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Scholar-Baller: Student Athlete Socialization, Motivation, and Academic Performance in American Society

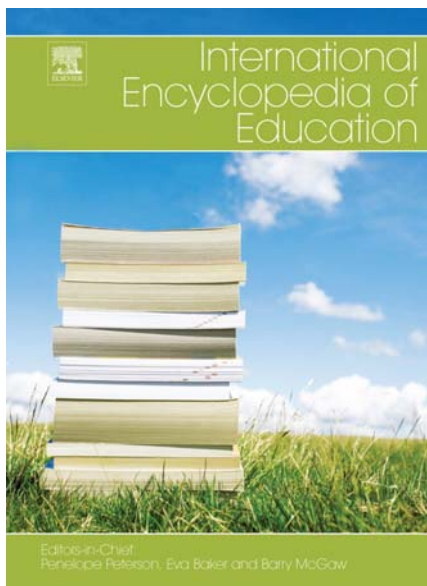
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Scholar-Baller[®]: Student Athlete Socialization, Motivation and Academic Performance in American Society

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Introduction

Movies such as *Varsity Blues*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *Coach Carter* portray the American socialization of high-school student-athletes who have aspirations of attending college with the common ultimate goal of playing professional sport. Many of the characters in these three feature films prioritize athletics over academics and have an unrealistic understanding of their chances of making it to the pros. These representations of sport and student-athlete focus in American society enable youth, teachers, coaches, and fans to examine the values that sport and society teach through athletics and other cultural organizations (Coakley, 2004).

In American higher education, a greater emphasis is frequently placed on the athletic abilities of student-athletes and the success of athletic teams, as compared to the classroom achievements of student-athletes. The primary purpose of higher education is too often overlooked, and the academic success of student-athletes is too often overshadowed. As high-school and college athletics become increasingly commercialized, secondary and post-secondary institutions are now facing the challenge of addressing an increasing lack of academic productivity among some student populations. Specifically, the student-athlete culture in higher education possesses certain sub-cultures that tend to underachieve educationally (Bowen and Levin, 2003). This issue, compounded by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Academic Reform Movement, requires the creation of new cultural paradigms and educational programs that have the ability to challenge student-athletes to apply a competitive spirit not only on the playing field but also in the classroom and in the development of life skills (Brand, 2003).

A lack of commercial and institutional emphasis on education still remains. This lack of focus on branding and marketing student-athlete academic success permeates into all sectors of high-school and collegiate sport and influences how student-athletes are presented in the media and perceive themselves. To solve some of the problematic issues relating to student-athlete academic performance and motivation, a group of colleagues, all of whom are former student-athletes, created a nonprofit

organization called Scholar-Baller[®], which was established in 1995 as a working theory and concept. Scholar-Baller has developed and implemented culturally relevant incentive-based educational programs at the high-school and college levels to help bridge the gap between education, sport, and popular culture, to help reposition the current model of sport in American society and to help create a new mindset among student-athletes in terms of their perceptions about education, sport, and career aspirations.

The curriculum intervention programs and related initiatives developed by Scholar-Baller serve as an excellent example of a marketing platform to reposition student-athletes and to tell true and meaningful stories about their successes on and off the playing field. Scholar-Baller, which is endorsed by the NCAA, recognizes the academic achievements of student-athletes who attain a high *grade point average* (GPA) or who demonstrate significant academic improvement. For some academic institutions who have partnered with Scholar-Baller, marketing and positioning of the student-athletes takes place in part via the display of a uniform patch or a helmet sticker called ThinkMan[™] or ThinkWoman[™] (see Figures 1 and 2), which helps to draw attention to the academic performances of the student-athletes while still allowing the players to demonstrate their athletic skills – truly epitomizing a student-athlete. In addition, Scholar-Baller, in conjunction with the National Consortium for Academics and Sports, sponsors the Academic Momentum Award, which recognizes 16 student-athletes each year for their academic accomplishments. Many institutional partners of Scholar-Baller have begun to market the academic successes of their student-athletes. Images and stories relating to the academic performance of student-athletes can be found in school media guides and on websites of college athletic programs. What follows is an overview of what constitutes a Scholar-Baller as well as further discussion of the Scholar-Baller program.

Scholar-Baller

Dr. C. Keith Harrison, director of the Paul Robeson Research Center for Academic and Athletic Prowess,



Figure 1 ThinkMan™.

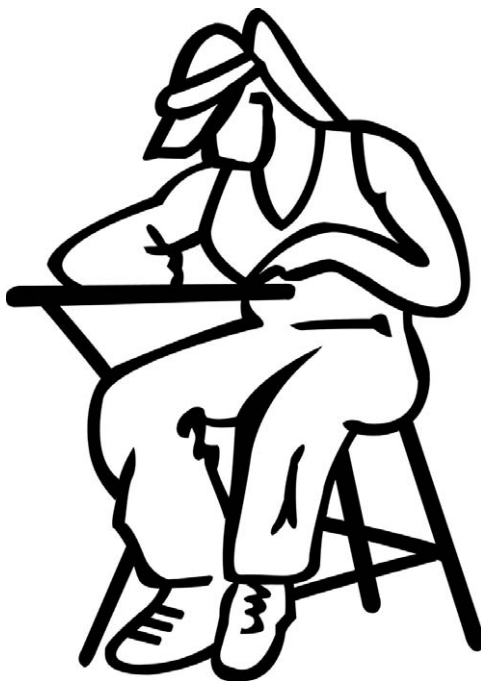


Figure 2 ThinkWoman™.

first introduced the term Scholar-Baller in his continued discussion and academic research on Paul Robeson's incredible commitment to education and sport (Harrison, 1995, 1996).

Scholar is a term used to describe an individual who possesses academic prowess or a commitment to education and learning. For example, Paul Robeson, a 1919 graduate

of Rutgers University, possessed the intellectual capacity and political awareness to earn the status of Phi Beta Kappa scholar, valedictorian of his class, and legendary political icon. Robeson represented a scholar on many levels, as he earned his law degree from Columbia University and gave numerous speeches throughout the world.

Baller is an urban term that resonates with individuals of all origins and has taken on global meaning in recent years. In popular culture, baller has been mainstreamed on ESPN, Music Television (MTV), in major newspapers such as USA Today, and in speeches by President Obama. The term baller can be used as a noun, adjective, or verb to signify aspects of achievement or success. For example, an individual who is considered a high achiever in any task or vocation can be labeled as a baller. Many of today's student-athletes view a baller as someone who has gone to the top, won the biggest prize, and who has simply just made it. Ask a room full of high-school or college football players, "Which one of you is a baller?" and nearly all the hands in the room reach sky high. It is a concept student-athletes understand and embrace. Paul Robeson was a baller, as he played professional football and was a renowned actor.

Scholar-Baller essentially means an educated individual who also participates in sport, art, music, or any other extracurricular activity. The Scholar-Baller concept promotes the willingness of students to accept the challenge of harmonizing academics and athletics. At a pragmatic level, Scholar-Baller is about cultivating education, sport, and entertainment consumption into one lifestyle. Any misunderstanding about the term or any uneasiness has come from coaches and administrators who do not identify with young people and what they are into. Dr. Harrison has published numerous articles and book chapters relating to how popular culture (e.g., sports and entertainment imagery) impacts the educational aspirations and perceptions of youth in society.

Scholar-Baller Paradigm: Promoting Critical Literacy Through Engaging Popular Culture with Urban Youth

The Center for the Study of Sport in Society (1997) reported that 66% of African-American male youth between the ages of 13 and 18 stated they perceived that their first career would be as a professional athlete. Another related study found that 48% of African-American inner-city youth responded that hip-hop/rap music is their favorite musical genre. Just over one out of three (34%) of the respondents in that study reported watching 4 h or more of television per day, and 62% of the respondents reported going to the movies two or more times a month. According to the study's findings, urban youth disproportionately

spent their disposable income on the following items: shoes, music, and jewelry (MEE Report, 1993).

Teachers, coaches, and administrators need to be able to interact with today's student-athletes in a culturally diverse and impactful manner that allows the students to be prepared for the next level and for life after sports. Teachers, coaches, and administrators must engage student-athletes and must re-emphasize the importance of education. The message that school is cool must get out to all student-athletes. As those at Scholar-Baller often say, it is imperative that we help "make the cool students smart and the smart students cool."

People in academic circles must know what they teach and why the material is relevant to today's student-athletes. For this to happen, it is essential for educators to identify desired results (i.e., what do we want students to know?), determine acceptable evidence (i.e., what counts as proficiency?), and plan learning and instruction (i.e., what do we do and how do we teach it?). There are a few things that allow learning to be maximized when trying to create a lifelong learner. Course content must be relevant and meaningful. Teachers must also find ways to be engaging and should utilize a variety of teaching styles that incorporate concepts from the sport and entertainment industries.

As utilized by scholars such as Taylor (1999), this concept suggests that sport and athletic principles (i.e., character, determination, perseverance, and commitment) should be applied to academics, which should improve the motivation of student-athletes in the classroom. This motivation for academic excellence is enhanced through utilizing aspects of popular culture entertainment (i.e., music, film, athletics, and the arts) to challenge and motivate student-athletes. Scholar-Baller uses popular culture as a framework to engage and motivate student-athletes. Numerous colleges and universities have implemented the Scholar-Baller curriculum intervention program, which uses DVDs, CDs, social media platforms and other relevant mass media materials that student-athletes already consume and understand.

Implications for Practice: A Collegiate-Level Case Study

Pilot implementation of the Scholar-Baller program began in August 2001 at a major NCAA Division I institution with their football program. Student-athletes on the football team were first introduced to the concept of Scholar-Baller during fall training before the 2001 season. The team was asked how many of the student-athletes considered themselves to be ballers; approximately 85 out of 105 raised their hands. When asked how many of them saw themselves as Scholar-Ballers, only a few raised their hands. The students' responses illustrate the fact that

many college student-athletes who participate in a revenue sport such as football or basketball tend to focus narrowly on their athletic prowess while trivializing their academic and social development.

However, with the introduction of the Scholar-Baller program, it was immediately evident that the concepts, messages, and approach resonated with the student-athletes, in this case those who participated in the revenue sport of football. During the weeks following the initial introduction of the Scholar-Baller program, multiple student-athlete football players approached both the head football coach and the football academic counselor and communicated sincere interest in attaining Scholar-Baller status and recognition. The football student-athletes at this institution were challenged to employ their competitive spirit in the arenas of academics and social development.

A series of strategies were utilized to establish a consistent message that subpar (or even an average performance) in academics was simply unacceptable. Some of these strategies included helping student-athletes examine their social- and self-identities to reinforce that they were complete human beings with a multiplicity of abilities beyond athletics. Student-athletes were exposed to Scholar-Baller icons (i.e., Paul Robeson, Ralph Bunche, Vince Carter, and others) via innovative lesson plans. Academic goals for the football program were displayed in the locker room alongside football goals. In addition, team members engaged in an academic team competition in which groups of football student-athletes competed against each other throughout the school year.

Additionally, the head football coach and assistant coaches embraced the Scholar-Baller concept and soon incorporated it into some of their pedagogical vernacular, including utilizing the term in memorandums and letters to the team during the off-season, encouraging academic excellence during team meetings, and including the term in the school's players manual. More importantly, an incentive and disincentive system was established that rewarded the student-athletes for high performance in the classroom. This same system parallels internally what the NCAA Academic Reform Movement is attempting to do externally with its incentive/disincentive system to increase academic achievement and graduation rates.

At this particular institution, a Scholar-Baller was defined as a person in a given academic year who earned a fall, spring, or cumulative GPA of 3.0 or above. First-year Scholar-Ballers earned a T-shirt. After completion of the academic team competition during the second year of the program, the top three academic teams earned sweat suits that lauded them as "Scholar-Ballers competing in the classroom." Needless to say, the entire Scholar-Baller program was very well received and reinforced that it really was a benefit to compete and perform well in school. Scholar-Ballers were acknowledged by the head football coach at the beginning of each semester, and at the end of

a particular academic term the Scholar-Ballers were rewarded with a steak dinner, hosted by the athletic director. In fall 2004, football student-athletes who achieved Scholar-Baller status were recognized with the ThinkMan logo jersey patch, the first known time in the history of NCAA Division I football that academic prowess had been acknowledged on the jersey of student-athletes.

In the first 3 years that the Scholar-Baller program was implemented (2001–04), there were significant increases in team-cumulative GPA, fall-team GPA, freshman-cohort GPA, and retention rates of student-athletes. For example, retention rates skyrocketed to 80% for the three classes that entered during the first 3 years of the program. The number of football student-athletes earning a GPA of 3.0 rose from figures in the teens in 2000 to 38 in 2004. Another shift occurred with decreases in the number of football student-athletes on probation, which went from five after spring semester in 2000 to zero in 2004. Finally, 33 student-athletes earned B or better averages during the academic semester that coincided with the 2004 football season (see Steinbach, 2004).

Student-athletes in this football program understood from day 1 that they had entered a culture in which it was not acceptable to do the minimum work required to pass classes and remain eligible. Academic excellence became the verbal and written goal of most of the student-athletes. The following are some quotes and narratives from 2004 Scholar-Baller participants (28 football student-athletes) who were interviewed about becoming the first NCAA Division I school to acknowledge academic success on the front of a football jersey:

- It feels good because of the stereotypes that have been set that football players can't be smart but society always changes. Happy to represent [support the program's image and concept] by wearing the patch.
- It feels good to be recognized for something positive. Many people think of football players as dumb jocks so this was a way to prove that they were wrong.
- It gave me something to push for. I feel it is a great honor to wear this patch. The patch is not about separating yourself from others, yet its purpose is to glorify those who work hard in all phases of life. This is a motivation for those who do not have one.

Implications for Practice at the High-School Level

As implied by Scholar-Baller, it is assumed that this paradigm will serve as a resource for academic and athletic success for all student-athletes at any educational institution across the nation. Because this model is currently most widely utilized at the intercollegiate level and has

been proven to be successful, it can be assumed that it would be effective if implemented on a wide-scale level at some of the nation's high schools that are most in need of Scholar-Baller's program and message. However, the model would have to be flexible enough to fit the needs of any interscholastic program in which implementation would take place.

There are many things to consider related to the implementation of the Scholar-Baller program at the high-school level, many of which have already been discussed above. Other aspects to be considered in the implementation process of Scholar-Baller would include the socioeconomic status, ethnic background, demographic region, and overall morale of the students at the particular high school in which implementation of the Scholar-Baller would take place.

The Scholar-Baller implementation process begins with high-school coaches, administrators, counselors, and teachers involved in a life-skills curriculum designed to challenge student-athletes to create powerful visions for their future. The typical curriculum covers content standards such as: (1) self-identity, (2) the competitive spirit, (3) the Scholar-Baller paradigm, (4) purpose/vision/mission and goals, (5) decision-making system, and (6) living the Scholar-Baller way. The goal of Scholar-Baller is to create an environment on high-school campuses that will allow student-athletes as well as other students to view education and athletics as means to success. The Scholar-Baller program empowers student-athletes to be better prepared for the rigors of college and the many challenges that college provides; GPAs will likely continue to increase, and parents will be empowered to support their children not only athletically but also academically. Finally, Scholar-Baller should also help students develop critical life skills and should equip student-athletes with the ability to make positive future decisions relating to career and other aspects of life.

The Scholar-Baller Patch and Related Incentives: The New Badge of Coolness

As mentioned above, the Motivational Entertainment Educational (MEE) Report (1992/93) found that 387 urban youth, ages 13 to 18, spent most of their disposable income on clothes, food, music, shoes, and jewelry. This finding has significant implications. First, urban youth set the trends for popular culture, and hip-hop culture is currently one of the most consumed products and commodities in American society (Boyd, 2004). Specifically, marketing, fashion, language, and urban styles permeate the most mainstream cultural spaces (Simmons, 2002). In addition, athletic identity is a valued status symbol in secondary and post-secondary education. Thus, the desire to be cool often involves the attainment of some of the

material items found in the MEE Report. Through the previously mentioned cultural facts about urban styles and athletics in secondary and post-secondary education, we hope that the Scholar-Baller, ThinkMan, and ThinkWoman logos (see **Figures 1 and 2**) will become a tipping point and trend (Gladwell, 2000) in American culture. This is possible if Scholar-Baller continues to become aligned, associated with, and embedded in social activities and academic programs that today's student-athletes value, understand, and embrace.

The essence of the primary Scholar-Baller logos, such as the ThinkMan and ThinkWoman images, are of a student-athlete sitting at a desk studying – representations that are powerful in their simplicity, with or without additional wording.

These logos, when applied to a piece of apparel, are meant to be a badge of honor that can be proudly worn, a statement of the acceptance of the Scholar-Baller ideals and the related accomplishments made by each individual. The Scholar-Baller logos and their related marks and graphics will continue to evolve with recognition, acceptance, specific individual or team needs, and style trends.

To date, ThinkMan and ThinkWoman have adorned team jerseys, football helmets, polo shirts, sweatshirts, sweat suits, shorts, hats, shoes, coffee cups, duffel bags, dress shirts, visors, and more. For instance, Arizona State University became the first NCAA Division I football team to recognize academic achievement during athletic competition on 2 September 2004. Hampton University and Morgan State University also sported the patch during the New York Urban League classic, becoming the first of the historically black colleges and universities to participate in the Scholar-Baller uniform-patch recognition program. Coincidentally, during the 2004 Vitalis Sun Bowl, Arizona State University and Purdue University became the first bowl teams to recognize academic achievements on student-athlete jerseys based on the Scholar-Baller concept. Finally, one of the historical moments of the NCAA and higher education occurred on 10 November 2006 when Southeast Missouri State University and Tennessee State University became the first two institutions with the same symbol/patch to honor student-athletes for their academic success immediately before an athletic contest; what made this recognition ceremony unique is that both teams interacted with the administration, staff, and the Ohio Valley Conference Commissioner at mid-field.

Much more is planned for the Scholar-Baller logo set, including continued evolution of the base trademarked logos, creation of complementary logos such as the emerging It's Cool to be Smart, AthletesThink, and ThinkKids logos, and development of additional recognition and motivational items. Not only do we want the Scholar-Baller ideals and related curriculum to be

embraced by many, but we also want those that are deemed to be Scholar-Ballers to be able to proudly express this recognition in a variety of ways.

Conclusion and Implications

For over a century, improving the academic success of student-athletes has been a complex challenge for high-school and college educators and administrators. There are major cultural disconnects between the educational, athletic, and entertainment communities in America. This gap and lack of synergy between the three areas impacts the lifelong learning and consumption patterns of student-athletes. Two obvious questions are (1) when did this disconnect begin? and (2) how do we connect education, sport, and entertainment in a constructive way so that student-athletes become intellectually engaged and dedicated to lifelong learning? The disconnect and gap between academics, athletics, and popular culture are poignantly articulated by Coleman (1960) in three powerful narratives. First, speaking of adolescence, Coleman said,

What our society has done is set apart, in an institution of their own, adolescents for whom home is little more than a dormitory and whose world is made up of activities peculiar to their fellows. They have been given as well many of the instruments which can make them a functioning community: cars, freedom in dating, continual contact with the opposite sex, money, and entertainment, like popular music and movies, designed especially for them. The international spread of rock-and-roll and of so-called American patterns of adolescent behavior is a consequence, I would suggest, of these economic challenges which have set adolescents off in a world of their own. (p. 338)

This world of their own often consumes American youth in nearly all cultural forms, except in educational engagement and intellectual development. Student-athletes are especially influenced by and susceptible to the bombardment of messages about material gain based on the athletic and entertainment identity of professional athletes, actors, and musical artists (Gerdy, 1997). What are the effects of a cultural system that reinforces athleticism and not intellectualism? The second narrative by Coleman is key to understanding and responding to this question.

Coleman (1960) continues to frame the incentive and reward system of American education and society by having a vision that

the fundamental change which must occur is to shift the focus: to mold social communities as communities, so that the norms of the communities themselves reinforce educational goals rather than inhibit them, as is at the present case. (p. 338)

Presently, the social communities have learned to consume athletics, material objects, and immediate gratification at such an influential rate that education is overlooked and neglected as a viable option for success (Harrison, 2002). In a Coleman culture the movies, music, video games, and athletic contests would compliment the pedagogy of school systems with competency in reading, writing, and arithmetic (commonly known as the three Rs). This method could easily enhance educational goals instead of inhibiting them – hence, a method that inspires youth to desire learning and intellectual development throughout their lifetime. This leads to the third and final narrative by Coleman.

In the final analysis, Coleman (1960) exposes the bias in American sport and entertainment by indicating the cultural fact that “the outstanding student has little or no way to bring glory to his school” (p. 347) (in comparison to athletics). This is where the Scholar-Baller paradigm may theoretically and practically influence the culture of American sport by ending the silence about the importance of student-athlete academic success. This is an approach we hope will become the new roadmap for success in American higher education. We must continue to inspire youth to excel in education and life by making the most of their cultural interests in sport and entertainment. Having visual evidence such as the ThinkMan logo visible on the uniform and discussions of Scholar-Ballers in print stories, on the Internet, and on television are essential in repositioning high-school and college athletes as student-athletes and ultimately establishing that image as the norm rather than the exception. More middle schools, high schools, and colleges need to implement culturally relevant programs that incentivize and motivate student-athletes to balance playbooks with textbooks.

Postscript: Coach Carter Film Screening

On 13 January 2005, the triangle of success (education, sport, and entertainment) celebrated a collaborative moment of combining influential cultural worlds. Scholar-Baller® and its team of educators, Rush Philanthropic led by Russell Simmons, the *Women's National Basketball Association*

(WNBA) represented by Diana Taurasi, and the NCAA represented by Senior Vice President, Bernard Franklin, all partnered together for a film screening of *Coach Carter* for over 300 urban and inner-city youth in New York City. Educational and critical dialog followed, with a panel and group discussion about the influence of sport and entertainment on the educational aspirations of America's youth.

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