The Academic Experience of African-American Male Student-Athletes

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Abstract

This paper explores the academic experience of former African-American student-athletes who have graduated from Virginia Tech. Student-athletes choose to attend college for many different reasons and once enrolled, they often face challenges such as time management. Academic support centers have developed throughout the country at various institutions to assist student-athletes with the academic challenges that they may face. Through interviews with former student-athletes, this paper was developed to answer two research questions: What experiences have positively impacted African-American male student-athletes' academic success and graduation? And, what support initiatives and/or programs have student-athlete support offices implemented at Virginia Tech to support African-American male student-athletes?

Seven former student-athletes were interviewed in this study and results show that the majority of those interviewed chose to attend Virginia Tech to play basketball and to receive a strong education. The biggest challenge faced by student-athletes was time management. The most utilized resources were: academic advisors, professors, tutoring, and relationships with coaches, teammates, and others. All of the student-athletes interviewed had a positive experience at Virginia Tech and were pleased with their decision to obtain a degree. In terms of the programming for African-Americans, common themes were that they did not want to be stereotyped.

Implications and recommendations based on this research include continuing to support the African-American student-athlete population by developing relationships with them.

Keywords: student-athletes, academics, African-Americans, graduation

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Introduction

NCAA graduation rates and the academic success of student-athletes have continued to rise over the years and many people speculate about the factors that influence the numbers behind these rates. Even though the literature states that a degree may not be the primary goal for many African-American student-athletes, they are still earning their degrees at a record pace. The purpose of my study was to explore why these student-athletes graduation rates are at an all-time high despite the fact that this is not their primary goal for attending the university. I chose to research what Virginia Tech has done to help impact graduation rates and support the African-American male student-athlete population. The purpose of study was to find out what African-American male student-athletes at Virginia Tech feel has led to their success academically and what areas they think are lacking. This project was approved by Virginia Tech IRB (#19-366).

My interview participants consisted of African-American male student-athletes who have earned their degree from Virginia Tech. In these interviews, I asked them about their academic experience at Virginia Tech, the resources they have used, what they feel could have helped them more, and what they think has both led to their academic success, and been a barrier or challenge to their academic success. There is a lot of research on the numbers, such as graduation rates, APR, etc., but there is limited research on the factors that influence these numbers. Very little research has been done from the student-athletes perspective and how they view the resources they have access to, as well as their thoughts on academic success. The findings from this study can be used to help the student athletes support services office continue to evolve at Virginia Tech. They can also be used to help other academic support office for student-athletes at other universities. Finally, the data provided by student-athletes can be used to help future

generations of student-athletes and administrators to ensure that they are doing everything they can to create an environment conductive to academic success.

Literature Review

Student-athletes differ from non-athletes in a number of ways. According to Gayles (2009), student-athletes tend to differ from their nonathletic peers in their levels of career maturity and psychosocial development (p. 35). They also differ from their peers in the amount of time spent dedicated to their sport, missed class time, and academic requirements. Gayles (2009) states that, "participation in college sports may actually have a negative impact on cognitive development" (p. 35). In a study on African-American male student-athletes, Person and LaNoir (1997) found that on average black male athletes spent twenty-eight hours preparing for and participating in their sport and twenty-three hours preparing for class; on average they missed two classes per week during the season and one class during the off season (p. 80). Some student-athletes spend even more time than that on their sport. "Some student-athletes spend upward of forty hours a week on their sport, and when they are done practicing or playing they are often in pain from the intense physical, and emotional exhaustion; as a consequence, the motivation to study loses priority to getting rest" (Person & LaNoir, 1997, p. 80).

Many student-athletes would not be in college if it were not for their athletic skillset. Although black male athletes place high priority on completing their degrees, education is not their primary goal, and it reveals that had they not been recruited for athletics many would not be attending college (Person & LaNoir, 1997). The issues of admitting ill-prepared athletes was intensified by the desegregation of college athletic teams, which, combined with open admissions, freed coaches to recruit virtually any athlete in the country, including those from

predominantly African American, poor, and academically inferior schools in the south, or inner cities throughout the country (Ferris, Finster, McDonald, 2004).

Not only do student-athletes have to maintain university admissions requirements, they must also meet NCAA initial eligibility requirements to ensure they are academically eligible to compete in their sport. These NCAA guidelines have changed and evolved over the years, leading to stricter admissions standards. Part of the NCAA reform processes began in 2003 with the NCAA eliminating another "cut score" in this case 820, the minimum SAT score required to play at the college level (Hamilton, 2005). The NCAA also raised the bar both by increasing the number of "core course" high school athletes had to take and by increasing the grades they were expected to make in them (Hamilton, 2005). The NCAA eligibility requirements are more restrictive that the admission requirements of approximately 25% of division 1-A universities. Some athletes who could matriculate at these universities as students cannot do so as athletes (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004). For so many of these student-athletes, if it wasn't for their sport, they wouldn't be able to earn a degree. Even though many of these student-athletes wouldn't have gotten into school if it weren't for their athletic ability, many of them are performing well in the classroom once they arrive.

Meeting the eligibility requirements and graduating is not easy for many student-athletes. According to research, football and basketball student-athletes scored lower in reading comprehension and mathematics compared to non-athletes and athletics in other sports. Female athletes scored lower than female non-athletics on reading comprehension. Female athletes do not experience long term disadvantages in reading comprehension as a result of participating in college sports (Gayles, 2009). African American students as a whole constitute only 8.7 percent of college enrollments and a very low 5.7 percent of college graduates (Person & LeNoir, 1997).

These numbers reveal that about one out of every nine African American male student at predominantly white four-year institutions is an athlete (Person & LeNoir, 1997).

A number of academic support program directors talked about how critical the admissions office is to their success in graduating student athletes. Nearly 60 percent of black student-athletes scored in the lowest quartile of both the SAT and ACT, while 6 percent scored in the highest quartile (Person & LeNoir, 1997). Although these student-athletes may not be the best fit for an institution academically, coaches may still want to recruit them. The pressure to win may potentially impact admission practices, graduation rates, and the overall academic reputation of the institution (LaForget & Hodge, 2011).

In January 1991, the NCAA Division I membership adopted a proposal mandating academic counseling and tutoring services for all Division I student-athletes (Meyer, 2005). The eligibility requirements provide athletes with an additional incentive to maintain a 2.0 GPA and take course that progress toward a degree. To this end, many athletic departments have developed highly sophisticated academic support services for this athletes, including academic advising, tutoring, academic mentors, learning specialists, and any number of other services. When effective, these factors increase athletes' satisfaction with the collegiate experience and promote continued persistence toward a degree (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004). Where the time constraints are most demanding, most Division I institutions have high quality support service programs in place to assist student-athletes with managing academics and athletics tasks (Gayles, 2009).

Individuals providing support to the student athletes can be very effective in assisting the coaching staff by monitoring their progress and reporting to the coaches. Athletic academic advisors' primary concern is the integrity of their institutions and the welfare of student-athletes.

They act as liaisons between the academic and athletic communities and are primarily responsible for ensuring that student-athletes have as much academic success as their ability can afford (Meyer, 2005). Student athletes need academic support services to increase their likelihood of academic success (Gaston-Gayles, 2003). According to Coach Crimins, "When you recruit a young man who does not have the proper background, then you have to make sure there is a support service, a developmental process, which can accommodate this young person" (Bingham & Crimins, 1989, p. 31). Academic support centers and athletic academic counselors are there to fill that role. The focus of academic support programs is not on maintaining eligibility to compete but reflects a greater concern for the development of the whole student through such support services as life skills development and mentoring (Gaston-Gayles, 2003).

Research Design

The philosophical framework for this study was epistemological. I chose this framework because I am currently a student-athlete and am studying NCAA graduation rates and academic success. I was looking to see what had influenced the academic success of African-American male student-athletes. Because of my experiences and knowledge as an "insider" with the population being studied, I felt this framework was most appropriate. My interviews were conducted with African-American male student-athletes who had earned their degrees from Virginia Tech. I had direct access to this population and to the athletic academic counselors at Virginia Tech through my status as a student-athlete. I contacted my interviewees directly through phone. Conducting interviews was an important part of my project that I needed to be successful.

The interpretative framework for my study was the social constructivism framework. This framework was chosen because my study attempts to understand the world in which

student-athletes live and athletic academic professionals work. There has been an increase in

graduation rates and academic success among student-athletes over the last ten years and I was

interested in learning more about what led to this increase. According to the NCAA, "more

Division I student-athletes than ever are earning their degrees" (Brutlag Hostick, 2018). The goal

of my study was to see how African-American male student-athletes viewed the rise in

graduation rates of student-athletes. There may be a number of reasons why there has been a rise

in graduation rates. My interview questions were more open-ended and allowed for the interview

participants to express their opinions and thoughts.

As the researcher in this study, I realize that my background may shape my

interpretation of my findings. This is because when I am going through this project I realize that

everyone doesn't have the same background or connection to this information like I do. I have

graduated from a Division I institution so I am in the statistic that I am studying. I know what

helped me get to graduation day and the support and resources that I used to be successful in

college. I asked others what they believe influenced these rates and I interpreted the results of the

study to try to make sense of this increase in graduation rates.

The research questions for this study were:

1. *What experiences have positively impacted African-American male student-athletes'*
   academic success and graduation?
2. *What support initiatives and/or programs have student-athletes support offices*
   implemented at Virginia Tech to support African-American male student-athletes?

Methodology

Data was collected through interviews (Appendix A) with seven former African-

American male student-athletes who had earned their degree from Virginia Tech. These

individuals were recommended through snowball sampling. Each interview participant was

contacted through phone and asked to set up an appointment after going through the interview

consent process. All interviews were conducted by phone and lasted approximately 20 minutes.

Data was collected on cellular recording devices and deleted after being transcribed. Upon being

transcribed, each interview was coded and themes were found among the data.

Results

The results of this study helped to shed light on the academic experiences of African-

American male student-athletes at Virginia Tech. Unfortunately, the population sampled was

small due to timing; however, seven interviews were conducted with African-American male

student-athletes who have earned their degrees from Virginia Tech. The data collected helped to

answer the research questions about what experiences have positively impacted African-

American male student-athletes' academic success and graduation and what support initiatives

and/or programs have student-athlete support offices implemented at Virginia Tech to support

African-American male student-athletes.

In terms of the first question asked, the interviewees gave specific feedback regarding the

experiences that they have had that have positively impacted their academic success and

graduation. As one interviewee stated:

> *Just by building relationships with positive people. This was a very different experience than home so having someone to have my back and having a support system was very helpful and I was overcome any challenge that I faced…*

> *I think having an academic advisor was very helpful for me. Because I was able to stay on top of school work on the road, throughout tournaments, throughout the schedule, everything like that.*

For the second research question, interviewees listed the support services that they have utilized and found helpful, as well as offered advice on how to improve the support for African-American male student-athletes.

> *I used the library from time to time, I used the training staff, I used the dietitian, I used our academic advisor. I think I was pretty well rounded on using the resources that the school provided…*

> *I think maybe building programs that probably allow an appreciation for the African-American athletes because there's such a small population of them at this school so I think building programs that show an appreciation of them would be helpful.*

In addition, interviewees discussed the need to not stereotype when it comes to African-American student-athletes. As one interviewee stated:

> *I don't think there should be a stereotype on African-American student-athletes in the sense of that they are just coming here to play a sport. I think our basketball team as a whole wiped that stereotype out of the water when we had a team GPA of 3.22 and knowing that even as African-American student-athletes, we can be well represented on the court and off the court when it comes to us as human beings- students, and players.*

In transcribing the data from the interviews, the following themes were found to be the most significant: relationships, time management, support system, academic advising. Based on the interviews conducted, one of the biggest challenges that these individuals reported was time management. In order to overcome this challenge, some of the most influential resources utilized were their relationships and support systems, including academic advising/academic advisors and professors. The results are consistent with the literature which states that time management is a challenge for all student-athletes.

An interesting finding in the results is that most of the student-athletes who were interviewed stated that they would still have attended college if it were not for their athletic

ability. This finding differs from what has been found in the literature, stating that many college

athletes would not attend college if it were not for athletics. As Person & LaNoir (1997) stated,

"although black male athletes place high priority on completing their degrees, education is not

their primary goal… had they not been recruited for athletics many would not be attending

college" (p. 81). The student-athletes sampled in this study referenced their parents'

expectations, their academic abilities, and their high school preparation as reasons for their

statements.

Theme	Code
Resources	Relationships
	Support System
	Library
	Training Room
	Dietitian
	Academic Advisor
	Professors
Barriers	Time Management
Suggestions	Appreciation
	Less Stereotypes

Discussion

The interview participants in this study provided feedback that can be extremely helpful

to practitioners who work with student-athletes in institutions. As the results concluded, not all

student-athletes are only in college to play their sport and should not be looked at as only an

athlete. Although athletics may have been a primary reason for attending the college of their

choice, they all took pride in their decision to earn a degree. The student-athletes took advantage

of the resources available to them and took pride in the relationships that they made so that they

could make the most of their opportunity. They did not want to be "lumped" together or

stereotyped as not taking their academics seriously. Many of them successfully proved people

wrong through their studies. Educators can use this information to ensure that they are treating

student-athletes fairly and getting to know them on a deeper level. In terms of resources, the

interview participants suggested that the resource that has helped them the most is their

relationships. As individuals work with student-athletes, they should remember this and realize

the impact that they can have on this population. Although they have many barriers to their

academic success, their relationships with others could be the one thing that helps them

overcome these barriers. Recommendations for future research include interviewing more

African-American male student-athletes to get a larger sample size.

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Appendix A

The Academic Experience of African-American Male Student-Athletes

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

(IRB #19-366)

PROTOCOL

The interviewee will follow a standard protocol for each session that includes:
- Welcome and opening remarks
- Informed consent form review
- Reminder of interview procedures
- Questions and answers period
- Wrap-Up

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

Welcome, and thank you for being here. My study focuses on Graduated Student Athletes at Virginia Tech. The purpose of this study is to find out how has Virginia Tech helped you to succeed academically. How have you felt being a Student Athlete at Virginia Tech, and what might make your experience better?

I am Ahmed Hill, and I will be conducting the interview. We are going to focus our discussion today on your experiences at Virginia Tech. My task is to ask questions, and seek clarification as needed during our visit.

CONSENT FORM REVIEW

You received a copy of the consent form with your invitation to participate in the interview. Do you have any questions about this form, or parts of the form that you would like to review? Are you willing to give your consent to participate in this interview? If yes, I will now turn on the recording device. If no, thank you for visiting with me.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

- I will be recording this interview using an audio recorder.
- If you need to take a break at any time, please let me know and I will give you the time you request.
- You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and you can stop your participation at any time if you feel uncomfortable.
- Within the next week you will receive a written transcript of this interview. Please respond within one week, indicating any changes that need to be made. If you need additional time, please let us know. If we do not hear from you, we will assume that you were comfortable with the transcript and felt it accurately reflected our visit.

Interview Questions

Warm-Up

1. Tell me about yourself and what you have been doing since graduation from VT.
2. What was your goal or reason for attending Virginia Tech?

Personal Experiences

1. Describe your experience as a student-athlete at Virginia Tech.
2. Do you believe that if it was not for your athletic scholarship, would you have attended college? Why or why not?
3. Now that you have graduated, are you happy with your decision to attend Virginia Tech and obtain a degree or would you have rather just exceled in your sport?
4. What challenges did you face as a student athlete at Virginia Tech?
5. How did you overcome your challenges at Virginia Tech as a student athlete?
6. Did any of the resources provided by athletics help you along the way at Virginia Tech

Program Support

1. Which resources did you use to assist you academically while at Virginia Tech?
2. Looking back at your undergraduate experience, do you believe that you were equipped with all of the tools you needed to be successful academically? Why or why not?
3. In which areas/ways do you think Virginia Tech could improve in terms of support for African-American male student-athletes?

Wrap-Up

We are now at the end of the interview. I want to sincerely thank you for your time and input. Are there other comments you would like to make or questions you might have?

Are there other people that you recommend we contact for this project?

Thank you! I will provide the written transcript within a couple weeks. If I do not receive corrections from you within the agreed upon time, I will assume the transcript is accurate.