# "Do You Really See Us?":Black College Athlete Perceptions of Inclusion at DI Historically White Institutions

Shannon Jolly
*University of Georgia*, sjolly@uga.edu

Jepkorir Rose Chepyator-Thomson
*University of Georgia*, jchepyat@uga.edu

---

## Recommended Citation

# "Do You Really See Us?":Black College Athlete Perceptions of Inclusion at DI Historically White Institutions

## Cover Page Footnote

# "Do You Really See Us?": Black College Athlete Perceptions of Inclusion at DI Historically White Institutions

**Shannon Jolly**              **Jepkorir Rose Chepyator-Thomson**
University of Georgia          University of Georgia

A B S T R A C T

*While recent sport research has highlighted benefits of racial diversity on teams and in the workplace, few studies have examined how demographic composition is perceived by college athletes. Fewer have investigated how racially marginalized athletes experience the phenomena. Thus, the current study explores the intersection of race, gender, and athletic identity in Black college athletes at DI Historically White Institutions (HWIs), perceptions of inclusion, and its influence on sense of belonging. Employing critical race theory, two focus groups and six semi-structured interviews that incorporated vignettes were conducted with six current Black athletes at DI HWIs in the Southeastern U.S. Findings revealed five emergent themes: (a) overcompensation for racial marginalization, (b) gendered racism, (c) commitment to social justice activism and allyship, (d) athlete bubble on campus, and (e) invisibility of holistic identity. This research highlights the nuanced experiences of Black college athletes at HWIs and provides implications for coaches, administrators, and faculty to foster a true inclusive environment.*

*Keywords:* Black college athletes, equity, inclusion, sense of belonging, social justice

The year 2020 will forever be a historic marker in United States (U.S.) history. As leaders responded to a global pandemic (COVID-19), political and social unrest pervaded the nation. A unique social and cultural climate ensued, which arguably can be attributed to the murder of George Floyd, as nationwide protests for racial and social justice sparked through the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). Racism and racial inequality reemerged at the forefront of media attention as an endemic and deeply ingrained issue (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; West, 2017). The exploration of race as a socially constructed phenomenon (Bell, 1992; Hartigan, 2009) constitutes shared worldviews and experiences between racial group members (Bimper & Harrison, 2011). As such, oppressive ideologies and structural arrangements grounded in racism adversely impact specific racial groups, such as Black[1] people in the U.S. Notably, the same hegemonic structures of society that systemically undermine social justice and equality are reflected within institutions of higher education and collegiate athletics (Bimper, 2014; Cooper, 2016a). Sport as a social institution has been and will remain intertwined with societal occurrences and arrangements related to power and privilege (Cooper et al., 2017; Sage, 1998).

While many universities and athletic organizations have adopted current social trends to promote a more diverse and inclusive community, campus undertones of racism and sexism contribute to experiences of isolation and a low sense of belonging for Black students at historically white institutions (HWIs; Feagin, 2006; Gayles et al., 2018; Hurtado et al., 2007). In a study examining the impacts of racial stigmas on academic persistence, Chang and colleagues (2016) found that hostile racial climates warrant greater negative experiences for African American students than their white counterparts. These experiences are heightened for Black

---

[1] The terms "African American" and "Black" will be used interchangeably to refer to the racial distinction associated with people of African descent within the United States who are descendants of ancestors who may have been subjected to chattel slavery and intergenerational systemic racism

collegiate athletes. In an examination of the perceptions of discriminatory acts by professors and peers at a DI university, Comeaux (2012) found that Black athletes described instances of their intellectual abilities and academic motivation being questioned. In addition, these Black college athletes described experiencing racial stereotypes by other members of the campus community. Although Black collegiate athletes experience increased social capital on campus regarding their athletic status (Putnam, 2000), they still receive differential treatment from their white counterparts in academic, social, and athletic settings as a stigmatized population at HWIs (Cooper, 2019; Clopton, 2010; Singer, 2005).

Historically, Black collegiate athletes have been targets of racial stereotyping as athletes and as racialized students (Cooper & Hawkins, 2012; Jolly et al., 2020). Instances of being disregarded by faculty and support staff (Comeaux, 2010; Cooper & Hawkins, 2014) and a lack of representation in support roles (Cunningham, 2019; Mac Intosh et al., 2020) contribute to the unique experiences of Black athletes at HWIs. Researchers such as Brooks and Althouse (2000) attribute difficult experiences for collegiate athletes of Color[2] to under-preparedness for college academic rigor and cultural adjustment challenges. In examining the experiences of Black collegiate athletes at HWIs, it is important to contextualize the nuanced complexities for Black athletes across different gender groups. For example, Black female college athletes are stigmatized in distinct ways from their Black male peers based on their race, gender, physique, sexuality, and economic agency (Carter-Francique, 2013; Ferguson, 2016).

Despite the social and cultural adversities experienced by Black college athletes at HWIs, their athletic enterprise warrants them pivotal players in major collegiate athletics (Cooper, 2016a). Specifically, in profit-generating sports, the NCAA (2019) reported that Black collegiate athletes account for 56% of DI male basketball players, 45 % of DI female basketball players, and 50% of DI football players. Given their presence in collegiate sport, examining how Black athletes at HWIs negotiate their racial identities and perceive social justice and inclusion can inform how athletic and academic institutions holistically support this group of students. As contemporary socio-cultural movements for equality, such as Black Lives Matter, garner the support of racialized athletes and collective institutions, a call for transformational allyship has ensued (Jolly et al., 2021). A recent study on student-athlete activism and racial justice engagement released by the NCAA (2021) revealed Black collegiate athletes are significantly more likely to communicate (77%) or demonstrate (53%) for a cause than their peers across all other racial groups (39% Latinx athletes; 30% white athletes). The study also reported Black collegiate athletes possessed the highest levels of racial justice engagement – conversations with family/friends (94%); posted content to social media (89%); conversations with coaches (67%); attended protests/rallies (49%); monetary contribution to organizations (43%); and contacted public officials to express concerns (27%). We posit the burden of proactive social change must be removed from Black college athletes themselves and placed on change agents with privileged identities and institutional power (e.g., largely white coaches, administrators, faculty, and sport brands).

Traditionally, research has focused on advancing equity and inclusion in the workplace and among athletic staff (Adair et al., 2010; Cooper & Hawkins, 2012; Cunningham, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2012). Studies also have explored how university faculty perceive collegiate athletes broadly. Comeaux (2010) examined how teaching and research faculty perceived white and Black college athletes through photo-elicitation. His findings revealed the existence of colorblind ideology and lowered academic expectations of Black athletes when compared to their white peers. While this study explored the racial discourses that exist for Black college athletes at a large Division I institution, it primarily focused on the perceptions of collegiate athletes from teaching and research faculty members. Additionally, there is scant research that has examined the beliefs or attitudes of college athletes, especially those who are racially marginalized. Similar to

---

[2] The term "Color" is used to reference persons or people of Color (POC). Persons of Color are individuals who are non-white. The term is inclusive of many races and cultures who have a skin pigmentation that is darker than what is socially defined as white by racial context. The term emphasizes common historic experiences of systemic racism for people who do racially identify as white.

Comeaux's (2010) findings regarding athlete identity in the college campus environment, Martin and colleagues (2010) found that African American collegiate athletes are perceived to have lowered academic expectations than their white counterparts at academically rigorous institutions. The study revealed the existence of stereotype threat and stereotype reactance for Black athletes at HWIs and the confidence needed for these students to navigate their academic experiences as racial minorities. While this study highlighted the perceptions of Black college athletes regarding their academic experiences and climate, it primarily focused on high-achieving Black male athletes specifically from the Pac-12 Conference. In another study on high-performing Black male athletes, Oseguera (2010) found that Black male athletes who perform high academically experience attacks on their intellect from college faculty, administrators, and peers in both academic and athletic settings.

Moreover, researchers such as Singer (2016) and Fuller and colleagues (2020) have contextualized the intersection of race and sport as a relationship that often causes Black male athletes to negotiate their racial positioning in society for their athletic belonging on campus. Likewise, Beamon's (2014) study on former Black male collegiate athletes revealed the existence of racism, racial stereotyping, and self-segregation as central implications of the everyday experience of this group of students on campus. Though the beforementioned studies focused specifically on Black male college athletes, they provide relative insight into the unique experiences of Black athletes as a collective at HWIs. These studies also illuminate the relative gap in the literature that includes the experiences of Black female athletes, who often have exacerbated experiences based on their race, gender, and athletic identities (Carter-Francique, 2015).

The purpose of the current study is to understand how the sense of belonging for Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs is influenced by their perceptions of race, inclusion, and social justice activism. We seek to expand the current literature on Black athlete experiences to examine how this population navigates their athletic and academic settings during the current unique cultural climate. This study will further expand the conversation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within collegiate sport to include the views of one of its most vulnerable populations. In addition, the current study provides a pivotal contribution to research as recent years (Black Lives Matter era) have warranted heightened attention within the U.S. and global sport context to the existence of systemic racism, which perpetuates a system of inequities and inequalities for POC in society. These system imbalances are reinforced in higher education, which further renders nuanced experiences for racial minorities on campuses, especially Black collegiate athletes (Jolly et al., 2020). In recent years, racial discourses have been discussed but were not at the forefront of attention within the social-cultural contexts of sport (Cooper, 2019; Kluch, 2020; Mac Intosh et al., 2020). During a time when athletic organizations have begun prioritizing DEI strategies and initiatives (e.g., mission statements, propositioning, and programming), understanding perceptions of Black college athletes in the current mo(ve)ment provides relative insight into how this population of students navigate non-Black campuses and negotiate their sense of belonging as racialized minorities. The study also provides insight to aid in developing strategic initiatives and programming to bridge gaps between athletic departments and broader campus, as well as increase the sense of belonging and motivations for academic success for both Black male and female collegiate athletes.

### Critical Race Theory

Acknowledging the role of race and racism in the U.S. is necessary to understand the significance of and relationship between systemic imbalances of power (i.e., education, wealth, politics) and social support for Black college athletes attending HWIs. To conceptualize these racial discourses, critical race theory (CRT) offers an intuitive lens to explore how neocolonial ideologies of race are endemic within sport and other social structures. CRT largely stems from an examination of the operation of race and racism as social constructs and its imprint on the consciousness of society (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995; Solórzano et al., 1998; Tate, 1997). Researchers have reported CRT is a beneficial lens to examine racial inequalities within American education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016). In addition, CRT empowers participants to reflect on their social experiences that challenge dominant discourses based on white privilege and normality (Singer, 2009).

Though CRT is grounded in several primary tenets, the current study encompasses four tenets of the theory to highlight and legitimize the ideas, perceptions, and experiences of Black collegiate athletes at HWIs: (a) *intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of oppression* posits multiple ideologies converge to create endemic, normalized, permanent, and fundamental modes of oppression within U.S. society; (b) *challenge of dominant ideology* asserts that objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy do not exist in society; (c) *commitment to social justice*; and (d) *centrality of experiential knowledge*, which recognizes the experiences of people of Color are legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. In addition to the following tenets, the study encompasses the CRT principle of *interest convergence*, which asserts the dominant group (white individuals) maintain their power only by complying to demands of marginalized groups when interests of the two groups align. In essence, there is no winning for groups subjected to oppression unless the privileged group benefits more.

CRT helps to identify, analyze, and transform prevailing notions of colorblindness, racial coding, and symbolic racism that impact the thoughts and perceptions of Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs. More specifically, CRT serves as a critically reflexive view of understanding how Black athletes negotiate their racial identity and the impacts their perceptions of inclusion and social justice activism have on their sense of belonging at these institutions. In the current study, I extend the scholarship focusing on equity, inclusion, and social justice within athletics by examining salient identities of Black athletes and their influence on how they perceive and navigate hegemonic structures as racialized individuals. Focusing on this specific population's feelings toward the response of academic and athletic institutions to issues of diversity and inclusion can provide insight into strategic programming to support their holistic development at HWIs. In this regard, the study was guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What counternarratives of racial identity exist for Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs in the post-2020 BLM era?

**RQ2:** How do Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs perceive diversity, inclusion, and social justice activism in the post-2020 BLM era?

**RQ3:** How does intersectionality (race, gender, and athletic identity) influence a sense of belonging and motivation for success beyond collegiate athletics in the post-BLM era?

## Method

### Research Design and Site

This study used an instrumental case study design (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2003; Yin, 2003, 2009). Berg (2001) asserts that case study approaches involve "systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions" (p. 225). Instrumental case studies in particular provide insight into a particular issue or redraw generalizations (Mills et al., 2010). Utilizing this method, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of Black collegiate athletes' thoughts and perceptions of how those ideas shape their experiences at HWIs. The HWIs in this study provide a unique contribution to the current literature considering the historical context of African Americans being relegated to only attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) before the 1960s. Notably, during this time, a watershed moment of the Civil Rights movement (1954-1968) was *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), in which the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Currently, the relevance of the Black Lives Matter movement has posited a wave of Black students utilizing their agency to highlight their experiences with college campus climates at HWIs (Kluch, 2020). This has become heightened for Black college athletes, as increased commercialization of revenue-generating sports (e.g., football and men's basketball) have resulted in the increased exploitation of this group of students (e.g., overrepresentation of Black athletes in revenue-generating sports) (Harper, 2018). This design allowed the researchers to capture meanings, common experiences, and themes that were present through the participant narratives. To abide by Center for Disease Control (CDC)

safety protocols[3] during COVID-19 and ensure the well-being of the researcher and participants, this study was conducted through the Zoom video conferencing platform.

**Participants**

The participants ($n$ = 6) in this study are current Black collegiate athletes at Division I HWIs in the Southeastern region of the U.S. A total of 10 Black collegiate athletes were recruited as potential participants in the study. Although seven athletes agreed to participate in interviews, scheduling conflicts prevented one participant from participating, and only a total of six athletes participated in the study. Given the purpose of this study, a case study of six participants allowed for a deep understanding of the perceptions and experiences of this group of athletes. A smaller sample size helped the researcher facilitate a closer association with participants and enhanced the validity of fine-grained qualitative inquiry (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Scholars such as Yin (2009) and Mayes (2006) surmise that information-rich examinations of phenomena are more important than generalizability aims of larger sample sizes. For example, Bimper and colleagues (2012) utilized a sample size of seven participants to investigate the self-perceptions and behaviors contributing to Black male athlete success in navigating their college experience. The findings, while not generalizable, revealed consistent themes about perceived social and educational capital as a tool for liberation for the participants. In another study, Singer (2005) used an instrumental case study to examine the experiences of four Black male college athletes at a single HWI to understand how they perceive racism on campus. The researcher asserted that the number of participants allowed for a rich understanding of the external theoretical problem facing Black male athletes at HWIs.

In the current study, the participants were comprised of two male football players (King 1 & King 2), two male track and field athletes (Prince 1 & Prince 2), and two female track and field athletes (Queen 1 & Queen 2). Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Participant demographic information was collected to better understand their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences as racialized individuals on campus. Of the participants, four students (King 1, King 2, Queen 1, and Prince 1) attended predominately white high schools, and two students (Queen 2 and Prince 2) attended predominately Black high schools. All participants identified as heterosexual. Table 1 provides additional demographic information about the participants.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Data*

| Participant: | Classification: | Major: | Grade Point Average: |
|---|---|---|---|
| King 1 | Junior | Journalism | 3.00 – 3.49 |
| King 2 | Senior | Sport Management | 3.50 – 4.00 |
| Queen 1 | Junior | Psychology | 3.0 – 3.49 |
| Queen 2 | Sophomore | Managerial Science | 3.50 – 4.00 |

**Data Collection Procedure**

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), both purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009) was used to identify participants for the study. This sampling method allowed the researcher to lead with the specific criterion for the participants who were to be examined. Once the initial participants were identified, those individuals referred other Black collegiate athletes for the study. The following criteria were established for the targeted participants: (a) identify as Black or African American; (b) currently enrolled as a full-time student at a historically white institution (HWI); and (c) participate as a member of any varsity

---

[3] To prevent the spread of COVID-19, CDC guidelines recommended stay-at-home orders during the time of this study. Colleges and universities across the U.S., including the institutions participants attended, were closed to the public and virtual learning was implemented.

sport team. Due to schedule conflicts with the participants' schedules, the six collegiate athletes participated in two separate focus groups instead of a single focus group with all six individuals. Two football players and two female track athletes participated in a single focus group, and the remaining two male track athletes participated in a separate focus group. Both focus groups utilized the same interview protocol. All six participants completed a short demographic survey before participating in the focus group and individual semi-structured interviews.

## Data Collection Methods

### *Focus Groups*

The two semi-structured focus group interviews served as a preliminary data collection method. The focus groups helped draw upon participants' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions from a collective lens. Participant attitudes, feelings, and beliefs partially may be independent of a group or its social setting, but these perceptions are more likely to be revealed via a social gathering and interaction such as a focus group (Gibbs, 1997; Gill & Baillie, 2020). Focus groups specifically are useful for engaging in an in-depth analysis of the collective experiences of a specified group to identify commonalities or abnormalities on key topics of interest (Patton, 2002). For the current study, the semi-structured focus group interviews concentrated on understanding how participants perceive diversity and inclusion as well as the institutional factors in academic and athletic settings that impact how they experience college. Each focus group interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

### *Individual Semi-structured Interviews*

The primary data source for the current study included six individual interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' accounts and worldviews of their collegiate experiences (Roulston, 2010). The semi-structured interview protocol was guided broadly by questions focused on participants' personal experiences as a Black college athlete and their perspectives of inclusion, social justice, and its influence on their sense of belonging at HWIs. Throughout the interview sessions, dialogue with participants naturally became a conversational exchange (Harper, 2009), which allowed participants to authentically answer questions on the topic. In addition, the semi-structured nature of the interviews provided opportunities for participants to offer additional insight into their experiences in academic and athletic settings.

### *Vignettes*

During the individual semi-structured interviews, the researcher utilized vignettes to elicit rich but focused responses on issues surrounding diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Vignettes often are used to investigate attitudes and feelings about motivation, cross-cultural communication, racial integration, and other sensitive social phenomena (Sampson & Johannessen, 2020; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). In the current study, participants were encouraged to comment on four photos that depicted concrete examples of individuals (Valenti & Costall, 1997) and their actions representing facets of identity and inclusion in the athletic context – race, gender, athlete, social justice, and allyship (Hazel, 1995; Torronen, 2018). The photos used were: (1) NBA teams kneeling in support of Black Lives Matter protests (Sherman, 2020); (2) NFL players standing for the national anthem (Zaleski, 2019); (3) NBA team owner during a basketball game (Graham, 2019); and (4) Becky Hammon, a female NBA assistant coach (Marchi, 2019). The participants described their thoughts and perceptions of the situations or person being depicted in the photos, which provided deeper insight into how their identities shape their worldviews concerning inclusion and sense of belonging on HWI campuses.

## Data Analysis & Trustworthiness

The semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times for accuracy by both authors. Following the transcriptions, member checking was used to reduce the impact of subjective bias in data analysis and strengthen data trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Participants had the opportunity to check the transcripts for clarity and make amendments. After clarifying the transcripts, a sequential

thematic analysis was used to identify themes within the data (Biddle et al., 2001; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). To further avoid researcher biases, the raw data (transcripts) were independently analyzed, categorized, and coded into initial codes (78), second-cycle codes (22), and emergent themes (5) using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (ATALAS.ti). The ATLAS.ti analysis provided a more intricate lens for examining relationships in the data and substantiating the analysis and interpretation of data findings (Ang et al., 2016). An abductive approach to coding, which involves a combination of inductive and deductive coding, was utilized to identify final themes in the data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The inductive analysis allowed the researcher to stay close to the data by using codes directly from the participants, whereas the deductive analysis informed categorical areas of the theoretical framework (CRT). Data triangulation involved the perspectives of Black male and female student athletes across two different sports (football and track and field). The emergent themes are reflective of the shared experiences of participants and organized following interpretive CRT frames to better contextualize participant narratives.

## Findings

The findings of this research study revealed the most salient and negotiated identity for Black collegiate athletes at HWIs is their race. Acknowledging the duality of their underrepresented presence on campus and overrepresentation in athletics is important in understanding their perceptions of inclusion, social justice activism, and sense of belonging. All participants (n = 6) had a specific personal definition of diversity and inclusion, which framed how they perceive the campus climate and navigate those environments. Five emergent themes were found from the data analyses: (a) overcompensation for racial identity (RQ1); (b) gendered racism (RQ1, RQ2); (c) commitment to social justice activism and allyship (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3); (d) athlete bubble within the campus (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3); and (e) invisibility of holistic identity (RQ2 & RQ3).

### Racial Identity Salience

To understand the first research question, which seeks to understand how Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs perceive their racial identity, the interviewees expounded on how they negotiate their racial identities. King 2, a junior football player, described feelings of pride, surveillance, and hard work:

> Being Black is very important to me. […] Since coming to college I learn about being Black more and more. You're living in a world where everybody else has a head start, everybody else being, you know, white people. You have to keep going…You have to do more right than wrong, so your family is looked at in better light or you'll be called a thug or out of your name. You really have to be on your Ps and Qs at all times. You know what I mean? I have to put on for my last name. It's what drives me to be successful.

King 2's comments compliment the CRT tenet that race and racism are endemic and permanent. His feelings reveal the hypervigilance that accompanies being a racialized minority in America. His acknowledgment that white people have a head start in life and the motivation to overcome racist realities highlights systemic power imbalances that are reinforced at HWIs and directly impact people of Color. King 1, a senior football player, shared similar sentiments of pride and adversity:

> It makes me unique in this world, and in America of course. It comes with inherited problems where some people view you as a perceived threat without even knowing you personally. I'm still proud to be Black! Everything that comes with it and adversity only makes you stronger. […] If you take Black people out of the picture, what would America be like? Unseasoned. I'm proud to say that!

King 2's comments reaffirm the socio-cultural discourses that place Black people at a disadvantage in society. The heightened sense of judgment based on race signifies the stereotype threat of being viewed through a lens of negative stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995) that contributes to feelings of isolation and lack of acceptance for this subgroup of students at HWIs. King 2's comments also reflect the view of subordination and racial marginalization as a motivator to defy stereotypes and succeed. King 2's insight also highlights the prove-them-wrong syndrome,

which Moore and colleagues (2003) attribute to the persistence of African American males to succeed despite negative academic and social experiences on campus.

Queen 2, a junior track and field athlete, added: "There's pride in being Black. Black people are just different. I've been through a lot; we've overcome a lot as a race!" Queen 2's response reinforces the will to prevail in unfavorable circumstances. Prince 2, a senior track and field athlete, describes the complexity of honoring his ethnicity as a Nigerian, but being confined to racial distinctions as Black because of the color of his skin:

> I'm proud of my Nigerian American heritage. But this is what you see – I'm a young Black male. That's all people go off of. My name is not a regular name. Most likely you wouldn't know my Nigerian ethnicity unless you asked me […] I just say I'm Black.

All participants acknowledge the dichotomous representations of Black people in America when compared to other races, especially white people. While they highlighted the inherited barriers and disadvantages that come with being Black, there was a renowned presence of resilience in overcoming adversities to challenge the dominant ideologies of society. Additionally, the recollection of the historical and contemporary implications of their racialized social positioning supports the CRT tenet of experiential knowledge. Thus, the participants offered counter-narratives of personal experiences that were defined by strength and will to conquer oppressive circumstances.

**Defining Diversity & Inclusion**

To better understand research questions two and three, which are concerned with how participants perceive inclusion and a sense of belonging in academic and athletic settings on the campus, the interviewees offered their definitions of diversity and inclusion. All participants had a unique, but a fundamental understanding of the terms, which informs how they define their sense of acceptance or lack thereof on campus. Queen 1, a junior track and field athlete, provided the following response to how she understood diversity and inclusion within athletic and academic settings:

> Diversity means various differences and traits […] in general everything does not look the same. Inclusion means together and united. Uniting the differences.

When describing her perception of diversity and inclusion within athletics, Queen 1 said: "I feel it's pretty diverse […] there's Black and white people, and women. I'd say it's inclusive too." However, in academic settings she explained: "There's not much diversity. And I wouldn't say there's much inclusion. Everyone has their own groups." Her insights reveal the experiential gaps in inclusion between athletics and the broader campus. Thus, the divide between the athletics and campus communities can contribute to a lowered sense of belonging for this group of students. Similarly, Prince 1, a senior track and field athlete, described diversity as having different people of different backgrounds, along with inclusion, as consciously learning from people's differences and happenings in the world:

> Having a mix; different groups of people from different backgrounds, like race and social class. Inclusion is learning about each other and what everyone goes through. You know, rich people won't have the same problems as low-income people […] understanding their differences.

In describing the athletic department and university sense of diversity and inclusion, Prince 1 said: "I wouldn't say that our campus is diverse, it's predominately white. I would definitely say that in the inclusion aspect, I don't know if the university admissions are really targeting African American communities; I wouldn't say it's too inclusive." He went on to describe the athletics department as inclusive, but not very diverse. He referenced the largely Black population of athletes, but not many people of Color were on staff or in leadership positions. These statements reinforce the CRT tenants of permanence of racism, as well centrality of experiential knowledge, as they highlight the nuanced understandings for Black athletes at HWIs. It is worth noting that both participants offered surface-level descriptions of diversity in both settings, which identify readily visible differences in demographic characteristics (Lambert & Bell, 2013). Deep-level diversity, which concerns non-observable differences (e.g., religion, beliefs, attitudes), often is difficult to evoke because of personal biases.

**Emergent Themes**

*Overcompensation for Racial Marginalization*

Research question one is concerned with how participants negotiate their racial identity at HWIs. To better understand this question, we explored the influence of racial identity in campus interactions with peers (athlete and non-athlete), coaches, administrators, and faculty. This theme was identified to characterize the racial stereotypes, microaggressions, and internal obligation to prove or validate their belonging as racialized students in academic and athletic settings. Prince 2 describes his experience proving his academic legitimacy as a STEM major:

> I really believe they (white peers) think a lot of us are getting in off of affirmative action…In class, they're curious to know what I'm about to say, I think being the only Black person and Black male in class, people turn around and listen when I speak. When I'm talking to my boys, I can talk like this. If I'm in class, I show them – I do this! You can't ever play me – I can articulate myself and ask questions too.

Prince 2's statements highlight the preconceived undertones of racial stereotypes (i.e., affirmative action, under-preparedness for academic rigor, dumb jock) and stereotype threats (Cooper, 2016b) associated with Black students that directly impact the sense of belonging for this group of students at HWIs. To validate his existence in classrooms, Prince 2 mentions a code switch or assimilation technique he utilizes to gain approval from his peers. Similarly, when asked to describe how her identity as a Black female impacts the relationships she pursues with administrators and staff in athletic settings, Queen 1 explained how she code switches and overextends a welcoming persona to give a good impression before being judged as a racial minority:

> You feel like people who don't look like you aren't really willing to listen…I feel more comfortable reaching out to people who look like me, I don't feel as bothersome. I don't have to go out of character. It's like sometimes you deal with people of a different race, you feel like you have to code switch. I make sure to go out of my way to be professional and speak to more people in the athletic academic center, so they know I'm a Black girl and I'm a nice person too.

Queen 1's response compliments the CRT tenet regarding the permanence of racism and challenge to dominant ideology as she overcompensates for the stereotype threat of being a Black woman (Cooper et al., 2016). Both participants' responses contextualize the dualities of being racially marginalized on campus in both academic and athletic settings. Their sentiments embody the sense of pride in being Black and having to overcome obstacles as a race. As such, intentionally rewriting the narrative of Black stereotypes (males as intellectually inferior; females as angry or hostile) sometimes comes at the expense of authenticity. King 2 added:

> I know I'm a large Black guy on a white campus [. . .] I want people to know like, I'm not just here for the gear, I'm here to "milk the game" – I'm here to get the most out of this opportunity. I'm not just an athlete, I'm a student. At the end of the day, I have to put on for my name, for my race, and be smarter than those other kids […] you have to prove that you're not dumb. They automatically assume I don't want to do my work. Like you have to insert yourself in group projects.

King 2's statement highlights the controversial existence of exploitation of Black college athletes. Referencing his access to the institution via his athletic participation in a game reveals the CRT dynamic-interest convergence facing Black college athletes at HWIs (Donnor, 2005). He acknowledges the benefits of being on the team (access) and using it as leverage to better represent his family and racial heritage. Thus, illuminating the linked fate (Simien, 2005) or awareness and belief that what happens to the individual member (King 2's academic success) will impact the larger group (family).

*Gendered Racism*

Research question two is concerned with how Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs perceive diversity, inclusion, and social justice activism. Many Black collegiate athletes at HWIs have reported experiences of stereotype threat that attribute to their feelings of lack of acceptance or inclusive campus climates in both athletic and academic settings. This theme represents the nuanced experiences of the interviewees based on their gendered racial identities. Both male and

female interviewees highlighted experiences of overt and covert racism and its influence on their perceptions of inclusion. These psychosocial and emotional realities can present major problems for Black collegiate athletes' sense of belonging on campus. Queen 1 expressed her experience being objectified, sexualized, and criminalized as a Black female in athletic settings:

> Sometimes African American females have little dips in our lower backs, everyone in my family has them. You don't see it as much in Caucasian women. My strength and conditioning coach (white woman) told me I need to stop sticking my butt out. She told me I was trying to get attention and being promiscuous by making my butt look bigger. I was so confused. I'm built this way.
>
> A lot of us on the team wear weave and headbands to preserve our natural hairstyles during lifting and practice. The guys wear durags, but that's fashion now. I remember an assistant coach, she stepped to us and decided we had on bandanas, and she was like, "What gang are you in?" I was taken back because she was African American, and she basically said I look ghetto. When it comes to cultural things – would you call that discrimination? Because I think so.

Queen 1's statements exemplify microinsults that perpetuate the disregard and lack of cultural empathy for Black women. Their multiple marginalized identities within the white male-dominated institution of sport render them silenced and often invisible (Bruening, 2004). Her reflection also highlights CRTs permanence of race and centrality of experiential knowledge as she recognizes the racial microaggressions that still pervade institutions of higher education (Solórzano et al., 2000). These assertions made by athletic staff are dangerous and have major implications on the emotional psyche of this subgroup of students. Moreover, in explaining the impacts of being a Black male on his sense of belonging, King 1 stated:

> It can be frustrating that people perceive me as one-dimensional. I remember going into a dorm with another Black student (non-athlete peer). The receptionist asked us if we play sports and I made up a random sport, and my friend said, "No, I'm just a student." She said to him, "How are you a Black guy at this university and you don't play a sport?" That really stung me. I wear less gear because I love to see the reaction of people. I pride myself on being more than an athlete.

King 1's response highlighted the social positioning of Black males on predominately white campuses, which further impacts their sense of belonging. The denial of the existence of Black males on campus outside athletics perpetuates stereotypes, such as unearned admittance for athletics instead of intellectual ability. Both participants reveal the experienced microinvalidations that disregard their realities as persons of Color in both athletic and academic settings, further contributing to feelings of isolation on campus by this group of students.

### Commitment to Social Justice Activism & Allyship

The third component of the second research question explores how Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs perceive and engage with social justice activism. This theme reflects the overwhelming presence of the interviewees believing in an obligation to social justice activism as well as expecting allyship from their coaches, athletic departments, and universities. Though all interviewees described allyship in different ways, there was a reemerging idea that coaches, athletic departments, and universities should use their platforms and power to advocate for positive social change on behalf of Black college athletes. All participants felt their individual teams (e.g., coaches, teammates, etc.) addressed issues of racism and inequity promptly. There also was an acknowledgment of athletic departments' efforts to support diversity and inclusion. However, overall, the interviewees expressed feelings of hesitation from their universities, which intensified the gap between athletes and their peers in the broader campus community. When asked about his views of athlete activism for social justice, King 1 explained:

> I love to see it! It has to be more than a moment. I don't want players to catch flack for it by their coaches…I started an idea with our position group to create a video with a hashtag for social justice. Of course, they (white spectators) hear me whenever I make a play on Saturdays, but do they hear me whenever I say police brutality against Black people is a problem in America? Does my value change when I take my jersey off? Am I just Black? I'm a big advocate of using your platform and I think more athletes need to do that in the most respectful and appropriate manner.

Similarly, King 2 added:

> I'm glad that players are holding their coaches accountable because almost every sport, major sports, are bringing the most money. The coaches are often white and the players that make up the teams are Black. Coaches have an obligation to speak for equality. On the field they love us, but when we take the helmet off, we're just Black.

Both comments from King 1 and King 2 support the CRT tenet of commitment to social justice and experiential knowledge/counter-narratives. Their sentiments highlight the sense of obligation and support for social justice activism, especially by athletes who can use the social capital for advancement. Their accounts acknowledge the intercentricity of race and racism, particularly the invisibility of their feelings/concerns and needs as it relates to social justice issues beyond playing their sports. The hegemonic realities that exist outside their team dynamics impact their lives off the field and thus why they cannot just "shut up and dribble." They also highlight a call to action from coaches as supporters and allies, and inadvertently reference the exploitation of Black athletes as they are accepted on game days and not valued off the field. This is yet another racial microinvalidation they experience whereby they are reduced to being one-dimensional (only athletically talented), which also is a form of athletic commodification and dehumanization.

### *Athlete Bubble within Campus*

The theme "athlete bubble within campus" addresses research questions two and three, which are concerned with how DI Black college athletes' sense of belonging is motivated by their perceptions of diversity, inclusion, and social justice activism. Within the sport context, many of the participants felt feelings of diversity and inclusion received within the athletics department are not reflected in their experiences with the broader campus community. While they acknowledged the existence of negative racial discourses within athletics, their team cohesion with teammates and coaches influences their sense of belonging within athletics. Their athlete identities provide an in-group commonality and acceptance within athletics, while their racial identity on campus warrants heightened feelings of surveillance, exclusion, and lack of support that widens the gap between the athletics department and campus. Many of the interviewees accredited the lower sense of belonging and inclusion on campus to the limited availability (time constraints or schedule conflicts with sports) or interest (exhaustion from athletic commitments) to engage with the broader campus due to conflicting schedules. King 2 perceived the campus' reactive response to Black Lives Matter as a reflection of its lack of care for the Black community. He stated: "Athletics does their part to bring awareness. However, it took our university a bit longer to come out with a statement regarding all the Black Lives Matter movement." This assertion aligns with CRT tenets regarding challenges to dominant ideology and commitment to social justice as he seeks the support of his institution in the fight for racial equality. Moreover, when asked how he feels his identity influences faculty and peer interactions with him in the academic setting, Prince 1 commented:

> Here, there's an athlete bubble, in athletics I feel that there's inclusion… on campus, athletes hang with athletes, Black people hang with Black people. Everything is semi-divided. It's just a regular college campus, I've been to plenty college campuses and it's just a regular big school. I don't feel like an over sense of belonging here…I went to a boarding school – my high school class, that was a sense of community. Here, you stick to your groups.

Prince 1's comments highlight the segmentation of social groups at HWIs, which act as a barrier to foster an inclusive community. He presents a nuanced experience, as he had the privilege of attending a boarding school from which he references his sense of belonging and community. Prince 1 described the demographic makeup of his boarding school as predominately white but culturally diverse with a fairly sizeable athlete population, which attributed to his sense of inclusion at this institution. When describing the campus climate, Queen 1 added:

> Quite frankly, I just see a bunch of white people. You would think there's no Black people on campus. You'll see Asians, Caucasians, you will see every other race besides Black people in your class. You can have 300 people in your class, you might have 10 Black people. It's not very diverse at all. I think that's one of the things I struggle with is trying to find the Black community.

Again here, Queen 1 attributes the surface-level demographic breakdown of her class as an indicator for her lack of feelings of belonging on campus. Her assertion speaks to the CRT tenets

regarding permanency of race and experiential knowledge because she highlights that her visual lens and perception of diversity on campus does not reflect one of inclusivity, which adds to her feelings of isolation. Prince 2 provided interesting insight as he recognized his comfort within athletics and the dichotomies of his racial identity on campus, but he has had positive experiences with the campus community. He stated: "I gravitate more towards athletes, specifically Black athletes, but as far as professors I have people like my PI from my lab, my old chemistry teacher – they embraced me." As mentioned before, Prince 2 is a STEM major and his motivation to be successful post-undergraduate drives his willingness to participate and engage with faculty on a deeper level. His recollection offers insight to the CRT tenet regarding experiential knowledge because he provides a counter-narrative to relationships with faculty members on campus. Lastly, when asked about the athletic department and college's response to issues of racial and social justice at her university, Queen 2 shared the following:

> Our athletics released statements. Our coaches have talked to everyone about the issues. I feel like they really care. They told us we would get in trouble for being out during the pandemic, but they would allow us to attend protests... I can't say the university as a whole has done a good job of speaking up.

Queen 2's statement highlights two separate experiences for Black collegiate athletes – a feeling of support from the athletics department and a lack of similar affirmation from broader campus leadership. These experiences constitute a barrier to the broader sense of belonging for this population and influence their level of engagement (or lack thereof) with the university outside of athletics.

### Invisibility of Holistic Identity

Research question three was concerned with the intersection of race, gender, and athlete identity and its influence on the sense of belonging and motivations post-collegiate athletics. Throughout the interviews, participants referenced instances that revealed the duality of being collegiate athletes on campus. All participants acknowledged the social status they possess on campus. For example, Queen 2 mentioned: "Activism is so important because athletes are leaders on campus and people look up to us." However, their social positioning on campus can overshadow their needs for holistic support, such as the desire for minority representation in both academic and athletic settings, mentoring, life skills, and time to explore career and internship opportunities. When asked about receiving support, King 2 described being self-motivated and support as non-existent. When describing his relationship with administrators within the athletic context he stated:

> They, you know, I feel like they truly see us like – I'm going to be blunt, but it's about money. You know what I mean. Some of them see us as a tool to pay their bills and that's it. They have to take care of us and make sure that we're content with you know, our conditions…I'm self-motivated. I do it for my family, but mostly myself.

King 2's comment aligns with the CRT tenet regarding interest convergence, whereby he feels he only receives support from the athletic department because the members benefit as well. Moreover, when asked about her preparedness for life post-collegiate athletics, Queen 1 added: "So much of our time is gone to our sport that we don't have time to get ready to prepare towards life after college." Her statement reveals the desire to seek opportunities to invest in her future, but her commitment as an athlete conflicts with those desires. In addition, King 1 said: "I think schedule-wise, schedule is majority reason why I hadn't developed relationships." He went on to say: "Within athletics, it's basically your job. When you come here for college, that's your job for the next four or five years. There are opportunities for me to feel included in campus, but football is different. I'm always tired after campus." King 1's statement illuminates the role conflict experienced by many collegiate athletes on campus. The sport business culture that focuses on maximizing time, energy, and interest in sport conflicts with academic enrichment (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Moreover, when discussing changes for the university to foster a more diverse and inclusive environment, Prince 2 mentioned:

> I would say that I want to gravitate more towards people who look like me because that's just something you don't find in common at a PWI. I had my first ever Black male professor last year.

Prince 2's comments highlight the desire for more minority representation. Similarly, Queen 1 and Prince 1 also mentioned the need for a more diverse presence in campus faculty, positing that a more diverse presence would motivate them to engage more. Black collegiate athletes at HWIs inevitably are perceived as an outgroup because of their racial identities. Diversifying the campus workforce, specifically those in faculty and administrator roles, could help validate Black student athletes' sense of belonging on campus and further cultivate an inclusive community (Jolly et al., 2020).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the sense of belonging for Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs, and how these experiences influence their perceptions of race, inclusion, and social justice activism. This study considered the relevance and significance of the current unique social and cultural climate (post-2020 BLM era), and its influence on the findings. CRT tenets were utilized to interrogate how socially constructed racial discourses inform the lens for Black collegiate athletes and their experiences on campus (Ladson-Billings, 2016). The analysis of participants' responses suggests the CRT tenets (intercentricity of race/racism, commitment to social justice, interest convergence, centrality of experiential knowledge, challenge to dominant ideology) used to rationalize the reflection of society's hegemonic structures on college campuses impact participant perceptions of inclusion, social justice activism, and sense of belonging. The interviewee counternarratives revealed the understanding of their racial significance and positioning, which further influenced how they perceived their environments in academic and athletic settings differently.

In the athletic context, participants acknowledged the presence of racial marginalization and expressed specific desires for genuine holistic support, such as more Black representation across all levels at the university (e.g., student body, faculty, staff, administration, etc.), mentorship, and time to explore resources to prepare them for life post-collegiate athletics. Similarly, in a study that examined the impact of holistic development support programs at DI HWIs on Black athlete experiences and outcomes, Cooper and colleagues (2019) found that strategic culturally-relevant programs provided a range of personal and professional benefits to Black athletes. Though the study primarily focused on Black males, the findings revealed the desire for more Black representation, mentoring, and experiences to support their unique cultural positioning on predominately white campuses. Furthermore, in a qualitative study investigating academic, social, and athletic experiences of Black collegiate athletes at HWIs, Sato and colleagues (2017) found that the participants had a negative experience with the campus climate due to academic challenges such as lack of preparedness, cultural differences, and negative sport and race-based stereotypic beliefs from faculty. Consistent with these findings, throughout the current study participants expressed instances of cultural incompetence from faculty, staff, and peers, code-switching, and uncertain genuineness of support from institutional staff in athletics and academic units. In contrast, the overrepresentation of Black collegiate athletes, team cohesion (athlete identity), and intentional responses for social justice and equality within the athletics department promoted an in-group experience of trust that shaped the participants' perception of athletics as a more inclusive community when compared to the academic setting.

Concerning the academic context, the lack of social support contributes to the stress of alienation and isolation based on the participants' racial and athletic identities. Carter-Francique and colleagues (2015) applied a CRT framework to examine Black collegiate athletes' experiential realities within their academic environments. Their findings revealed academic success was contingent upon interactions with faculty, as their status as Black athletes promoted positive and negative interactions. Similar to these findings, in the current study Black collegiate athletes expressed interactions with faculty and non-athlete peers undergirded by prejudice and racial stereotypes served as barriers for them experiencing an inclusive campus climate. Participants in the study referenced experiences of microaggressions and preferential treatment of white counterparts from faculty. However, it is worth noting one participant acknowledged having generally positive experiences with faculty members.

Moreover, many Black collegiate athletes have difficulties transitioning to new social discourses; they may once have been the majority in their previous communities, and now struggle

with the reality they are the (numerical) minority at HWIs. Interestingly, the participants who attended predominately white or racially diverse high schools (King 1, King 2, Queen 1, Prince 1) reverted to mainly establishing relationships with other students (athletes and non-athletes) who shared similar racial, ethnic, and/or cultural backgrounds. The interviewees expressed culture shock from the drastic disproportionate number of non-Black students on campus compared to Black students. The lack of Black representation in faculty was another contributing factor to these athletes' lack of sense of belonging in academic settings. All participants expressed the desire for more people of Color as professors and campus leaders. These findings support Bimper's (2014) study, which also employed CRT to investigate the influence of post-racial narratives on colorblind racism for Black intercollegiate athlete experiences. The study revealed that Black athletes recognized that colorblind racism from faculty and peers indirectly affected their experiences and perceptions in campus environments.

In addition, the findings revealed a major influencer in participant perceptions of campus inclusion is the university's response to issues of racism, social justice, and equality. All participants referenced their disdain for the reactive, delayed, and ambiguous responses from their institutions to condemn racism and racial inequality. The participants suggested the hesitation or silence in support of recent movements for racial equality inadvertently supports white supremacy or the status quo and negatively impacted their sense of belonging on campus.

All in all, the participants expressed their self-motivation and/or support from family drives their desire to continue at their universities despite negative experiences. Throughout the study, participants revealed a reoccurring sense of pride in their racial identities. Following CRT's tenet of experiential knowledge/counter-narratives, their understanding of the historical positioning of Black people in America warrants their perception of adversity and difficult situations as an opportunity to strengthen their emotional intelligence. Additionally, participants expressed the desire to feel better prepared for life post-collegiate athletics. While they attribute the support received to athletics, the participants asserted limited time and availability adversely impacted their level of engagement with the broader campus.

It is worth noting that there is a wealth of historical and contemporary sport research that highlights the descriptive experiences of Black athletes at HWIs (e.g., academic neglect, social isolation and lack of support, athlete identity crises, etc.). However, the current study provides considerable insights to how these athletes interpret and apply meaning to their experiences as racial minorities on campus during a climate of heightened awareness of racial inequality and inequity. More specifically, applying a CRT lens to the study allowed the researcher to identify the various instances where race converges and diverges in the participant experiences. The current study highlights the significance of recent racial justice movements in shaping the perceptions and expectations Black athletes have of their athletic departments and educational institutions. The study reveals how the broader BLM movement not only enhanced Black college athletes' sociopolitical consciousness, but also empowered them to speak out and demand more of their athletic departments. Collectively, the participants acknowledged a sense of social "wokeness," in which Black athletes expect their athletic departments and institutions to explicitly express their support for racial equality, while openly condemning racism. As such, the athletes applied meaning to reactive responses to racial equality and BLM from their institutions; delayed responses often resulted in the participants questioning the genuineness or intention of their institution's commitment to racial equity and inclusion. Previous studies have indicated how Black college athletes felt marginalization and were passionate about challenging conditions they faced on campus, but this study highlights how the collective action garnered by a broader social movement had a direct impact on their self-efficacy to engage in local and national political efforts centered on racial justice. Participants not only were more aware of their experiences of marginalization, which has mirrored current conditions in the broader U.S. society, but they also were more determined to change these realities given the socio-historical and socio-political context of the BLM era.

## Limitations

In the current study, some limitations should be taken into consideration. One limitation is participants were selected from two HWIs in the Southeastern region of the U.S. Thus, though the

findings highlight the unique experiences of Black collegiate athletes at DI HWIs, they are not generalizable to all Black collegiate athletes. In addition, due to time constraints and precautions during COVID-19, a limited sample of current Black collegiate athletes were included in the study. Also, this study explored perceptions of inclusion and a sense of belonging through the lens of racial identity. The findings do not posit an all-encompassing solution for Black college athlete inclusion on campus.

### Conclusion and Implications

This study provides opportunities for athletic departments and institutions of higher education to engage and understand the experiences of Black collegiate athletes. As society is undeniably becoming more diverse, inclusive, and socially conscious, individuals on campus with privileged identities (e.g., coaches, administrators, faculty, and other higher ed professionals) are encouraged to leverage their power to redress racial inequities and inequalities. Populations who historically have been systemically denied access to certain types of power should not bear the responsibility of challenging systemic imbalances of power alone. To combat intentional and unintentional stereotyping and microaggressions, faculty members should be mandated to engage in unconscious and implicit biases training. Subsequently, accountability measures should be instituted by including completion of those trainings in annual performance reviews. In addition, the NCAA (2020) has encouraged athletic departments to appoint an athletics diversity and inclusion designee (ADID) to assist in promoting and sustaining inclusive programming and policies.

Another recommendation is for every institution to be intentional about filling this role and allocating funds for strategic programmatic efforts to foster diversity and inclusion for its athletes and the broader campus community. Hiring a faculty member for this position can warrant positive benefits, as it provides an opportunity for athletics to align with university strategic plans. For example, departments can implement standing dialogues on topics of race, gender, sexuality, and other various diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. In addition, developing programming that exposes collegiate athletes to research, internships, and study abroad experiences also are recommended to increase positive cross-cultural interactions. More importantly, institutions of higher education are encouraged to be proactive in advancing equality and social justice for all students on campus. We suggest advocacy through mentorship programming, funding opportunities, and enrichment experiences that focus on groups such as Black college athletes. For example, campus faculty and higher education professionals can develop a pipeline summer bridge program that introduces incoming athletes to the broader campus community outside athletics. In addition, implementing a mentoring program that pairs college athletes with faculty members in related fields of interest could help bridge the gap between athletics and the broader campus community. The intentional hiring and retention of more diverse candidates to replicate the diverse and inclusive student body also can help increase feelings of inclusion and a sense of belonging on campus as well.

In addition, one of the best methods to advocate for Black collegiate athletes is through time. Given their demanding schedules juggling sports and academics, allotting time back into their day and presenting opportunities to engage with the campus community can help bridge the gap between athletics and the broader campus. Athletic departments should work collaboratively with faculty members and campus representatives to develop alliances with campus support groups (e.g., multicultural offices, career centers, STEM groups, LGBTQI+ organizations, and units, etc.) that can help infuse collegiate athletes into broader campus initiatives.

While this study focused primarily on the influence of racial discourses on the sense of belonging, future research should consider other identities — such as sexual orientation, socio-economic status, religion, sport affiliation, scholarship status (e.g., full, partial, walk-on), and institution types (e.g., private, public, HBCU, PWI) — that shape athlete experiences on college campuses. In addition, exploring perceptions and experiences of a larger sample of collegiate athletes of Color across various universities and divisions also can uncover unique findings in athletic and academic contexts. Future research also could employ experimental and comparative designs to directly investigate the influence of identity on the sense of belonging. We posit that further exploration of nuanced experiences of athletes of Color at HWIs can help translate the

effectiveness of initiatives aimed at centering these athletes' holistic development at HWIs. Considering the current unique cultural and social climate for racial equality and the re-emergence of the athlete-activist, the voices of athletes of Color are relevant and worth exploring. Future research also could conduct a longitudinal study from an athlete's senior year of high school through college to explore how cultural backgrounds and preparedness for college influence the sense of inclusion, belonging, and academic motivations for collegiate athletes of Color. In addition, while this study utilized a qualitative design to explore the phenomenon, a mixed-methods study can provide a deeper understanding of the factors that negatively impact the experiences of athletes of Color at HWIs.

## References

Adair, D., Taylor, T., & Darcy, S. (2010). Managing ethnocultural and 'racial' diversity in sport: Obstacles and opportunities. *Sport Management Review, 13*(4), 307–312. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2010.06.002

Ang, C. K., Embi, M. A., Yunus, M. M. (2016). Enhancing the quality of the findings of a longitudinal case study: Reviewing trustworthiness via ATLAS.ti. *The Qualitative Report*, *21*(10), 1855–1867. https://www.proquest.com/openview/df220566b53a68537413847c85589606/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=55152

Bell, D. A. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review, 93*(3), 518–533. https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546

Bell, D. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*. Basic Books.

Bell, D. A. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.

Biddle, S. J., Markland, D., Gilbourne, D., Chatzisarantis, N. L., & Sparkes, A. (2001). Research methods in sport and exercise psychology: quantitative and qualitative issues. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *19*(10), 777–809. https://doi.org/10.1080/026404101317015438

Bimper, A. Y. (2014). Lifting the veil: Exploring colorblind racism in black student athlete experiences. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 39*(3), 225–243. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0193723513520013

Bimper. A. Y., & Harrison, L. (2011). Meet me at the crossroads: African American athletic and racial identity. *Quest*, *63*(3), 275–288. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2011.10483681

Bruening, J. (2004). Coaching difference: A case study of four African American women student-athletes. *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*, *18*(2), 242–251.

Carter-Francique, A. R. (2013). Black female collegiate athlete experiences in a culturally relevant leadership program. *The National Journal of Urban Education & Practice*, *7*(2) 87–106.

Carter-Francique, A., Hart, A., & Steward, A. (2013). Black college athletes' perceptions of academic success and the role of social support. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, *6*(2), 231–246. https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.6.2.231

Carter-Francique, A., Hart, A., & Cheeks, G. (2015). Examining the value of social capital and social support for black student-athletes' academic success. *Journal of African American Studies*, 19, 157–177. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-015-9295-z

Chang, M. J., Eagan, M. K., Lin, M. H., & Hurtado, S. (2016). Considering the impact of racial stigmas and science identity: Persistence among biomedical and behavioral science aspirants. *Journal of Higher Education*, *82*(5), 564–596. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2011.11777218

Comeaux, E. (2010). Racial differences in faculty perceptions of collegiate student-athletes' academic and post-undergraduate achievements. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *27*(4), 390–412.

Comeaux, E. (2012). Unmasking athlete microaggressions: Division I student-athletes' engagement with members of the campus community. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, *5*(2), 189–198. https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.5.2.189

Cooper, J. N., & Hawkins, B. (2012). A place of opportunity: Black male student athletes' experiences at a historically black university. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, *5*(2), 170-188. https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.5.2.170

Cooper, J. N. (2015). The value of qualitative approaches in the examination of black male student-athletes. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *7*(3), 361–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2014.888586

Cooper, J. N. (2016a). Excellence beyond athletics: Best practices for enhancing black male student-athletes' educational experiences and outcomes. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *49*(3), 267–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2016.1194097

Cooper, J.N. (2016b). 'Focus on the bigger picture:' An anti-deficit achievement examination of black male scholar athletes in science and engineering at a historically white university (HWU). *Whiteness and Education, 1*(2), 109–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2016.1272627

Cooper, J. N. (2019). *From exploitation back to empowerment: Black male holistic (under)development through sport and (mis)education*. Peter Lang.

Cooper, J. N., Cooper, J. E., & Baker, A. R. (2016). An anti-deficit perspective on black female Scholar-athletes' achievement experiences at a ivision I historically white institution (HWI). *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, *10*(2), 109–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2016.1218647

Cooper, J. N., Corral, M. D., Macaulay, C. D. T., Cooper, M. S., Nwadike, A., & Mallery, M. (2019). Collective uplift: The impact of a holistic development support program on black male former college athletes' experiences and outcomes. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *32*(1), 21–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1522011

Cooper, J. N., & Hawkins, B. (2014). The transfer effect: A critical race theory examination of black male transfer student athletes' experiences. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, *7*(1), 80–104. https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.2013-0033

Cooper, J. N., Newton, A. C., Klein, M., & Jolly, S. (2020). A call for culturally responsive transformational leadership in college sport: An anti-ism approach for achieving equity and inclusion. *Frontiers in Sociology, 5*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.00065

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York Times: the New Press.

Crouch, M., & McKenzie. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, *45*(4), 483–499. https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018406069584

Cunningham, G. B. (2008a). Commitment to diversity and its influence on athletic department outcomes. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, *1*(2), 176–201. https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.1.2.176

Cunningham, G. B. (2008b). Understanding diversity in intercollegiate athletics. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, *2(*3), 321–338. https://doi.org/10.1179/ssa.2008.2.3.321

Cunningham. G. B. (2009). Understanding the diversity-related change process: A field study. *Journal of Sport Management, 23*(4), 407–428. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.23.4.407

Cunningham, G. B. (2019). *Diversity and inclusion in sport organizations*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429504310

Delgado, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Temple University Press.

Feagin, J. R. (Ed.). (2006). *Systemic racism: A theory of oppression*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880938

Ferdman, B. M. (2014). The practice of inclusion in diverse organizations: Toward a systemic and inclusive framework. In B. M. Ferdman & B. R. Deane (Eds.), *Diversity at work: The practice of inclusion* (pp. 3–54). Jossey-Bass.

Ferguson, T. (2016). "*I can do more things": How black female student-athletes contend with race, gender, and stereotypes* (Publication No. 10024531) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Fuller, R. D., Harrison, C. K., Bukstein, S. J., Martin, B. E., Lawrence, S. M., Gadsby, P. (2020). That smart dude: A qualitative investigation of the African American male scholar-baller identity. *Journal of Urban Education, 55*(5), 813–831. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916668955

Gayles, J. G., Crandall, R., & Morin, S. (2018). Student-athletes' sense of belonging: Background characteristics, student involvement, and campus climate. *International Journal of Sport & Society, 9*(1), 23–38.

Gibbs, A. (1997). Focus groups. *Social Research Update,* (19)*.* https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU19.html

Gill, P., & Baillie, J. (2018). Interviews and focus groups in qualitative research: An update for the digital age. *British Dental Journal, 225*, 668–672. https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.2018.815

Graham, N. (2013). *Chris Paul #3 of the Los Angeles Clippers tosses a basketball to team owner Donald Sterling* [Photograph]. NBAE via Getty Images. https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/chris-paul-of-the-los-angeles-clippers-tosses-a-basketball-news-photo/161648829

Harper, S. R. (2018). *Black male student-athletes and racial inequities in NCAA division I college Sports*: 2018 edition. University of Southern California, Race and Equity Center. http://abfe.issuelab.org/resources/29858/29858.pdf

Hartigan, J. (2009). Is race still socially constructed? The recent controversy over race and medical genetics. *Science as Culture*. *17*(2), 163–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505430802062943

Hazel, N. (1995). Elicitating techniques with young people. *Social Research Update*, (12). https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU12.html

Hurtado, S., Han, J. C., Sáenz, V. B., Espinosa, L. L., Cabrera, N. L., & Cerna, O. S. (2007). Predicting transition and adjustment to college: Biomedical and behavioral science aspirants' and minority students' first year of college. *Research in Higher Education*, *48*(7), 841–887. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9051-x

Jolly, S., Cooper, J. N., Chepyator-Thomson, J. R. (2020). An examination of culturally responsive programming for black student-athletes' holistic development at division I historically white institutions (HWIs). *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics,* (Fall 2020 Special Issue), 73–90. http://csri-jiia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SI_2020_01_04.pdf

Jolly, S., Cooper, J. N., Kluch, Y. (2021) Allyship as activism: Advancing social change in global sport through transformational allyship. *European Journal for Sport & Society, 18*(3), 229–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.1941615

Kiger, M. E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No.131. *Medical Teacher*, *42*(8), 846–854. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030

Kluch, Y. (2020). "My story is my activism!": (Re-)Definitions of social justice activism among collegiate athlete activists. *Communication & Sport, 8*(4–5), 566–590. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519897288

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (2016). Toward a critical race theory of education. In D. Gillborn, E. Taylor, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*. Routledge.

Lambert, J. R., & Bell, M. P. (2013). Diverse forms of difference. In Q. Roberson (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Diversity and Work* (pp. 13–31). Oxford Handbooks.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Sage Publications.

Linneberg, M. S., & Korsgaard, S. (2019). Coding qualitative data: a synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *19*(3), 259–270. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012

Mac Intosh, A., Martin, E. M., & Kluch, Y. (2020). To act or not to act? Student-athlete perceptions of social justice activism. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, *51*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101766

Marchi, M. (2019). *Assistant coach Becky Hammon with Gregg Popovich of the* San *Antonio Spurs* [Photograph]. Getty Images. https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/assistant-coach-becky-hammon-with-gregg-popovich-of-the-san-news-photo/1133939712

Martin, B. E., Harrison, C. K., Stone, J., & Lawrence, M. (2010). Athletic voices & academic victories: African American male student-athlete academic experiences in the Pac-ten. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *34*(2), 131–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723510366541

Mayes, T. (2006). *LEX: The learner experience of e-learning methodology report.* Glasgow Caledonian University.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey-Bass.

Mills, A. J., Durepos, G., Wiebe, E. (2010). *Encyclopedia of case study research*. Sage.

Moore, J. L., Madison-Colmore, O., & Smith, D. M. (2003). The prove-them-wrong syndrome: Voices from unheard African American males in engineering disciplines. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *12*(1), 61–73. https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.1201.61

National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2019). *NCAA demographics database.* https://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/ncaa-demographics-database

National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2021). *NCAA student-athlete activism and racial justice engagement study.* https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/research/demographics/2021RES_NCAASAActivismAndRJ_ES.pdf

Oseguera, L. (2010). Success despite the image: How African American male scholar-athletes endure their academic journey amidst negative characterizations. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education, 4*(3), 297–324. https://doi.org/10.1179/ssa.2010.4.3.297

Patton, M. Q. (2002*). Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective interviewing: A guide to theory & practice.* Sage.

Sage, G. H. (1998). *Power and ideology in American sport* (2nd ed.). Human Kinetics.

Sampson, H., Johannessen, I. A. (2020). Turning on the tap: The benefits of using "real-life" vignettes in qualitative research interviews. *Journal of Qualitative Research*, *20*(1), 56–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118816618

Sato, T., Hodge, S. R., & Eckert, K. (2017). Experiences of black student-athletes on a predominately white university campus. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education, 11*(2), 104–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2017.1316890

Schoenberg, N. E., & Ravdal, H. (2000). Using vignettes in awareness and attitudinal research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *3*(1), 63–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/136455700294932

Sherman, D. (2020). *Pelicans and Jazz kneel together during national anthem* [Photograph]. NBAE via Getty Images. https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/the-new-orleans-pelicans-and-the-utah-jazz-kneel-for-the-news-photo/1227846395

Singer, J. N. (2005). Understanding racism through the eyes of African American male student-Athletes. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*, 365-386.

Singer, J. N. (2009). African American football athletes' perspectives on institutional integrity in college sport. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, *80*(1), 102–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2009.10599534

Singer, J. N. (2016). African American male college athletes' narratives on education and racism. *Journal of Urban Education*, *51*(9), 1065–1095. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916669749

Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *69*(1/2), 60–73. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2696265

Solórzano, D. G., & Villalpando, O. (1998). Critical race theory, marginality, and the experience of students of color in higher education. *Sociology of Education: Emerging Perspectives, 21*, 211–224.

Stake, R. E. (2003). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (2nd ed., pp.134–164). Sage.

Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(5), 797–811. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797

Tate IV, W. F. (1997). Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education*, *22*(1), 195-247. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X022001195

Törrönen, J. (2002). Semiotic theory on qualitative interviewing with stimulus texts. *Qualitative Research, 2*(3), 343–362. https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200304

Törrönen, J. (2018). Using vignettes in qualitative interviews as clues, microcosms or provokers. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *18*(3), 276-286.

Valenti, S. S., & Costall, A. (1997). Visual perception of lifted weight from kinematic and static (photographic) displays. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 23*(1), 181–198. https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-1523.23.1.181

West, C. (2017). *Race matters, 25th anniversary: With a new introduction*. Beacon Press.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Sage.

Zaleski, M. (2019). *New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees and wide receiver Michael Thomas stand for the national anthem before an NFL football game* [Photograph]. Nola.com. https://www.nola.com/sports/saints/article_ba44838c-a65e-11ea-8825-73abd88bdb43.html