NCAA Division I Athletes' Engagement in Educationally Sound Activities: A Review of the Research

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A B S T R A C T

Today's academic support centers will have to forge a more authentically responsive approach to address the needs of intercollegiate athletes in U.S. higher education. This approach must include new and different ways of thinking about all athletes and the quality of their educational experience. This article presents findings from a review of a steadily growing body of research on the benefits of educationally sound engagement activities for Division I athletes. The review indicates that participating in purposeful engagement activities enhances athletes' personal and academic self-concept and their collective learning and communication skills. These academic-related activities for athletes are conditional on sport demands and the campus climate. The article concludes with an introduction to the Career Transition Scorecard, a data-driven approach to fostering evidence-based practices among practitioners that can improve academic engagement activities among athletes by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport.

Keywords: Campus Climate, Career Transition, College Athletes, Engagement, Gender, Intercollegiate Athletics, NCAA, Race

Over the last few decades, scholarly and public scrutiny of intercollegiate athletics has intensified, perhaps in response to disparaging graduation rates in Division I football and men's basketball (Harper, 2018), academic fraud cases (Sack, 2014; Willens, 2015), major clustering (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Gurney & Southall, 2013; Paule-Koba, 2015, 2019; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Schneider, Ross, & Fisher, 2010), and misplaced spending priorities (Desrochers, 2013; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics [Knight Commission], 2010). Ineffective engagement strategies for college athletes' learning exacerbate this concern (Benson, 2000; Comeaux, 2013a). Calls for reform have come from within colleges and universities and beyond (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Knight Commission, 2010). Undeniably, discovering creative ways to reform college athletics, or to integrate college athletics into the educational context of higher education and to re-engage athletes into the learning process, has been an ongoing struggle.

In an attempt to respond to some of these concerns, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules limit athletes to 20 hours per week of supervised practice and training time during the season and eight hours per week in the off-season, as well as restrict the number of athletes who live in the same resident hall (Oriard, 2012). In 2005, the NCAA enacted the Academic Progress Rate (APR) initiative as an effort to improve the eligibility, retention, and graduation of college athletes in team sports (NCAA, 2011a). Under this metric, teams that fail to achieve the minimum expected graduation and retention rates are subject to contemporaneous penalties, such as loss of scholarships, reduction in practice times, suspension of coaches, and a ban from post-season competition (NCAA, 2011b).

Despite the compelling educational benefits of the APR, there is a need for more innovative ways to enhance the quality of the educational experience for Division I athletes. Recently, NCAA President Emmert (2014) asserted:

> Division I Board and I are searching for solutions to ensure that student-athletes maintain a better balance between academics and athletics with an emphasis on dedicating additional time to academic pursuits to promote their success once their playing days are over (para. 46).

Indeed, we need a more precise understanding of the kinds of effective educational activities and practices that foster learning and personal development for this unique population of students.

On average, 45% of Football Subdivision School football players—who are disproportionally Black and generate a great deal of revenue for their universities—do not receive college degrees (Madsen, 2014; New, 2015). As such, it would be instructive to understand the influences of educationally sound engagement activities on the learning and personal development of athletes. An examination of data-driven practices that enhance the engagement activities and quality of school-to-career transitions for athletes also is warranted. Both for reasons of social justice— broadly defined as "improving the learning of all pupils and enhancing their life chances" (Mitescu et al., 2009, p. 18)—and for reasons of racial equity—broadly defined as producing fair and just academic experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for racial/ethnic students at predominantly White institutions (Bensimon, 2004; Harvey, 2003; Nettles, 1988)—athletic stakeholders must do more to improve the quality of the educational experience for all college athletes.

While this article focuses on strengthening the quality of educational experiences for Division I athletes as shaped by the athletic department, it is important to note that the larger institutional culture and external environment also play an important role in the multi-billion-dollar athletics enterprise. For

example, the athletic department is influenced to some degree by a variety of externalities (e.g., television networks, NCAA, boosters, alumni). The NCAA supports commercial policies that shape athletic department operations, which may or may not be consistent with the academic values of U.S. higher education (Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008). Moreover, there are ongoing systems of oppression and white supremacy that impact the quality of educational experiences for racialized athletic bodies (see Comeaux, 2018). We refer the reader to other works for a more thorough explanation of how these external forces shape the quality of the college athlete experience (e.g., Clotfelter, 2011; Comeaux, 2015, 2017; Duderstadt, 2000; Toma, 2003).

In this article we critically review what is known empirically about educationally sound engagement activities for Division I college athletes. Educationally sound engagement activities include, but are not limited to, preparing for class, reading and writing, meaningful interactions with faculty, and collaboration with peers on problem solving tasks (Kuh, 2001). We then offer an introduction of the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS), a practitioner-as-researcher model designed to foster evidence-based practices for improving the well-being of college athletes by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport, including their sound engagement activities. This article is intended to encourage educational innovation among practitioners and other stakeholder groups in the affairs of intercollegiate athletics. In particular, this analysis can benefit faculty members, practitioners, head coaches, community advocates, and researchers in efforts to enhance the future quality of educational experience for Division I athletes.

Review Method

This article draws upon the emerging body of literature related to the educational benefits of sound engagement activities for Division I athletes in U.S. higher education. Literature was identified with a broad search of the Educational Resources Information Center, Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PsycINFO databases. Reference lists of these peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, scholarly books, book chapters, and research reports were consulted as well to ensure that important work was not overlooked. We used a combination of two key terms—college athlete and college athlete experience— with several other terms and phrases—engagement, engagement activities, interaction with faculty, race, gender, well-being, academic success, campus climate, and academic support.

Interest in the Division I college athlete experience seemed to gain momentum in the mid-1990s. Therefore, search parameters included restricting the search to works published from 1995 to the present. The works in the review were limited to those solely associated with NCAA Division I college athletes in high- and low-profile sports. Large-scale quantitative studies and qualitative studies as well as relevant information on diverse expert opinions on college athletes and sound engagement activities were included. It also is worthwhile noting that four experts on Division I college athletes reviewed the list of scholarly works to be included and recommended additions.

In our initial search, we discovered more than 450 documents concerned with the college athlete experience. In the next step, we excluded all documents that were not associated with Division I college athletes as well as those that did not report data on educationally sound engagement activities or campus climate issues related to athletes. This filter reduced our list to about 75. Finally, after a closer review of the documents we excluded published works that did not meet all of our above search parameters, resulting in 27 documents selected for our review.

Literature Review

As is the case with their non-athlete peers, intercollegiate athletes undergo a host of developmental changes during their college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Yet, the college experiences of Division I athletes are compounded by well-documented academic and personal challenges, prompting some scholars (e.g., Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Hyatt, 2003; Watson, 2005) to place them alongside other "non-traditional" or "special needs" student populations (Hyatt, 2003, p. 263). These deficits in academic performance and measures of personal wellbeing, combined with notable instances of academic fraud, have raised critical questions about the quality of the educational experiences of college athletes (Willens, 2015). Accordingly, the support resources and educationally sound engagement opportunities that institutions afford their athletes are garnering increasing levels of public attention (e.g., Comeaux, 2010, 2013a; Gayles & Hu, 2009a; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). In this literature review section, we begin with an overview of academic support centers to understand the academic culture of athletic departments as well as services offered to meet the personal and academic needs of Division I athletes. Next, we review the steadily growing body of research on the benefits of educationally purposeful engagement activities for Division I athletes.

Academic Support Centers for Athletes

Aligning with the NCAA's expectation that its member institutions employ efforts to "protect and enhance the educational experience of student-athletes and to assure proper emphasis on educational objectives" (NCAA, 2013a, p. 379), the majority of postsecondary institutions have taken aims to provide adequate support services for their Division I athletes (Comeaux, 2010). Athlete support programs are no longer concentrated primarily on athletes' class scheduling, ability to manage time, and academic tutoring (Broughton & Neyer, 2001), but have instead expanded over the past four decades to include a comprehensive array of services. Many of today's athletic departments provide athletes with resources such as academic advisement and tutoring, career advising, mentoring, freshman-specific orientation programs, and life skills development education (Gaston-Gayles, 2003; Gayles, Crandall, & Jones, 2015).

Scholars have emphasized the importance of a multi-faceted approach to athlete academic support programs (e.g., Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996; Gaston-Gayles, 2003), maintaining that institutions must strive to provide a context within which college athletes can succeed in competition and the classroom

alike. Though rife with programmatic efforts to foster success in both arenas, the effectiveness of a large number of academic support centers is questionable (Comeaux, 2010, 2013a). Most often, the eligibility of athletes—many of whom spend more than 40 hours each week on sport-related activities (Wolverton, 2008)—becomes the foremost priority for support centers, particularly those competing at Division I institutions (Knight Commission, 2001). Eligibility maintenance is not a sufficient standard. Instead, there is a need for practitioners, in part, to maximize opportunities for athletes to participate in educationally purposeful activities and, ultimately, to prepare them for life after sport.

Evidence of the emphasis on maintaining player eligibility lies in a recent version of the purpose statement of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A), the principal professional organization for academic support personnel and advisors who work with athletes. As recently as 2010, the organization purported that they existed "to assist the student-athletes in maintaining their eligibility [emphasis added] and achieving a viable education leading to graduation" (Comeaux, 2010; National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics, 2010, para. 2). Although the overt reference to eligibility is no longer present in N4A's purpose statement, an overemphasis on maintaining academic eligibility remains the norm for many academic support centers. Put another way, many athletes remain unfree or captives rather than engaging in a practice of active learning within colleges and universities.

With so much attention directed toward ensuring that Division I college athletes remain academically qualified to compete; the educational experience of these individuals is often structured in such a way that athletes are hindered from reaching their full academic potential— to engage in independent thought and critical learning. Numerous research studies highlight the academic gaps between athletes and their non-athlete counterparts (e.g., Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Gayles & Hu, 2009a). For example, Division I male college athletes perform less well academically than other athletes, and female athletes exhibit academic preparation and performance comparable to non-athletes and far better than their male counterparts (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Simons et al., 2007). Further, college athletes are less likely to participate in educationally sound engagement activities than their non-athlete peers, largely because of their sport demands and expectations of coaches (Gayles & Hu, 2009a). Referring to the current state of eligibility-centric support centers, Comeaux (2010) asserted that many athletes, namely those playing in the revenue generating sports of football and men's basketball, are simply positioned within "an athletic subculture of low academic expectations" (p. 261).

Black male athletes frequently enter college less academically prepared than other racial/ethnic groups (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Sellers, 1992), and they are therefore the most affected by eligibility-focused support centers. Consistently, academic gaps emerge between Black athletes and their White counterparts (Comeaux, 2008; Sellers, 1992; NCAA, 2013b; Paskus, 2012). The reality is that academic support centers rely to a significant degree on anecdotal information rather than empirical data when they make decisions about the academic

needs and futures of athletes by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport (Comeaux, 2013a). When practitioners are not engaged in the kind of research that influences their practices, they are less likely to be fully aware of the types and magnitude of academic and personal issues that athletes face (Polkinghorne, 2004), and they are less likely to respond to athletes in meaningful and effective ways. Further, in the absence of data-driven practices, practitioners generally rely on assumptions, and in some cases, they develop internalized biases about athletes, which too often present them through a deficit lens (Benson, 2000; Comeaux, 2007).

Bolstering criticism of the overall culture of academic support centers for athletes and the corresponding set of academic expectations for intercollegiate athletes, support services for athletes are commonly isolated geographically from the resources that institutions make available for the rest of the general student body. This segregated approach precludes athletes from interacting in constructive ways with their non-athlete peers, a concern noted by several studies (e.g., Bernhard & Bell, 2015; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Southall & Weiler, 2014).

The Importance of Educationally Sound Engagement Activities

Scholarship on purposeful engagement within the college environment is abundant (e.g., Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Hu & Kuh, 2002; Kuh, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), reinforcing the benefits of sound engagement activities on student learning and personal development. As detailed in Chickering and Gamson's (1987) "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," students benefit from educational contexts that incorporate student-faculty interaction, task orientation, cooperation among students, opportunities for communication, active learning, respect for diverse talents and ways of learning, and prompt feedback. Subsequent research, including that of Kuh (2001) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), also points to the important role that these and similar activities have on key college outcomes.

Comparatively limited in the body of research on student engagement are specific explorations of intercollegiate athlete engagement, including the relationship that educationally sound activities have on the development of athletes. Although Umbach et al. (2006) found no differences in educational engagement practices between athletes and the general student population when using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, there is other evidence (e.g., Comeaux, 2010; Comeaux, Speer, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011; Gayles & Hu, 2009a) to suggest there are differences; theses difference will be discussed in this section. More recently, research also has revealed the potential that these efforts have on society at large, as co-curricular engagement—albeit linked to the campus culture and individuals' own beliefs and attitudes—has positive implications for athletes' social activism goals and involvement with charitable practices (Gayles, Rockenbach, & Davis, 2012).

In general, intentional interactions with faculty members and non-athlete students are valuable aspects of the college experience for athletes. Notably, evidence points to the potential that educationally sound engagement opportunities have for athletes early on in their undergraduate experience. Using data collected

from Division I athletes, Comeaux (2010) and Comeaux et al. (2011) found that faculty mentoring, developing friendships with academically-focused athletes, and working to advance academic talents all had a positive impact on first-year athletes' academic goals and self-concept. More than merely reinforcing earlier research, these findings illuminate the possibility that institutions have to counteract athletes' educational challenges from the very start of college.

Like non-athlete students, athlete interactions with faculty members often emerge as a primary means of academic integration that, in turn, leads to academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Outcomes from athlete-faculty interactions appear to be contextual, however, with differences arising according to the nature of the contact (Comeaux, 2005, 2011). Moreover, when accounting for background characteristics, the benefits of particular types of athlete and faculty interactions vary by race, and, to a lesser degree, by gender (Comeaux & Harrison, 2006, 2007). For instance, Comeaux and Harrison (2006) revealed differences between Division I White and Black athletes in their various forms of interaction with faculty. Faculty who provided help in achieving professional goals and assistance with study skills were positively associated with White athletes' academic success, whereas these variables were not significant for Black athletes.

In terms of gender, using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found minimal differences between Division I male and female athletes in their various forms of contact with faculty in the college social system. Faculty who provided letters of recommendation, encouragement for graduate school, and help in achieving professional goals made fairly strong contributions to both male and female athletes' academic success. Likewise, in a survey of Division I athletes, Marx, Huffmon, and Doyle (2008) found that male and female athletes varied in their socialization experiences. Male athletes in particular were more likely to distance themselves from the student role rather their female counterparts.

Sound interactions with non-athletes also have positive effects for athletes in terms of self-concept, as well as communication and learning skill development (Gayles & Hu, 2009a). In their analysis of NCAA Basic Academic Skills Study (BASS) data, Gayles and Hu (2009a, 2009b) found that interaction with non-athlete students was the most common means by which engagement took place for athletes. Yet, alarming trends appeared when they examined the data by sport revenue status. Compared to low-profile sport competitors, athletes from high-profile sports exhibited lower levels of interaction with non-athletes (Gayles & Hu, 2009b).

In a qualitative interview study, Riley (2015) explored how former Division I football players viewed the influence of participation (or lack thereof) in sound engagement activities during college on their career transition. This study highlighted a number of sound engagement activities—e.g., internships, first year seminars, interaction with faculty, undergraduate research, and writing-intensive courses. Riley (2015) found that these football participants varied in their views of sound engagement activities and that some of them were aware of the educational benefits of sound engagement activities on the quality of their

career transition (although they would have preferred more support and guidance from athletic stakeholders). The author concluded that "athletic stakeholders can benefit from a distinct set of student engagement criteria for revenue sport student-athletes, which include a range of purposeful activities related to academic and career transition support" (pp. 64-65). To date, it is important note this was the first study to explore Division I athlete views of sound engagement activities on their career transition.

Other studies on related engagement variables have focused on the educational benefits of cross-racial interaction (CRI). Using data provided by White athletes during their first semester at 24 predominantly White colleges and universities, Brown, Brown, Jackson, Sellers, and Manuel (2003) found a significant relationship between communication with Black teammates and White racial attitudes, although it varied by type of sport played. For example, White athletes playing team sports with a higher percentage of Black teammates reported more positive attitudes toward Blacks in general, as compared to White athletes playing individual sports. In addition, Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) surveyed athletes from 18 Division I universities, and the majority reported that participation in intercollegiate sports contributed to their understanding of people of racial or ethnic backgrounds different from their own.

More recently, Comeaux (2013b) examined the extent to which CRI influenced post college pluralistic orientation and leadership skills for Division I White athlete graduates, and the degree to which engagement effects were conditional on their precollege neighborhoods. The author surveyed 310 White athlete college graduates representing 16 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision conferences. The findings suggest that cross-racial interaction during college has lasting benefits on pluralistic orientation and leadership skills in the years after college for White athletes from racially diverse neighborhoods and long-term effects on leadership skills for White athletes from segregated precollege neighborhoods.

College athlete engagement in both academic and athletic activities can be challenging, however, as these students need to balance their academic and athletic demands and expectations, leading to physical and psychosocial ill-being at times (e.g., mental fatigue, physical exhaustion, academic and social isolation from the campus community) (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Further, the engagement in educationally sound activities of college athletes is often grossly diminished, primarily because of campus climate issues (Comeaux, 2011, 2012; Engstrom et al., 1995; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). For example, in a study that employed the Situational Attitude Scale, Comeaux (2011) found that faculty members viewed Division I male athletes negatively in areas concerning intellectual abilities, special services such as an expanded tutorial program, and out-of-class achievements.

In addition, Black male and female athletes experience some of the most deeply-rooted racial stereotypes by campus members. These notions are well-documented by studies on the college experiences of Black athletes attending predominately White institutions (Benson, 2000; Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Hawkins, 1999; Singer, 2005). For example, Singer (2005), using critical race theory as an analytical lens, explored African American Division I male football athletes at a predominately

White institution to understand their perceptions of racism and the potential impact that racism might have on the quality of their college experience. Through focus groups and in-depth interviews, the author, in part, found that participants believed that African American athletes were treated differently than their White counterparts regarding the scheduling of classes and consequences for behaviors that could be detrimental to the team.

In a qualitative interview study, Bruening and colleagues (2005) examined the collective experiences of Division I African American female athletes at a large Midwestern university. The researchers employed the ideological standpoint of Collins (1990) to understand the effects of intersectionality on the "silencing" of African American female athletes. They found that the mass media, coaches, athletic administrators, and other athletes played a role in virtually ignoring their experiences and concerns. As such, the concept of intersectionality revealed how challenges encountered by African American female athletes might differ in some cases from other women and their Black male counterparts.

To summarize, there is a growing body of work that, albeit conditional on sport demands and expectations as well as the campus climate, documents the link between educationally sound engagement activities and academic performance for college athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gayles & Hu, 2009a; Umbach et al., 2006). The degree to which athletes interact with faculty members will increase the likelihood of academic success (Comeaux, 2005), and these interactions may vary by athletes' race (Comeaux & Harrison, 2006) and, to a lesser degree, by gender (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007). Further, participating in educationally sound engagement activities (e.g., interaction with non-athlete peers, faculty mentoring) enhances athletes' personal and academic self-concept as well as their learning and communication skills (Comeaux et al., 2011; Gayles & Hu, 2009a), and White athletes tend to benefit from meaningful interactions across racial lines during college (Brown et al., 2003; Comeaux, 2013b). Lastly, some former Division I athletes understand the educational benefits of sound engagement activities on the quality of their career transition (Riley, 2015).

Despite the growing work in this area, additional research is needed to better understand the type and quality of educational activities in a range of academic settings that lead to positive gains for athletes. Qualitative inquiry (e.g., case studies) and large-scale quantitative studies—with data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport, and other background characteristics (e.g., first generation status, family income, athletic scholarship status)—would advance this line of work. It would also be instructive to explore the intersectional identities of athletes with a diversity of theoretical perspectives (e.g., critical race theory, antiracism theory) and methodological approaches to better understand their participation in sound engagement activities. For example, using a feminist theory lens (e.g., intersectionality, Black feminist thought, postmodern feminism, social constructionism), we can better understand how athletes' experiences are gendered, as well as how athletes' engagement in sound activities are impeded or facilitated due to campus climate issues and/or the structure of intercollegiate athletics. Lastly, it would be prudent to build upon the work of Riley (2015) and explore the linkages between sound engagement activities and career transitions for athletes by race/ethnicity, gender, and type

of sport using a variety of methodological approaches. The next section will discuss an alternative methodology, the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS), which is designed to engage athletic stakeholders in collaborative inquiry so they can more thoroughly understand and address the academic strengths and needs of college athletes.

Framework for the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS) for Athletes

There certainly is a need for changes in the fundamental ways in which practitioners and other athletic stakeholders learn to think about athletes and differences in their academic experiences and outcomes by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport. As well, there is a need for more intentional sound engagement activities that foster learning and personal development for college athletes. Thus, the question remains: *How can practitioners and other athletic stakeholders begin to understand what processes and approaches will lead to more educationally sound engagement activities for athletes of all races/ethnicities, genders, and types of sport?*

Single-Loop vs. Double-Loop Learning Model

Change requires attention to both the individual and organizational levels, and Argyris and Schön's (1996) "single-loop" and "double-loop" learning concepts are especially helpful for shedding light on the relationship between the two. A single loop model of learning embodies an ends-justify-the-means philosophy, with little consideration given to the antecedents of academic performance. That is, emphasis is placed on the resulting grades and/or Academic Progress Rates (APR) of teams, largely forsaking consideration of the organizational structure and the effectiveness of implemented programs. In this model, practitioner anecdotes and intuition are relied upon as "proof" of the quality of help received by athletes. By contrast, double-loop learning involves questioning the problems of learning systems and uncovering the underlying norms, beliefs, and principles of a given organization (Bensimon, 2005). In double-loop learning, data are used to increase awareness of existing problems, recognize inequalities, promote critical thinking, and challenge underlying cognitive frames.

In this light, a reformer of academic support systems using a single-loop method might ask: *How can we ensure that athletes maintain their eligibility?* In contrast, with a double-loop learning approach, one might ask: *How can we do a better job of re-engaging athletes in the learning process? How do we build on the academic strengths of athletes?* Successfully answering the latter questions will require an understanding of the support service organization, historical practices, and the successes and shortcomings of the program. To realize this level of understanding, the use of data-driven practices is imperative.

The Career Transition Scorecard

Suggested by Comeaux (2013a), the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS) has the potential to simultaneously bridge the gap

between academics and athletics while also engaging academic support practitioners in double-loop practices. The CTS evolved from the Diversity Scorecard (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004), which has been used to address the opportunity gap for historically underrepresented students. It is intended to bridge the gap between research and practice in academic support centers for Division I athletes and to help athletes' transition from college to career. More specifically, using a data-driven approach, it is designed to challenge both individual and collective assumptions as well as learning in athletic departments; address the lack of explicit and positive learning environments designed to influence desirable educational outcomes for athletes across race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport; and to enhance the quality of their school-to-career transitions. In Argyris and Schön's (1996) terminology, the CTS operationalizes double-loop learning in the athletic department.

Both the Diversity Scorecard and the CTS consist of desirable outcomes in the following performance perspectives: access, retention, institutional receptivity, and excellence/high achievement. The CTS also adds an engagement dimension (see Figure 1). The *access perspective* might assess the distribution of athletes in certain majors and programs as well as access (or lack thereof) to internship opportunities, which can influence both their learning and desirable outcomes (see Kuh, 2008). The *retention perspective* might focus on the completion rates and levels of success in basic skills courses among athletes. Under *institutional receptivity*, athletic departments might use existing data to answer questions about the extent to which coaches, staff, and administrators reflect the diversity of the athletes they recruit (see Comeaux & Fuentes, 2015). Under the *institutional receptivity* perspective, the athletic department might also focus on the organizational culture and climate (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). The *excellence/high achievement perspective* might examine existing data that provide answers to questions about athlete participation in high demand programs of study, their career placement post-graduation, and the types and magnitude of academic honors and awards they have received. Lastly, the *engagement perspective* can bring attention to the educationally sound engagement activities of athletes in campus environments (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).
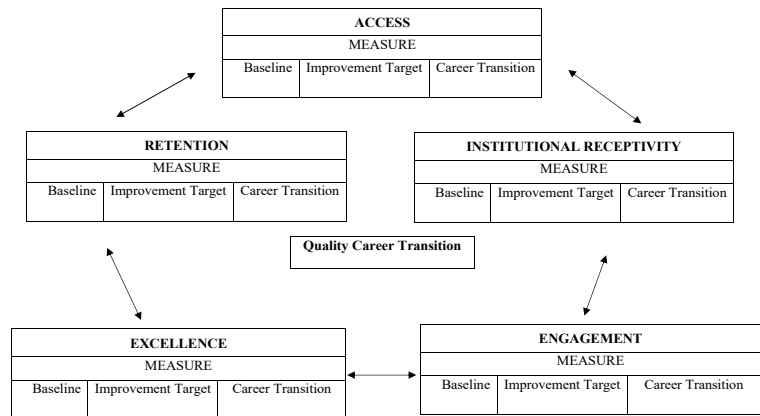
Engagement activities of athletes might include the type of meaningful interactions across racial lines (Brown et al., 2003; Comeaux, 2013b). Engagement activities also can include, but are not limited to, study groups, preparing for class, reading and writing, meaningful interactions with faculty, and collaboration with peers on problem solving tasks (Kuh, 2001). With a better understanding of the frequency and quality of athletes' interactions with faculty, for example, practitioners would be more likely and better able to take principled actions (e.g., establish a faculty-student mentor program) that could lead to positive gains in learning (Comeaux, 2010; Gayles & Hu, 2009b). In all of this inquiry, it would be particularly wise for the team of practitioner researchers to explore how the performance of athletes on all of these aspects varies by subgroup (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport).

Figure 1.

Career Transition Scorecard

Through the ongoing process of creating the CTS and examining data disaggregated by subgroups, practitioners essentially become knowledge *makers* rather than merely knowledge *users*. In so doing, they have the opportunity to shift their cognitive frames and more precisely learn to think from an anti-deficit and data-driven standpoint. As well, organizational problems can be understood in radically different ways, including as a mechanism for social justice.

In athletic departments that use the CTS framework, professional facilitators have already observed changes both to practitioner practices in academic support centers and to their ways of thinking about all athletes (Comeaux, 2013a). Structured interviews are ongoing. It is too soon, however, to evaluate athlete experiences and subsequent outcomes or behavioral changes among practitioners, because the CTS framework is longitudinal in nature and thus requires longitudinal data. To generate findings through the practitioner-as-researcher model generally requires more time than other methodological approaches allow.

Conclusion

Higher education practitioners indeed face tremendous pressure to find fresh and creative ways to improve their academic production. It seems evident that the quality of the educational experience for Division I athletes will be shaped to a significant degree by the vision, knowledge, and competencies of those providing leadership in this athletic enterprise. Colleges and universities must devote themselves to social and racial justice education in order to create more cross-racial understanding as well as equitable experiences and subsequent outcomes for all

college athletes. In addition, the CTS, as outlined above, can serve as a useful tool and a process to broaden the ways in which we define and measure academic success in order to improve the quality of educational experiences, including participation in purposeful engagement activities for athletes.

With all deliberate speed, athletic stakeholders must redefine and refine the baselines in intercollegiate athletics while aiming to actively align them more closely with the core values of colleges and universities, including the educational mission. In this way, we can ensure the college athlete is given a fighting chance to demonstrate a high degree of commitment to both their academic *and* athletic roles.

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