

Motivation vs. Structure: Factors in the Academic Performance of African American College Athletes

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Historically, sports, along with entertainment, has been one of the few avenues of upward mobility in American society in which African Americans might hope to be judged on their ability instead of their skin color (Ashe, 1988; Edwards, 1979). Although African American males are under-represented in just about every traditional venue for upward socioeconomic mobility in our society (such as education), they are significantly over-represented in professional football, baseball, basketball, and boxing. African Americans comprise 12% of the United States population and the median enrollment of African American undergraduates at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institutions is only about 4% (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1988), yet they comprise about 46% of the football players and 62% of the male basketball players who participate in Division I college athletics (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 1992). Approximately 1 out of every 9 African American males on the campuses on the 302 Division I universities are scholarship athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 1995). In contrast, only 1 out of every 50 White male college students are scholarship athletes. Intercollegiate athletics is clearly an important vehicle for higher educational attainment among African American males.

Over the past 15 years, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has experienced a reform movement to restore academic integrity to intercollegiate athletics. The focus of the NCAA's reform efforts has been directed towards making incoming student-athletes as similar academically to the rest of the student body as possible by increasing the pre-college academic requirements for the initial eligibility of potential student-athletes. As a result, Proposition 48 was implemented in the fall of 1986. It required that potential student-athletes obtain high school grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 in a set of 12 core curriculum courses as well as at least a 700 combined score on the SAT to be eligible to participate in athletics during their first year. A potential student-athlete who met only one of the requirements was considered a partial qualifier and was ruled ineligible to compete during their first year. However, the partial qualifier was allowed to receive an athletic scholarship. In 1989, the NCAA passed legislation (Proposition 42) that eliminated the partial qualifier. The passage of Proposition 42 meant that all student-athletes must meet both the SAT requirement and the grade point average or they would lose the opportunity to receive an athletic scholarship their first year in college as well as lose a year of athletic eligibility. In 1996, the initial eligibility requirements were raised and a sliding scale was implemented to address some of the criticism levied about the use of a single cut-off score for the SAT. The new legislation requires a potential student-

athlete with a 2.0 high school GPA on a set of 15 core curriculum course to earn a combined score of 900 on the SAT in order to be eligible to receive an athletic scholarship. A potential student-athlete with a combined 700 SAT score must have earned at least a 2.5 GPA in the 15 core curriculum courses in order to be eligible.

Recent evidence suggests that the increased initial eligibility requirements have been effective. The overall graduation rate for student-athletes has steadily increased since the adoption of Proposition 48. The five-year graduation rate for all student-athletes has grown from 45.7% in 1990 to 58% in 1995. This improvement has also been seen in the African American male student-athletes have also exhibited an improvement in their graduation rates. In 1991, the NCAA reported that only 24.8% of the African American male student-athletes who entered school in the fall of 1984 had graduated five years later (Lederman, 1991). Four years later, the five year graduation rate for African American male student-athletes had climbed to 42% (NCAA, 1995). Interestingly, African American male student-athletes actually graduate at a significantly higher rate than African American nonathletes who graduate at a rate of 34%.

However, the picture is not all rosy for African American male student-athletes. There is growing evidence that African American male student-athletes are disproportionately excluded as a result of the initial eligibility requirements. African American athletes were six times more likely to be excluded by Proposition 48 than white student-athletes (McArdle & Hamagami, 1994). The NCAA (1991) reported that approximately 65% of the African American athletes who entered before Proposition 42 standards came into effect in 1990 would have been ineligible under those standards. Meanwhile, only 9% of the white male and female athletes would have suffered the same fate (NCAA, 1991). An NCAA (1993) report on graduation rates found that percentage of African American male student-athletes in the year immediately following the implementation of Proposition 48 dropped significantly. Although the percentages of African American male athletes steadily increased over the next two years, they still did not reach the percentages witnessed in the pre-Proposition 48 year of 1984.

Other studies have reported evidence which suggests that many of the African American student-athletes who are excluded from full participation and scholarship opportunities by the initial eligibility requirements would actually graduate if they are given the chance (NCAA, 1984; Walter, Smith, Hoey, & Wilhelm, 1987). The NCAA reported findings regarding the graduation class of 1984, two years before Proposition 48 went into effect, that 54% of African American male athletes who attended and subsequently graduated from the surveyed institutions would

have been disqualified from freshman eligibility by the standardized test requirement of Proposition 48 (NCAA, 1984). Similarly, Walter and his colleagues (1987) reported that 60% of the African American football players at the University of Michigan from 1974-83 would not have been eligible under Propositions 48 and 42. Yet, 87% of those African American football players who would have been excluded under Propositions 48 and 42 actually graduated.

The NCAA's almost exclusive focus on increasing initial eligibility requirements has been based on the assumption that the academic problems of student-athletes are motivational in nature. Specifically, the argument has been that too many student-athletes place too much emphasis on athletics and not enough emphasis on academics. Thus, the higher admission criteria is believed to send the message to potential student-athletes in junior high school and high school that they must place a greater emphasis on academics if they plan to play sports in college. Further, potential student-athletes' improved academic preparation at the secondary level will result in increases in the graduation rates once they reach college. Some proponents of the current reform movement also believe that the initial eligibility requirements also send a message to high schools that they must also do a better job of preparing their athletes academically for the rigors of college work.

Although the Presidents Commission has whole-heartedly embraced the Motivation Argument as its primary explanation for the need for academic reform, an examination of the underlying premises of the argument raises doubts about the validity of the argument. Four major assumptions undergird the Motivation Argument. (1) A large number of student-athletes undervalue academic achievement. (2) Academic motivation is related to academic achievement for student-athletes. (3) Taking a way athletic opportunities will motivate student-athletes to work harder in the classroom. (4) High schools will be motivated to do a better job of preparing student-athletes academically for college by the potential rejection of their under-prepared student-athletes.

With respect to the first assumption of the Motivation Argument, the research literature contradicts the premise that a significant number of student-athletes undervalue academics. In 1986, the NCAA commissioned the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to survey student-athletes at 42 Division I institutions about their academic, athletic, and social experiences. Overall, 95% of the student-athletes in football and basketball reported that getting a college degree was either important or of the greatest importance to them (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1988). In a report written specifically about African American student-athletes, AIR found that more than 82% of

African American basketball and football players reported getting a college degree as being of the greatest importance (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1989). In both instances, student-athletes reports of the importance of obtaining a degree were not significantly different from a comparison sample of college students who did not participate in intercollegiate athletics.

The second premise of the Motivation Argument - that academic motivation is related to academic performance for student-athletes- is also unsupported by the research literature. Surprisingly little research has examined the relationship between student-athletes' academic motivation and their academic performance. The little research on academic motivation that is available suggests that academic motivation is not a significant predictor of student-athletes' academic performance. Sellers (1992) found that neither effort (as measured by hours spent studying) nor aspirations (the importance of obtaining a degree) was a significant predictor of student-athletes' grade point average. In an AIR report focusing specifically on African American student-athletes, over one-third of the African American football and basketball players who regarded earning a degree as being of the greatest importance had earned GPA's of less than 2.0 (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1989). More research is needed before anything definitive can be concluded regarding the role of academic motivation in the academic performance of student-athletes.

A third assumption underlying the Motivation Argument is that taking away the opportunity to compete at the intercollegiate level will motivate student-athletes in high school to place greater emphasis on their school work. There is no research available that directly investigates the merits of this assumption. However, high schools in many districts have adopted similar "no pass/ no play" policies in which student-athletes must meet a certain grade point requirement in order to participate in extracurricular activities such as athletics. The research evaluating these policies at the high school level has been somewhat equivocal. Some school administrators have lauded the "no pass/ no play" as an important motivating force for many student-athletes who were not taking their academics seriously (cf. Morton, Richardson, & Vizoso, 1994 ). Such proponents of the policy believe that the policy has changed some student-athletes academic behaviors. Opponents of the policy concede that the "no pass/ no play" policies improve indicators of the teams' overall academic performance (e.g., Peterman, 1986, Honea, 1987). However, they argue that these policies do so not by motivating academically weak student-athletes to work harder in the classroom, but by eliminating these student-athletes from the teams.

In addition to focusing on the personal motivation of the student-athlete, the Motivation Argument also assumes that initial eligibility requirements will somehow boost the high schools' motivation to better prepare their student-athletes academically. However, it is unclear how this policy will effect institutions at the high school level since they are outside of the NCAA's jurisdiction. The NCAA has neither funding nor regulatory powers over high schools. Yet, implicit in this final assumption of the Motivation Argument is the belief that high schools have the capacity to do a better job of preparing student-athletes but for whatever reasons are not motivated to do so. At present, there is no empirical evidence to support such an argument. In fact, it would be somewhat difficult to design such research. How would one operationalize motivation at the high school level? Would one focus on school administrators, or teachers? On the other hand, school level variables such as class room size that are tied to the level at which schools are funded have been tied to students' academic performance. Also, the assumption that initial eligibility requirements will motivate high schools to do a better job of preparing athletes is simply illogical. If high schools are not motivated by an intrinsic value to prepare their students as well as they possibly can, then it is doubtful that punishing these very same students by denying them access to an athletic scholarship will motivate the high schools.

In general, student-athletes come to college less prepared than other non-athletic students (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1988; Sellers, Kuperminc, & Waddell, 1991). African American student-athletes come from poorer educational backgrounds than their white counterparts (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1989a; Sellers et al., 1991), and once in college, they perform less well academically (e.g. Ervin, Saunders, Gillis, & Hoglebe, 1985; Kiger & Lorentzen, 1986; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982; Sellers, 1992; Shapiro, 1984). The motivation argument would suggest that these differences in academic preparation is, in part, a function of differences in motivation. In essence, African American male student-athletes must suffer from lower academic aspirations or place less effort into their studies than their White counterparts. Interestingly, Sellers (1992) found no race differences in either the aspiration or the amount of effort that student-athletes place on their school work.

If academic motivation does not explain the differences between the academic performance of African American collegiate athletes and White college athletes, then what does? The Structural Barrier Argument suggest that those differences are a function of the quality of the educational experiences available to African American and White student-athletes at the secondary level. The quality of the public education available to a child in the United

States varies greatly and is a function of the financial status of that child's family. People who live in communities that are more affluent have a greater tax base from which to finance their public schools and thus, have more money spent on their children's public education. For example, the Chicago public school system has an overall dropout rate of about 40% compared to its neighbor to the north, Evanston, IL, which has a drop out rate of approximately 3 percent. The national high school dropout rate is approximately 12 percent. Meanwhile, the public school system in Gary, IN spends 38% less per student than the public school system in Evanston. Unfortunately, the present NCAA reform efforts view the educational opportunities of students from the Gary and Chicago public school system as being equal to the educational opportunities of students in the Evanston public school system. Hashway and his colleagues found a relationship between the amount of money that states spend on education and the average SAT scores of the students in the state (Hashway, Clark, Roberts, & Schnuth, 1990). States that spend more money on education had students who score higher on the SAT.

According to the Structural barrier argument, there are two main factors which have caused African American student-athletes to be disproportionately affected by the increased initial eligibility requirements. First, athletics has historically been and continues to be one of the most visible avenues for African American students from poor backgrounds to achieve upward mobility. Thus, athletics plays a much different role in the lives of poor African Americans than in any other group (including more affluent African Americans). Second, African Americans are over-represented among the poor. As a result, African American student-athletes are the sole representatives on our college campuses of a growing number of African American high school students who, because they are not athletically-gifted and are trapped in a deplorable educational system, have less access to higher education. For most such students, a college education is not a viable option.

The African American student-athlete is often coming from a very different high school environment than even other African American college students. African American student-athletes come to college with significantly poorer socioeconomic and educational backgrounds than their African American non-athletic college classmate (Sellers, Kuperminc, & Waddell, 1991). The football team and the admissions office does not recruit in the same place. The admissions office recruits African American students from schools that have strong academic reputations and a history of graduating students to college. Often times, these schools have a disproportionately high number of African Americans from the upper levels of the socioeconomic stratum. Meanwhile, the football coach recruits

from any school that has athletes with athletic talent. As a result, they are more likely to get a more representative segment of the African American population since athletic ability is not likely correlated with socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, many students from the same poor educational environment who do not possess superior athletic ability but who have performed better academically than their athletic classmates do not get the same opportunity for a higher education. Thus, excellence in athletics becomes one of the few keys that will open the door to higher education. In actuality, African American student-athletes are the only connection between the problems of the inner city educational system and our many fine institutions of higher education.

Before the argument between motivation and structure can be definitively settled, there is a need for more research. This research must be longitudinal in nature so that causal inferences can be made. Appropriate comparison groups are also needed to examine the impact that athletics has on academic motivation and performance. It is also important that researchers begin to examine the experiences African American student-athletes have once they are on campus (Sellers, 1993). Research on such experiences may lead to the development of interventions for student-athletes once they are on campus that may enhance academic performance without the adverse side-effects on African American student-athletes that presently exist with the current reform efforts. Nonetheless, it is clear that intercollegiate athletics are in need of reform. However, any reform effort that targets student-athletes' motivation without also addressing structural inequities in our education system is destined to exacerbate those inequities.



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