupid.” And he came down and brought like 50 tacos for like 4 or 5 of us, which is an NCAA violation … But then the next day, I walk up to the facility and I see my coach pull up in a brand new Lexus. Beautiful. There were a lot of guys on my team who sold drugs. That’s why you hear a lot of guys selling their rings. They’re just trying to eat, man … But you don’t say anything because, if you say anything, you’re stepping out of line, and that will hurt your chances of getting to that next level. It’s a brilliantly devised evil scheme to keep kids quiet. (Muscato, Finkel, Martin, & Paley, 2013, n.p.)

In the passage aforementioned, Arian Foster, an elite NFL running back describes his experience as an amateur athlete at the University of Tennessee, noting the a stark contrast in the rewards system for athletes and coaches. The immensely lucrative nature of DI men’s basketball and football has made it impossible to deny college sports have evolved into big business and resulted in drastic ethical and academic compromises (Clotfelter, 2011). Because we have mixed “dollar values with educational ones,” Hanford (1978) argued we are amidst “an educational dilemma concerning the place and mission of athletics within our intellectual estates” (p. 232). Inherent in this issue is the fact that the NCAA focuses more on payment of athletes and amateurism infractions than inferior education matters (Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982). Thus, Clotfelter (2011) posits the NCAA’s determination to not pay its amateur athletes is the main source of trouble in college sports. The harshest critiques liken these bylaws to apartheid (McCormick & McCormick, 2010) and slavery (Rhoden, 2007). While Hawkins (2013) titles his book on Black athletes on PWI campuses The New Plantation, Branch (2011) contends that the current college sports regime is more analogous to colonialism. “Two of the noble principles on which the NCAA justifies its existence — ‘amateurism’ and the ‘student-athlete’ — are cynical hoaxes, legalistic confections propagated by the universities so they can exploit the skills and fame of young athletes” (Branch, 2011, p. 3).
If exploitation is a moral construct that can be understood as an unfair exchange between two parties (Van Rheenen, 2012), the relationship between institutions of higher education (IHE) and players, in which IHEs use players’ athletic talents to garner publicity and generate revenue, is in fact exploitative.

And yet, defining college athletes as amateurs serves multiple purposes for educational institutions: (a) it maximizes profits for the schools; (b) as amateurs, these athletes are not considered employees and thus receive no workers’ compensation or other benefits; (c) viewing college athletes as non-employees means that the NCAA escapes scrutiny as an illegal business cartel; and (d) none of the money generated by amateur athletes for the NCAA and its member institutions is taxable because it is part of an educational program. (Van Rheenen, 2012, p. 6)

Thus, the NCAA and its’ member institutions use the ideal of amateurism as an exploitive ideology (Eitzen, 2001). In a rare, large-scale study ($n = 521$) that asked college athletes their feelings about their collegiate experiences, Van Rheenen (2011) found one quarter of student-athletes who participated in non-revenue-producing sports and nearly three quarters of student-athletes in revenue-producing sports felt exploited.

Enormous television rights packages price tags, athletic department spending, and coaching salaries are evidence of the growing popularity of big time college sports (Clotfelter, 2011). To broadcast just four of the five major Bowl Championship Series (BCS) games, ESPN contracted to pay the NCAA $500 million dollars in 2008 (Wilbon, 2011). In 2010, the expenditures of 228 athletic departments totaled $6.8 billion (Berkowitz & Upton, 2011). The following year, coaches of 58 of the 120 football bowl subdivision (FBS) schools and roughly half of the 68 teams that made the 2011 NCAA Men’s Basketball tournament earned salaries greater than $1 million dollars (O’Neil, 2011). Meanwhile, the average student-athlete at an FBS school lives below the poverty line, the average shortfall between a full scholarship and the cost of attendance is $3,285 (Huma & Staurowsky, 2011).

Understanding the racial disparities present between players and coaches makes the comparisons to apartheid, colonialism, and slavery clearer. Once segregated and exclusively White, the racial composition of big time intercollegiate basketball and football teams has grown increasingly Black, while the athletic directors and managers of these sports have remained overwhelmingly White (McCormick & McCormick, 2010, 2012). For example, the top 25 NCAA Division I basketball and football teams were 66% and 61% Black, respectively, while the administrators for those same teams were 91% and 96% White, respectively.
As Black men comprise the majority of these two sports, it is indisputable that the revenue generated from the consumption of college sports has been disproportionately made possible by their talent and labor. By only placing a salary cap on athletes, “amateurism reserves the vast financial rewards for the managers of college sports who are almost exclusively of European descent” (McCormick & McCormick, 2012, p. 18). Thus, despite generating over $12 billion dollars in revenue annually (Muscato et al., 2013), student-athletes remain uncompensated throughout their college tenures. Though many Black male student-athletes seek to play professionally (i.e., 76% in men’s basketball), the NFL and NBA draft fewer than 2% of student-athletes each year (Martin, 2009). Further, the average sports career lasts a mere three and a half years (Coakley, 2009) and within five years of retirement, 60% of former NBA and over 80% of former NFL players are broke or bankrupt (Corben, 2012). With such little opportunity existing for professional success, the NCAA also asserts its commitment to the academic success of its student-athletes.

“A QUALITY EDUCATION IS THE FIRST PRIORITY”

I’m from South Central Los Angeles. It’s about 10 or 15 minutes away from UCLA. It’s a rough place with a lot of single parent households, a lot of gangs and drugs going on, police sirens every night and helicopters. Growing up, it was making money and taking care of my mom. That was it. That’s all. Nobody was talking about a degree coming out of here. Nobody was going to college. Nobody was talking about going to college. So many of my friends didn’t make it were shot or dead or went to jail. I just … Something in me just said “be different.” Football definitely made me focus and helped me get out the neighborhood. (Muscato et al., 2013, n.p.)

Educational exploitation begins, Figler (1981) explains, when a college athlete “is recruited into the college setting without possessing the necessary abilities or background to have a reasonable chance of succeeding academically” (as cited in Leonard, 1986, p. 40). In the passage aforementioned, record-breaking University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) running back, Jonathan Franklin discusses his orientation to the academic side of school, revealing that it was always the afterthought. Though America’s preoccupation with sports is ubiquitous, it is especially salient in low-income and ethnic minority communities as the media provides few images of Black male success outside of athletics or entertainment (Benson, 2000). Black families, for example, are four times as likely as White families to
view athletic activity as a pathway to professional sports (Funk, 1991). Subsequently, while they may earn degrees playing basketball and football at the NCAA’s most competitive and lucrative level, DI Black male student-athletes have been socialized by their communities, families, friends, parents, and schools to value athletics over academics from a young age (Beamon & Bell, 2006). They continue to receive similar messages from the college and universities that endeavor to win games, gain publicity, and reap enormous financial benefits at the expense of their academic success.

Most often from low-income households with no collegiate experience and recruited from less prestigious high schools with inferior academic resources and preparation and lower GPAs (Sellers, 1992), Black male student-athletes arrive at school underprepared for the rigors of college work (Harrison, Comeaux, & Plecha, 2006). In The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values, Shulman and Bowen (2001) analyzed 40 years (1951–1990) of data from 30 highly selective postsecondary intuitions with rigid admissions policies. The findings, referred to as “hidden costs” of intercollegiate athletics, are more troubling as the pervasiveness of athletic pressures undermined the values of the most academically rigorous institutions. Even these schools were complicit in the underperformance and lower graduation rates of student-athletes, who were shown preferential treatment in admissions’ processes, recruited academically underprepared, clustered into certain majors, and funneled into disengaged athletic subcultures isolated from campus culture, Shulman and Bowen found. Bowen and Levin (2003) more closely examined the collegiate experiences of recruited athletes, walk-on athletes, and nonathletes in Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values. At the 33 schools that do not offer athletic scholarships, recruited athletes were as much as four times more likely to gain admission than a nonathlete applicant with similar academic credentials; considerably more likely than walk-on athletes and non-athletes to end up in the bottom third of their class; performing even worse than their GPAs and standardized test score predicted. These phenomena lend credence to the longstanding argument that in colleges and universities with major sports programs the erosion of academic ideals is endemic (Purdy et al., 1982).

Participation in athletics may also negatively influence student learning and personal development (Gaston-Gayles, 2009), academic performance (Harper, 2009), career maturity (Sowa & Gressard, 1983), and psychosocial and cognitive development (McBride & Reed, 1998). In fact, basketball and football are the only sports in which
participants scored lower in reading comprehension and mathematics than nonathletes and athletes in other sports (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995). Men in high revenue-producing sports (i.e., men’s basketball and football) are also not experiencing cognitive benefits to the extent other college men are (Gaston-Gayles, 2009). Further, data disaggregated by race and gender reveals a consistent and significant gap between the graduation rates of Black male student-athletes and those of their White counterparts (Harper et al., 2013).

Black Male Student-Athletes and Racial Inequities in NCAA Division I College Sports (Harper et al., 2013) make transparent the racial disparities within the NCAA’s six most competitive and lucrative conferences. This juxtaposes the graduation rates and representation of DI Black male student-athletes with those of student-athletes overall, undergraduate students overall, and Black undergraduate men overall. The racial disparities—the underrepresentation of Black men in the undergraduate student population at predominantly White colleges and universities, their overrepresentation on revenue-generating NCAA DI sports teams, and their comparatively lower six-year graduation rates—are deep and pervasive. Still, Harper et al. (2013) assert what is most surprising is that the American public has accepted these troubling disparities as normal and that college and university leaders, athletic conference commissioners, and the NCAA have not done more in response.

Exacerbating Black male student-athletes’ lack of preparation are their demanding athletic schedules (Harrison et al., 2006). In the American Institutes for Research (AIR) (1989) report, Black male student-athletes spent, on average, 28 hours on athletics and 23 hours on academics, while missing one or two classes per week (AIR, 1989). More recently, Sperber (2009) reported that student-athletes spend closer to forty hours on their sport, which often results in adequate rest becoming a priority over coursework. The inordinate amount of time and attention spent practicing, conditioning, traveling, and competing propagates a dominant and problematic message: the terms student and athlete seemingly are mutually exclusive for some collegians (Messer, 2006). Further, the perception of the playing field as an alternative classroom precipitates the attitude that it is okay to not excel academically as long as they are excelling athletically (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Thus, although many Black male student-athletes place high priority on completing their degree programs, education is not their primary goal; had these young men not been recruited for athletics, many would not attend college at all (Messer, 2006). Paradoxically, committing to the sport that got them
there often does not leave Black male student-athletes enough time to become integrated in other parts of campus life (Hyatt, 2003).

Key components of student success and persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1988), academic and social integration can be especially difficult for students of color, first-generation college students, and students from low-income backgrounds. Black male student-athletes are often representative of all three characteristics (AIR, 1989). Socially, they receive inordinate amounts of attention (Lapchick, 1989), particularly in high-profile programs. Being celebrities in the athletic world, these student-athletes are often outcasts in scholastic spaces, leaving them with feelings of deflated self-esteem, abandonment, and isolation (Funk, 1991). Conflicting ideologies about the purpose of their undergraduate experience can quickly lead to privileged athletic identities undermining marginalized academic ones (Messer, 2006). In most cases, the student-athlete’s academic identity diminishes as his athletic identity increases (Hyatt, 2003).

Racist experiences in college – from faculty and peer stereotyping to sociocultural isolation – are among the main explanatory variables accounting for differences in Black students’ academic performance as well as psychosocial adjustment (Fleming, 1984; Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985). For Black male student-athletes at PWIs, only 7% of the student body, 3% of the faculty, and less than 5% of the top athletic administrators and coaches are of the same race (Lapchick, Hoff, & Kaiser, 2010). Arguably even today, when they arrive on PWI campuses, the culture shock they experience is exacerbated by “the connotations and social reverberations of the traditional ‘dumb jock’ caricature,” the “implications of the myth of innate Black athletic superiority,” and “the more blatantly racist stereotype of the ‘dumb Negro’ condemned by racial heritage to intellectual inferiority” (Edwards, 1984, p. 8). Often times, the only refuge from academic circles in which professors and peers discriminate, stereotype and ignore them are the athletic courts and fields on which coaches prioritize athletic accomplishment over academic engagement and discourage participation in activities beyond sports (Martin, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2010). Then in these environments, there are limited opportunities for them to engage in mentorship, advisory, and peer relationships with others from similar racial backgrounds (Lapchick et al., 2010). Particularly devastating is the lack of people of color on athletic staffs, as student-athletes often find their campus homes among their teams and coaches (Messer, 2006). Though a means of support proven effective in aiding retention, the presence of Black coaches is scant at least in part due to the discrimination prevalent in hiring practices (Hill, 1997). As
stakeholders consistently squander opportunities to improve outcomes for Black male student-athletes, questions of exploitation within the academy have surfaced.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE**

We’re told we can’t promote ourselves, but then they promote us and use our names in jerseys and video games … and we’re not seeing any of that [revenue]. Also, when you see some graduation rates, you realize some [student-athletes] are not reaping the true benefit of their scholarship. It’s time for the players to have a voice. It’s time for us to step up and voice our needs. (Greenstein, 2013, p. 2)

The NCAA and amateurism supporters contend student-athletes benefit from college sports because they have the opportunity to reap lucrative professional rewards and receive a free education (Person & LeNoir, 1997; Van Rheenen, 2012). While the literature in this chapter refutes those claims for Black males on revenue-generating DI teams, former athletes, no longer muzzled by eligibility concerns, have begun to share their personal narratives. As with Shabazz Napier, Kain Colter’s four years within a big time athletic program allowed him to recognize some fundamental inconsistencies between the NCAA’s espoused goals and his and teammates’ lived realities. In the passage aforementioned, Colter’s main points of contention are athletes’ inability to profit off their own image and the ways athletic success consistently undermines academic success. Colter also finds flaw with the NCAA’s health policies. “I sacrificed my body for four years, and they sold my jersey. They should protect me” (Greenstein, 2014, p. 1). But they do not. Despite its formation as a regulatory body to ensure both fairness and safety, the NCAA “denies that it has a legal duty to protect student-athletes” (Fenno, 2013, p. 1). Thus, in spite of their individual successes, both Napier and Colter have gone public about their perceptions of the system’s failures.

The NLRB ruling is the first step in procuring college athletes the voice Colter is advocating for, as recognition as employees may ultimately allow them to collectively bargain for comprehensive reforms. The College Athletes Players Association (CAPA) website lists the following as their primary goals: (1) guaranteeing coverage for sports-related medical expenses; (2) minimizing risk of sports-related injury; (3) improving graduation rates for current and former players; (4) securing due process
rights; and (5) increasing athletic scholarships and allowing players to receive compensation for commercial sponsorships (College Athletes Players Association [CAPA], 2014, n.p.).

The proposed reforms do not seek to throw away the entire NCAA system, but rather make more equitable the exchange between individual and institution. As such, it may be in the best interest of the NCAA to heed the concerns of CAPA, if not to uphold its lofty ideals, then at least to maintain its existence. Meeting these demands can help alleviate feelings of exploitation, keep the current college sports system intact, and avoid large NCAA payouts that would cripple their revenue model. While investing in these students’ education is more cost effective for the NCAA, the lifelong benefits of an education for individuals and society make this protection more valuable than the fleeting financial compensation professional athletes routinely squander. Either way, the depth and pervasiveness of racial inequities — namely disparities in graduation rates and representation — NCAA DI college sports necessitate a multi-dimensional response from a variety of stakeholders. Educators, policymakers, conference officials, coaches, and families committed to the success of Black males beyond athletics should seriously consider the following recommendations for research, policy, and practice.

Recommendations for Education Research

The road to equity begins with transparency. Because their appraisals of NCAA policies are practically absent from the literature (Van Rheenen, 2012), there is much more to learn about how student-athletes generally, or Black men specifically, experience amateurism (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012). If in its simplest form, exploitation is an unfair exchange, investigating what former and current student-athletes perceive to be the costs and benefits of participation in big time college sport as well as how they juxtapose the NCAA’s lofty ideals with their own educational and professional expectations, experiences, and outcomes is critical.

To date, researchers have not been able to clearly delineate the multiple characteristics and cumulative processes — sport commitment, educational expectations, campus climate issues, and academic engagement practices — that influence academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). “These analytical gaps constrain the ability of student affairs leaders, particularly academic advisors and counselors, to explain, not simply to describe, how certain factors influence student-athletes’ academic success”
(Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, p. 235). Consequently, the support services and programs for student-athletes have failed to consistently and effectively enhance student-athletes’ learning and personal development and raise graduation rates (Comeaux and Harrison, 2007).

Researchers seeking to understand and mitigate Black male student-athletes’ perceptions of amateurism policy and feelings of exploitation must: employ a critical theoretical perspective on race (Donnor, 2005), investigate their experiences and perspectives (Benson, 2000; Bimper et al., 2012; Singer, 2005, 2009), and put their needs at the center, considering all aspects of the student and his development (Person & LeNoir, 1997). The NCAA should partner with its affiliated member institutions as well as athletic conferences to establish a commission on racial equity that routinely calls for and responds to disaggregated data reports (Harper et al., 2013).

**Recommendations for Education Policy**

The amateur ideal was never a truly noble principle. Once an exclusionary ruse, it has been adapted into an exploitative legal defense. Of the $12 billion generated by college sports each year, more than half, $6.6 billion, come from football and men’s basketball, the sports in which Black men are the majority. Race aside, all revenue athletes provide multiple and quantifiable services to their colleges and universities for which only a few are rewarded professionally. In fact, a joint study conducted by the National College Players Association (NCPA) and the Drexel University Department of Sport Management found that were football and basketball players at FBS schools allowed to access the fair market like their NFL and NBA counterparts, they would be worth (not counting individual commercial endorsement deals) approximately $137,357 and $289,031 during the 2011–2012 school year, respectively (Huma & Staurowsky, 2011, 2012). Thus, Huma and Staurowsky (2011) demand the U.S. Department of Justice and Congress pursue antitrust suits to deregulate the NCAA and force them to:

1. Allow universities to fully fund their athletes’ educational opportunities with scholarships that fully cover the full cost of attendance. The average $3,285 increase per player would be enough to free many from poverty and reduce their vulnerability to breaking NCAA rules to make ends meet.
2. Lift restrictions on all college athletes’ commercial opportunities by allowing the Olympic amateur model. The Olympics’ international definition of amateurism permits amateur athletes access to the commercial-free market. They are free to secure
endorsement deals, get paid for signing autographs, etc. Commercial opportunities—should also include receiving payment when entities use their rights of publicity.

3. Promote the adoption of legislation that will allow revenue-producing athletes to receive a portion of new revenues that can be placed in an educational lockbox, a trust fund to be accessed to assist in or upon the completion of their college degree. Many athletes in these sports need educational assistance beyond the duration of their eligibility in order to make up for the significant time demands associated with their sport. About 43% and 53% of football and men’s basketball players DO NOT graduate, while their athletic programs receive 100% of revenues produced by these athletes regardless of their programs’ federal graduation rates. (p. 5)

Recommendations for Education Practice

In *Education Pays 2013*, the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center investigated the importance and benefits of college readiness, access, and completion for both individuals and the larger U.S. population. Their findings reveal myriad financial, as well as personal and other lifelong, outcomes. Not only do individuals with higher levels of educational attainment earn more, but also they are more likely to be employed, receive health insurance and pension benefits from their employers, be very satisfied with their jobs, and live healthier lives as active citizens (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). When access to and success in higher education is broadened, higher levels of income provide increased tax revenues to national and local government entities and raise individuals’ spending and investment capacity. Both increased income levels and more access to steady, gainful employment translate to lower reliance on government assistance (Baum et al., 2013). Additionally, people with higher levels of education are also more likely to volunteer, vote in political elections, and show greater appreciation for diversity. Recognizing the incredible value of college, the discourse around the compensation of revenue athletes must be primarily situated in education.

Black male student-athletes and their families should prioritize academics over athletics throughout their college tenures, but especially during the recruitment process. Rather than viewing college as a pathway to a career in professional sports, they should recognize that it is exponentially more likely to be a productive pathway to employment and greater earning potential after. As such, student-athlete families should prepare and ask questions about opportunities for academic and occupational success before committing to an institution. Student-athletes should also be engaged in academically purposeful activities during their undergraduate years.
As four-year colleges and universities assert their commitment to providing a liberal arts education, graduating and developing students, serving their local areas, and preparing students for the real world, civic duty and service in their mission statements (Morphew & Hartley, 2006), customized approaches must be taken to actualize those outcomes for all students, including all student-athletes (Messer, 2006). College and university leaders should be particularly attentive to the ways in which Black male student-athletes experience their campuses as well as how they make sense of those experiences. This includes closely monitoring grades, encounters inside and outside of the classroom, course enrollment and major selection trends, participation in academically purposeful activities, and transitions from college to the professional world. Provosts, deans, and department chairs should better prepare faculty for interactions with diverse students groups, including student-athletes generally and Black males especially. Faculty must be made aware of Black male student-athletes’ confrontations with low expectations and stereotypes in classrooms and elsewhere on campus as well as the racist and sexist assumptions they may possess about this population.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter synthesized research on the experiences of Black male student-athletes to juxtapose their realities with NCAA rhetoric to gain insight into why some of them feel exploited as participants in high-profile intercollegiate athletics. While commercialism has been the subject of much college sport literature, authors have largely treated it as an abstract force from which intercollegiate sport stakeholders have refuge. “There remains a considerable gap in the historical record when it comes to the evolution of ‘NCAA-sponsored’ professionalism in the form of athletically related financial aid” (p. 8) purport Sack and Staurowsky (1992) because “almost no attention has been given to the process by which the NCAA itself has incorporated professionalism into its constitution and bylaws” (p. 8). In College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA Amateur Myth (1999), Sack and Staurowsky explain that amateurism rhetoric obscures NCAA-sanctioned payments, downplays the institution’s role in professionalizing college sport, and sways the public into perceiving the Association as a defender of this erroneous ideal. In reality, Black male student-athletes are exploited when they are regarded as amateurs not
permitted to benefit from their likeness or image or profit beyond athletic scholarships that do not cover the full cost of college attendance; witness a bevy of others reap myriad benefits made possible by their efforts on the court or field; are recruited to colleges despite a lack of academic preparation; are overrepresented on a few selected sports teams (i.e., basketball, football, track and field), while Black men are grossly underrepresented elsewhere on campus; and far too many are not equipped to graduate or actualize the lifelong benefits of a quality education at the same rates as their non-sport peers; are not developed professionally and struggle to transition out of sports into the occupational sector; and suffer from psychological issues and other sport-related injuries for which they are not insured. Thus, amateurism not only undermines educational integrity, but the “NCAA-fabricated mythology” also exploits athletes financially (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

REFERENCES


