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ARTICLES

# “I’m Running So You Can Be Happy and I Can Keep My Scholarship”: A Comparative Study of Black Male College Athletes’ Experiences With Role Conflict

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The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of two groups of Black male college athletes at a Division I historically White institution (HWI) to better understand the key contributors that influenced their academic performance levels, academic engagement, and the quality of their overall college experiences. Two focus groups were conducted with 10 Black male college athletes enrolled at a Division I HWI and a demographic questionnaire was administered to ascertain a better understanding of their personal backgrounds, college academic experiences, and college athletic experiences. Role theory was incorporated as a theoretical lens to investigate the participants’ identity salience, role commitments, and overall college experiences. Findings revealed participants from each group shared common experiences encountering role conflict. However, the coping strategies and academic performance outcomes varied between each group. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** Black male college athletes, educational experiences, role theory, academic performance

The intense debate over the proper role of big-time intercollegiate athletics within the educational mission of colleges and universities in the United States (U.S.) has been prevalent since the inception of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1906 (Byers, 1995). However, two recent well-publicized scandals at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), one of the premier institutions of higher education in the U.S., have intensified public scrutiny over the structure of intercollegiate athletics and its subsequent impact on Black

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college athletes<sup>1</sup> (Ellis & Wilson, 2014). Although the names of the athletes were not revealed, it is likely that many of them were Black given the fact that Black males are persistently overrepresented on Division I football and men's basketball teams (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). For example, in 2012–2013, Black males accounted for 58.1% of men's basketball players and 46.5% of football players at the Division I level (NCAA, 2014a).

Not coincidentally, while accounting for a majority of the athletes in the two highest profit generating sports, African American football and men's basketball "student" athletes at Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions consistently post the lowest graduation success rates (GSRs) among all student athlete subgroups (NCAA, 2014b). For example, the most recent NCAA (2014b) GSR report included data from the 2007 cohort and revealed the GSRs for African American male "student" athletes (65%) was 20 percentage points lower than White males (85%), 28 percentage points lower than White females (93%), and 16 percentage points lower than African American females (81%). The recent UNC-CH scandals along with the aforementioned NCAA Division I GSR data underscore a longstanding concern held by NCAA critics who argue that these institutions continue to be engaged in educational malpractice and athletic exploitation of college athletes in general and Black male college athletes more specifically (Byers, 1995; Davis, 1992; Sellers, 2000).

In an effort to identify key factors that contribute to positive educational and developmental outcomes for this group of college athletes, researchers have investigated different subgroups of Black male college athletes separately. Two primary subgroups that have been investigated in the literature are those who were identified as high achieving or academically engaged (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012; Harrison & Martin, 2012; Martin & Harris, 2006; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010) and those deemed as academic underperforming/academically at-risk or academically disengaged (American Institutes for Research, 1988, 1989; Benson, 2000; Eitzen & Purdy, 1986; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1985; Sellers, 1992). In the following sections, the authors will highlight the aforementioned literature on Black male college athletes. Following this review of the literature, the theoretical framework for the current study will be presented. Next, the authors will explain the uniqueness of the current study and introduce the guiding research questions.

## **Academically Engaged Black Male College Athletes**

A common theme across studies on high achieving and academically-driven Black male college athletes is their unwavering desire and ability to overcome negative stereotypes associated with their racial/ethnic backgrounds, athletic status, and gender (e.g., pervasive stereotypes in the U.S. associated with Black males include notions that they are intellectually inferior, lazy, aggressive, violent, and athletically superior; Bimper et al., 2012; Harrison & Martin, 2012; Martin & Harris, 2006; Martin, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2010; Martin, Harrison, Stone, et al., 2010). For example, in a qualitative study of 27 high achieving African American male college athletes from four different Division I HWIs, Martin et al. (2010) found

participants acknowledged the pervasiveness of the dumb jock stereotype, but instead of confirming these stereotypes they felt motivated to disprove them. Despite facing significant time constraints balancing their roles as full-time students and college athletes, participants cited how they would work over spring and summer breaks and put in extra study hours throughout the year to ensure they maintained their academic progress and high achievement levels.

In another study, Bimper et al. (2012) found that academically and athletically successful Black male college athletes at different Division I HWI were intentional about developing a strong support system on campus (both within and outside of the athletic department) to foster the development of their holistic identities as well as internalized the notion that their academic success served as a form of resistance against dominant racial norms and a beacon of hope for all Black males. Collectively, these studies on academically-driven Black male scholar athletes revealed these individuals possessed positive support systems (parents, faculty, etc.), strong academic identities, and a keen desire to discredit negative stereotypes associated with Black males in general and Black male athletes more specifically. Next, we will discuss the literature on another group of Black male college athletes who were deemed as academically disengaged and explore the common themes associated with their experiences and subsequent academic outcomes.

## **Academically Disengaged Black Male College Athletes**

Previous studies on college athletes have found that this subgroup of students face different challenges from their nonathlete peers due to the intense demands of intercollegiate athletics (American Institutes for Research, 1988, 1989; Eitzen & Purdy, 1986; Purdy, et al., 1985; Sellers, 1992). Another common theme across the aforementioned studies is the fact that a large number of Black male athletes entered college academically underprepared and grew up with lower socioeconomic statuses compared with their peers. Coupled with these factors, Black male college athletes were more likely to express feelings of isolation on campus, poor or nonexistent relationships with professors, and encounter experiences with racial discrimination on campus and the surrounding community. The collective findings from these initial studies generated awareness of the unique challenges Black male college athletes face before college enrollment as well as throughout their postsecondary experiences.

Benson (2000) opined that African American football players' marginal academic performance in college was a byproduct of an interrelated set of institutional practices that devalued their academic development (e.g., overemphasis on athletics during recruitment, routine enrollment in "easy" majors, and frequent encounters with apathetic and dismissive professors). Despite the fact that researchers have examined academically engaged and academically disengaged Black male college athletes' experiences separately, there has yet to be a study where the experiences of both groups have been analyzed and contrasted concurrently at a single institution using qualitative approaches. The current study seeks to fill this gap. In an effort

to better understand the aforementioned phenomena, the researchers incorporated role theory to examine identity salience, role commitments, and overall college experiences among two groups of Black male college athletes at a Division I HWI.

## Role Theory

Peter and Patricia Adler (1985, 1987, 1991) conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study of the socialization experiences of a Division I men's basketball team in the Midwestern U.S. during the 1980s. One of the key findings from this study revealed how the participants in the study, many of whom were Black, often began their college careers with high academic aspirations (academic idealism), but as they matriculated these aspirations declined due to their increased prioritization of their athletic roles (role engulfment). The authors conceptualized this process in role theory. Role theory focuses on the impact of social systems/structures (e.g., educational institutions, athletic programs, etc.) and processes (e.g., socialization experiences, relationships, etc.) on an individual's identity salience and developmental outcomes (e.g., academic, personal, and psychosocial) (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991).

Core components of role theory include statuses, roles, identities, and self (Adler & Adler, 1991). Statuses refer to positions within an organized group or system that are related to other positions by a set of normative experiences. For example, college athletes possess a higher social status on college campuses due to their public visibility as members of athletic teams and atypical physiques as compared with their nonathlete student peers (Gaston-Gayles, 2009). Roles are activities people of a given status are likely to pursue when following normative expectations for their positions. An example of a role would be a college athlete engaging in behavior that reflects the dumb jock stereotype such as displaying an apathetic attitude toward academic tasks (Sailes, 1993). Identities are defined as the self-conceptions individuals develop from occupying a particular status or enacting a role. Studies have found college athletes possess strong athletic identities, yet often times to the detriment of their personal development aside from athletics (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2008). The self is defined as the "more global, multirole, core conception of the real person" (Adler & Adler, 1991, p. 28). Previous studies on high achieving and academically-driven Black male scholar athletes revealed benefits that manifest when college athletes are provided with support systems that nurture the development of their holistic selves (Bimper et al., 2012; Harrison & Martin, 2012; Martin & Harris, 2006; Martin, Harrison, Stone, et al., 2010).

Adler & Adler (1991) also examined the impact of role-set members on college athletes' holistic development. Role-set members exist in three primary categories: academic (e.g., professors, classmates, tutors, and academic advisors), athletic (e.g., coaches, teammates, athletic administrators, and athletic staff), and social (e.g., girlfriends and peers who are nonathletes). The nature and quality of college athletes' interactions with each of these role-set members greatly influences the salience of their identities, roles, statuses, and subsequent educational experiences and outcomes in college. Additional processes associated with role

theory include role expectations, role conflict, role engulfment, role domination, and role abandonment (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987, 1991). Role expectations are described as an athlete's projected perceptions of their roles as a student and as an athlete before college enrollment. Role conflict (also referred to as role strain Snyder (1985)) arises when athletes encounter the inherent structural constraints and entrenched challenges associated with fulfilling roles as a student and as an athlete at a Division I institution.

Role conflict eventually leads to role engulfment, which is the gradual process of an individual's self-identification with one primary identity such as college athletes primarily identifying themselves as athletes and not as students. Key precursors to role engulfment are role domination and role abandonment. Role domination is "the process by which athletes became engulfed in their athletic role as it ascended to a position of prominence" (Adler & Adler, 1991, p. 27). Conversely, role abandonment is "the process by which student athletes progressively detached themselves from their investment in other areas and let go of alternative goals or priorities" (Adler & Adler, 1991, p. 27–28). Building on Adler and Adler's (1985, 1987, 1991) role theory, Snyder (1985) introduced a theoretical model that explicated the relationship between role commitment and role identity salience. Within this model, a college athlete is either classified as a scholar athlete, pure scholar, pure athlete, or nonscholar-nonathlete depending on their role commitment and role identity salience. Within the current study, the researchers incorporated role theory as a theoretical lens to examine the salience of role identities and role commitments between two groups of Black male college athletes at a Division I HWI.

## Purpose of the Study

The current study examined the experiences of two distinct groups of Black male college athletes at a Division I HWI. In an effort to move away from stigmatizing labels such as "high achieving," "gifted," "low achieving," or "academically at-risk," which reinforce deficit perspectives on student's learning capabilities and outcomes, the authors incorporated the terms educational navigators (ENs) and potential educational navigators (PENs) to describe the two groups in the current study. Educational navigators (ENs) refer to students, in the current study college athletes, who perceive themselves as holistic individuals and engage in behaviors that foster the development of their holistic identities such as being academically engaged. Potential educational navigators (PENs) are students, in the current study college athletes, who also perceive themselves as holistic individuals, but for various reasons (both internal and external) feel limited in their ability to engage in behaviors that foster the development of their holistic identities. For example, PENs may be academically disengaged as a result of being enrolled in a major they did not choose, significant pressures associated with their athletic scholarship, and/or a combination of a host contributing factors (e.g., finances, feelings of isolation, lack of holistic support, etc.).

Consistent with previous studies on academically engaged (Martin et al., 2010) and disengaged (Benson, 2000) Black male college athletes, college grade point

average (GPA) was used as a proxy for academic engagement in the current study. Therefore, ENs earned between 2.50–4.00 GPAs and PENs earned between a 2.49 or below GPAs. It is important to note the authors do not purport that college GPA is a measure of intellectual ability, academic motivation, or learning outcomes, but rather as one indicator of a student's performance and to some extent level of engagement in academic course content. In an effort to explore the aforementioned phenomena further and build on existing literature, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of two groups of Black male college athletes at a Division I HWI to better understand the key contributors that influenced their academic performance levels, academic engagement, and the quality of their overall college experiences. The following research questions were investigated in the current study:

1. What are personal backgrounds of Black male educational navigators (ENs) and potential educational navigators (PENs) at a Division I HWI?
2. How do Black male educational navigators (ENs) and potential educational navigators (PENs) make meaning of their academic experiences at a Division I HWI?
3. How do Black male educational navigators (ENs) and potential educational navigators (PENs) make meaning of their athletic experiences at a Division I HWI?

## Methods

### Site Selection

Northern University (NU)<sup>2</sup> is a four-year public university located in the Northeastern U.S. NU is a member of the NCAA's Division I FBS classification. A Division I was selected because these institutions generate the highest amount of revenue from television broadcasting rights, football bowl games, merchandise and licensing sales, and annual donations (Byers, 1995). These institutions are also charged with the highest level of public scrutiny regarding the imbalance between educational missions and athletic commercialization (Byers, 1995). Using criterion sampling (Patton, 2002), the institution in the current study was selected based on the following criteria: 1) a member of the NCAA's Division I FBS level, 2) possesses a strong history of athletic success (e.g., national championship honors across multiple sports and success at the conference level across multiple sports), and 3) possesses a rich academic tradition as evidenced by being ranked in the top 100 of institutions of higher education in the U.S. (U.S. News & World Report, 2014).

### Participants

The participants ( $n = 10$ ) in this study included Black male college athletes who attended a Division I HWI. Purposeful and criterion sampling techniques were used to identify participants who could provide the most information-rich responses regarding the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). Participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) self-identified as Black, 2) an active member of a varsity athletic team at a Division I HWI, 3) enrolled as a full-time student at a Division I HWI, and 4) classified as an EN or PEN. As previously mentioned,

college GPA was used as a proxy for academic engagement to delineate ENs and PENs for the current study, which is consistent with previous studies on academically engaged (Martin et al., 2010) and disengaged (Benson, 2000) Black male college athletes. The comparison of the two groups was a unique feature and vital aspect of the current study.

## Data Collection

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the current study, the primary researcher contacted the Head Athletic Director and the Director of the Student Athlete Support Services (SASS) at NU and explained the nature and aim of the proposed study. The primary researcher spent four months in the field before the beginning of data collection to develop a rapport with the athletic department and institutional culture. Once a rapport was established, the primary researcher initiated a dialogue with the Head Athletic Director and Director of SASS to identify participants who met the criteria for this study.

Data collection methods included two semistructured focus groups and an 8-item demographic questionnaire (six multiple choice questions and two open-ended questions). Focus groups were incorporated in this study because they allowed the researchers to examine group interactions, which tend to foster greater depth of discussion regarding the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, given the breadth of topics covered in the interviews, the focus group setting provided participants with a level of comfort sharing their experiences with a group of their fellow college athletes. The 8-item demographic questionnaire (see Tables 1 and 2) was beneficial because it allowed the researchers to collect meaningful data that may or may not have been discussed in the focus group (e.g., college GPA, annual household income, etc.).

## Data Analysis

The 8-item demographic questionnaire was analyzed using basic descriptive statistics via the Service Product for Statistical Analysis (SPSS) 21.0. The focus group data were analyzed using a content analysis coding procedure whereby the raw data from the transcripts was coded and organized into emergent themes (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Scanlan, Ravizza, & Stein, 1989). A deductive approach was used to identify the participants' responses to the three research questions for the current study. The content analysis coding procedure involved a four-step coding process: 1) raw data themes, 2) first-order themes, 3) second-order themes, and 4) general dimensions. In vivo coding (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), an inductive approach involving the use of the exact words or phrases from the participant for code units, was incorporated throughout the coding procedure to ensure emergent themes were grounded in the participants' responses and lived experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All codes and clusters were also quantized throughout the coding process to assist the researchers with the identification of emergent themes as well as substantiated by response patterns (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In addition, individual participants' codes were color-coded to ensure the researchers could analyze the extent of consensus among emerging themes throughout the coding process.



**Table 1 Potential Educational Navigator (PEN) Participants' Demographics**

Participants	Year	Major	Sport	College GPA	HS GPA	SES	Parent/ Guardian Composition	HS Race	First Generation
Bishop	Jr.	Econ. & History	FB	2.00–2.49	3.50 or >	\$70K or >	Both parents	Mixed	No
Lamont	Soph.	Comm.	BB	2.00–2.49	2.00–2.49	DNI	Transient	Transient	Yes
Nate	Fresh	Allied Health	TF	1.99 or below	3.50 or >	\$70K or >	Mother/Aunt & Uncle	White	Yes
Octavius	Soph.	Poli. Sci. & AFAM	FB	2.00–2.49	3.00–3.49	\$10K-\$29,999	Single Mother	Black	Yes
Hamilton	Soph.	Comm. & Journalism	TF	2.00–2.49	3.00–3.49	\$50K-\$69,999	Both parents	Mixed	Yes

**Table 2 Educational Navigator (EN) Participants' Demographics**

Participants	Year	Major	Sport	College GPA	HS GPA	SES	Parent/ Guardian Composition	HS Race	First Generation
John	Grad.	Ed. Psy.	BB	2.50–2.99	2.00–2.49	\$30K-\$49,999	Single Mother	Black	No
Ryan	Soph.	Civil Eng. & Physics	TF	3.00–3.49	3.50 or >	\$9,999 or <	Single Mother	Black	Yes
Bryce	Jr.	Mech. Eng.	Soccer	3.50–4.00	3.00–3.49	\$70K or >	Both parents	White	No
Jerome	Sr.	Mech. Eng.	Soccer	2.50–2.99	3.00–3.49	\$70K or >	Both parents	White	No
David	Sr.	Comm.	TF	2.50–2.99	3.00–3.49	\$10K-\$29,999	Mother and GPs	White	Yes



The raw data theme process involved a line-by-line coding of each transcript to identify the subjective descriptions by each participant. This raw data theme process resulted in 1,415 codes (628 for the PENs and 787 for the ENs). Following the raw data theme coding, the researchers engaged in the first order-theme coding whereby raw data theme codes were examined and clustered into related subcategories. The first-order theme process resulted in 162 codes (77 for the PENs and 85 for the ENs). If there were any codes that were not related to a group of codes, then they would be set aside for further analysis. Next, the second-order theme coding involved examining the first-order theme codes for higher-level themes as well as identifying any outlier codes that were not substantiated by multiple participants. For example, if a series of codes were attributed to one participant and not substantiated by a group of codes from multiple participants, the group of codes was deemed as unique to one participant and nonsalient among the group. The second-order theme process resulted in 73 codes (37 for the PENs and 36 for the ENs).

The final phase of the coding involved the general dimensions or emergent theme identification process whereby the second-order theme clusters were examined to identify the most salient themes as determined by the number of quantized codes as well as the extent of consensus across multiple participants. The general dimension analysis phase resulted in six emergent themes (two for each group for the three construct areas: 1) personal backgrounds, 2) college academic experiences, and 3) college athletic experiences). In an effort to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers employed several qualitative research strategies such as different forms of triangulation (data, methodological, and investigator/multiple analysts), negative cases, member checks (including follow-up interviews not analyzed for the current study, but used as member checks), detailed memos, documentation of an audit trail, and the writing of a subjectivity statement (Patton, 2002).

## Results

To better understand the college experiences of the participants<sup>3</sup>, the authors sought to ascertain detailed information about their personal backgrounds. Select demographic information about the PENs and the ENs from the 8-item demographic questionnaire is highlighted in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Participants were also asked to describe their personal backgrounds in their respective focus groups. The emergent themes from each focus group as related to each research question are highlighted in the subsequent sections.

### Personal Backgrounds

***“Role Models at Home, Dumb Jocks at School” – Perspectives From PENs.*** For research question one, participants were asked to describe their personal backgrounds. Using the role theory lens, the theme “role models at home, dumb jocks at school,” was identified from the common perceptions expressed by the PENs regarding their personal backgrounds. More specifically, the PENs described how they felt they were role models for their families by virtue of attending college, but concurrently felt their identities at NU were marginalized. Even though participants were asked to describe their personal backgrounds exclusively, the

PENs contrasted their personal backgrounds with their experiences at NU to highlight the challenges they faced in college. For example, four of the five PENs (Lamont<sup>4</sup>, Nate, Octavius, and Hamilton) were first-generation four-year college students. They described the immense pride their families possessed because they were able to attend a four-year college. Lamont, a sophomore basketball player, described how he was the first in his family to attend college:

My dad never even went to high school. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade. My mom she actually... She got married when she was 18 and had a kid...out of all of my siblings I'm the first to go to college. All of them kind of look at me as a role model. It's so funny because here on campus, it's like I get stereotyped as like a Black athlete ...Like we're dumb, ghetto, like all types of stuff like that.

Lamont's conceptualization of his double consciousness in each of these settings underscore the vast differences in sociocultural norms and values between his precollege background and the Division I HWI he was currently enrolled. Similar to Lamont, all PENs cited how they felt they were role models to their families particularly their younger siblings. It is also important to note that three out of the five PENs (Octavius, Bishop, and Hamilton) also cited how their families valued and emphasized education throughout their youth. The fact that many of their family members (in some cases no other family member) had never attended a four-year college created a sense of pride in the PENs because they were representing their family, which also motivated them to persist in college through graduation.

During their high school years, the PENs described how their statuses as athletes began to ascend due to their success in their respective sports (Adler & Adler, 1991). Even though four of the five PENs (Nate, Octavius, Bishop, and Hamilton) earned 3.00 GPAs or higher in high school, the PENs primarily described their high school experiences in athletic terms, which reflected the salience of their athletic identities before the college enrollment. For example, Octavius, a sophomore football player, captured the sentiment of the group when he said: "If it wasn't for football I really don't know what I would be doing right now." It was clear that sport participation was not only a safe haven from the negative pressures the PENs encountered in their neighborhoods and schools, but also a space where they received strong self-concept and affirmation. Snyder (1985) suggested individuals are likely to have increased role commitment and role identity salience with activities that they experience intrinsic satisfactions.

Along the same lines, the PENs expressed how they felt their athletic abilities were their pathways to upward mobility and the primary means they could attend college, which further explained the value the PENs placed on their athletic participation. Nate, a freshman track and field athlete, conveyed the consensus among the PENs' reasons for attending college when he said: "I didn't want to stay in Castletown. So, my drive was just to go to college if anything just to get away so I could get away and stay away." In other words, the PENs (four of the five of whom were first generation college students) perceived college enrollment by any means (in their case, athletics) as a marker of success in itself with less emphasis on academic performance postenrollment. The PENs' precollege background

information provided vital insight into understanding and contextualizing their subsequent academic and athletic experiences in college.

***“If You’re Going to Do Anything, Strive to Be the Best” – Perspectives From ENs.*** In response to research question one, the theme “if you’re going to do anything, strive to be the best” reflects the ENs’ descriptions of how the development of their academic and athletic identities was influenced by precollege socialization experiences. More specifically, three out of the five ENs (Bryce, Jerome, and John) had parents who had earned college degrees and two were first generation college students (Ryan and David). This is important to note because the ENs emphasized how they were socialized into the notion that college attendance as well as academic achievement were normalized expectations within their families; this fact is reinforced by the fact that each of them either had parents or close family members who successfully attended and graduated from college. Ryan, a sophomore track and field athlete, explained how his mother and his coach instilled in him the value of striving to the best in everything you do:

I feel like it’s like a combination of a lot of the people in my life who influenced me, like my mother and my high school coach. Both of them just agreed that if you’ve going to do anything you might as well strive to be the best at it. . . I was always brought up if you’re going to do something, whether it’s a video game or this class work or it is your sport, try to be the best.

Ryan’s mother, who did not graduate from high school, instilled in him the values of hard work, determination, and striving to be the best in everything you do. In addition, ENs also referenced how their participation in sports gave them a competitive drive that they transferred into their academic endeavors. David, a senior track and field athlete, explained how playing sports influenced his competitive drive:

Definitely, for me at least a part of it is, for the majority of athletes we just strive to be the best at what we do. That’s the reason why we’re competing at the Division I level, because we strive to be the best. We take that attitude athletically as well as academically. . . That is definitely something that has been with me most of my life.

Although, their academic and athletic lives were separate, it was clear the ENs maintained the same mentality regardless of the context. Similar to the PENS, four out of the five ENs (Jerome, Bryce, Ryan, and David) reported earning a 3.00 GPA or higher in high school. Given this performance in the classroom coupled with the ENs’ descriptions of their academic competitive drive, it is evident they possessed strong academic identities before college enrollment as well as high levels of intrinsic motivation to excel academically (Snyder, 1985). Thus, the ENs experienced what the authors of the current study describe as “role balance” before college enrollment whereby they possessed strong academic and athletic identity salience and a high level of role commitment to both identities.

## Academic Experiences

**“I Just Go To Class” – Perspectives From PENs.** Research question two focused on understanding the participants’ perceptions of their academic experiences in college. The theme “I just go to class” reflected the PENs’ minimal interest in their academic engagement and performance in college. The lack of positive relationships with their professors was cited as a key contributor to their lack of academic engagement. In fact, four of the five PENs (Nate, Octavius, Hamilton, and Bishop) expressed how they did not have any relationship with their professors. For example, in response to the question about his relationships with professors, Nate offered the following response:

My who?...My what? [sarcasm implied] I know all the professors by name only because at study hall we have to write the name of our professors down. If it wasn’t for that or because I have to write my professor’s name down on my Big Brother sheet [university-based mentor program], I wouldn’t know their names...your professors don’t really contribute to your learning...All the stuff I’ve learned either happened from the tutors I got during SASS or people who are in a class that helped me or Google.

Nate’s comments highlight the extent of the disconnection between him and his professors. Lamont was the only PEN who cited having positive relationships with his professors. Aside from Lamont, the PENs expressed a range of reasons for their lack of interest in building a relationship with their professors such as they were unaware that they were supposed to have a relationship with professors, they lacked confidence in their professors’ knowledge about the content area they were teaching, and they did not feel their professors contributed to their learning.

PENs also expressed a general sentiment about attending class just to remain eligible rather than possessing a strong interest in understanding the course content and/or acquiring knowledge for their postcollege careers. Hamilton, a sophomore track and field athlete, described his feelings about his academic courses:

To be honest, I just go to class...I can just sit in class not know this professor’s name, sit there, pay attention, take my notes, go to the lab or discussion...and do what I got to do and just pass the class...That is basically my mind set... To be honest some of these professors they either don’t care or they just really don’t know what they be talking about sometimes.

A possible explanation for Hamilton’s lack of interest in his courses could be the fact that he was not enrolled in his desired academic major. Hamilton explained how his career goal is to be an actor in the entertainment industry, but he was unable to pursue the Drama major at NU because of his athletic schedule. Bishop, a junior football player, also had to change from his desired major of engineering because the laboratory class times conflicted with his football practice schedule. In both Hamilton and Bishop’s circumstances, the conditions associated with their athletic participation created barriers or a role conflict between their athletic and academic roles, which resulted in the role abandonment of their student identities and concomitant role domination of their athletic identities (Adler & Adler, 1991).

Along the same lines, PENs communicated the idea that excelling academically in college was not a prerequisite for success in life. In other words, the PENs placed a low value on academic performance as measured by GPA. For example, Bishop expressed his attitude toward college when he said:

College isn't for everyone, that's all I gotta to say really...I see it in the sense that you can get the same knowledge that all these people are getting in the classroom you can get it in books. You know what I'm sayin', you can do your own research...the main thing is that piece of paper.

In other words, PENs in this study were determined to earn their degrees, but felt like college was primarily a time for them to maximize their athletic abilities and pursue their athletic goals. As mentioned earlier, four out of the five (Nate, Octavius, Bishop, and Hamilton) earned a 3.00 GPA or above in high school. Thus, a majority of the PENs had experienced some level of academic success before attending NU, which suggests their socialization into the NU institutional culture exacerbated their athletic role engulfment that was present when they were in high school rather than strengthening their academic identities. The combination of the PENs' lack of connection with their professors, minimal interest in their academic courses, and time missed from class due to athletics contributed to their academic role abandonment (Adler & Adler, 1991).

In contrast to their academic challenges, PENs were also asked to describe institutional services or programs they felt were beneficial to their academic performance. PENs cited two key institutional resources they found were helpful to them, peer tutors and the SASS. Octavius expressed the sentiment of the group regarding their tutors when he said: "The majority of the stuff I learned I learned from my tutor." In addition, all NU athletic teams have assigned counselors from the athletic department's SASS. Collectively, PENs highlighted three beneficial aspects of working with their peer tutors and SASS counselors: 1) the personal attention and interactions, 2) their eagerness to help the PENs learn, and 3) their familiarity with the PENs' athletic schedules. When speaking about their interactions with their peer tutors and SASS counselors, PENs spoke with a level of enthusiasm and genuine appreciation. Unfortunately, none of the aforementioned sentiments were attributed to their professors, which highlighted the role conflict between PENs and primary academic role-set members at NU (professors).

***"I'm a Serious Student" – Perspectives From ENs.*** In response to research question two, the theme "I'm a serious student" reflected the ENs' prioritization of their academic performance and overall role balance in college. Similar to the PENs, a primary factor that influenced their academic engagement was their relationship with professors. However, unlike the PENs, the ENs engaged in concerted efforts to establish a positive rapport with their professors. David, a senior track and field athlete, explained how he built strong positive relationships with his professors:

I know that for the most part with my professors I have a pretty good relationship. Most of them are very understanding...I make sure I tell them or email

them a week in advance the days that I'm not going to be there or if I'm not going to be there that week just to let you know so that we can make plans. Most of the professors really appreciated that I was always so forward about it.

Each of the ENs felt it was necessary for them as athletes to establish a relationship with their professors at the beginning of the semester to ensure communication lines were open and clear. Even though their academic advisors from the SASS sent emails to each professor about the team's schedule at the beginning of the semester, the ENs believed it was their responsibility to communicate and follow up with their professors regarding any personal academic matters. John, a graduate student basketball player, summarized the ENs' logic behind their targeted efforts to establish a relationship with their professors when he said: "That's all they want is for you to show that you care and you're putting forth the effort." The ENs engaged in several intentional behaviors such as meeting with their professors at the beginning of the semester, consistently communicating with them both inside and outside of class, answering questions in class, and earning high marks at the beginning of the semester to earn the professors' respect. Ryan captured the ENs' mentality toward academics when he said: "I'm a serious student."

Despite having positive relationships with their professors, the ENs also cited instances where some of their professors were unwilling to work with them when they had to miss class for athletics. In fact, the number one role conflict the ENs encountered was when they had to miss class due to athletics. Although they notified their professors at the beginning of the semester and closer to the time they would be absent, some of the professors felt athletics was not a sufficient excuse to miss class. Bryce, a junior soccer player, told a story of when one of his professors gave him a difficult time when he had an athletic conflict with attending class:

[W]e had a test and we were traveling again. I asked if I could take it when I came back, which would be, I think, two days after the test... She told me that would be a disadvantage to other students if I took it on Monday and I had extra time... What I had to end up doing, I just stayed on campus and missed the trip and just took it when with the other students. Yeah, something like that, that's what kind of irks me. It makes me want to work harder. On that same test I got almost 100%.

Several ENs described similar examples of when they felt they were being penalized because they were athletes. Ryan echoed Bryce's experience when said: "My freshman year, I had to change my schedule because one of my teachers told me that athletes aren't real students, they are just being portrayed as students, so that they can play their sports..." The fact that an academic role-set member was exacerbating the role conflict among this group of students is alarming and highlights the differential treatment athletes encounter at many institutions of higher education particularly Division I institutions (Adler & Adler, 1991). Interestingly, instead of abandoning their academic role in the face of this role strain, the identity salience of the ENs' academic identities intensified because they were committed to fulfilling their personal academic goals (Snyder, 1985).

In addition, ENs were asked to highlight the key institutional factors that contributed to their academic success. ENs primarily highlighted their own study

habits, university-wide academic support services (e.g., the Writing Center and the Math Center), and study groups with peers. Each of these factors enhanced the ENs' academic role identity salience because none of these interactions were centered on their athletic identities. Contrarily, the ENs did not cite the SASS, athletic peer tutors, or athletic study hall as beneficial. More specifically, the ENs explained how the peer tutors offered through SASS were primarily for entry level courses so these individuals were not useful to them now that they were in upper level courses in majors such as engineering.

## Athletic Experiences

***“I’m an Employee and I Got to Answer to the Employer” – Perspectives From PENS.*** The most salient theme from the PENS' responses about their athletic experiences was the notion that at the Division I level “athletics is a business.” Specifically, PENS talked about how the nature of their relationship with their coaches and the conditions associated with their athletic participation resembled a transactional business arrangement rather than coeducational activity. Moreover, the PENS highlighted how the business nature of Division I athletics was initiated during their recruitment and manifested during their enrollment. Bishop described his frustration with his athletic experiences:

I mean they'll sell you the dream like crazy...first of all they told us they would pay for our flights to go home and everything. I had to pay for all my flights...like the weight room they was saying I was going to get an iPad or something like that... we met a nutritionist on our visit and that was it. I never saw her again. We didn't get a nutrition plan... We never got the iPad... You think it's going to be one thing, but it ends up being like an elevation of high school basically.

The disconnection between role expectations advertised by the athletic role-set members at NU (coaches) and the PEN s' actual experiences once they were enrolled resulted in their feelings of frustration and discouragement. Thus, the NU coaches capitalized on the PENS' desire to compete at the Division I level by providing them with athletic scholarships to attend college in exchange for their time, energy, effort, and athletic talents. When describing his overall athletic experiences, Bishop conveyed the following sentiments:

You got to like conform. You got to sacrifice your own beliefs and feelings on things just to be a part of something. If you want to do something on your own, they're not going to play you and they are just going to throw you to the side like people who are just not necessary to the program ...While you are the employee you're going to have to answer to your employer. That's what football and this college experience has taught me. I'm an employee and I got to answer to the employer.

As mentioned earlier, Bishop had to change his academic major because of athletics and this reflected one way that he felt like he had to conform. In addition, like many recruits, he was also told he was going to see more play time than he



was actually awarded. These concessions along with the unfulfilled promises he described in his comments about his recruitment experiences made him view Division I athletics as a business and fueled his frustration his college experiences. PENS also described how they felt their coaches' control over their athletic scholarship resembled a business arrangement rather than coeducational activity.

Regarding relationships with their primary athletic role-set members, four out of the five (Nate, Hamilton, Lamont, and Bishop) PENS expressed having overall positive feelings about their coaches. Three out of the five PENS (Nate, Hamilton, and Lamont) also cited how their coaches stressed academics and even described examples when they were allowed to miss or be late for a practice to attend to their academic-related tasks. However, it appeared the coaches primarily expressed their concern about the PENS' academics when it seemed to be an issue that may affect their athletic eligibility rather than generally promoting academic achievement. In fact, only one PEN (Lamont) mentioned how his coach emphasized education as important because he knew many of the players would not make it to the professional ranks so they would need something to fall back on. In addition, all five PENS expressed having positive relationships with their teammates and highlighted how they spent time together outside of athletic-related tasks.

***“I’m Running So You Can Be Happy and I Can Keep My Scholarship” – Perspectives From ENs.*** The theme “I’m running so you can be happy and I can keep my scholarship” reflects the ENs’ feelings that Division I athletics is a system designed to maximize their athletic abilities, but instead of solely being exploited by the system, they felt empowered to engage in concerted behaviors to use the system to their advantage. John explained when he realized the business nature of college sports when he said:

I think coming in when student athletes are freshmen they don’t really get how college is a business. Every single thing you do is all money and marketing. You realize that the coaches, they have to feed their family depending on what the athletes do...They try to manipulate us and just so many things just to benefit themselves...Sometimes, it’s so tough you don’t want to believe it because that’s cruel, but that’s how it is when it’s all business...Some student athletes see it and accept it. Some people who know, they understand...we’re just going to play each other out until we can get what we get out of it.

On some level, he empathized with his coaches because he understood they had to “feed their families.” But therein lies the inherent conflict with the structure of Division I athletics whereby coaches’ jobs are largely based on wins and losses with little incentive for them to be focused on their athletes’ academic development beyond eligibility standards or overall personal well-being aside from athletics. The ENs expressed their displeasure with the business structure and felt like they were being used, which manifested in their role strain.

Despite the inequitable structure of this arrangement, the ENs described how they used their athletic participation and the structure of Division I athletics to benefit them holistically. Bryce described how his perception of athletics evolved throughout his college experience:

What I’ve seen my coach do is he will treat the starters and the people that play a lot differently than he treats the rest of the team. Like me, I don’t really

start or play a whole lot. When I was a younger freshman beginning my sophomore year, I would take offense to that. Then I learned to just use soccer as an advantage just to basically get mine. If I'm going to go for an interview, you know I'm going to pull out that soccer thing and make it look like it's a whole great thing right there. I'm going to use it to my advantage. In general, I don't think they care about you unless you're playing very well.

All five of the ENs offered stories that illustrated the harsh reality of Division I athletics. In response to this business structure, the ENs engaged in what the authors describe as strategic responsiveness to interest convergence (SRIC). In order for SRIC to manifest, three conditions must be met: 1) an individual must recognize an inequitable structural arrangement that is designed to exploit them, 2) an individual must internalize or believe they possess the power to alter their personal outcome within this arrangement, and 3) an individual must actively engage in behaviors to counter the inequitable arrangement in such a way to maximize the holistic benefits for themselves. The ENs understood the interests of the NU athletic department was being met by having talented athletes on their rosters performing at a high level. Once the ENs realized their value to their coaches was primarily based on athletic performance, they engaged in SRIC by putting more effort in their academic pursuits and viewing their athletic participation as a tool to help them achieve their goals in life beyond sport. Hence, the ENs' approach to athletics changed from elation about the opportunity to compete at the Division I level to a more business savvy approach as captured by Ryan when he said "I'm running so you can be happy and I can keep my scholarship."

Although the ENs expressed their frustration with the business aspects of their athletic participation, they also described several positive outcomes from their athletic experiences including their relationships with their teammates and their enhanced time management skills. When referencing their relationships with their teammates, the ENs affectionately used terms such as "my brothers" or "my best friends" to describe the nature of their bond. Although each of the ENs mentioned how they had friends who were nonteammates, the general consensus was most of their time was spent with their teammates or other athletes. Regarding relationships with their coaches, John was the only EN to describe how he had a relationship with his coach that extended beyond athletics. The ENs referred to their relationship with their coaches in strictly athletic business terms, which they internalized as appropriate given the structural arrangements associated with Division I athletics.

## Conclusion

The current study offers valuable insight into the experiences of Black male college athletes at a Division I HWI. The uniqueness of this study included its intentional focus, inclusion, and contrast of two groups of college athletes (ENs and PENs) within the same subgroup (Black male college athletes) at one institution. This research design enhanced the researchers' ability to closely examine the relationship between the institutional culture at a Division I HWI and the participants' academic and athletic experiences. Another unique feature of the current study involved the collection and analysis of data on the participants' personal backgrounds. Previous qualitative studies on both academically engaged and disengaged Black male college

athletes have failed to investigate in-depth the influence of precollege backgrounds on participants' subsequent experiences and outcomes in college.

Even though quantitative studies have collected data on precollege characteristics and attempted to control for these factors in statistical models, there is a dearth of exploratory studies that have taken into account and examined how these precollege factors affect postsecondary experiences. For example, the facts that four out of the five PENs were first generation college students, throughout their lives sport served as a safe haven and a source of positive self-concept affirmation, and the reality that athletics was their primary avenue to college had a significant impact on their academic and athletic identity salience and role commitments both before and during college. Unlike previous studies, the incorporation of two groups of Black male college athletes across academic performance levels at one institution also highlighted how institutional services designed to assist college athletes primarily serves as an eligibility stabilizer rather than facilitator for academic achievement. For example, the ENs in the current study primarily attributed their academic success to individual efforts and interactions with individuals outside of the athletic department. In contrast, the PENs spent a majority of their time with athletic role-set members and experienced higher levels of athletic identity salience and concurrent disengagement with academic role-set members.

Moreover, the institutional norms at NU included professors who possessed stereotypical perceptions of athletes, an athletic schedule that prevented some participants from pursuing the major of their choice, and an athletic business culture that focused on maximizing their time, energy, and interest on sport rather than academics, which contributed to the participants' role conflict. Another troubling finding was the fact that the PENs possessed feelings of institutionalized powerlessness to alter their personal situation within this inequitable arrangement (Edwards, 1973; Adler & Adler, 1991). Conversely, when the ENs encountered role conflict they adopted a SRIC approach. Rather than let the structure overhaul their precollege academic role expectations, the ENs focused on maximizing their full potential and using athletics as a catalyst for their holistic development. The fact both groups encountered intense role conflict further emphasized the need for reform of the current structure of Division I athletics as well as the need for greater efforts to enhance the quality of educational environments at postsecondary institutions for college athletes. In summary, understanding how institutional policies, practices, and systems contribute to role conflict and role balance is important for institutions that are seeking to address the unique challenges facing Black male college athletes. A common goal of all institutions of higher education should be to cultivate educational environments that enable and empower students to become *ENs who chart their own paths to success rather than PENs who float aimlessly toward an unforeseen and unsure shore.*

## Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings from the current study provide several implications for policy and practice. First and foremost, findings from this study highlight the importance for any strategic plan or approach designed to enhance the academic achievement and college experiences of Black male college athletes must focus on improving the following three core areas: *conditions, relationships, and expectations.* The authors

suggest that every institution, particularly those who graduate Black male college athletes at lower rates, should consider creating and implementing a *conditions, relationships, and expectations* optimization plan (CREOP). Within this CREOP, the following recommendations should be considered. From the current study, a common challenge experienced by both groups was their frequent encounters with negative stereotypes and differential treatment from their professors. To enhance this condition, institutions should host mandatory and regular workshops where faculty are made aware of their personal bias and behaviors they engage in that negatively impact college athletes' engagement and performance in their class. Student affairs personnel could host diversity training and stereotype awareness workshops that highlight the experiences of college athletes at their institution and/or research on this group of students. In addition, there should be a clear and consistent message from the president's office about the role of athletics at the institution. For example, there should be a concrete policy that states college athletes cannot be penalized for missing class for athletics and they should be given reasonable time to make up assignments and/or complete them in advance or shortly after their return from an athletic trip.

The current study also revealed that coaches have a major influence on college athletes' priorities. Thus, coaches' contracts should be revised to include more incentives for academic achievement rather than simply academic eligibility and progress. For example, higher financial incentives could be awarded for accomplishments such as having a high percentage of players earning a 3.0 or higher on a team, reducing the graduation gap between races within and between teams, and demonstrating significant improvement of academic progress rates (APRs), GSRs, and the previously mentioned measures on an annual basis. These incentives could compel coaches to alter the operating conditions they create for their players. Another condition that should be changed is the replacement of mandatory study hall with academic policies that integrate college athletes into the academic and social culture of the institution. For example, college athletes could be required to attend their professors' office hours, attend tutoring sessions from university-wide academic support services, attend study halls in academic buildings on the main part of campus, and participate in study groups with their peers who are nonathletes. All of these approaches were cited as beneficial by the ENs in the current study. Allocating funds to hire more full-time professional tutors so the college athletes can receive more personalized academic support is another recommendation institutions should consider.

Related to relationships, college athletes should be required to meet with professors consistently throughout the course of the semesters as a part of their eligibility to establish stronger relationships. Given the rich insights expressed by the participants in the current study, institutions should also establish a formal advocacy group consisting of Black college athletes across academic performance levels to share their experiences, challenges, and strategies for success. Another recommendation for enhancing relationships is for athletic departments to partner with student affairs and multicultural offices to develop comprehensive and interdepartmental programs for first generation college students and ensuring they are equipped with the information and support they need to navigate and excel in college.

Regarding expectations, a recommendation for increasing the academic achievement among Black male college athletes is to increase the minimum GPA

requirement for athletic competition for all college athletes. Currently, institutions set their own eligibility standards, which could be as low as 1.99. If the NCAA and its member institutions are truly vested in developing scholar-athletes and not athlete-students, academic standards should reflect this value. Thus, requiring all college athletes to earn a minimum of a 2.50 GPA to compete is a recommendation. College athletes who do not meet this standard could still be allowed to participate in team activities (albeit limited) and maintain their scholarships, but just not able to compete to send the message that academic development is valued more than athletic performance. Collectively, the aforementioned recommendations should be considered for implementation concurrently rather than separately. In summary, if institutions are truly serious about improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Black male college athletes, then they must be willing to change the quality and nature of the conditions, relationships, and expectations facing this group of students.

## Future Research

The current study provides insight into ideas for future research. For example, comparative studies of a similar nature should be conducted at different institutional types such as among and between Division I, II, and III institutions to examine the impact of institutional cultures and athletic competition levels. Similarly, additional comparative studies of Black male college athletes within and across different sports (e.g., profit-generating sports vs. nonprofit generating sports, team vs. individual sports, etc.) should be explored to examine the impact of specific sport and team cultures on academic and athletic experiences. Future research should also explore more in-depth the experiences of first generation college athletes to better understand their experiences. In addition, a range of methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) as well as longitudinal and ethnographic studies could provide deeper insights into the phenomena.

## Notes

1. The term “college athlete” will be used throughout the manuscript to describe individuals who participate in Division I intercollegiate athletics and enrolled as full-time students. Given the history of the term “student athlete” (Byers, 1995) and the misappropriation of the label given the current realities of big-time college sports, the authors intentionally avoid using this term unless cited directly from an NCAA source or research study where the term was used.
2. To insure the anonymity of the institution and participants in this study, directional institutional pseudonyms were assigned to each institution based on its geographical location within its state in the southeastern U.S.
3. The term “participants” will be used when referring to all 10 participants in the study. The term “PENS” will be used when referring to the group of five participants who were classified as potential educational navigators. Similarly, the term “ENS” will be used when referring to the group of five participants who were classified as educational navigators.
4. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants’ names and specific people and places they referenced in their responses to preserve their anonymity.

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