

# BEYOND BELIEFS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF DIVISION I ATHLETIC ACADEMIC ADVISORS' SOCIAL IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT BEST PRACTICES FOR BLACK MALE STUDENT ATHLETES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given the racial disparity in academic outcomes for Black male student-athletes, there is a significant need for research on athletic academic advisors' professional beliefs about supporting Black male student-athletes, and how those professional beliefs might be shaped by social identity. As citizens and stakeholders in public education, athletic academic advisors can continue to advocate for equity in K-12 school systems, but in their current professional roles, there is not much else that this group can do to improve student-athletes' educational experiences prior to arriving on campus. Instead, athletic academic advisors must confront and address racial and other forms of bias against Black male student-athletes when they arrive on college campuses, and they must work to ensure that Black male student-athletes have college experiences that promote the student-athletes' long-term interests.

As such, this study examined athletic academic advisors' professional beliefs regarding the academic challenges faced by Black male student athletes, and it sought to understand the advisors' preferred advising style for supporting the retention and matriculation of Black male student-athletes. The researcher distributed a survey to athletic academic advisors' professional listservs and social media groups. Using multinomial logistic regression, the researcher analyzed multiple-choice scale items, while open-ended items were qualitatively coded. College capital, inflated athletic identity, and stereotype threat were the three coded themes that

emerged based on the responses from the advisors, and all provided broad but detailed insight into the challenges for athletic academic advisors. This study is significant because findings could be the basis of professional development and targeted interventions that might help improve the higher education outcomes of Black male student-athletes.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to examine NCAA Division I athletic academic advisors' professional beliefs about the perceived academic challenges and their preferred advising styles for supporting the retention and matriculation of Black male student-athletes. One goal was to determine if differences in perception correspond to social categories such as race, socioeconomic status, or gender. A second goal was to explain if perceptions correspond to other, less studied group memberships such as political affiliation and athletic identity.

Formally, the role of the athletic academic advisor is to provide informed advising in a manner that supports student-athletes in establishing an effective academic trajectory (Vaughn & Smith, 2018). Athletic academic advisors are expected to understand and communicate student-athlete eligibility requirements and student-athlete responsibilities, as well as contribute to the development of successful academic and life skills for

these student athletes. Given the importance of athletic academic advisors to student-athletes' academic success, concerns have been raised about how well these professionals are equipped to support an increasingly diverse body of student-athletes. Lapchick (2000) noted, "The reality is that few campuses or athletic departments have the right people to help guide these young men and women into the 21st century" (p. 16). Much of the concern has focused on the needs of Black male student-athletes. Black male student-athletes experience racial, sexual, and gendered biases that impact their lives prior to college enrollment, and this affects academic and athletic performance. Lapchick (2000) continued, "Black student-athletes arrive on most campuses and see that only seven percent of the student body, three percent of the faculty and less than five percent of top athletics administrators and coaches look like them" (p. 17). Similarly, black male student-athletes will encounter a population of athletic academic advisors that overwhelmingly self-identify as White/Caucasian (Rubin, 2015). There is a need to understand how athletic academic advisors might intentionally or unintentionally contribute to continued racial disparity in academic outcomes for Black male student-athletes.

## METHODS

This study used survey methods and the target sample was 200; there were 212 responses collected. The data was collected through a convenience sample using an author-developed survey instrument. The research questions were:

1. What are NCAA Division I athletic academic advisors' professional beliefs and preferred advising style for supporting the retention and matriculation of Black male student-athletes?
2. What are NCAA Division I athletic academic advisors' perceptions of academic challenges for Black male-student athletes?
3. Is there a correlation between social identity and the selection of preferred advising style and professional beliefs regarding academic support for Black male student-athletes?

The survey asked for the advisors' thoughts on the main academic challenges for the Black male student-athlete. The survey was comprised of multiple-choice questions and one open-ended text box. Questions used on the survey were developed from research on Black male student-athletes and advising styles. The results of the nominal survey noted that most of the advisors preferred developmental advising regardless of their background and prior experience. Developmental advising recognizes the important interactions between the student and his/her environment and it focuses on the whole person, meeting him/her at their current stage of life. This style of advising has been shown to be the preferred method when working with Black male students in the majority of student-affairs research.

For the open-ended question, the results showed three major themes. The first theme is college capital. College capital refers to the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to college student success. Specifically, when referring to Black male student-athletes, many of the respondents considered lack of college capital to be one of the main challenges in pursuing their undergraduate degree. Factors leading to a lack of college capital for many Black male students include prior achievement, precollege programs, socioeconomic status, and parental expectations (Strayhorn, 2010). The college capital theme emerged from the respondents' concentrated concerns relating to the academic backgrounds, time management, and status as a first-generation college student in regard to the Black male student-athlete. These respondents found that black male student-athletes were not equipped with the specific skills needed to navigate academics.

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The second major theme that emerged from the open-ended responses related to academic challenges caused by the Black male student's inflated identity as a student-athlete. This theme was developed from the respondents' concerns that athletic privilege, academic expectations, and postgraduate plans served as the biggest academic challenges for the Black male student-athlete. Their concern was related to the Black male student-athletes' developing such a strong attachment to their athletic identity that they often let their academic pursuits fall by the wayside.

The third theme that emerged from the open-ended responses was stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is being at risk of confirming as self-characteristic a negative stereotype about one's classified or assigned group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Dr. Claude Steele, who developed the theory of stereotype threat, determined that a negative inherent feeling about self could be threatening enough to have disruptive effects when completing specific tasks. This is especially true for Black male student-athletes who are not comfortable in the classroom and are hyper aware of the student-athlete stereotype. Beasley and Fischer (2012) described the phenomenon: "The results of these types of experiments indicate that simple awareness of a stereotype is sufficient to reduce women and minority's intellectual performance" (p. 428).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study provided an in-depth examination of the advisors' perspectives when working with Black male student-athletes who are often coined as an academically and socially "at-risk" population due to their lower-than-average graduation rates and the campus perception that they are apathetic towards academics. The data illustrated that the advisors' perceptions did not differ much on the lines of their personal biases, but that their career industry training as athletic academic advisors shaped this viewpoint. The advisors' perceptions of this specified student population's academic challenges were coded into the following themes: college capital, inflated athletic identity, and stereotype threat.

While academic challenges are not unique for traditional college students, Black males' graduation rates have been extremely low in comparison to any other gender or racial group (Harper, 2016). Additionally, at many NCAA Division I institutions, student athletes are given admissions exceptions making them at-risk in academic environments from the start (Martin & Harris, 2007). Many of the special admissions exceptions are given to the revenue sports such as football and men's basketball that are primarily comprised of Black male student-athletes. This initial eligibility process is the main reason for many of these academic challenges, but with the competitiveness of major college athletics, many universities consider these exceptions a necessary evil even though it puts these athletes at increased academic risk. These factors led to the responses that indicate major academic challenges for Black male student athletes stem from a lack of college readiness, inflated athletic identity resulting in athletic privilege, and their own self-doubts and lack of a sense of belonging on college campuses.

## RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several implications for practice for athletic academic advisors concerning advising black male student-athletes. Black male student athletes are in need of additional transitional programming, with the first focus on de-emphasizing the "athletics-over-all" mentality that many Black male student-athletes possess, and the second focus on time management and problem-solving skills. Targeted programming is needed to educate Black male student-athletes about their new environment, policies, procedures, and how to take advantage of their resources.

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For many advisors it is hard to designate which students need additional transition assistance and who will be fine on their own. This often leads to the students being thrown directly into college classes and an environment for which they are not ready. This is where setting a culture of academic accountability is essential as the Black male student-athletes learn how to adjust to their new expectations.

Programming related to inflated athletic identity as an academic challenge will require more than just baseline programming and information sessions for Black male student-athletes. Identity diffusion is not something that can happen overnight, but challenging the student athletes to find themselves and develop additional identities to being a student-athlete is very important. One of the most impactful ways to start the process is to have a mentoring program, specifically with former student-athletes who can shed light on the professional process and the transition to life after sport. As identified in the demographics, many of the advisors were former student-athletes themselves. Having that serious conversation with Black male student-athletes about who they are outside of sport and their non-athletic postgraduate plans will assist with academic identity and motivation.

Finally, academic challenges relating to stereotype threat can be addressed with programming, mentoring, and referring the Black male student-athletes to counseling services. Many of these students may have unintended pretenses relating to their educational experience that needs to be unpacked by a professional. In addition to assessing and addressing their issues, many of the students have not been tested for learning disabilities that may impact their education. Some of the Black male student-athletes walk into the classroom with a defeatist attitude, and when the students can recognize the presence of stereotype threat, it can assist them with overcoming their stigma. Not only do the findings in this study reflect significant contributions to the literature that should be investigated further, but they also highlight potential gaps in professional development for athletic academic advisors, especially as the profession continues to grow and NCAA institutions continue to admit academically at-risk student athletes.

## REFERENCES

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Rubin, L.M. (2017). Who are athletic advisors? State of the profession. *NACADA Journal*, 37(1), 37-50. doi:10.12930/NACADA-15-046.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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