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2014

Black Men as College Athletes: The Real Win-Loss Record

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Black Men as College Athletes: The Real Win-Loss Record

FRUSTRATED by the endless grumbling about black men's failures, I have spent much of my career examining how black men get to college and what helps them succeed. We now have hard data, and many of the most effective strategies cost relatively little.

So I am particularly troubled that major collegiate athletics programs, known for generating significant revenue for their institutions, do not use proven methods to get their black male athletes through baccalaureate-degree programs and prepared for careers beyond professional sports. I am also amazed that these programs continually fail the men whose minds they have promised to develop along with their athletic prowess.

There's no question that athletics can be a pathway to education

that transforms lives. But all too often, black male student-athletes leave college without degrees, and with little in the way of the training they need to succeed in life beyond sports. Recently I heard from a senior athletics administrator who was startled

when one of his black former football players served him lunch at a fast-food restaurant. Why should that have surprised him? For what else was the young man prepared once his college sports career ended?

Only 50 percent of black male athletes graduate within six years from colleges in the seven major NCAA Division I sports conferences, compared with 67 percent of athletes over all, 73 percent of undergraduates, and 56 percent of black undergraduate men. And while black men are underrepresented in the undergraduate population at predominantly white colleges and universities, there is an enormous overrepresentation of them on those revenue-generating Division I sports teams. Their comparatively lower six-year graduation rates warrant a resounding response from college presidents, trustees, and athletics administrators.

In December the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education here at Penn released data detailing the low graduation rates of black male athletes on football teams participating in the 2014 Bowl Championship Series. Sixty percent of the players on the top 25 BCS football teams are black.

These programs would seem to be a natural employment opportunity for black men after graduation. However, only 12 percent of coaches and athletic directors at the top 25 BCS colleges are black.

Of the BCS data, there is perhaps no better example than Florida State University, which defeated Auburn University in the BCS national championship game this month. By all common metrics, it was a successful year for Florida State's football team, highlighted by the selection of the quarterback, Jameis Winston, as the Heisman Trophy winner.

But will Winston and most of his other black teammates actually graduate from college? Chances are, no. Of all the teams that played in the bowl series, Florida State's has the lowest graduation rate. Sixty-five of the 94 students on the team—69 percent—are black. Based on an analysis of the past four cohorts of black male athletes at Florida State, only 24 of those 65 are predicted to graduate within six years. (For the record, Auburn doesn't do much better at graduating its black male athletes.) And although Winston will very likely go pro, most of his teammates will end their athletics careers when they leave the university.

And let us dispel the myth that droves of college athletes from powerhouse programs leave early to turn professional. That misconception is often

used to explain low graduation rates among black male athletes. However, less than 2 percent of college athletes, regardless of race, are drafted into the NFL or the NBA. Only seven football players, five of them black, from Florida State were drafted in 2011 and 2012 combined, and not all of them left college early for the draft. Auburn has had five players drafted over the past two years, three of whom are white.

So what can we do? My hope is that with more light shining on the issue, some of these colleges will begin to pay real attention to the future of their black male athletes. With a more serious game plan, they can lead the way for all colleges and universities to score more wins in educating black men.

In the Penn center's December report, "Black Male Student-Athletes and Racial Inequities in NCAA Division I Revenue-Generating College Sports," Collin D. Williams Jr., Horatio W. Blackman, and I suggest several steps. I summarize a few of them here.

First, college presidents, trustees, and faculty members must demand transparency and data from athletics departments and offices of institutional research. Reports should include analyses of the racial composition of individual sports teams compared with the overall undergraduate population, as well as of disparities in graduation rates. Presidents must hold themselves, athletic directors, and coaches accountable for narrowing racial gaps documented in those reports.

Coaches and athletics administrators should pay attention to the course enrollment and selection of majors by their black male athletes, as well as those students' participation in enriching educational experiences, like study-abroad programs and summer internships. Colleges must examine and more fully support postgraduation pathways such as graduate school, employment in the student's major field of study—and recruitment into their own athletics departments.

Coaches and athletics administrators must also address the "dumb jock" stereotypes that plague black male student-athletes—they are not there to learn, they have not met admissions standards, they are interested only in professional sports careers. Working with faculty members to raise their consciousness of such stereotypes and of racist assumptions they themselves may possess seems like a necessary first step.

Additionally, assigning faculty mentors or advocates from outside the athletics culture for these student-athletes can be enormously helpful in increasing their academic engagement and their likelihood of graduating.

A motivated athletics department should create a task force focused on racial equity and including professionals within and beyond the department: administrators from academic and student affairs, current and former black male student-athletes, and professors who study race and sports. Coaches and the athletics department should provide a detailed plan for improving the educational outcomes of their athletes. The goal is not only to get them through college but to provide the foundations of productive careers after they graduate.

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POINT OF VIEW

SHAUN R. HARPER



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