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Examining Productive Conceptions of Masculinities: Lessons Learned from Academically Driven African American Male Student-Athletes

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Conceptions of masculinities among African American male student athletes are considered in this article. Grounded in the social constructivist perspective and guided by the phenomenological qualitative research tradition, individual interviews were conducted with 27 academically driven African American male student-athletes attending four Division I universities. Findings suggest that the participants embrace a wide range of productive gender-related attitudes and behaviors that are uncommon among male college student-athletes. Implications and recommendations are offered for coaches and university administrators charged with working with African American male student-athletes.

Keywords: masculinities, college men's behavior, African American men, student-athletes, college sports

Published research on gender and male student-athletes competing at U.S. institutions of higher education is one-dimensional in that it focuses on narrow sets of problems and issues. Alcohol abuse (Koss & Gains, 1993), academic performance and outcomes (Carey, 2000; Hyatt, 2003; Pascrella, Truckenmiller, Nora, Terenzini, Edison, & Hagedorn, 2005; Pearson & LeNoir, 1997), violence and sexual assault (Crosset, 2000; Messner & Stevens, 2002), homophobia (Messner, 2001), and self-concept (Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Yates, 2001; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001) are the primary areas that have commanded much of the recent scholarly attention on male student-athletes. There are multiple examples of these approaches of studying student-athletes. For example, Messner (2001) examined student-athletes' interac-

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tions in locker rooms and argued that sexual joking and exaggerated story telling are commonly used strategies employed by male student-athletes to confirm their heterosexual statuses among teammates while also coping with fear of commitment and a lack of confidence in their intimate relationships. Crossett (2000) examined the perpetration of sexual assault among male student-athletes and found that, in 1995, male athletes constituted 3.7 percent of the student population but were responsible for 19 percent of sexual assaults reported to campus judicial affairs offices. Finally, in 1998, the Trauma Foundation conducted a comprehensive study of alcohol abuse among student-athletes and revealed that approximately 61 percent of the male respondents reported binge drinking on a regular basis.

While such inquiry is warranted and continues to be important, other dimensions of male student-athletes' gender identities are not adequately explored. Thus, our purpose in this article is to identify and discuss productive conceptions of masculinity situated in collegiate athletic contexts. We define productive masculine conceptions as feelings, beliefs, and interpretations about masculinities that encourage men to engage in and express positive gender-related behaviors and attitudes. In college contexts, productive masculine conceptions have been linked to increased positive student outcomes for African American men such as leadership, campus involvement, academic success, and civic engagement (Harper, 2004, 2005). The productive masculine conceptions presented herein were observed among African American male student-athletes at Division I universities, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) highest level of intercollegiate athletic competition.

We believe our work is essential for several reasons. First, previous research on male student-athletes focuses almost exclusively on destructive behaviors that inadvertently portray male student-athletes as a monolithic group who endorse a common set of problematic attitudes and beliefs. In addition, much of the previous research is not disaggregated by race or ethnicity. As a result, little is known about specific examples of positive behaviors among subpopulations of male student-athletes including African American men who are frequently characterized as violent, aggressive, uneducated, and disengaged. Images that counter these prevalent negative portrayals of African American male student-athletes are needed. Last, university administrations, within and beyond athletic departments, continually offer reactionary programming instead of proactive developmental interventions for male student-athletes. More often than not, these programs are based on deficit perspectives of male student-athletes, which dominate published research and public discourses regarding this population. Consequently, institutional efforts aimed at supporting student-athletes are, by default, constructed around negative aspects of these students' behaviors.

The theoretical framework of the study is presented in the section that follows. Afterward, we present the methods and the research findings. We conclude, in the discussion, with implications for working with African American male student-athletes.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in theoretical models and perspectives pertaining to the social construction of masculinities and expressions of masculinities among

African American males. An overview of these perspectives is presented in the sections that follow.

The Social Construction of Masculinities

This examination of masculinities is situated within the social constructivist perspective. Scholars who advocate this perspective contend that hegemonically masculine behaviors and attitudes (e.g., violence, aggressiveness, and physicality) are not biologically determined. Instead, they are learned behaviors that are produced in social institutions and reinforced through human interactions (Connell, 1993; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005; Kimmel & Messner, 2004; Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1981; Pollack, 2000). Boys are taught at an early age to be physical, aggressive, homophobic, unemotional, and athletic (Whitson, 1990). Moreover, literature regarding boys' early schooling experiences highlights the role of masculinity in their underachievement by consistently stating that the development of a masculine identity negatively affects boys' disposition toward school. Given the context and focus of the present study, we highlight school settings and sports culture as two social institutions in which traditional and stereotypical masculinities are constructed and reinforced.

School settings. Researchers that draw attention to the incongruence between masculine identity and academic achievement imply that boys perceive learning as a feminine endeavor. For instance, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) noted that "if commitment to schoolwork is characteristic of girls, and if to be masculine requires being different from girls, then boys' commitment to schoolwork becomes a challenge to their masculinity" (p. 140). Consistent with Gilbert and Gilbert's claim, Swain (2005) asserted that academic achievement and masculinity are "fundamentally incompatible." With some exceptions, boys do not openly embrace the tasks associated with academic achievement.

Secondary schooling, specifically grades 6-12, is identified as an exceptionally challenging period for boys to achieve academic success and maintain a masculine status (Alder, Kless, & Alder, 1992; Davis, 2003; Swain, 2005). This is the period where the role of masculine identity is intensified and situated within the contexts of sports and work (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002). For example, scholars report prevalent male underachievement at the secondary grade levels due to the estimated 48 percent high school completion rate for male students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Peer promotion of sports and athleticism in school contexts contributes heavily to boys' unsatisfactory academic performance in secondary school. These activities play significant roles in shaping their masculine identities (Harper, 2004).

Scholars have also considered the social construction of masculinities in postsecondary school settings. Capraro (2000) considered the nexus between drinking and the construction of masculinity among college men. He argued the heavy drinking that characterizes collegiate male culture is a strategy for coping with the "paradox of masculinity." He noted, "My interpretation of a variety of evidence suggests that men may be drinking not only to enact male privilege but also to help them

negotiate the emotional hazards of being a man in the contemporary American college" (p. 307). The privilege that comes with being a male is a source of power for men. Yet the physical and emotional vulnerabilities that result from alcohol-induced conformity to traditional masculine expression render men powerless and often lead to numerous gender-related conflicts and destructive behaviors that are common among college men.

Harper, Harris, and Mmeje (2005) proposed a theoretical model to explain why college men are disproportionately sanctioned for nonacademic campus judicial offenses. In doing so, the authors highlighted the interactions between socially constructed masculinities and five additional variables as the underlying drivers of men's misbehavior, aggression, violence, and rule-breaking: pre-college socialization, male gender role conflict, the development of competence and self-efficacy, context-bound gendered social norms, and environmental ethos and corresponding behaviors. Ludeman (2004) also explored the relationship between socially constructed masculinities and misconduct among college men. He contended that violence, alcohol abuse, and other sanctioned behaviors are the consequences of "restricted emotionality" among male students.

While the studies by Capraro (2000), Harper et al. (2005), and Ludeman (2004) underscored negative male attitudes and behaviors, Harper's (2004) examination of conceptions of masculinities among high-achieving African American male college students is one of few studies that reveals productive masculine conceptions among college men. "High-achieving" denoted individuals who earned "cumulative grade point averages above 3.0 [and] established lengthy records of leadership and involvement in multiple campus organizations" (p. 95). Among the key findings was that the participants had developed alternative conceptions of masculinity that differed significantly from those of same-race uninvolved male peers who conformed to traditional and hegemonic masculine concepts. The active pursuit of dating opportunities, competition in male-dominated activities, and the accumulation and display of material possessions were among the conceptions reported by the participants of their uninvolved male peers. On the contrary, the high-achievers challenged these traditional expressions by exhibiting masculinity through their academic achievement, leadership, and involvement in community advancement. Although these activities are not traditionally viewed as masculine, the participants reported that their uninvolved peers never called their sexual orientation into question. Instead, their efforts were applauded and supported by other African American male students. As noted by Harper (2004):

> Although their definitions of masculinity were relatively unconventional and the activities in which they were most engaged were not part of the traditional African American male portfolio of manliness, the participants indicated that their masculinities were never questioned or challenged by their African American male peers or anyone else. The high-achievers received an incredible amount of support and praise from other African American male students on their campuses, including the uninvolved. (p. 100)

Harper's findings challenge other published reports (e.g., Cuyjet, 1997; Fries-Britt, 1997) suggestive that men who embrace intellectual pursuits and choose not to conform to traditional standards of masculinity are not accepted or respected by their male peers.

Sports cultures. The social construction of masculinity through sports is a well-documented phenomenon. Sports culture factors heavily into socially constructed masculinity because many boys participate in organized athletic activities throughout their adolescent years. This trend typically transcends race, ethnicity, and other stable demographic categories including socioeconomic status. For young men, participation in sports plays a central role in reinforcing societal expectations of male behavior (Messner & Sobo, 1990; Morrison & Eardley, 1985). Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) recognized the tension that exists between athletic and academic interests among boys. They suggested that involvement in sports increases the likelihood that young men will be welcomed into male peer groups. On the contrary, boys who choose to pursue academic interests and are not engaged in sports find it difficult to gain respect and acceptance from their male peers.

> Sports figure strongly into what it means to be cool and are crucial to [boys'] need to be a part of the social group. Unfortunately, this image of the cool sociable sportsman is constantly set up against the picture of the boy whose interest might be to read a book, a practice mostly associated with girls. In this respect, sport is one of a number of masculine pursuits which run counter to a commitment to school learning. (p. 63)

Through their participation in sports, boys learn to internalize traditional male language and become socialized with hegemonic masculine attitudes such as homophobia and sexism (Connell, 1995; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Fine, 1987; Oriard, 1984; Whitson, 1990). Accordingly, Griffin (1998) stated that participation in sports reinforces hegemonic masculinity among men by (1) defining and reinforcing traditional conceptions of masculinity, (2) providing contexts for male bonding and intimacy, (3) reinforcing male privilege and female subordination, (4) establishing status among males, and (5) reinforcing heterosexuality. The inherently aggressive masculinity reinforced through sports can promote dysfunctional values among men such as disrespect for women and reliance on physicality and violence to resolve differences (Connell, 1995; Estler & Nelson, 2005).

Expressions of Masculinities among African American Males

Masculinity is often expressed by men through the mainstream and traditional ideals of accumulating wealth and material possessions and by gaining social power and positions of influence (Oliver, 1989). Yet given the prevalence of racism and social alienation directed at men of color in the United States, African American men often lack the power and resources necessary to express masculinity in this regard. Instead, they often typically rely on alternative modes of masculine expres-

sion (Harris, 1995). For example, Oliver (1989) described two primary orientations through which masculinities are expressed by African American men—the "tough guy" and the "player of women." Tough guys are men who intimidate and engender fear in others. Players are young men who have established reputations for engaging in sexual relations with multiple women.

"Cool pose" is proposed by Majors and Billson (1992) to describe modes of masculine expression that have been popularized by African American men. Cool pose is expressed through unique styles of behavior such as speaking, gesturing, dressing, hair styling, walking, standing, and shaking hands (Majors, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992). One example offered by Majors and Billson is the "Black male stance." This stance involves lowering a shoulder, tilting one's head toward the lowered shoulder, and placing a hand in a pants pocket, under the belt, or cupped loosely over one's genitals (Majors & Billson, 1992). These ritualized acts are directed at the dominant culture and other African American men in order to manifest pride, strength, and control (Majors, 2001). "Being cool is an ego booster for Black males comparable to the kind White males more easily find through attending good schools, landing prestigious jobs, and bringing home decent wages" (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 5).

Researchers (e.g., Boyd, 2003; Majors, 2001; Messner, 1992) have located cool pose in athletic contexts and suggested that sports are effective mediums for African American masculine expression. Many playground, high school, college, and professional athletes, for example, embody the expressive styles of cool pose (Majors, 2001). Social resistance underscores the creative expressions of African American athletes, as noted in the following claim by Majors (2001):

> Faced with a lack of resources, facilities, services, goods, information, and jobs, Black males who live in poor Black communities have taken a previously White-dominated activity [sports] and constructed it as an arena in which they find accessible recreation, entertainment, stimulation, and opportunities for self-expression and creativity. (p. 213)

Messner (1992) also associated expressions of masculinity among African American male athletes with cool pose. In a study of former athletes, he found that African Americans' displays of aggression during competition served to garner respect and gain a mental edge over their opponents. As is the case with some mainstream expressions of masculinity, cool pose has been associated with educational underachievement, substance abuse, criminal activity, and other social problems that plague African American communities (Majors & Billson, 1992).

Given the literature and the theoretical perspectives on the social construction of masculinities, African American masculine expressions, and the limited empirical attention devoted to academically driven African American male student-athletes, the following research questions were considered in this study: (1) What (if any) productive conceptions of masculinity are held by academically driven African American male student-athletes, and (2) what roles do these productive conceptions play in the postsecondary experiences and outcomes of these students?

<div align="center">Methods</div>

This article is based on a larger qualitative study in which the postsecondary experiences of academically driven African American male student-athletes were examined. Grounded in the phenomenological research tradition, the focus of the study was to describe what the participants had experienced, how they experienced it, and the meanings they made of their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The student-athletes were asked questions about their self-images, identities, academic histories, and out-of-class experiences. As a result, insights into the participants' conceptions of masculinity and their behavioral manifestations were captured in their responses.

Sites

The study was conducted at four highly selective, Division I research universities. These institutions, consisting of two public and two private universities, were similar in size, academic rigor, geographic proximity, and athletic conference. Collectively, the universities enrolled approximately 72,000 undergraduates, of which 3,500 were African Americans. In addition, the enrollment of African American students ranged from 3.7 percent to 8.8 percent at the selected institutions. Nearly 31 percent of the African American students enrolled at these institutions were men. The mean SAT scores for the four institutions ranged from 1310 to 1460. The six-year graduation rate for African American undergraduates enrolled at the four institutions ranged from 70 percent to 87.8 percent.

Sample

To recruit participants, athletic administrators and athletic academic counselors at all four universities were asked to identify African American male student-athletes who met the following criteria: cumulative grade point average at or above 2.8 on a 4.0 scale; participation in varsity football, men's basketball, track and field, or soccer; and being on schedule to graduate in five years or less. The resulting sample yielded 27 students who met the criteria for participation and were available for an interview during the data-collection phase of the study.

Student demographics. Each participant had completed at least three full academic terms at the time of data collection. The sample included five sophomores, six juniors, and 16 seniors representing a wide range of academic majors. Twenty-six of the participants were of traditional college age, 18 to 24, and were single (not married) with no dependents. One participant was married and had one child.

Academic achievement. The mean undergraduate grade point average (GPA) for the sample was 3.07, with averages ranging from 2.82 to 3.84. Five participants were named to the conference's All-Academic Team, seven earned Honorable Mention All-Conference, and two were second-team All-Americans in Track and Field. Additionally, 15 participants were starters on their teams, and 22 were team cap-

<div align="center">365</div>

tains, which allowed them to be involved in many athletic department and campus decision-making endeavors as representatives of their teams and their institutions' community of student-athletes.

Aspirations. Nearly all the participants expressed an interest in competing professionally in their respective sports after college. Upon concluding their professional athletic careers, the participants expressed ambitious educational and career goals. Specifically, seven of the participants expressed intent to earn doctoral degrees (Ph.D., J.D., or M.D.), and four of the student-athletes planned to earn MBAs. One participant indicated that he planned to travel abroad and, afterward, pursue a career in social work.

Data-Collection Procedures

Each student-athlete participated in a one-hour, face-to-face interview and one follow-up interview by telephone. The face-to-face interviews were conducted on the participants' campuses. A semi-structured interview approach was used, which allowed the dialogue to be unrestrictive, conversational, and exploratory (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The goal was to allow the participants to be comfortable expressing their gender identities and sharing sensitive information about their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study followed the phenomenological techniques proposed by Moustakas (1994). First, each transcript was reviewed in order to identify statements that described how the participants experienced the phenomenon of being an academically driven African American male student-athlete attending a Division I institution. Upon identifying these statements, the researcher's thoughts and postulations were bracketed. Afterwards, significant expressions and thoughts were noted in the margins with each statement treated as having equal worth. Key phrases were organized and sorted using NVivo® (a qualitative data management software program). This process resulted in the identification of 23 invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994), subthemes that were reflective of at least 22 of the participants' experiences.

After the invariant constituents were identified, *textural descriptions* (what the academically driven student-athletes experienced) and *structural descriptions* (how the participants had experienced the phenomenon) were written for each of the 27 participants. A combination of 27 textural and structural descriptions, coupled with the 23 invariant constituents, produced thematic categories that captured the essence of the participants' shared experiences.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1986) proposed four measures for assessing the trustworthiness of a given study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was obtained in this study through a seven-member informant team con-

sisting of one to four participants from each institution. The informant team provided feedback on the degree to which the interpretations and conclusions of their experiences were accurately represented in the research findings. Dependability and confirmability were obtained through a five-member peer debriefing team. Each member of the peer debriefing team was familiar with the fundamental issues concerning the postsecondary experiences of African American students in general and African American male student-athletes in particular. The debriefing team consisted of two senior associate athletic directors, two doctoral students, and one faculty member with expertise in qualitative research methods. Each member of the debriefing team was given copies of the full interview transcripts and the initial interpretations of the research findings.

The focus of the feedback offered by the debriefing team is summarized as follows: (1) overall credibility, (2) major concerns or issues, and (3) factual or interpretative errors. Finally, the study met the measure of transferability given that it was conducted at four diverse and comprehensive research institutions. Thus, it was concluded that the findings of this study would likely transfer to other large, highly selective, public and private institutions with Division I athletic programs.

Limitations

Despite extensive efforts to ensure trustworthiness, several methodological limitations are evident. First, the clear similarities of the sites presented a limited view of the experiences of undergraduate academically driven African American male student-athletes. Students with similar profiles attending other institutional types (e.g., historically Black colleges and universities, Ivy League universities, liberal arts colleges, and institutions participating at the Division II and III levels) would likely report experiences that differed from those of the 27 participants in the present study. The study is also limited by its methods. Different methodological approaches may have yielded other significant findings. For example, a grounded theory or case study approach would have required different interview protocol, data collection, and data analysis procedures and may have resulted in a different set of findings.

Findings

The findings of the study provide a rich and meaningful view of the productive conceptions of masculinity that were held by the 27 participants in this study. Although the participants attended four different institutions, their perspectives and experiences were similar. It was clear that the men in this study understood their purpose and place in society, thus providing insightful assertions of accountability, endurance, and vision. The participants were truly unique in the way they perceived and expressed masculinity.

These participants associated masculinity with having strong, upstanding, and moral character. Moreover, they equated masculinity with having integrity and the courage "to do what is right." The student-athletes' perspectives regarding masculinity were undoubtedly distinctive. Unlike many of their teammates who defined masculinity by material possessions and athletic status, the participants considered

masculinity as a call for accountability, making unpopular decisions, and setting positive examples for others to follow. In response to a query about the assumptions that characterized their masculine conceptions, two participants offered the following reflections:

> Masculinity, to me, is knowing that as a man you have to make decisions that are going to be different from everybody else and being comfortable with who you are as man, regardless of what other people say. And masculine men can do things like go get their nails done, because they are comfortable with who they are. They understand that there are more important things out there than to be portrayed as this big tough guy. I think a masculine guy is somebody who is responsible, presents himself well, and is just not caught up into the whole type deal.

> It's that presence and strength of character that's what makes you a man. It's being an individual and standing for something. What do you stand for? Standing for something that's respectable and demanding respect by who you are, not by what you say, like "You better give me respect" or "Respect me because I'm bigger than you," but you respect me because of my character, not because I ask you to, but because my character demands respect. That's being a man, chivalry, all that stuff, being polite, opening doors for people, smiling, shaking hands, all that stuff. It has an effect on people when a man does it, when a strong man does it. That's being a man. Going out having sex, getting girls pregnant, that's not being a man.

Having "character" and being steadfast in "doing what's right" were also offered by the participants as core components of masculinity. "I wasn't raised to be a follower. A lot of Black men around here don't have a 'backbone,' and that causes them to make poor decisions. I am strong in what I believe is right regardless of the situation," commented a student-athlete. A track-and-field participant maintained, "I feel that I am what all African American men should be: I display strength through my character, I'm determined to succeed, I help support my family, and I don't 'punk out' when times get hard." This same student-athlete expounded on having to return home several times throughout the week to care for his younger siblings: "I don't have time to think about being tired. This is bigger than me. I feel like I have to show my brothers and sisters that I'm there for them. Besides, I'm the only example they have." The student's responses suggest that his character was strengthened by his motivation to support his family despite his demanding schedule.

According to the participants, having character also meant not being defined by their more publicized reputations as athletes. Instead, the student-athletes believed it was important to have laudable identities beyond the "jerseys on their backs." They viewed character as a perpetual search for cultivation, culture, and growth. Attending theater, distinguished lectures, book signings, and musicals are examples of the

types of activities in which the participants regularly engaged. "Just because I had two interceptions on Saturday doesn't mean that's all that I can do; I have more layers to me than most people know about," expressed one participant. Though they were appreciative of fan and peer support, the participants also wanted to be praised for their academic achievements. A participant commented, "We're praised by students, the media, and our coaches for getting sacks and scoring touchdowns, but we are never commended for earning A's on exams. I think sometimes people just put us in a box."

Serving as a resource and a source of support for others was a shared value among the participants. For example, a student-athlete discussed how he shares football tips with some of the young players from the high school he attended.

> When I go back to watch my best friend's little brother play, then I'll tell him stuff after the game. I'll give him my [receivers'] gloves, and then his teammates will be like "how did I do," and I'll be like, "You know, I watched you and you did such-and-such," and I will tell them about their routes and different things. They love it.… And it's from a source that they really look up to and they're going to take that, and they're going to cherish it, and it's knowledge that I worked to learn, and you could use it, so why not take it?

The incongruence between academic achievement and developing a masculine identity, according to the research (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998), means that being a good student does not equate with being a man. Male students, for example, are more likely to devalue education in favor of stereotypically masculine pursuits such as displaying physical prowess, excelling at sports, pursuing sexual relationships with women, playing video games, and accumulating material possessions (Harper, 2004). On the contrary, the participants in this study reported placing high value on academic success. Several participants indicated that, despite being Division I athletes, their academic achievement was more important than their success in their respective sports. To illustrate this, when asked which role was more important to him, being a student or student-athlete, a participant stated:

> I would say that my identity as a student has to be the most important because, of course, we play collegiate sports, but, at the same time, that only gets you so far. You just see so many times where people either go to the NBA or NFL, and then they may not get their degrees. And then, once that is over with, then they can use their name after that, but eventually that is going to die out unless you are a big star. But, just looking at the normal person who doesn't go to college or doesn't get their degree, it's like, how much can you actually do with that? How much can you actually do with a high school diploma? Some people get lucky, of course—you see those stories on TV—but that is not really defining most of the people who don't get their degrees.

In line with the preceding claim, another student-athlete commented:

> If I had the chance to be an investment banker or a Heisman Tro-
> phy winner, I would choose being an investment banker any day
> of the week. How many Black kids are able to see other Black
> investment bankers in their communities? How many Black
> investment bankers do you see on television? I want to be the
> example for young Black kids. I want to show them that they
> don't have to be the next Kobe [Bryant] or [Michael] Jordan to
> make it in this world. That's what society is preaching to them.

Several of the participants discussed how their approach to their academic work was in sharp contrast to some of their teammates' approaches. One student described some of his teammates as being lost in a "system" of underachievement and despair. The participants shared a few of their reflections regarding the attitudes of their teammates.

> A large majority of my teammates say, "We're here to play foot-
> ball; we won't get additional respect by being nerds in the class-
> room." A lot of them think that it's cool not to go to class. If I tell
> them that I went to my accounting class, they often say, "You're
> an idiot…. Class is terrible…. You're a fool…. You need to come
> to the house and hang out with us."

> Basically, the guys who flunk out of school and have 1.5 GPAs
> are just cowards. They chase women all day, but they can't put
> forth any effort in school. If they don't change some of their ways,
> a lot of these dudes will end up on the streets. They just haven't
> figured it out yet.

The attitudes about women expressed by the participants also reflected their productive masculine conceptions. Three student-athletes in the sample were involved in exclusive dating relationships during the time of data collection. These participants spoke at length about having respect for their girlfriends and valuing their time together. Moreover, even those who were not currently involved in an exclusive relationship commented on the standards and expectations they held of the women they dated. "Intelligence," being "God-fearing," and "being in good physical shape" were all noted as fundamental requisites. Others reported on the importance of having their mothers "approve of" their girlfriends. "I think about when my mom meets this person, what's my mom going to think," noted one participant. Simply put, these men were not interested in dating women who were not committed to self-enhancement and displaying exceptional character. A participant submitted, "I value the same things in a woman that I value about myself. I want her to be successful in the classroom, have pride in herself, and always try to be someone in life. Anything less, I can't accept." Another participant described himself as a "hopeless romantic." But when asked about his teammates' dating practices, he offered the following:

> Nobody's doing it [dating exclusively]. Hardly anybody's doing it. I mean, their [his teammates'] whole concept of relationships and manhood, it's ridiculous. It's the concept. You know, "I got my wifey [main girl], you're my number one, but when I'm not with her, I'm basically single. I'm doing what single sleazy people do, and when I'm with wifey, then I pull it back a bit."

When asked about the individuals who have had the most positive effects on their lives and self-identities, the participants cited their parents and adult males. Fathers, older brothers, and high school coaches were referenced most often in this regard. For example, when asked about his male role models, one student-athlete asserted, "My father is a man of outstanding character, and we were always in church, so I was always surrounded by, like, positive male role-models, and I just modeled myself after them." In the following quotation, one participant described his home as one of mutual respect in which violence between him and his older sibling was not a household norm.

> Ours was a house of respect, so we always respected our parents. Me and my brother, we never fought, like physically fought. We got mad at each other, though, but we never fought and stuff like that. I don't know . . . so you learn to be polite, be courteous, listen to adults, respect those in charge of you, different things like that. Hold on to your opinions, like, don't let go of that, and you learn the difference between right and wrong, and you learn to stick up for what's right.

It is likely that the participants' parents and other adult male role models were the individuals most responsible for the productive masculine conceptions they expressed.

Reportedly, academically driven African American male student-athletes conceptualize and express their gender identities in ways that are uncommon among male college student-athletes. They are guided by the intrinsic values of character, respect, and integrity, which are at the forefront of their masculine conceptions. In addition, "being a man" for these students means achieving academic success and positively influencing their teammates and other young men with whom they interact. They engage in meaningful dating relationships that are grounded in trust and respect. Last, academically driven African American male student-athletes are not motivated by stereotypically masculine pursuits such as accumulating material possessions and establishing reputations for having sex with multiple partners. These conceptions of masculinity are in sharp contrast to published reports on both African American men and athletes.

Discussion

Over the past three decades, scholars have examined the plight of African American men and have focused almost exclusively on boys, teens, and those not

participating in higher education. Though previous researchers have produced sound literature that supports some of the findings of the present study, several inconsistencies have been discovered. As previously mentioned, most of the existing literature regarding African American men has focused primarily on the hardships, conflicts, and dismal statistics that inevitably categorize this population as being "endangered" or "at risk." To this end, this study underscores some of the positive attributes and characteristics of African American men, particularly student-athletes.

Gilligan (1982) suggested that masculine identity development among men is typically demonstrated through achievement, dominance, competence, and competitiveness. While the participants considered this true of the majority of their teammates, they offered broader views of their own masculine identities. The academically driven student-athletes defined and expressed masculinity by having strong upstanding character, achieving academic success, and respecting women. They also equated masculinity with remaining strong in times of crises and making unpopular decisions to do "what's right." Additionally, the student-athletes aspired to have commendable identities beyond their more publicized reputations as athletes.

Majors and Billson (1992) maintained that cool pose is a part of African American male expression and is strategically employed by African American men in order to cope with daily hostilities, struggles, and challenges. Although the participants in the present study did not discuss individual coping strategies that were consistent with cool pose, they spoke extensively about how a majority of their teammates exuded detrimental attitudes and behaviors to counter their academic and social inadequacies. Getting drunk, wearing expensive clothes and jewelry, and being disrespectful to authority figures were noted by the participants as their teammates' ways of being "cool." Conversely, the academically driven student-athletes dealt with their daily challenges by staying focused on their academic pursuits and long-term career aspirations. To this end, the participants' cool pose was exemplified more by their unwavering determination to succeed beyond the meager expectations of African American men at their universities.

Fathers were the participants' primary role models. This finding counters previous reports of mothers being the main supporters of academic achievement for academically talented African American boys (Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998; Sampson, 2002). Although mothers were involved in shaping the participants' masculinities, they highlighted their fathers as their role models. The participants' fathers constantly communicated positive messages regarding achievement and embodied productive masculine conceptions. In addition, since many of the participants' fathers had earned advanced degrees in respected fields such as business, law, and medicine, they expected excellence from their sons in the classroom. To this end, fathers were integral figures in the participants' development of productive gender identities.

Finally, the findings from the present study confirm that African American men can express their gender identities in productive ways while still maintaining a masculine status even within student subcultures that are intensely hegemonic such as men's athletic teams. This finding is consistent with Harper's (2004) work. The high-achievers in Harper's study reported never having their masculinities called into question by their peers despite their high levels of campus involvement and ten-

dencies not to prioritize stereotypically masculine activities (e.g., drinking and pursuing sexual interests) above studying and leadership.

Conclusion and Implications

Given the findings of this study, it is important for postsecondary administrators, coaches, and faculty to collaborate and engender practical ways to support the identity development of African American male student-athletes. This effort will only be successful if institutional leaders are willing to learn more about the student-athlete experience and recognize the effects of policies and procedures developed for this group. Male student-athletes' poor academic outcomes, low rates of involvement, narrow self-concepts, and antisocial behaviors are well noted. Efforts to expand male student-athletes' concepts of the behaviors and attitudes that constitute appropriate masculine expression should be paramount on college and university campuses. In light of the findings of this study, we offer several recommendations and implications for practice aimed primarily at student affairs professionals, athletic administrators, coaches, faculty, parents, and the NCAA.

Increasing numbers of young boys are getting involved in sports at early ages. Parents must work closely with youth league coaches and directors to begin helping boys form healthy gender identities within the contexts of sports early in their athletic careers. Monitoring coaches' interactions with players during practices and games and establishing clear expectations of appropriate behavior are useful first steps. Equally important is the need for parents to reinforce the many lessons learned and practical competencies that can be gained by participating in sports. These include humility, teamwork, discipline, and determination. While supporting their sons' early athletic interests, parents should also be actively involved in their sons' academic lives before and during college. Parents, for example, should praise their sons for noteworthy academic achievements instead of solely recognizing athletic prowess. They should also consistently empower their sons to excel in the classroom in order to expand their identities beyond their athletic skills and reputations.

If we expect student-athletes to express their masculinities in productive ways, efforts to help coaches expand their concepts of masculinity beyond traditional and stereotypical norms are also necessary. Coaches face numerous demands and time constraints, making it potentially difficult for them to address gender identity issues with their students. Consequently, institutions should provide coaches with opportunities for professional development during off-seasons. Furthermore, coaches could collaborate with university offices that are equipped to address issues of male gender identity such as student affairs and counseling services. It is important to explain to coaches why these efforts are in the best interests of their student-athletes and athletic programs.

Though college student-athletes are typically required to participate in athletic department–sponsored campus orientation sessions, additional campus orientations should focus on an introduction to the academic and student culture of the institution. Key administrators, faculty, and staff members should lead these sessions. Sessions should include a thorough description of academic expectations, appropriate behavior in residence halls and on campus, and an overview of involvement opportunities and pertinent campus resources.

Campus leaders should also consider the climate for African American students on their campuses. Identifying African American male leaders, introducing student-athletes to African American faculty members, and encouraging student-athletes to live in African American–centered residence halls are all possible ways to socialize African American male student-athletes to campus.

There is a need for more African American faculty and student-athlete interaction. African American faculty should collaborate with academic advisors for student-athletes (e.g., Student-Athlete Academic Centers) and develop ways for faculty members to mentor and advise African American male student-athletes. Moreover, African American faculty should host various lectures and discussions on life skills, engaging in respectful dating relationships, homophobia, establishing meaningful connections within nonathletic settings, the benefits of community involvement, pursuing academic success, and the overall significance of being a positive and successful African American man.

The participants in the study spoke candidly about expressing masculinity by serving as a resource and a source of support for others. Thus, providing opportunities for student-athletes to serve the local campus community is warranted. A majority of the participants in this study asserted that nonathletic and out-of-class activities enriched their educational experiences. As they extended themselves to different people, groups, and organizations on campus, the participants felt less cheated out of having "normal" student experiences. Coaches are typically concerned about nonathletic time commitments, but they should strongly support campus involvement opportunities during off-seasons.

Previously, the NCAA required all athletic programs to offer life skills education to their student-athletes. Career exploration, cultural sensitivity training, classroom etiquette, and relationship issues are examples of topics that were addressed in life skills workshops. Some athletic departments continue to offer multifaceted programs for student-athletes. However, a majority of these programs do not address the gender identity development of male student-athletes, particularly those participating in revenue-generating sports. Given that more than half of African American male student-athletes participate in revenue-generating sports, NCAA officials need to mandate that life skills programs include components specifically for this population. Self-exploration, coping with racism, and career development are all critical issues for African American male student-athletes. Life skills programs can help student-athletes develop skills and strategies that will prove useful beyond their college athletic careers.

Finally, there is a real need to generate greater awareness among collegiate athletic personnel on issues related to male gender identity. Faculty and campus administrators who are concerned about gender-related issues must regularly engage in discussions with student-athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators. In addition, faculty and campus administrators should share their work in venues frequented by coaches, administrators, and other professionals working closely with student-athletes. Recent issues involving high-profile college athletic programs (such as the sexual assault and harassment charges levied against the University of Colorado's football program in 2004 and Duke University's lacrosse team in 2006) are noteworthy case studies with which coaches will be familiar and that are likely to garner their attention to gender-related issues.

Although African American male student-athletes were the focus of this article, many of the findings and implications have relevance to other college male student populations. Postsecondary achievement depends heavily on opportunities for healthy psychosocial development (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998), yet this development often conflicts with socially constructed expectations for masculine behavior (Ludeman, 2004). Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned, and morally obligated to support men in their total development given the points in life at which traditional-aged students matriculate to their respective institutions. The campus environment is ripe with opportunities to challenge undesirable behaviors and attitudes while also encouraging the development of healthy identities and lifestyles. Such success may go a long way to increase outcomes for male students and reduce the effects of the harmful attitudes and behaviors often situated in male-dominated contexts.

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