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## “I Might as Well Get My Education”: The Experiences of Black Male Division III College Athletes

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### ABSTRACT

*Division III college athletes largely have been ignored in the growing literature involving college sport. Given that the majority of college athletes that participate in high profile sports are athletes of color, there is a need to explore the experiences of this population, specifically at the Division III level. Informed by the Excellence Beyond Athletics (EBA) framework, which empowers students of color, especially Black male athletes, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black male athletes at two rural Division III institutions. Ten Black male Division III athletes took part in semi-structured interviews. Using inductive analysis and descriptive coding, six final themes were established: College Choice/Financial Issues, Academics, Time Management, Athletic Identity/Culture, Commitment to Athletics, and Campus Climate/Black Experience. This study strives to better understand the experiences of Black male college athletes at the Division III level in hopes of enhancing the student experience through impactful programming.*

Keywords: Black athletes, college athletes, Division III, qualitative research, student experience

Little has been studied on the experience of college athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) Division III, even though approximately 40% of NCAA athletes are in this division (Kayda, 2021). The NCAA’s (2021b) Division III philosophy statement reads:

Colleges and universities in Division III place the highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students’ academic programs. They seek to establish and maintain an environment in which a student-athlete’s athletics activities are conducted as an integral part of the student-athlete’s educational experience, and in which coaches play a significant role as educators. They also seek to establish and maintain an environment that values cultural diversity and gender equity among their student-athletes and athletics staff. (p. 187)

There are research studies (e.g., Bimper et al., 2013; Fuller et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2011; Singer, 2005; Williams et al., 2020) on athletes in Division I, but less about athletes in Divisions II and III. Several researchers have focused on high profile (e.g., football, men’s basketball) athletes (Williams et al., 2020), which are the sports with the most Black male athletes (Rubin, 2016). However, since the majority of athletes are not in Division I, more research is needed on the experiences of athletes in Divisions II and III.

All college athletes, particularly those at the Division I level, often face negative stigmas commonly referred to as the “dumb jock” stereotype (Comeaux 2010, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995; Simons et al., 2007). However, for Black college athletes, instances of stigma, discrimination, and racism often serve as a common theme in the experiences of this particular sub-population of college athletes (Cooper & Hawkins, 2012; Fuller et al., 2017; Rubin, 2016; Singer, 2005). Black college athletes face discrimination by their peers, professors, and even academic advisors who have been shown to believe that Black athletes lack intelligence and are unmotivated in their academic pursuits

(Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995; Riciputi & Erdal, 2017; Sailes, 1993; Shaw et al., 2019; Stokowski, Rubin et al., 2020). The discrimination Black college athletes endure has a substantial impact not only on the collegiate experience of this population, but also on their sense of self-worth (Chao et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of Black male athletes in these contexts, which could help break stereotypes (Stokowski & Ferguson, 2020). Cooper (2019) emphasized that despite stereotypes, “Black male athletes are not monolithic” (p. 3). He expressed, “Given the diversity of experiences among Black male athletes, there is a need for more nuanced coverage of their socialization experiences and subsequent life outcomes” (Cooper, 2019, p. 4).

Because the majority of athletic opportunities are at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Rubin (2016) noted that “Black student-athletes are often isolated from the rest of campus, especially given the stereotypes others have about their motives, academic ability, or just about their skin color” (p. 187). Additionally, the Division III environment makes the Black male athlete experience more intriguing to study since Division III institutions have a significant amount of the student body participating in athletics (NCAA, 2014). As the majority of the literature on Black college athletes is limited to those participating at the Division I level (e.g., Bimper et al., 2013; Fuller et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2011; Singer, 2005; Williams et al., 2020), the purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black male athletes at Division III institutions.

## Literature Review

### Black Male Athlete College Experience

Research on the experiences of Black male college athletes generally has been situated in the Division I context (e.g., Bimper et al., 2013; Fuller et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2011; Singer, 2005). In general, studies from the Division I context have highlighted negative experiences of Black male college athletes, such as racism and stereotyping (e.g., Fuller, 2017; Singer, 2005) and identity foreclosure (e.g., Harrison et al., 2011). For example, Fuller et al. (2017) studied the connection between academic self-concept, athletic identity, and Black identity among 168 Black male athletes attending 13 Division I PWIs across the U.S. Participants completed various surveys tied to these concepts, revealing “effects of negative athletic experiences on the academic functioning of African American male college athletes” (Fuller et al., 2017, p. 717). Through statistical analysis, they noted that Black athletes are impacted by stereotype threat, not necessarily reaching their potential given negative messages about their abilities, calling for students to recognize their academic abilities and Black identity (Fuller et al., 2017).

There is a growing body of literature, however, that has utilized an anti-deficit approach to understanding Black male college athletes (e.g., Bimper et al., 2013; Cooper, 2013; Cooper, 2019; Martin et al., 2015). Bimper and colleagues (2013), for example, investigated the self-perceptions and behaviors contributing to academic success in Black male college athletes. Likewise, Cooper (2013) examined the function of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in positively impacting the experiences of Black male college athletes, and Martin et al. (2015) explored the influences of peer groups on the academic motivations of academically successful Black male college athletes at four academically rigorous universities. These studies, as well as others, are shifting the focus away from focusing on the negatives surrounding Black male college athletes (e.g., racism, stereotyping, identity foreclosure) to their successes.

### Division III Athletic Experiences

According to the NCAA (2014; n.d.), one-fourth of students at Division III institutions are athletes. In line with the Division III philosophy, member institutions do not provide athletic scholarships to their athletes (Kayda, 2021; Navarro et al., 2020; Nichols et al., 2020). Because

NCAA academic metrics like the Academic Progress Rate (APR) and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) only include athletes on scholarship, Division III institutions do not report these statistics. Division III athletes do not get the same type of media attention as Division I participants (Nichols et al., 2020).

Nichols et al. (2020) studied 503 Division III men's basketball athletes from 37 institutions to determine factors that influenced their college choice. They found that "academic reputation and opportunities provided at a college or university outweigh other factors such as athletics and financial aid" (p. 44). Athletes found career opportunities and the head coach to be key factors in their college selection. Financial aid differed as a reason based on socioeconomic status; athletes from a wealthy background were not concerned with aid, whereas athletes receiving a full academic scholarship placed a high value on aid (Nichols et al., 2020). Race/ethnicity data were collected in a demographic survey, but was not reported to be significant in the college choice of men's basketball athletes in Division III (Nichols et al., 2020).

In his study of athletic identity differences in NCAA divisions, Huml (2018) used structural equation modeling from 576 responses on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), finding that Division III athletes have decreased athletic identity compared to athletes in Divisions I and II. Division III athletes are less likely to pursue professional athlete careers and have more academic and career development experiences (Huml, 2018). Division III athletes reported that they feel part of the campus community (91%) and 94% felt connected to campus through being an athlete (NCAA, 2014). The NCAA (2014) added:

Those student-athletes who report a greater sense of connection to the campus also are more likely to report higher levels of academic motivation, greater satisfaction with the overall academic experience, feelings that the team environment is inclusive and accepting of different cultures and backgrounds, seeing their coaches as ethical leaders (para. 3).

The NCAA (2020b) released information regarding athletes' time demands in each division, noting that Division III athletes' academic and extracurricular activities were enhanced by athletics participation. Almost a quarter (24%) of Division III athletes have or plan to study abroad, 44% are employed and work a median of eight hours a week, 66% have internship experience, and 67% intend to pursue graduate education (NCAA, 2020b). Though Division III athletes spend less time on athletics, they have to balance their full-time student and athlete roles with work responsibilities and campus involvement, which still is challenging for their time management.

### **Division III Academic Experiences**

In the NCAA's (2020a) Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Learning of Student Athletes in College (GOALS) study, 85% of male Division III athletes chose their college for athletics, and 80% selected academics as a factor. Those numbers swapped for female Division III athletes, with 85% choosing academics and 80% for athletics as their top reasons. Across all sports, athletes in Division III responded "agree" or "strongly agree" in higher percentages to the item "I am able to find balance between academics and extracurriculars (including athletics)" compared to students in the other two divisions (NCAA, 2020a, slide 16). Schroeder (2000) found that athletes in Division III interacted and had positive academic experiences with faculty.

Kayda (2021) noted that Division III athletes need academic support from their institutions, but because of the division's philosophy, there might not be specialized services for athletes. In her study of attrition of NCAA Division III athletes, she found that only gender was a significant factor in academic attrition, that "females are generally more likely to persist in academics through graduation than their male student counterparts" (pp. 67-68). Sport and sport type did not yield statistically significant results, and the race composition of the sample was not robust enough to study as a variable (Kayda, 2021).

In a study of Division III athletes' athletic identity and perceptions of academic support, Williams et al. (2011) surveyed 409 athletes at three northeastern institutions, followed by conducting focus groups. They found that Division III athletes hold a strong athletic identity, and many struggled with academic support services on their campuses. They felt that faculty advisors were not accessible or available, study hall locations and times were not ideal, and that athletic commitments were not always considered excused absences from missed classes. However, students with grade point averages above 3.0 tended to have more positive perceptions of faculty. Williams et al. (2011) suggested that formal faculty mentoring programs would be a best practice to support athletes at Division III institutions.

Supiano (2018) interviewed a Division III faculty member, Dr. McKay, who went out of her way to engage with athletes in her course when she was encouraged by their energy and retention of information. The Faculty Athletic Representative at her institution noticed she was attending away games, and invited her to serve as a faculty mentor. McKay mentioned that many professors see athletes negatively because of the scandals and issues that are prevalent in Division I (Supiano, 2018). Athletes at her institution were afraid of stereotypes, choosing not to wear any athletic gear to class to avoid those negative perceptions (Supiano, 2018).

### **Division III Athletes' Involvement and Service**

Since athletes at Division III institutions understand the importance of being part of the campus community, they are involved in various activities outside athletics. The NCAA (2020b) GOALS study showed that in Division III, male athletes self-reported spending 24 to 34 hours per week on athletic activities, and female athletes self-reported dedicating 22 to 31 hours per week. While this is a significant number of hours, the median reported hours in all sports in Division III are less than the numbers reported by athletes in Divisions I and II (NCAA, 2020b). Schroeder (2000) studied the involvement and experiences of 14 Division III basketball athletes (eight male, five female) at a small, private liberal arts college in California. Through interviews, he determined that the athletes in his study were able to get involved on campus in a variety of activities, including Greek life, club sports, cultural organizations, and religious activities. Additionally, many participants held jobs on- and off-campus and volunteered for local non-profit organizations.

Another area of involvement is activism and engagement in social justice initiatives. Fuller and Agyemang (2018) studied the attitudes and perceptions that Black male athletes had toward activism. They interviewed 10 Division III Black male athletes from two institutions regarding political activism, especially around social justice issues. Many athletes felt that activism could be considered unacceptable behavior as they navigated their dual identities as a Black male and an athlete (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018). They found that "while the participants' multiple identities included their racial identity and athletic identity, it appears the NCAA Division III athletic context influenced their identities such that their athletic identity was made more salient than their racial identity" (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018, p. 201). Through their interviews, Fuller and Agyemang (2018) also gained a broader set of perspectives from the participants. We sought to learn how the athletes perceived the campus climate and any racism through their Black identity. This study builds on their previous work by exploring other dimensions of Division III Black male athletes' experiences from the same data.

### **Theoretical Framework: Excellence Beyond Athletics**

According to Patton et al. (2016), "As postsecondary education increases in ethnic diversity, understanding the ethnic identities of college students remains an area ripe with possibilities" (p. 152). Scholarship must strive to understand the development of all college students, including those in underrepresented groups (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Given the prevalence of Black athletes

competing throughout the NCAA membership (NCAA, 2021a), scholarship must be dedicated to understanding the needs of marginalized populations.

The Excellence Beyond Athletics (EBA) framework empowers students of color, especially Black male athletes, through an anti-deficit lens, to achieve their full potential (Cooper, 2016). Cooper (2016) noted that “the quality and nature of Black male student athletes’ experiences and outcomes at institutions are predicated on three key factors: (1) conditions, (2) relationships, and (3) expectations (CRE)” (p. 271). He emphasized that Black male athletes who struggle with academic performance or degree completion are responding to a gap in these three factors (i.e., conditions, relationships, expectations) rather than in achievement or ability (Cooper, 2016). The EBA approach roots the holistic development of Black male college athletes in six principles: self-identity awareness, positive social engagement, active mentorship, academic achievement, career aspirations, and balanced time management (Cooper, 2016).

Just as Fuller and Agyemang (2018) determined Division III Black male athletes have a more salient athlete identity than their Black identity, Cooper (2016) warned of the overemphasis on Black male athletes’ athletic identity. Self-identity awareness also connects with how Black students experience racism throughout their college experiences. Cooper (2016) called for athletes to engage socially both with athletes and non-athletes on campus, and to get involved in their community. The third principle, active mentorship, requires engaging coaches, staff, faculty, and community members to support athletes’ needs and development. While not all mentors need to have shared characteristics with the athletes, there should be Black mentors to support the athletes.

Black athletes would benefit from athletic programs’ collaborating with campus to provide academic support, which engages athletes into the campus community and also provides the structure for academic resources (Cooper, 2016; Stokowski & Ferguson, 2020). There also should be an effort by campus constituents to be culturally competent and understand the consequences of stereotyping students based on race (Shaw et al., 2019). Coaches also play an important role in encouraging academic success and prioritizing college athletes’ academic experiences (Cooper, 2016). Black male athletes also should learn about a wide range of career possibilities during college and explore majors to find the best fit for them without athletic department influence or pressure. Lastly, Cooper (2016) discussed the importance of time management for athletes so they can develop holistically, rather than with a lopsided focus on athletics. The Division III philosophy is different from the Division I and II levels in that the priority at Division III institutions is education first with an emphasis on degree competition (NCAA, 2020a).

### Research Questions

This led us to develop three research questions for this study:

**RQ1:** What are the academic experiences of Black male athletes at Division III institutions?

**RQ2:** What are the athletic experiences of Black male athletes at Division III institutions?

**RQ3:** What are Black male Division III athletes’ perceptions of campus climate?

### Methodology

#### Procedures and Participants

The current study is part of a larger study of the experiences of Black male athletes at NCAA Division III institutions. Following institutional review board (IRB) approval of the study, a member of the research team discussed the purpose of the study with athletic administrators at two Division III institutions located in the northeast region of the United States. These institutions were selected for a variety of reasons. First, the institutions provided diversity with respect to setting, as one is a private institution and the other is a public institution. Also, one of the researchers had built rapport

and trust with the athletic administrators at these institutions. These athletic administrators would serve as gatekeepers (Patton, 2002) by identifying potential participants from the population of interest. Research has demonstrated the importance of rapport and trust with gatekeepers when attempting to conduct research with vulnerable or socially excluded populations (Emmel et al., 2007).

Athletic administrators as gatekeepers used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to compile a list of eight to 10 Black male athletes at their respective institutions who varied in sport played and years in college. Purposeful sampling was deemed appropriate for this study as it allows for the “selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources” and “involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). The researcher, with the approval of the gatekeepers, then contacted the individuals on the lists, informed them of the purpose of the study, and requested their voluntary participation. In total, 10 Black male athletes consented to participate in the study. Their information is provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants’ identities.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Information*

Name	Year	Sport(s)	Institution Type
Clay	Senior	Football	Private
Jimmy	Sophomore	Football	Public
Namond	Sophomore	Football	Public
Cedric	Senior	Football	Private
Dennis	Junior	Basketball	Public
Marlo	Junior	Soccer	Private
Kenard	Junior	Basketball	Public
Michael	Sophomore	Track & Field	Public
Lester	Freshman	Lacrosse	Public
Avon	Senior	Football, Track & Field	Private

One participant was a freshman, three were sophomores, three were juniors, and three were seniors. With respect to sport participation, four participants played football, two were basketball players, one played lacrosse, one played soccer, one participated in track and field, and one was a dual-sport athlete in football and track and field. The average GPA for these individuals was 2.67. The highest GPA was 3.25 and the lowest was 2.1. Six participants were enrolled at the public institution, which had enrollment of approximately 3,500 students. Approximately 10% of the students at the public institution identified as Black or African American. The remaining four participants were enrolled at the private institution. Enrollment at this institution was approximately 2,000 students. Of those 2,000 students, approximately 8% identified as Black or African American.

Both institutions were located in a region where 4-5% of the population identified as Black or African American.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-person, semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant. Interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes in duration. An audio recording device was used to record the interviews. Interviews were grounded in a phenomenological approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), and focused on participants' academic, athletic, and social experiences at their respective DIII institutions. Sample interview items included, "Tell me about being an athlete here at this institution," "Tell me about being a Black male athlete at this institution from an academic standpoint," and "What are things like at this institution socially?" As a phenomenological approach was utilized, general questions about the academic, athletic, and social experiences were provided so that participants could discuss what was most central to their experiences (Patton, 2002; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In this manner, participants were able to make meaning of their own experiences, which is fundamental to a phenomenological interview (Patton, 2002; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Probing questions were more specific and were guided by the existing literature on Black male college athletes. For example, one such probing question was, "Are you familiar with any stereotypes of Black male athletes at this school?" Additionally, emerging topics within sport and popular culture were discussed such as the rise in athlete activism.

While a semi-structured interview protocol was followed, participants were encouraged to contribute to the direction and content of the interviews (Patton, 2002). For example, Marlo, whose family originated from Somalia, provided a history lesson as he detailed how the Somali Civil War drove his family to live for 10 years in a Kenyan refugee camp. Allowing participants to contribute to the direction and content of the interview is beneficial when examining topics such as one's experiences in a given setting (Mishler, 2006). Further, allowing participants agency over what to disclose also creates an equitable relationship between the researcher and the participants (Overcash, 2003).

After interviewing the 10 participants, the researcher observed redundancy in responses suggesting data saturation had been achieved (Patton, 2002). Thus, the researcher did not request additional names from the athletic administrator gatekeepers. Though it might appear limited, the sample size of the current study allowed the research team to focus on depth and quality of interviews in contrast to quantity of interviews (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016) given the breadth of the scope of this study (i.e., the academic, athletic, and social experiences of Black male athletes). Further, the sample size is consistent with similar research, such as Singer's (2005) well-cited examination of racism through the eyes of Black male college athletes, which only had four participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Through the coding process, we sought to make meaning by identifying patterns in the narrative data (Mihas, 2022). According to Mihas (2022), "Interviews activate language that gradually reveals a participant's life course and meaning making," thus enabling us to make sense of their experiences through their words (p. 114). Coding is a multistage process (Turner, 2022) that requires data reduction through thoughtful analysis (Richards, 2022). Specifically, inductive analysis led our process since we focused on a topic limited in current literature (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). We individually allied to highlighted quotes from each participant that stood out, called "key quotes, used to identify the most illustrative text" (Turner, 2022, p. 126). We then met to refine our codes through a descriptive coding process (Saldaña, 2009). Descriptive coding allowed the researchers to use the research questions as a guide when finalizing the codes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Saldaña,

2009). Thus, we also achieved investigator triangulation to reduce any bias from an individual perspective and confirm similar findings through analysis (Guion et al., 2016).

To exemplify the coding process, one identified key quote is: “From a realistic perspective it’s Division III, it’s not like I’m going to go pro or anything so I might as well get my education and worry about sports later” (Avon). Between the three researchers, in the initial coding process this was coded as “post-college” or “motivation.” In the descriptive coding process, considering the research questions below, we agreed that “Academics” best described this narrative.

### **Credibility**

Establishing credibility is an important aspect of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Credibility was established in this study via member checks and investigator triangulation. Member checks occur when participants are provided the chance to review data and any interpretations made by researchers (Patton, 2002). Participants in this study were provided with the researchers’ understanding of their statements and were asked to provide additional clarification or insight, if needed. No participants provided any further clarification. Credibility also was achieved through investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002). This occurs when multiple researchers are involved in the research process, thus limiting the potential bias that can occur with single-researcher studies (Patton, 2002).

## **Results**

Through our analysis, we developed six codes that responded to the three research questions: College Choice/Financial Issues, Academics, Time Management, Athletic Identity/Culture, Commitment to Athletics, and Campus Climate/Black Experience.

### **RQ1**

The first research question asked, “What are the academic experiences of Black male athletes at Division III institutions?” Three themes addressed this question: College Choice/Financial Issues, Academics, and Time Management.

#### ***College Choice/Financial Issues***

There are a few studies about Division III athletes’ college selection (e.g., Nichols et al., 2020). Though not the focus of our research, many participants mentioned why they selected the institution where they enrolled. Jimmy shared:

I see it as an opportunity to play football and get my grades up, and being at this Division III, well this is really the only school that gave me the opportunity to come play ball and excel at my academics, so I choose them.

Namond selected the institution because he found it had a “good employment rate after graduation” and could play football while planning for his future. In the EBA framework, Cooper (2016) noted the importance of career aspirations and supporting students toward their future goals.

Several students had financial reasons for their college choice. Kenard specifically chose the institution because it was the only one in his home state to recruit him, so he could pay in-state tuition. In Marlo’s case, he originally planned to attend a Division I institution to play, but was offered 95% tuition covered by his current institution for academic merit, so he chose that over taking student loans for soccer dreams. Clay originally planned to attend a Division I or II institution, but his grades were poor in his first two years of high school, so he was not able to meet athletic eligibility standards in those divisions. Cedric stated, “[Institution] wanted me, they had my financial aid right and the guy from [institution] who was recruiting me was calling every day so I said you know what, I’m just

going to sign.” Lester pursued the institution for academic reasons: “I really do like it here, so I felt comfortable enough where I could learn something and get a good degree here.”

### *Academics*

Many of the participants mentioned their focus on education, aligning with the Division III philosophy and the EBA framework’s academic achievement principle (Cooper, 2016). Avon explained: “From a realistic perspective it’s Division III, it’s not like I’m going to go pro or anything so I might as well get my education and worry about sports later.” There were different resources available for athletes at the public and private institutions in this study. From the participants’ stories, it appears that the private institution offered more academic resources for athletes. When asked about academic support, Kenard responded: “Everything’s on my own basically.” The public institution did offer tutoring but it was through academic departments, not offered specifically or separately for athletes. Marlo suggested that many athletes would not take advantage of tutoring anyway because “it’s hard for some athletes to swallow their pride” and own up to needing help. Clay shared that his team required study hall for athletes with a 2.5 or below GPA.

The students shared various experiences regarding professors, some positive and others negative. Dennis, a basketball athlete, lamented:

Favoritism not from many teachers, but you know, you see the difference. I don’t wanna say names but a couple of the soccer and softball kids came in late to a class where you can’t show up late to a class and they were late but they came in late and they didn’t get penalized, but the Tuesday before that class I got penalized for being two minutes late.

Avon described a negative experience:

This one professor in particular before he retired he hated all athletes. He was my bio teacher my freshman year. He failed me because he told me the wrong time for the final because I had to leave early for a track meet so I showed up at that time and he was like oh the final was four hours ago. So I was like why did you tell me it was at 1 o’clock? He was like I never said that. So I was like well can I take it, and he said no you failed the course.

However, other participants shared about positive interactions with faculty. Gayles and Hu (2009) found that athletes who interact with faculty positively build learning and communication skills. Being proactive has worked well for Lester. He shared:

I try to meet with my professors and classmates daily. I’m very organized and proactive when it comes to schoolwork and my professors are very helpful with getting me tutoring, staying long hours with me, giving me information about my classes every day, so I’m very satisfied with that.

Jimmy echoed this sentiment: “I love my professors, like I have good relationships with them. I try to interact with them before classes and after classes just to say hi you know get to know them a little bit to feel comfortable.” Michael added that class sizes are small so it is easy to connect with professors and ask them for help. Clay liked the personalized experience he had with his professors. He mentioned: “I stopped and talked to a teacher yesterday and she gave me a hug, asked how everything was, she met my parents and everything at a football game, so it’s like you have a good relationship with your teachers.” In addition, Clay noted that his coaches were supportive of an academics-first mentality, allowing students to miss practice for class without consequences. Both Clay and Michael highlighted the helpful support they got from academic advisors. Several participants mentioned that they tended to procrastinate on schoolwork; thus time management and balancing roles as an athlete and a student with other activities was a challenge for many of them.

### *Time Management*

Through his response, Jimmy summarized the struggle with time management for athletes:

Just being an athlete while trying...well, being a student-athlete I'll put it that way because it really is hard trying to balance schoolwork, practice, and then if you have anything else with work, a job that you have, so it's really kind of hard balancing it so what you choose to do just gotta get it done. It [sometimes] can be complicated.

His team practiced at 6:00 A.M., so he had to balance the rest of the day between his work and class schedules with any additional time required to complete academics. Several participants mentioned juggling jobs with being a student and an athlete. Cedric described the challenges with trying to major in athletic training while being an athlete and a student. He had to get 100 clinical hours completed in his sophomore year, so he missed almost all of his practices during the week. Sometimes, Dennis's coach held practice at 10:00 P.M. or midnight since the gym could not be scheduled right after practice during daytime hours. That impacted everything leading up to practice and the next day's schedule. The EBA framework suggests that balanced time management is critical to Black male athletes' success (Cooper, 2016).

Several participants shared that they hoped to have a life outside athletics and academics. Marlo explained:

My thing is I know what my weaknesses are, and when it comes to sports and soccer I get distracted easily. I mean yes I go with the philosophy that your education comes first, but sometimes a little fun doesn't hurt, but that little fun comes a lot. I think I will definitely be doing better than some semesters...but that's because I didn't have a social life. So I was like soccer, school, soccer, school, and even when I had the chance to go out on the weekend I was like I'm too tired.

He warned that it is better for athletes to be busy than to have "too much time" on their hands. Michael agreed, adding:

When you get time on your hands you just don't know what to do with it. I wasn't as focused on a grade as I should've been which is the whole reason I didn't run track in the first place, but once you get that extra time with your friends every day and you get back it's let's go hang out, alright well I don't want to do homework today, let's go enjoy the sun.

In the same vein, Avon suggested:

I would say if I wasn't an athlete here, I would have so much time on my hands I wouldn't be able to deal with it. So like I would probably end up getting in trouble for being bored. Honestly, I feel like a lot of people here that's why they get in trouble, they're just bored. They go and do something and get in trouble. Being an athlete you're never really bored, and you're always trying to strive to get better.

Yet, even among some Division III athletes, there is no time for anything but athletics and academics, as Namond lamented: "Being a college athlete you're not able to experience other clubs and stuff like that." Though Jimmy shared that he was on a dance team, he had to give it up during football season. However, many of these students participated in community outreach through their teams.

## RQ2

The second research question asked: "What are the athletic experiences of Black male athletes at Division III institutions?" The opportunity to be an athlete offered students experiences they may not have had otherwise. Namond shared: "I think the best thing is being able to travel to experience different schools, just to go to Missouri and all these different places I never thought I would be able to go." Two themes addressed this question: Athletic Identity/Culture, and Commitment to Athletics.

### *Athletic Identity/Culture*

Though research (e.g., Fuller & Agyemang, 2018) has shown athletes in Division III to have a strong athletic identity, that might depend on the institution they attend, its athletic culture, and its

athletic success. According to Dennis, athletes “don’t stand out more. You’re just an athlete, a regular person, a regular student on campus.” When Michael talked about being a Division III Track athlete to friends and family, he described their response as mixed, some being impressed and others saying, “you’re just running DIII, that’s nothing.” Yet, Jimmy quipped: “I think that anybody that plays a sport wants to make it to the next level. I think that everybody has dreams to make it big.”

Many participants offered their perceptions of the differences between Division I and Division III athletics. Kenard expressed:

Division I it’s just living life. Easier for them. I have a couple friends that’s Division I. I think it’s more focused on athletics on the D1 level. The school work is probably easier for them honestly because they got a lot of help, more resources. As you go down to the D3 level it’s more about the academics I would say.

Similarly, Avon commented:

From a student perspective you have to work a lot harder at D3... Well again you don’t have that extra help that you would have in D1, so it’s like, how do I put this, it’s almost like you have to watch your own back, no one is gonna go out there and give you a helping hand, at least that’s what I’ve experienced here.

In essence, they feel like they have accomplished more academically with fewer resources and support. Clay described Division I: “It’s like everybody is a freak athlete.” However, Marlo highlighted positive aspects of the athletic culture at his institution. He shared that the athletic director is incredibly supportive of his team, attending away games and learning the name of every student on the team. Clay, Kenard, and Dennis all noted their coaches encouraged their teams to join organizations and get involved in community service. Jimmy felt his team’s involvement in service was very positive for the community to see the students as helpful and representing the institution well.

Lester described a positive team culture, which connected to positive social engagement in the EBA framework (Cooper, 2016):

I have a great connection with all of them, again that’s part of the reason why I came here was because of the coaching staff. I felt very comfortable with my coaches, and I felt like I could tell them anything and I know I could trust them. With my teammates, we’re very close. We didn’t have a lot of seniors, we had about two or three, but we’re always together, we’re at dinner together, we did team runs, we were just together all the time, we really bonded. As the season kept progressing we bonded and got closer.

Marlo felt that people looked to athletes as leaders of the university. Being a representative led to team rules for Cedric, who shared:

My coach when I was there his two big rules were “act like a gentleman and obey the law.” [That] was his two rules because he knows we know we will go out and people will act stupid and get in trouble, so those were his two rules. He wouldn’t really discourage something, like, because it’s a small town.

Overall, the participants were positive about the culture of the athletic department and team, though some were not emphatic about their athletic identity.

### *Commitment to Athletics*

Because not everyone was tied to athletic identity, participants mentioned different levels of commitment they had or had observed of their teammates. Clay felt that some of his teammates were on the team because “you get to tell people you’re on the football team, that you get free stuff, like you get free shirts, I guess just being on the sideline.” Cedric felt that of his team, 60% were committed and 40% were not. He described a list the coaches had of students who missed study hall or used illegal substances. Yet, he felt like there was a lack of accountability for students who went rogue. However, Clay thought people did join his football team for the love of the game but were

satisfied to say they were just on the team rather than put a lot of effort into practice and earn playing time.

For Marlo, his team experienced tension between the leaders and the others. He explained:

I don't think everybody's committed, honestly. It goes to sacrifice. I mean our program has been bad for the past couple years, everybody has settled, and I think it's four or five players that are top-notch players that are always striving for the best, and I can just sense everybody else is angry at them. I'm like really intense when it comes to the sport because they're so intense, they're like chill out, and you want excellence, you gotta put a little more effort. I feel like the worst thing for my team is they're afraid to fail, but they're also afraid to go the hard way...if you succeed that means hard work, and 70% of my team is not as committed as the three captains.

Kenard shared: "I would say everybody shows up to practice, may not work as hard." Yet, he is motivated to participate, explaining: "If I wasn't playing ball I would probably be back home working honestly, working for my dad, something like that." A few students mentioned working hard on their fitness and in practice because they aspire to transfer to an institution in a higher division.

Michael wanted to take advantage of his opportunity to be a college athlete:

One of the best things is the competition because you're constantly being challenged, you're constantly being, you're not number one like you were in high school. The soccer coach explained it to me as when you come to college, take the best two or three from your team and that's what your competition is every single day. And then when I started running that's exactly what it's like so it's nice, you get the competition, you get pushed, you get to see your body changing and doing different things if you actually put the work in and take care of yourself. I think that was one thing that really stood out to me.

While Michael had individual goals, Namond more broadly wanted to improve the team and institution's reputation. He shared: "Some people say this program is a joke. I came here to actually want to help build the program and be one of those pillars so when I graduate people will know [institution] football team is a top Division III school." A few participants felt alienated by their coaches, whether because of injury or personality clashes. Michael, who did not get along with his coach, said: "So I mean from an athletic standpoint it wasn't the greatest experience I've ever had in my life in athletics, but I learned a lot from it so I'm not going to say that it was terrible." In contrast, Marlo was very motivated by his athletic experience, sharing:

I'm more confident. I am able to express myself in any way. I use soccer as a way of expressing how I feel. Like I'm going around campus asking people to come to our games and things like this. I am always trying to make the program better and I feel like being part of any team at this school that we have an obligation to give back to the whole school.

Athletics participation made Lester's college experience very positive. He expressed: "I live through sport and being a part to play a sport with a school has made the experience a lot more fun and I made friends and I've met new people and experienced so much in college, so I'm very grateful for that and very satisfied with it." His experience also highlighted the EBA principle of positive social engagement (Cooper, 2016). Yet, as Dennis considered the future, he stated: "After this in life, I just have to face reality," not anticipating a professional athletic career.

### RQ3

The third research question asked: "What are Black male Division III athletes' perceptions of campus climate?" One theme was robust in addressing this question and students' experiences with racism on campus, Campus Climate/Black Experience. Fuller and Agyemang (2018) concluded that "the identity of a NCAA DIII athlete took precedent over the identity of black athlete, and its accompanying responsibilities of being involved in social issues" (p. 201). Regarding campus climate and racism, we aimed for their lens as a Black athlete.

### *Campus Climate/Black Experience*

Though both institutions are relatively small, both are PWIs. Athletic opportunities at PWIs are common (Rubin, 2016). Participants experienced campus climate and racism in different ways. Dennis described: “It’s majority white over here. So it’s something that you got to get accustomed to I guess, which is not necessarily right, but you just got to get accustomed to it.” Because of that environment, Clay cautioned:

I feel like here you have to really be on top of your game, because being black here we are like the minority. So when you go to class maybe one or two of you, so you stand out. So you have to work just as hard if not harder as the white kids because you’re looked upon, well, black people don’t go to college, they do all this other stuff like riot.

Experiences with racism on campus and in the community were discussed by participants. Black athletes often face race stereotypes due to their skin color (Rubin, 2016). Cedric noted: “Racial issues I feel like here it hasn’t been very blatant, like I said everything’s been subtle. I feel like I wasn’t really discriminated on the football field or classroom because of my skin color.” Several athletes mentioned hearing stereotypical comments, such as that their White teammates were surprised they could not jump higher than they did. Many students also mentioned that in classrooms, Black students tend to sit with each other separately from White students, who also tend to sit with each other. Michael said that for group projects, most students avoid picking Black students to join the group, and he felt like professors could mitigate that situation by handling the organizing. Namond suggested he behaved in certain ways to be appropriate for his environment, and Cedric said he was questioned for speaking with perfect grammar. Often, such experiences of Black athletes lead this population to become disconnected from the campus community (Stokowski & Ferguson, 2020).

Several participants highlighted the importance of having Black role models in leadership positions on campus. Cedric mentioned an assistant dean who serves as a mentor to him as he navigates college as “the only Black staff member on this whole campus.” Namond’s coach was the only Black coach at the institution. Jimmy explained: “If you have another black professor, academic professor, you have that certain connection with him or her.” This lack of Black leadership and mentors for Black students is a major concern as they progress through college at PWIs. Avon emphasized: “Probably should hire more Black faculty honestly.” This is critical at a time when institutions are being called out for their low numbers of non-White tenured faculty, such as in the case with Black women (June & O’Leary, 2021). Active mentorship is critical to Black male athletes’ holistic development and requires some representation among leaders and role models to support the students (Cooper, 2016).

### **Discussion**

Through the lens of existing literature and the EBA framework, we analyzed our findings on the lived experiences of Black male college athletes at two Division III institutions. Through the study design, we sought to understand the academic and athletic experiences of our participants and their perceptions of campus climate.

In the Division III setting, athletes cannot receive scholarships for athletic ability. This puts a financial burden on the students and their families. Historically, Black families are economically disadvantaged in the U.S. (Cooper, 2019). Though this study did not fill in missing information regarding demographics and financial aid from Nichols et al.’s (2020) study, it does suggest that students rely on parental support, jobs, and/or academic grants and scholarships.

Suggested by the EBA holistic development of Black male student athletes, active mentorship is vital to academic achievement (Cooper, 2016). Faculty mentorship of college athletes is important (Stokowski, Fridley et al., 2020). The participants spoke to the importance of having a good relationship with their professors. Stokowski, Fridley et al.’s (2020) study demonstrated that faculty

members outside the Power 5 mentored college athletes differently, believing that they were role models for this population. Additionally, both Stokowski, Fridley et al. (2020) and Williams et al. (2011) spoke to the importance of athletic teams having a faculty mentor to assist college athletes with navigating higher education. Stokowski, Fridley et al.'s (2020) suggestion was echoed by Supiano's (2018) interview in which a faculty member chose to engage with Division III college athletes and such interactions lead to an increase in positive perceptions of those participating in intercollegiate athletics. Yet there are challenges, especially at PWIs, where faculty typically do not engage non-White students or athletes in high-impact practices such as mentoring students through undergraduate research activities (Rubin et al., 2020).

Navarro et al. (2020) addressed the fact that college athletes dedicate a large amount of their time to athletic endeavors. It would appear that the theme of "time management" does not fall in line with the Division III philosophy (NCAA, 2020a) in which athletes that participate at this level are expected to focus on academic endeavors. This theme also is not congruent with the EBA approach in which Cooper (2016) suggests the importance of balanced time management for Black male athletes to develop. However, several participants focused their time on academic and extracurricular endeavors, even taking a break from the athletic experience to get involved elsewhere on campus. Efforts to spend quality time on a variety of opportunities can help Black male athletes develop skills that are beneficial in the future (Cooper, 2019).

This exploration of identity connects with the EBA principle of self-identity awareness (Cooper, 2016). However, it's important to note the lack of literature that speaks to the identity development of college students, particularly college students of color (Patton et al., 2016; Phinney & Ong, 2007). In the context of Division III, Black male athletes challenge the stereotyped perceptions others have of them through their holistic development. Previous research by Huml (2018) has shown that Division III athletes do not identify as strongly as an athlete compared to their Division I peers. Many of our participants expressed understanding of the Division III athletic experience and their eye toward a future outside of sport. In the EBA framework, holistic development and self-identity awareness can mitigate the challenges of identity foreclosure (Cooper, 2019).

The Division III model is not about the commercialization of sport, but rather about the student experience (NCAA, n.d.). Williams et al. (2011) found that Division III college athletes reported high levels of athlete identity. However, Huml (2018) found that Division III college athletes did not demonstrate high levels of athlete identity when compared to their Division I peers. The Division III philosophy speaks to the interaction of sport and academics with the ultimate goal being degree completion (NCAA, 2020a). Thus, although the participants reported different levels of commitment to sport, perhaps this theme is in line with the Division III philosophy.

The literature regarding Black male college athletes largely has ignored those who participate at the Division III level (Bimper et al., 2013; Fuller et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2011; Singer, 2005). Although the participants reported attending Division III institutions to participate in college sport, to get an education, and to not be in debt post-graduation, the racial identities of the participants appeared to have a large role in their experiences. Division III institutions often do not have the resources to offer athlete-only services (Williams et al., 2011). Interdisciplinary programming is needed to enhance the overall experience of Black male Division III athletes (Stokowski & Ferguson, 2020). According to Patton et al. (2016), "Increased research on ethnic identity development may lead to improved educational practice that will enhance student development and create healthy, diverse campus environments that encourage it" (p. 153). There also is a dearth of Black leaders represented in athletic and academic administrator roles (Cooper, 2019). Students would benefit significantly from role models and mentors who share their background and lived experiences.

## Implications

Based on the comments from the participants as well as previous work, we offer several implications for Division III institutions and administrators. Because the Division III philosophy is unique (NCAA, 2020a, n.d.), such a construct should be embraced. Administrators at the Division III level should champion the philosophy and leverage how this unique model can be beneficial to athlete growth and development when engaging with non-athletic university staff, faculty, and community stakeholders. Additionally, the participants brought up the importance of establishing relationships with faculty. Thus, in line with previous scholars (e.g., Cooper, 2016; Stokowski, Fridley et al., 2020; Supiano, 2018; Williams et al., 2011), Division III athletic administrators, in conjunction with the institution's Faculty Athletics Representative, should encourage faculty to serve as mentors for the sports teams. Such faculty could be invited to practices, recognized at sporting events, or even asked to travel with the team during an away game in order to create a deeper connection between student and faculty.

We also recognize the importance of representation. Thus, Division III institutions should strive to recruit people of color to their campuses. This is particularly salient for institutions that are located in less diverse areas, such as the two institutions in the current study. The NCAA provides diversity grants for Division III schools to enhance gender and ethnic representation in athletics administration and coaching positions at member institutions (NCAA, 2021c.). For those institutions that do struggle with having a more representative athletic department staff, such grants are one method to recruit underrepresented populations to campus with minimal impact on the departmental budget.

College students from underrepresented groups often enter higher education, but once on campus receive little institutional support (Singer, 2005). Thus, there also is a need for such programming (Navarro et al., 2020). Many institutions, particularly those at the Division I level, offer programming for unique sects of the college athlete population (e.g., Black athletes, first-generation college students, international athletes, LGBTQ athletes; Navarro et al., 2020). We suggest that Division III institutions have programming and support groups specifically allocated to Black male college athletes. Such programming should consist of leadership development and career construction, as well as peer and faculty mentorship programs (Navarro et al., 2020). Division III college athletes also should be provided information regarding resources that are available on their respective campuses to ensure an optimal college experience. Not only should programming be available to Division III athletes, but also to those working with this population. Shaw et al. (2019) suggested cultural competency training for all who work with students of color.

## Limitations

The study was limited to interviews with 10 participants at two institutions in a rural part of the northeast, and results are not indicative of the Division III experience of Black athletes at other institutions and in other geographic areas. Division III is a sizeable division representing a wide variety of institution types; thus, students' experiences are quite varied depending on where they enroll. Also, the athletes contrasted their experiences on their respective Division III campuses with those of athletes at Division I institutions. Except for Avon, none of the participants had first-hand experience of being a Division I athlete. Instead, their perceptions were based on what they were told by friends who were Division I athletes and cultural and societal assumptions about Division I athletes. Thus, participants' accounts about the experiences of Division I athletes possibly were inaccurate.

Though it was consistent with similar research (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010; Singer, 2005) and data saturation was achieved, the sample size in the current study was a limitation. Also, the process by which the participants were recruited was a limitation. The athletic administrator gatekeepers supplied a list of possible participants. It is possible they selected individuals they believed would

have positive things to say and omitted the names of those who might speak unfavorably about their respective institutions.

### **Future Research**

There is an abundance of future work that is needed on Division III college athletics. Specifically, more research is needed on Division III college athletes from marginalized groups. Future work should examine the identity construction of Black male Division III college athletes. There is a need to understand the motivations of college athletes for attending Division III institutions. Such research can look at different variables (e.g., gender, race) or compare institutional types by size, type (e.g., Liberal Arts college), or location. Researchers need to better understand the career maturity of this population. Perhaps longitudinal studies are warranted to examine this population post-graduation. Future research also is needed to better understand the programming available to Division III college athletes. With this, research that examines the utilization of such programming is warranted.

Moreover, research at the Division III level needs to extend to faculty and staff members at these institutions. The perceptions of Division III college athletes would be a welcome addition to the literature. Work on faculty mentorship of Division III college athletes, specifically athletes of color, also should be a focus of future inquiry. Lastly, future research should examine the experiences of Black coaches and administrators on the Division III level. In 2020, only 8% of all coaches, including head coaches, assistant coaches, and strength coaches were Black compared to the nearly 86% that were White (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021d).

### **Conclusion**

While a body of research exists about Black male Division I college athletes, there is little information on the lived experiences of Black male athletes in Division III. Through the lens of the Excellence Beyond Athletics (EBA) framework we sought to understand the academic and athletic experiences and perceptions of campus climate that Black male athletes had at two Division III institutions, one public and one private, in the northeastern U.S. Through their words we learned about positive growth, challenges, and opportunities to improve the experiences for Black male athletes in Division III. Black athletic and academic administrators are sparse, especially at PWIs, which is a significant concern when EBA and the literature demonstrate the importance of active mentorship for Black male athletes' holistic development. Athletes require balanced time management to juggle multiple roles and identities as well as focused time to develop self-identity awareness in preparation for the post-college and post-sport life (Cooper, 2016). Mentors can encourage Black male athletes in Division III to develop career aspirations outside their athletic identity. Division III institutions and athletic departments should encourage positive social engagement to connect athletes with non-athlete students and other aspects of campus life. Without question, academic achievement should be at the forefront for students in college, which connects with the other principles of EBA (Cooper, 2016).

The EBA should be utilized at Division III institutions as well as throughout the NCAA membership to empower Black male athletes (Cooper, 2016). It is important to remember CRE, as these three factors (i.e., conditions, relationships, expectations) significantly can impact the experience and outcomes for Black male athletes. To assist in the holistic development of Black male college athletes, all six principles (i.e., self-identity awareness, positive social engagement, active mentorship, academic achievement, career aspirations, and balanced time management), should be recognized and programming focused on these principles should be initiated.

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