

Advancing Racial Equity and Opportunity in College Sports

Race does indeed matter, and it remains a potent force in 21st-century intercollegiate athletics. We need to search no further than the Division I Black college athlete experience to understand this social phenomenon. Although the issue crosses all genders, the control, commodification, and economic exploitation of young Black men has been a theme of controversy within this complex athletic enterprise for decades (Comeaux, 2018). The stakes are higher today than ever, and the extreme treatment of Black athletes remains prominent. The commercial success of the nonprofit National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its member institutions has enabled disproportionately (privileged) white athletic power brokers—coaches, athletic directors, conference commissioners, and externalities, such as sponsors and boosters—to reap benefits from this enterprise, relying on the undercompensated athletic labor of primarily Black athletes.

What would reforming the NCAA look like, if reform made racial equity the center of the efforts? This paper looks at ways to right historical wrongs and enact structural change in the NCAA, thereby improving the Black college athlete's experience. That will in turn benefit all college athletes, too.

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Ultimately, the quality of the educational experience for Black athletes will be shaped by the vision, knowledge, schemas, and humane policies of those providing equity-focused leadership in this athletic enterprise.

Redressing racial injustice in college sports must be an ongoing commitment for the NCAA and its member institutions. At its core, this is a civil rights issue. Vulnerable Black college athletes should enjoy the same material benefits of safe, healthy learning communities and campus engagement activities that their white counterparts do, and these experiences should be free of exploitation, hostility, and violence. The time is ripe to pursue a more equitable athletics model, including

more humane policies and procedures that support Black college athletes. We must move beyond antiblack, racism-evasive reform initiatives and begin to think about radical projects and policies that center Black athlete conditions, that recognize what it means for Black athletes to exist as humans, and that imagine, without parameters, a new world of possibilities for them. First, we need a better understanding of NCAA policy initiatives that are reformist in nature and that avoid or gloss over discussions about the dehumanization of athletic Black bodies. In the next section I provide a broad description of this reformist perspective visible in much of NCAA and member institution policies and practices today.

An Antiracist Racism-Evasive Reformist Approach

Current narratives touting the declining significance of race and antiblack racism seem to be at odds with the lived realities of Black college athletes. They continue to routinely face mistreatment of all kinds in the disproportionately white space of college athletics. Not surprisingly, there is a tendency for the NCAA and its member institutions to adopt perspectives that are reformist in nature while avoiding discussions about race, racism, and antiblackness in athletics. The NCAA needs to be more bold in its reforms. The past incrementalist moves have not been good enough.

Indicators of this racially based system of advantages and underlying frames of antiblack unconsciousness in athletics are clear. And because athletic personnel tend to use Black athletes for their athletic ability rather than investing in their academic development, these students lag behind their white counterparts in graduation rates (Harper, 2018).

Relatedly, between the 2014–2015 and 2017–2018 academic years, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) accounted for the vast majority of schools penalized for low Academic Progress Rates (APRs) despite constituting roughly 6 percent of all NCAA Division I institutions (Marot, 2019). The APR essentially provides an instant snapshot of the academic culture of a school, particularly the eligibility, retention, and graduation of its athletes in team sports. It tends to penalize low-resource Division I schools, such as HBCUs, in part because these institutions

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do not have the resources that big-time Division I schools do to support athletes sufficiently to comply with APR standards (Cooper & Comeaux, 2017).

There are compelling educational benefits to the APR. For one, these standards place the onus on NCAA member colleges and universities to police themselves and to ensure that all athletes are progressing toward degrees. As such, more and more athletic departments have expanded their academic facilities for athletes and hired more specialized personnel to support athletes (Covell & Walker, 2019). In addition, the APR holds head coaches more accountable for the academic success or failure of the athletes they recruit. In 2019–2020, 22 teams received penalties due to APR violations, including eight that received post-season bans (Marot, 2019).

Nonetheless, much of the APR initiative consists largely of new rhetoric and language while producing the same undesirable results for Black athletes. And, college degree completion rates for Black athletes are below those for their counterparts, which raises serious concerns about whether they are receiving a meaningful education for their athletic labor. The work to identify and implement effective NCAA reform initiatives such as the APR is important and necessary but, too often, not adequate—and, in isolation, it tends to constrain opportunities to address the deeply rooted antiblackness that pervades society.

Essentially, by pursuing objectives through an antiblack, racism-evasive, reformist approach, NCAA and member institutions merely tinker with the edges of the existing athletic enterprise to make its academic outcomes for Black athletes slightly less depressing. This approach leaves unchecked, unaltered, and unnamed, however, the

larger foundational antiblackness within the enterprise itself. A reformist approach also does not adequately address the personal and academic needs of Black athletes, nor does it work toward the transformation of the social and racial order in athletics. In short, such an approach masks deep structural inequalities. We must center the Black athlete conditions and offer a more complete picture and analysis that name and challenge structural antiblackness, all while creating new transformational possibilities and alternative educational futures of justice in athletics.

Centering Antiblackness: Black Athletes as Property

At the center of these ongoing practices in athletics are patterns of antiblackness (Comeaux & Grummert, 2020; Grummert, 2021)—that is, a contempt and disregard for Blackness and society’s recurring failure to recognize Black humanity (Vargas, 2018). Antiblackness manifests as Black people being systematically excluded socially and politically and being viewed and treated as property, as inferior, and even as not fully human through the white gaze, irrespective of their level of intelligence or achievements (Wilderson, 2021).¹

The heavy concentration of Black athletes in revenue-generating sports in comparison to the general student body, the absence of uniform health and safety standards, unhealthy and isolating campus racial climates, and the disturbing inequities in graduation rates by race/ethnicity

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provide deep insight into the larger exploitative structural arrangement in athletics that is driven by antiblack logics of fungibility and disposability (Comeaux, 2018; Grummert, 2021). It is a kind of pressure that Black student athletes’ nonblack counterparts rarely encounter, and, in many cases, can even understand. It is imperative that higher education leaders, including athletic personnel, policymakers, and advocates for Black athletes guide institutional change and improvement by examining how current practices and policies reflect a global antiblack orientation.

In athletics, antiblackness permeates both policy and social engagements. Grummert (2021) used antiblackness and carcerality as an analytic to examine 20 current and former college athletes’ experiences with individuals—teammates, coaches, administration, and medical staff—and with surveillance mechanisms. She found that the structural arrangement of college athletics across Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), Football Championship Subdivision, and non-football Division I institutions and participants resembled other antiblack state projects and structural forms of antiblackness. In particular, Black women athlete participants, to a greater extent than their nonblack counterparts, were subjected to surveillance and disciplining mechanisms, and, at times, bodily and psychological harm designed to maintain antiblack structures and docile bodies. Indeed, there were enormous material and personal costs associated with the academic success of these Black athletes who were located in neoliberal, controlling, carceral-like educational settings.

For example, Black players were treated differently from their nonblack counterparts when choosing academic majors and enrolling in classes. They were highly discouraged from enrolling in certain majors, such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), due to the prevalence of antiblack stereotypes in combination with their athletic-related demands, although nonblack players were afforded more autonomy over their major choice. Furthermore, the majority of studied participants explained how there were plenty of resources—e.g., state-of-the-art academic support center,

¹ I use antiblackness as an analytical framework because Black people, including athletes, do not experience the same ongoing coordinated and relentless attacks on their humanity as other people of color (Hartman, 1997). Put another way, Black athletes do not occupy the same structural positionality as their vulnerable nonblack counterparts. I am not opposed to multiracial frameworks, but they tend to ignore or deny structural forms of antiblackness. Thus, before focusing on multiracial struggles, experiences, and possibilities, using a Black-centered framework to engage in a more robust analysis and interpretation of antiblackness in college athletics is both instructive and necessary.

academic advising, tutoring, entertainment options—within the athletic department to build community with other athletes and teammates and support their academic goals. However, this structural arrangement, as Black women participants described, functioned to isolate them from opportunities to engage in the broader academic community and discipline them into behaviors desirable to the athletic department, including requiring players to live on campus with other teammates and structuring their lives around sport-related activities—e.g., mandatory meetings, practice, film, physical therapy (Grummert, 2021). Black women participants also shared how athletic trainers and coaches undermined or dismissed their injuries, and, at times, pressured them to play while injured.

Grummert concluded:

Higher education institutions have created a carceral partnership with the state in their creation and normalization of the nonprofit “collegiate model of athletics.” College athletics operates in accordance with a carceral, antiblack logic, and in doing so extends other states sites of enclosure, de-politization, and dispossession. (2021, p. 157)

Eminent sociologist Harry Edwards (1985) was the first to characterize college athletics as a “plantation system” that viciously exploits Black athletes; civil rights historian Taylor Branch (2011) called the NCAA and its member institutions a “classic cartel”; more recently, writers Joe Nocera and Ben Strauss (2016) titled their coauthored text *Indentured*, analogizing college athletes to indentured servants. And Hawkins (2013) compared the current structure of college athletics to slavery, highlighting how it recreates and maintains a racist, exploitative, structural arrangement using predominantly Black men to generate large sums of money. Black athletes help generate more than \$100 million in revenue for major college football teams, yet they routinely have lower graduation rates. Only 55.2 percent of Black athletes graduate within 6 years, compared to 69.3 percent of athletes overall (Harper, 2018).

Further, Dancy and colleagues (2018) asserted that universities shifted from relying on enslaved Black labor to build and sustain institutions to relying on the sweat and underpaid athletic labor of predominantly Black athletes to generate revenue and promote the university under the pretense of amateurism (Dancy et al., 2018). These hostile

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and antiblack conditions and the undercompensated athletic labor, inadequate learning opportunities, and increasing toll on Black athletes’ bodies and psyche reinforce the notion that Black athletes are the property of the university; thus, they are yet another mechanism for extracting revenue for the white capitalistic enterprise (Gayles et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2013).

Additionally, engagement within classrooms and teams themselves, at times, reproduces antiblackness rather than authentic, humane, and humanizing experiences. Athletic personnel, including coaches, tend to steer Black athletes into majors or academic paths of least resistance to maintain their athletic eligibility (Fountain & Finley, 2009). Major clustering—that is, when 25 percent or more of the athletes on a team share a major—creates potential problems for Black athletes in particular, including limited future opportunities, because they are forced, at times, to enroll in undergraduate programs that do not align with their career aspirations.

The experience of the Black women athletes also must be addressed. Through document analysis and interviews, Bruening and colleagues (2005) found that the mass media, coaches, athletic administrators, and other athletes play a role in silencing Black women athletes and virtually ignoring their experiences and concerns. They revealed how Black women athletes encounter challenges that differ from those that other women and their Black male counterparts encounter. They demonstrated the need to consider intersectionality and how multiple marginalized Black student experiences are shaped by the social positions these individuals occupy (Crenshaw, 1991).

More recently, Hextrum (2019) conducted a life history interview study with 47 Division I college athletes on track and field and rowing teams. Several of these Black athletes were subjected to racial microaggressions and racist nicknames by their teammates and coaches. For instance, Black women participants recalled white teammates policing their behavior, thus reproducing gendered, racist ideologies (Hextrum, 2019).

Lastly, the negligence and disregard for Black athletes' lives might be most evident with the barrage of concussion lawsuits—more than 300 in 2019—and the deaths of Black college football players over the years (Russo, 2019). In the last two decades, Teg Agu, Ereck Plancher, Braeden Bradforth, Darius Minor, and Jordan McNair, among others, lost their lives during practice due to overexertion, heatstroke, and abusive conditions (Hruby, 2018). In each instance, coaches and administrators were complicit in creating an environment with little regard for athlete health, safety, and well-being, with the most devastating outcomes affecting Black men. Indeed, Black men who participate in athletics are largely positioned outside of humanness or the dominant norms, rendering them structurally vulnerable to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation (Comeaux, 2018).

The Way Forward: Transforming the Black College Athlete's Experience

With this context in mind, equity-focused and justice-oriented leaders must act now to transform college sports and improve the experiences of Division I Black college athletes. They must take urgent and bold action in three areas: enhancing the quality of school-to-career transitions to ensure that Black college athletes are well positioned for life after sport; enforcing mandatory health and safety standards to minimize and prevent injuries, accidents, and/or abuse; and addressing racial disparities in head coaching and senior administrative positions.

As commercial interests in college sports continue to grow, game schedules expand, travel increases, and practice hours are extended. It is increasingly difficult to ignore the effects of sport commitments and demands on the academic goals and futures of Black athletes. These structural impediments make it more challenging—and perhaps less likely—for Black athletes, particularly those

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in revenue generating sports, to fully engage in meaningful educational activities, to fully integrate into the larger campus community, and to prepare for quality school-to-career transitions. This ongoing academic concern primarily constitutes an organizational learning problem among higher education leaders and athletic organizations rather than an individual learning problem or deficiency among Black athletes. In light of the glaring inequities in educational outcomes, I recommend the following:

- **Schools must collect data on the college athlete experience by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport.** This will produce a collaborative culture of evidence that champions the use of evidence-based practices within athletic departments. In short, what is measured is what gets noticed. Thus, when athletic personnel are engaged in the kind of research that influences their decision making, they are more likely to be fully aware of the types and magnitude of academic and personal issues that Black athletes encounter, and they are more likely to respond in meaningful, supportive, and engaging ways (see Comeaux & Grummert, 2020). A well-developed data monitoring strategy should also include academic policies that limit academic major clustering and major choices that do not align with athletes' academic interests and career aspirations.

- **Conferences should use television revenue to develop a degree completion fund for athletes.** The funds should be used for athletes who have exhausted athletic eligibility or who want to return to college and complete their degrees. As well, degree completion funds should be used to incentivize athletes to finish their academic programs in a timely manner.
- **The NCAA and its member institutions should reconsider and redefine the National Letter of Intent (NLI).** In particular, they should consider a reciprocal contract rather than a contract of adhesion, and introduce terms and conditions in the NLI contractual agreement that require all athletes to participate in high-impact educational activities and support them in doing so. These activities—including first-year seminars, internships, undergraduate research projects with faculty, and writing-intensive courses—lead to desired educational outcomes, such as quality school-to-career transitions.
- **Schools should enforce the mandatory 20-hour-per-week NCAA time-demand rule.** Doing so will allow athletes to engage purposefully with college in the same ways that their non-athlete counterparts do. Moreover, schools should create processes and policies that require athletic personnel to report suspected violations of the 20-hour-per-week rule and provide protections against retaliation for whistleblowers.

Enforcing Mandatory Health and Safety Standards

Over the past decade, sport-related concussions—particularly in sports like football and soccer—have generated much public attention. Concussions are concerning for any athlete, but arguably especially for athletes who put their trust in colleges and universities to look out for their best interests. According to the NCAA's own data, concussive injuries represent 5 percent to 18 percent of all reported injuries, depending on the sport. The NCAA reported that between 2004 and 2009, college athletes suffered 29,255 concussions; more than half of these (16,277, or 56 percent) were among football players, who are disproportionately Black.

In addition, discussion of mental health remains largely taboo in college sports, yet approximately 30 percent of

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athletes across divisional classifications self-report mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. And, roughly one third of athletes report challenges stemming from the demands and pressures of their sports, with the highest rates in Division I revenue sports, such as football (NCAA, 2015).

The NCAA has asserted that it has no legal responsibility to protect the health of, or to provide a safe environment for, individual college athletes. The organization refuses to enforce uniform health and safety standards, despite athlete deaths, serious injuries and complications during workouts, and sexual abuse against hundreds of college athletes under the pretense of medical treatment. As well, a 2019 National Athletic Trainers' Association survey of certified athletic trainers who were employed at NCAA schools found that a significant number of coaches override medical decisions and fail to take seriously the recommendations of the independent medical model of care for athletes. Given the rampant abuse and mistreatment of athletes, NCAA and its member institutions should adopt the following five recommendations:

- **The NCAA, as a governing body, should enforce mandatory health and safety standards.** It is their duty to safeguard college athletes.
- **The NCAA and its member institutions should establish a policy that requires identification and selection of independent experts to regularly evaluate every aspect of the care that schools deliver to athletes.**
- **The NCAA and its member institutions should establish a policy to ensure team physicians and athletic trainers can make decisions and deliver health care to athletes free from outside,**

nonmedical influences, such as coaches and athletic administrators. Those who violate or do not comply with this policy must be held accountable, and protections must be provided for physicians, athletic trainers, and others who file complaints.

- **The NCAA and its member institutions should develop processes and policies that require athletic personnel to report suspected violations and abuse.** Moreover, whistleblowers must be provided with protections against retaliation.
- **The NCAA and its member institutions should institute long-term health care or health benefits for athletes who suffer chronic injuries.**

Addressing Racial Disparities in Head Coaching and Senior Administrative Positions

A lack of Black representation is a stubbornly persistent problem in college sports administration. The great majority of coaches, senior administrators, and executives in athletics are white, and they have upheld the long-standing project of collecting the benefits of undercompensated Black labor. During the 2012–2013 season, more than 80 percent of FBS coaches were white, as were more than 86 percent of FBS athletic directors in the prior year (Hummer, 2020). More recently, in the 2019–2020 academic year, 86.2 percent of head football coaches and more than 80 percent of athletic directors in FBS schools were white, as were 80 percent of Power Five conference commissioners (Lapchick, 2019). And, since 1951, the NCAA president has always been a white man.

The lack of Black coaches and senior leaders sends the wrong signal to Black athletes who are attempting

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in college sports administration.

to find their way in an environment that is, at times, unwelcoming and racially hostile. Given the gross underrepresentation of Blacks in leadership positions in athletics, I recommend the following:

- **The NCAA and its member institutions should collect in-depth employee data to measure and monitor equity in recruitment, hiring, and promotion outcomes by racial demographic group.** Research shows that sound employee data monitoring strategies can inform the creation of more equitable and inclusive environments over time.
- **NCAA member institutions should—individually and based on their state laws—enact policies that require at least three candidates of color to be interviewed for each head coaching, senior leadership, or high-profile position.** This is similar to the NFL Rooney Rule and to the Bill Russell Rule adopted by the West Coast Conference.
- **The NCAA and its member institutions should establish a policy that provides financial incentives and disincentives for hiring of people of color in head coaching and senior leadership positions.**
- **NCAA member institutions should actively recruit and hire more Black leaders and leaders of color to serve in athletic positions directly below head coaches and senior administrators.** These mid-level positions include assistant and associate coaches and administrators, such as coordinators and compliance officers. Black directors and coordinators in these positions need more opportunities to rise through the ranks, as many head coaching and top athletic leadership positions are filled from pools of mid-level candidates.

In sum, we must continue with all deliberate speed to account for the crucial issues and intentional policy recommendations outlined in this white paper. We must imagine a different future for Black college athletes who participate in an enterprise that firmly relies on their mistreatment and exploitation and that shamelessly refuses to love them. Black athlete advocates cannot fall silent or remain on the sidelines when it comes to the labor exploitation and rampant antiblackness in athletics. We must employ a razor-sharp focus to challenge and actively respond to antiblackness as a prevailing practice in the athletic enterprise.

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