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Critical Race Theory is used to consider the educational outcomes that could accrue when the interests of black male student athletes converge productively with the interests of community college administrators, faculty, and coaches.

Race, Interest Convergence, and Transfer Outcomes for Black Male Student Athletes

Shaun R. Harper

As indicated throughout this volume, much has been published about the experiences of student athletes in higher education. Some researchers have offered important insights into the psychosocial and identity-related challenges these students commonly face (Martin, 2009; Parham, 1993; Pinkerton, Hinz, and Barrow, 1989; Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston, 1992), while others have written about various issues related to career planning, academic motivation, and postcollege outcomes (Adler and Adler, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Miller and Kerr, 2002; Pascarella and Smart, 1991; Pascarella and others, 1999; Simons, Van Rheenen, and Covington, 1999). A smaller body of literature has focused specifically on black male participation in college sports (Beamon, 2008; Benson, 2000; Donnor, 2005; Martin and Harris, 2006; Messer, 2006; Person and LeNoir, 1997). This research has been almost exclusively concerned with student athletes at four-year colleges and universities, and mostly at the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division I competition level. Consequently, much remains to be known about community college student athletes in general and black male sports participants at those institutions specifically.

The aforementioned studies on black male student athletes at four-year institutions mostly describe racial differences in educational outcomes between them and their white male teammates. In his analyses of graduation rate data from the NCAA, Harper (2006) found that across four cohorts

of college student athletes 47 percent of black men graduated within six years, compared to 60 percent of white males and 62 percent of student athletes overall. The averages across four cohorts of basketball players were 39 percent and 52 percent for black men and white men, respectively. Forty-seven percent of black male football players graduated within six years, compared to 63 percent of their white teammates. Harper's findings led to this conclusion: "Perhaps nowhere in higher education is the disenfranchisement of black male students more insidious than in college athletics" (p. 6).

In addition to these quantifiable racial gaps in degree attainment, more than twenty-five years ago Edwards (1984) observed about black sports participants: "They must contend, of course, with the connotations and social reverberations of the traditional 'dumb jock' caricature. But Black student-athletes are burdened also with the insidiously racist 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" (p. 8). More recently, Benson (2000) found that many black males are socialized to prioritize sports over academics when they are in high school, and such messages are sustained (and arguably amplified) once they enroll in college. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "Black Athletes and White Professors: A Twilight Zone of Uncertainty," black male student athletes reported feeling that they were not taken seriously by many of their white professors (Perlmutter, 2003). Related to this, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found that engagement with faculty, particularly outside the classroom, was essential to academic achievement for black and white male student athletes alike, but professors devoted significantly more time to academic engagement with white student athletes.

Although much of the existing literature on black male student athletes in Division I sports programs at four-year institutions explores the social construction of their athletic identities, their lived experiences with racial stereotyping and low expectations, and one specific outcome variable (bachelor's degree completion), these topics remain largely unexplored in the context of community college sports. In fact, Harris and Harper (2008) contend that most of what has been published about male community college students narrowly pertains to how many enroll, earn an associate degree, and transfer. Little emphasis has been placed on demonstrated institutional commitment to the overall success of black male students, particularly those who play on sports teams at community colleges. Thus the purpose of this chapter is to consider the mutual benefits that could accrue for these students and the colleges they attend if the transfer rate to four-year institutions is strengthened. Although transferring to a four-year college or university is the outcome variable of interest here, I certainly recognize the importance of examining learning and other developmental outcomes; this is something I hope to see in future scholarship on black male community college student athletes. I later explain why I chose to focus expressly on transferring to the four-year as an outcome. Critical Race Theory, specifically the Interest Convergence tenet, is

introduced in the next section and used for explanatory sense making throughout the chapter.

Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence

Based on scholarly perspectives from law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a conceptual lens used to examine racism, racial (dis)advantages, and inequitable distribution of power and privilege within institutions and society (Bell, 1987; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). CRT also challenges misconceptions regarding colorblindness, merit, and racial equity; critiques the presumed innocence of self-proclaimed white liberals; and ignites consciousness that leads to social justice and advances for people of color (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, 1995). According to Donnor (2005), CRT offers an especially useful lens through which "to better recognize and more fully understand the forces that have constructed a system in which African American male athletes are cheered on the field by wealthy alumni and powerful fans while at the same time denied opportunities to earn the degree that could lead to wealth and power of their own" (p. 63).

One major tenet of CRT is Interest Convergence, which, according to Delgado (1995), typically compels white people to advocate for the advancement of people of color only if their own self-interest is better served. Put differently, theorists posit that those in the majority who enact social, political, and economic change on behalf of minorities rarely do so without first identifying the personal costs and gains associated with such actions. This perspective is informed by the Marxist theory that the bourgeoisie will work toward progress for the proletariat only if advances ultimately end up benefitting the bourgeoisie more (Taylor, 2006). It is certainly not our intent to liken community colleges to "the bourgeoisie," but we do argue that many white college faculty, administrators, and coaches must be made aware of the overall benefit to the institution (and in some instances, to themselves) before moving forward a serious strategic agenda to improve educational outcomes for black male student athletes. Hence, Interest Convergence is used in this chapter to help answer the question, Why would a community college whose faculty and staff is majority white deliberately engage in efforts to strengthen the rate at which its black male student athletes transfer to four-year institutions?

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argue that prior attempts to eradicate racism and racial differences in social, educational, and economic outcomes have produced minimal results because of insufficient convergence of interests. As Bell writes, "We cannot ignore and should learn from and try to recognize situations when there is a convergence of interests" (2000, p. 9). Making clear how transferring more black male student athletes to four-year institutions will ultimately increase the overall transfer rate for the community college is one example; I say more about this later. Another is pointing out how the prevailing culture of the college would benefit from having

black male sports participants—those who are often among the most visible students on campus (Person and LeNoir, 1997)—model for their peers (other student athletes and nonathletes alike) a serious disposition toward academic achievement.

In the Common Interest of Transferring

I have identified transferring from community college to a four-year institution as an important intersecting point of interest. For many (but certainly not all) black male student athletes, the opportunity to play their chosen sport on a bigger and more competitive field or court is appealing. Thus aspirations of transferring to a four-year college or university are more common than not for this group. These aspirations are in many ways connected to longer-term goals of playing professional sports. Donnor (2005) indicates: “Black males participating in sports are more likely to possess aspirations for pursuing sports professionally than their white counterparts because they believe they will be treated fairly. As a result, African American males will generally interpret their involvement in intercollegiate (and inter-scholastic) sports as a conduit for achieving their career aspirations” (p. 48).

Rudman (1986) found that blacks were more likely than whites to aspire to a career in professional sports. He suggested this difference in sport orientation is a result of social structures (for example, racism) that limit opportunities for blacks in other professional occupations. According to a 2006 NCAA report, 1.8 percent of college football players are drafted by the National Football League (NFL) and 1.2 percent of men’s college basketball players are drafted by the National Basketball Association (NBA). Although these odds are generally well known, many black male student athletes, including those at community colleges, exert tremendous effort to render themselves competitive for professional sports drafts. Transferring to a four-year institution makes actualization of professional sports aspirations considerably more likely; this is something that many black male community college athletes understand and work toward.

Similarly, transferring students to four-year institutions is a publicly stated goal and core function of most community colleges. Transfer readiness and the actual transfer rate remain among the most widely studied topics in the community college literature (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, because of a number of structural, financial, and informational barriers, only a small proportion of community college students who intend to transfer to a four-year institution actually do so (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008; Long, 2005). Even when students’ goals are transfer-oriented, many end up ineligible or insufficiently prepared to transfer (Hagedorn and others, 2006; Laanan, 2003). Previous research has found that the transfer rate is especially low among racial and ethnic minorities and low-income students. For example, Hagedorn and others (2006) note, “Students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are dis-

proportionately impacted by the sluggish nature of transfer, because the majority of these students who go to college will begin their postsecondary education in community colleges” (p. 224). Notwithstanding this area of institutional underperformance, transferring more students to four-year institutions remains among the major priorities for community colleges—one for which accountability agents are demanding increased effectiveness, as enrollments are beginning to reach capacity at many public four-year institutions and states are relying more on community colleges to offer the first stage of postsecondary education for students (Long, 2005).

Despite this goal in common between student athletes and community colleges, black men transfer at a low rate, especially in comparison to their white male peers. We recently discovered racial disparities in transfer rate among student athletes at several community colleges. For example, Pima Community College District in Arizona transferred 17 percent of its black male football players, in comparison to 63 percent of their white teammates, to four-year institutions in 2008. Similar trends were found in men’s basketball programs at Dixie State College in Utah (25 versus 56 percent), Enterprise-Ozark Community College in Alabama (25 versus 50 percent), and Gadsden State Community College in Georgia (0 versus 67 percent), to name a few. Data from these four institutions and several others make clear that transfer as a shared outcome of interest among many black male student athletes and the community colleges they attend has not effectively converged.

What’s in It for the College?

In my view, the Interest Convergence tenet of CRT has at least one noteworthy limitation. It presumes that white persons rarely do anything “out of the goodness of the heart” that advantages people of color. Accepting this as an absolute truth would be shortsighted. I acknowledge that there are white community college faculty, staff, and coaches who care authentically about minority student success. Indeed, some colleagues are committed for reasons that extend beyond their own selfish profits (educational and otherwise). However, I still find perspectives on Interest Convergence useful; there are some white community college professionals who will need to clearly see the ultimate value in deliberately constructing an educational environment that increases the transfer rate specifically for black male student athletes. Some may not easily recognize how their individual efforts might ultimately benefit the college overall, not just one segment of the student body (black males). Therefore, in this section I offer four ways in which community colleges would benefit from transferring a larger number of black male student athletes to four-year institutions.

First, when the transfer rate for black male student athletes increases, so too does the overall transfer rate for the college. This is especially true at community colleges where a disproportionate number of black male students play on sports teams. Given the dismal transfer rate for community college students in general (Laanan, 2003; Long, 2005) and students of

color in particular (Hagedorn and others, 2006), every individual black male student who transfers could make a potentially noticeable contribution to an institution's overall rate. In this era of increased transparency and accountability, institutions are expected to furnish evidence on the production of key educational outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). For community colleges, transferring students to four-year institutions is among the areas in which accountability agents expect to see progress. Thus, closing the gap between black male student athletes and their white teammates would ultimately fortify the college's efforts to confirm its educational effectiveness.

Increasing the number of black male student athletes who transfer to four-year institutions would also result in reputational gains for the community college. Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that some institutions garner a reputation within minority communities for being racist, which negatively affects student recruitment. Black and Latino participants in the study reported that family members discouraged their interest in certain predominantly white institutions because they were known to maintain a toxic campus racial climate and had long been ineffective in fostering an enabling environment for minority student success. As a community college helps more black male student athletes actualize their goal of transferring to a four-year institution, its reputation for doing so will improve. This could potentially compel talented prospective student athletes to more strongly consider one particular college over others. For example, if a prospective black male basketball player knows a certain community college does an outstanding job of helping members of the basketball team transfer to four-year institutions with excellent basketball programs, he would likely be more inclined to apply, enroll, and play basketball at that community college. Attracting more student athletes who choose an institution for this reason could also create a transfer culture on community college sports teams.

Third, coaches who work at a community college where the president holds educators and administrators uncompromisingly accountable for student success also have much to gain from enacting efforts to increase the transfer rate among black male student athletes. Benson (2000) found that coaches were complicit in the academic underperformance of black male student athletes. In fact, coaches often conveyed to these students that athletics were more important than academics. Community college leaders must expect athletics departments to furnish evidence of their contribution to the institution's transfer mission. If compensation and reappointment of coaches were based not only on wins and losses but also on transfer and graduation rates, then those who work most closely with student athletes would have more incentive to ensure their success. In the absence of accountability from the president, district leaders, and other top administrators, athletics departments will continue to help manufacture racial gaps in the transfer rate like those we cited earlier in this chapter. Seventy percent of the former black male student athletes who participated in Beamon's

study (2008) also had careers of varying length in professional sports. These men reported being made to feel like “used goods” by the colleges and universities at which they had been student athletes. For sure, such feelings are unlikely to incite these alumni to contribute financially to their alma mater.

Finally, community colleges should recognize that student athletes who transfer to four-year institutions could eventually be among the 1.2 percent drafted by NBA or the 1.8 percent drafted by the NFL. Once their professional sports careers become lucrative, these black male alumni could be solicited for donations to the college. It is possible that some for whom the community college served as the springboard into sports participation at a four-year institution and subsequently into professional athletics may be easily persuaded to support the college’s development endeavors. Long (2005) asserts, “Even as their role increases and their transfer function grows in importance, community colleges are facing reductions in funding” (p. 2). Given this, community colleges would benefit from expanding their revenue sources to include donations from alumni (Jenkins and Glass, 1999). It is possible that the wealthiest former students may be those who transferred to a four-year institution and later secured a multimillion dollar contract to play on a professional sports team.

Conclusion

I offered just four examples of how community colleges and their athletics departments and coaches would benefit from increasing the transfer rate among black male student athletes. These reasons were not meant to replace other more altruistic motives, such as an authentic commitment to racial equity, improving the transfer rate for the sake of mission realization, or investing in actualization of all students’ aspirations and success. I recognize these as most important. However, persistent disparities in transfer rate between black men and their white male counterparts signify to us that few educators, administrators, and coaches are likely to participate in strategic closing of a racialized outcome gap if the tangible return on their personal investment is not made more apparent. Regardless of the impetus, current transfer rates make clear that considerably more effort is required to improve black male student athlete transfers from community colleges to four-year institutions. Necessary and important are increased transparency and accountability, more research expressly focused on race and community college athletics, and the effective convergence of black male student athletes’ interests with those of the community colleges they attend.

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