

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE FORMER STUDENT ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS
OF THEIR ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AND FACULTY EXPECTATIONS OF
THEIR COURSE WORK AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

By

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ABSTRACT

NATHAN CHAPLIN III. African American Male Former Student Athletes Perceptions of their Academic Experiences and Faculty Expectations of their Coursework at Predominantly White Institutions.

(Under the direction of DR. JAE HOON LIM)

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the academic experience of African American (AA) male student athletes based on the recollected narratives of nine former student athletes who had played sports at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division-I predominantly White institution. In particular, this study examined the role of two critical axes, the student athletes' prior academic preparation in K-12 schools and university faculty/staff's expectations of their academic experience and success. This study also explored how the African American student athletes navigated through the university's infrastructure, resources, and relationships to accomplish their own academic goals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed verbatim, and analyzed following the guidelines of interpretive phenomenological analysis. Five themes central to the individual and collective lived experiences of the student athletes emerged as the results of the analysis. These five themes are: (a) academic dispositions and experiences, (b) facing a new world, (c) I am only of value on the field of play, (d) I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, and (e) taking the initiative.

While the study results revealed that African American male student athletes are significantly affected by racial stereotypes about their coursework at NCAA Division-I predominantly White institutions, many of the participants still found success in the classroom. The AA male student athletes K-12 schooling experiences and academic experiences varied greatly, leading to two contrasting groups: one academically well

prepared and the other without proper academic preparation entering college. The two groups had contrasting goals about their lives and the role of college education. The AA male student athlete's academic experiences were characterized by the faculty's low academic expectations (e.g. push through programs) and racial prejudices, yet the student athletes found it essential to take charge of academic decisions and to build a team that could support their academic success.

This study provides several important implications for both K-12 schools and higher education. The academic success of AA male student athletes must first start with K-12 school districts hiring qualified teachers who are capable of preparing AA male student athletes for college. In higher education, college coaches, in particular, must play an active role in ensuring that AA male student athletes are inspired and supported to thrive academically. It is their job to advocate on behalf of AA male student athletes so that the university community will gain an appreciation for what they have to offer beyond the field of play. In doing so, it will prompt institutions to put systems in place that will position AA male student athletes to excel in the classroom.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The academic preparedness of African American (AA) student athletes is an issue that continues to circulate around college sports today. The educational well-being of intercollegiate student athletes is a conversation that continues to reign in the halls of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its member institutions (NCAA Bylaw 1.3.1, 2017, p.1). At its core, the NCAA is a body that is built on upholding the highest quality of educational standards for its student athletes. Therefore, the educational ideals that are set in motion by its member institutions is vitally important to ensuring that student athletes are moving along a path that leads to higher levels of educational progress and to graduation. Currently, while the goal of the NCAA and its member institutions is to promote the academic success of all student athletes, there still remains a gap between African American student athletes and White student athletes (Cooper, 2016).

Background of Study

According to the NCAA (2017), the graduation success rate (GRS) for White student-athletes who entered college in 2010 was 91% compared to 77% (Table 1) for African American student athletes (i.e. the GSR evaluates the six year graduation rates for student-athletes, but it does not penalize schools when athletes transfer to another school).

Table 1

Comparison of Graduation Success Rates from Entering Classes of 2002 and 2017
16-Year Trends for Select Groups of Student-Athletes*

Student-Athlete Group	2002 GSR	2017 GSR
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Overall	74%	87%
White	81%	91%
African American (AA)	56%	77%
White (Male)	76%	87%
AA (Male)	51%	72%
White (Female)	89%	95%
AA (Female)	71%	87%

However, the federal graduation rate (FGR) for all AA student athletes is 59%, compared to 73% for White student athletes (for freshmen who entered in 2010). The FGR is based on the percentage of student athletes (Table 2) who graduate within six (6) years (i.e. college students have six years to graduate with a four year degree).

Table 2

Comparison of Federal Graduation Rates between Student-Athletes and Student Body for Select Groups in 2017 Graduation Cohort

Student Athlete Group	Student Athlete Graduation Rate	Student Body Graduation Rate
Overall	68%	66%
White	73%	69%
African American (AA)	59%	46%
White (Male)	66%	66%
AA (Male)	55%	40%
White (Female)	78%	71%
AA (Female)	84%	69%

As a whole, student athletes have struggled in the classroom (Gayles, 2009). Gayles (2009) asserted that intercollegiate sports programs have created an environment for student athletes that (1) alienates them from the overall student body, (2) limits their ability to make good grades, (3) lowers their level of educational prowess, and (4) stacks them in easy majors (where it is assumed that they will not have any problems obtaining a passing grade). In spite of these issues, student athletes still tend to flourish in atmospheres where they (a) interact with teachers and fellow students, (b) complete coursework, and (c) engage in campus activities and initiatives. Given the circumstances surrounding the ability of AA student athletes to graduate on par with their White counterparts, it is important to get a sense of what they expect to receive and accomplish during their educational journey (Gayles, 2009).

African American students generally come from urban K-12 schools where resources and teacher competency are limited (Anyon, 1997; Flenbaugh, et al., 2017; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Thereby, African American students typically view their teachers as being insensible, ineffective and easy (i.e. pointless coursework that does not prepare them for college), and low-skilled. On the whole, African American students generally feel that they need more teachers who are competent and knowledgeable in their content area to help them learn and be successful. Darling-Hammond (2010) conveyed that students who attend low-income urban schools are more likely to have incompetent teachers in the classroom. According to the Educational Testing Service (2011), in high schools that have 50% or more African American student enrollment, only 25% of the teachers are certified in their cognate area. Darling-Hammond (2010) asserted that the bottom-line requirement for any school should rest on having good teachers; however,

that is not the case in most urban settings. As a result, AA students often leave school feeling that they have not learned anything or have not been challenged to think critically (Flennaugh, et al., 2017). In fact, one student commented, “We lack challenging classes because [the teachers] always, always, always put us down and never really bring in that thing that motivates us ... that makes us use critical thinking” (Flennaugh, et al., 2017, p. 214).

Students in urban school settings generally do not have access to adequate levels of tangible resources like computers and books that are needed to effectively learn and complete assignments (Flennaugh, et al., 2017). Urban schools in most cases are dilapidated and in disrepair, which compromises the classroom learning experiences for AA students. Fryer and Levitt (2004) asserted that the K-12 schools that AA students attend have a major bearing on how they will fare academically in college. Warren (2015) posited that teacher apathy, lack of resources, and limited knowledge about the college admissions process all have an effect on preparing AA students for college. Moreover, quite often AA students cannot access information on college because their schools have limited numbers of guidance counselors (Warren, 2015).

The prevailing literature on this issue continues to reveal that AA student athletes are largely not exceling in the classroom due to the lack of pre-college academic dispositions (i.e. subpar GPA, low standardized test scores, and low college entrance examination scores) (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012; Sellers, 1992). As a result, AA student athlete’s grade point averages (GPA) and graduation rates tend to remain stagnant in comparison to White student athletes. Likewise, over the past 16 years the graduation success rate (GSR) of African American

males in NCAA Division-I schools (i.e. the highest level of college athletics that are primarily housed at large predominantly White institutions) has increased twenty-one (21) points from 2002 GSR (56%) to 2017 GSR (77%) (NCAA, 2017).

All in all, society created a storyline that entrapped AA student athletes at an early age into believing that education was not designed for them; hence, they became more engrossed with pursuing the economic benefits that are derived from participating in sports (Harrison, et al., 2002). This confirmed the current state of affairs within higher education when it comes to educating AA student athletes (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014). Institutions of higher education are not doing their due diligence in educating AA student athletes. As a result, AA student athletes have become stagnated in an unfit social, cultural, and academic environment that only serves the needs of White student athletes (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Historically, AA student athletes have encountered issues with (1) racism and social isolation (Benson, 2000; Hawkins, 2010; Sailes, 1993), (2) educational neglect (Hawkins, 2010), (3) economic deficiencies, and (4) few leadership appointments at PWIs. These challenges have made it increasingly more difficult for them to find a footing in higher education (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015). For the most part, society tends to look at AA student athletes as being academically endangered because they generally face six more issues than the average college student (Parham, 1993). African American student athletes face issues (a) balancing educational and sports demands (Singer, 2008), (b) dealing with being socially secluded from peers (Benson, 2000; Hawkins, 2010; Sailes, 1993), (c) managing relationships with coaches, family

members, friends, confidants, and the community at-large, (d) managing the stardom that comes from being successful on the field of play, (e) transitioning from sports to life, and (f) staying healthy (Parham, 1993). Given these experiences, many AA student athletes experience subpar educational outcomes as it pertains to their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills (Pascarella et al., 1999). Therefore, all of these factors play a vital role in gauging how AA student athletes will perform in the classroom.

Clopton (2011) asserted that AA student athletes are not served by predominately White institutions (PWIs) with the same level of excellence that they produce on the field of play. In essence, they give out more than they receive (in the form of support and encouragement). Rankin and Reason (2005) affirmed that the environments at PWIs are prone to repressing and discriminating against AA student athletes. The athletic identity of AA student athletes tends to outweigh their social identity at PWIs (Singer, 2008). Harper (2009) conveyed that PWIs lean heavily on the athletic skills of AA student athletes, but they do not provide the support that is needed for them to graduate. Hyatt (2003) conveyed that the graduation potential of AA student athletes increases and their desire to become socially and academically involved in campus initiatives strengthens when the university community (administration, faculty, staff, and students) supports them.

Even more troubling, this group has to cope with unwarranted levels of negative stereotypes that are spewed by members of the student body and administrators at PWIs (Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom et al, 1995; Sailes, 1993; Simon et al., 2007). This has been the case from the inception of intercollegiate athletics on college campuses (Thelin, 1996). The constant attacks on AA student athletes' intellectual abilities have made it

difficult for them to succeed academically, and tremendously limit their opportunities to learn and become socially integrated into the university environment (Davis, 1995; Steinfeldt et al., 2010).

Singer (2005) conveyed that many studies have been conducted on AA student's perceptions of racial inequality at PWIs; however, not many scholars have examined the viewpoints of AA male student athletes. In fact, no studies have examined the perceptions of AA student athletes concerning their academic preparedness for handling the rigors of college coursework. Similarly, no studies have evaluated the perceptions of AA student athletes concerning their experiences interacting with faculty members at PWIs. Other studies have focused more on examining common predictors (i.e. GPA and standardized test scores) of potential academic success or failure in AA student athletes (Gragg & Flowers, 2014). Overall, colleges and universities will have to strive to fully embrace diversity and their commitment to African American student athlete success (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore African American male former student athletes' perceptions of their academic experiences and faculty expectations of their coursework at PWIs. In particular, this study investigates how AA male former student athletes understand the role of faculty members in shaping their academic success at PWIs. Existing literature reports little about the influence of faculty on AA male student athletes' academic success (even though faculty may play an important role). Therefore, the researcher aimed to answer three questions through this study:

1. How do AA male former student athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?
2. How do AA male former student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and their own academic experiences at a PWI?
3. How do AA male former student athletes build their academic capacity to persist and succeed at the PWI?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

The theoretical framework for this study followed the tenets of critical race theory (CRT). CRT was designed to shed light on race and racial injustices within the context of American society (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Singer (2005) and Donnor (2005) asserted that CRT has been beneficial in telling the story about racial injustices that AA student athletes have faced in higher education. Moreover, from a historical standpoint, PWIs have made it difficult for AA student athletes to gain access to academic and athletic opportunities (Bilberry, 2000). The educational system is often viewed through the lens of being a unifier of people from different ethnic groups. However, this theory does not hold up because the system still isolates and exploits AA students. Therefore, CRT is a viable tool for analyzing the attitudes and experiences of AA student athletes (Singer, 2005).

Tinto's Principles of Effective Retention and Theory of Student Departure

The researcher also used Tinto's principles of effective retention and theory of student departure to elicit insights into what the university community can do to integrate

AA student athletes into the social and intellectual life of the university. In particular, this model will shed light on the benefits that derive from faculty members bonding with students within the university community. According to Tinto (1987, 1993), the ability of students to bond with faculty members outside the classroom setting is a strong indicator of whether they will persist at the school.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was used to examine the perceptions of former AA student athletes concerning their academic preparedness and faculty expectations at PWIs and how the two factors shaped their academic experiences and success during college years. Qualitative research can be defined in many different ways, yet it is commonly characterized by the use of a variety of textual data and focus on individuals' life experiences within specific social and cultural contexts. For example, Denzin and Lincoln stated:

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural contexts and productions; along with observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual's lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3-4).

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are concerned with how people build meaning around their experiences. In particular, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted for this study to highlight the meaning-making process of AA male former student athletes situated in a specific cultural and institutional environment, a PWI. Moreover, the ultimate premise behind IPA research is

to determine how individuals interpret and go about their daily lived experiences (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009).

For this study, the researcher employed criterion sampling as a means for selecting participants. Criterion sampling served as the primary quality assurance measure to make sure participants are a good match for the study (Mertens, 2015). The sample consisted of AA male former student athletes who have played sports for at least a year at an NCAA member institution. After signing a consent form, participants took part in a semi-structured interview process. Creswell (2013) asserts that conducting in-depth interviews with at least ten people is an effective way to collect phenomenological data. Therefore, the proposed sample size for this study is at least 10. The data analysis component of this study involved breaking apart interview transcripts to help the researcher identify emerging themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). The researcher, in accordance with the Belmont Report, made sure that all participants were protected from unreasonable harm.

Significance of Study

Singer (2009) championed the idea of having a platform for AA student athletes to speak on behalf of the issues they face as AA student athletes at PWIs. This study is unique in that it gave voice to AA male former student athletes concerning their academic readiness and faculty expectations about their ability to excel at PWIs. Singer (2009) found that AA student athletes gain motivation through being able to freely and openly discuss their concerns and thoughts. In Singer's (2009) study of four (4) AA males at a PWI in the Midwestern United States, one student athlete commented:

I think this is good because it allows Black males to really talk about what, you know, what is really going on. And a lot of people, they do not really know. You know, they do not really know what Black male (student) athlete goes through. You know, in society as far as academically, and you know mentally and on the football field and off. So, I think it is a good thing (Singer, 2009, p.110).

African American student athletes are not absent-minded individuals who could be or should be pushed around like robots (Singer, 2009). Eitzen (2000) and Coakley (2004) insisted that AA student athletes should be given a platform by which they can voice and relay their concerns about issues that affect their academic development. Eitzen and Coakley also asserted that AA student athletes should be given a stage to voice their concerns about the racial issues they face at PWIs.

Melendez (2008) posited that listening to the voices of AA student athletes would better prepare college administrators to offer them effective support services. In doing so, they will be able to provide academic programs and initiatives that are geared towards addressing racial and discriminatory issues that AA student athletes face on campus. In addition, given the challenges AA student athletes encounter navigating the academic setting and college environment as a whole, PWIs can find effective ways to make their campuses more accessible, warm, and inviting for AA student athletes.

This study was also significant in that it examined the perceptions and experiences of AA male former student athletes concerning their academic performance. Their academic success was not solely based on the viewpoints of others or pre-determined performance measures. Hodges et al. (2008) posited that academic achievement should be examined beyond grade point averages (GPA), standardized tests,

and graduation rates. Ladson-Billing (2006) conveyed that using standardized testing is not beneficial when determining the academic potential of marginalized groups.

Therefore, the methodological aspects of this qualitative study gave a truer sense of how AA male former student athletes viewed their academic experiences and college success.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the following elements of the study would transpire in an effective manner:

1. The participants would have a true desire to participate in the study and would not have any hidden agendas.
2. The participants would respond to interview questions truthfully.
3. The selection criterion was the same for all participants; therefore, they would have all experienced the phenomenon that is under investigation.
4. The researcher's subjectivity is an unavoidable part of this interpretive qualitative study, yet the researcher would engage in critical self-reflection and multiple strategies to establish the trustworthiness of the study's outcomes.

Limitations

The researcher was not able to generalize this study's findings to the population of AA male former student-athletes at PWIs due to the study's small sample size and contextual boundaries. The time needed to effectively conduct the study is another area of concern for the researcher. The researcher's prior knowledge and preconceived ideas about the research topic and participants could also influence the results of the study. Creswell (2013) asserts that ongoing interactions with participants will better position researchers to eliminate less reliable information and to gain an insider's perspective.

Lincoln and Guba (2001) stated that no research process can produce absolute truth; the goal of all interpretive research is to elicit partial, temporary truth through a careful and open-minded exploration. Creswell (2013) posited that qualitative researchers should be aware of their subjectivities and perspectives on how things are or should be (bracketing) to preserve the quality of their study.

Delimitations

The researcher only conducted interviews with AA male former student athletes from PWIs. This gave a micro-view of the issues of racial inequality that AA male former student athletes face at colleges and universities nationwide. Secondly, the study sample did not include White student athletes and other ethnic groups that participate in intercollegiate athletics at PWIs.

Summary

This phenomenological study explored the academic experiences and perceptions of AA male former student athletes who attended a PWI through the analysis of their reflective narratives. Existing literature clearly indicates that it is a daunting task for any student athlete to effectively matriculate in a college environment that does not fully understand their cultural and academic background. Moreover, African American male student athletes have been stereotyped and exploited more often than any other student group. For the most part, they have been exploited for their athletic prowess at the expense of their educational development. Thereby, the outcomes of this study provided valuable information that could help administrators, faculty members, and the student bodies at PWI better understand and celebrate AA male student athlete for what they can offer to the institution beyond their athletic talents on the field of play.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes a review of the literature that is essential to understanding the academic experiences and perceptions of African American (AA) student athletes in the institutional and cultural context of predominantly White institutions PWIs. Chapter II is organized into five (5) sections: (1) Theoretical framework for the study (e.g. critical race theory, Tinto's principle of effective retention (1987), Tinto's theory of departure (1975, 1987, & 1993), (2) barriers to academic success for African American students, (3) African American student athletes' academic experiences at PWI, (4) faculty expectations of African American student athletes academic success, and (5) factors that influence African American student athletes' ability to persist. These themes will help the researcher answer the following three (3) questions:

1. How do AA male former student athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institutions PWI?
2. How do AA male former student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI?
3. How do AA male former student-athletes build their academic capacity to persist and succeed at a PWI?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The critical race theory theoretical framework will shed light on the fight for racial equality that is waged by African Americans and minorities every day. Moreover, this framework will help to put their experiences into perspective as it pertains to being an AA. Tinto's principle of effective retention model (1987) and Tinto's theory of

departure model (1975, 1987, & 1993) will also inform this study. Both models will give insights into strategies that can be used to help retain college students and help them adjust to the institutional academic and social environments.

Critical Race Theory

The first theoretical framework for this study is critical race theory (CRT). Yosso (2005) defined CRT in education as “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 74). Delgado and Stefania (2012) asserted that CRT is built on the principle that individuals from different races experience life in a multiplicity of ways. Therefore, the CRT movement is comprised of individuals and scholars whose intent is on learning and changing the associations that have been erected around race, racism, and power. Ladson-Billings (1998) posited that CRT is a great instrument for “deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (p.9).

Furthermore, the CRT framework is generally comprised of five defining tenets that have been researched and examined by many scholars (Tate, 1997; Yosso, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy et al., 2015). First, CRT is aware that racism is pervasive and deeply embodied within all facets of American society (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In essence, racism has become the norm in society today (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998). According to Tate (1997), CRT upholds civil rights regulations in light of barriers that have been erected to render them null and void. Tate (1997) posited that civil rights are often undermined in a “so-called” liberal system that is slow to create change. Second, CRT aims to challenge the dominant ideology in America that deceptively tries

to promote a society that is built on the basis of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy (McCoy et al., 2015; Tate, 1997). McCoy (2015) and Tate (1997) asserted that these constructs are smokescreens that further allow America to serve the self-interest of the elite.

The third aspect of CRT is geared towards highlighting the experiential knowledge of people of color. Giving voice to the experiences of minority groups is a liberating factor that allows them to overcome the misconstrued thoughts and ideas that have been expressed about them within the American system (Closson, 2010; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billing, 1998; Tate, 1997). Solorzano & Yosso (2002) affirmed that giving AA a voice is pivotal to them dispelling misguided philosophies about their ability to learn. Delgado (1989) suggested four reasons why giving African Americans a voice to tell their stories is important: (a) truth is socially created, (b) stories are a potent means for abolishing and shifting uncharted mind-sets, (c) stories construct communities, and (d) stories facilitate psychological self-preservation among the members of marginalized social groups. Critical race theory has given AA student athletes a platform to speak their truth about their educational and intellectual capacity to succeed (Cooper, 2016).

Previous research on AA student athletes who attend PWIs focused primarily on issues of racial disenfranchisement, educational abandonment, social isolation, and restricted leadership opportunities, which are all byproducts of racism in America (Cooper, 2012; Donner, 2005; Singer, 2005).

The final two tenets of CRT focus on interest convergence theory and intersectionality. Interest convergence theory is constructed on the premise that the interests of African Americans will only be served when their interests converge with the

interest of those in authority (McCoy et al., 2015). The goal of interest convergence is to empower African Americans by standing up against injustice and eliminating racism and other forms of bigotry in society (McCoy et al., 2015; Yosso, 2007). In society today, the basis of a quality way of life is largely built on White supremacy ideology (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). This learned way of thinking still seems to prevail even though its premise is faulty (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Tate (1997) further conveyed that racism is so pervasive that it has infested the legal, cultural, and psychological aspects of American society. In essence, the American society is structured in such a way that the dominant race is favored above all other races of people (Delgado and Stefanic, 2012).

The final tenet examines the intersectionality between race and other barriers to equality. Intersectionality sheds light on the fact that African Americans are not only oppressed because of their race, but also experience hardships as a result of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, sex, religious observances, and disabilities among others (Ladson-Billings, 1999; McCoy et al., 2015). Ladson-Billings (1998) also posited that minority groups tend to consume the misconstrued pictures that have been portrayed about them by those who desire to maintain control over them. That is why CRT is not solely designed to dismantle oppressive structures (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and White ideology (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012), but to hallmark and uplift the noteworthy experiences of People of Color (Yosso, 2005). Ladson-Billings (1998) and Tate (1997) even ventured to give credence to the experiences of racial inequality that have given African Americans a platform to express themselves. Likewise, for this study, CRT theory is a feasible choice because it will give insights into the perceptions of AA student athletes concerning racial inequities at PWIs (Singer, 2005). In so doing, athletic

administrators will have the information needed to bring about change within their organizations.

Tinto's Principles of Effective Retention and Theory of Student Departure

The second theoretical framework for this study will center on Tinto's (1987) principles of effective retention model and Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) theory of student departure model. Tinto's principles of effective retention model will give insights into what college administrators can do to retain AA male student athletes. Person and LeNoir (1997) affirmed that institutional retention plans play a critical role in outlining what AA student athletes must do in order to thrive academically and socially within the college environment. Institutions must pride themselves on being student-centered, whereby they can make concerted efforts towards building a relationship with students (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto (1987, 1993) posited that the student-faculty relationship should extend beyond the walls of the classroom (i.e. mentorship initiatives, activities, and events). This will make university faculty and staff members more accessible to students (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Other student development scholars like Chickering and Reisser (1993), affirmed that solid student-faculty relationships develop as a result of faculty members being (1) available, (2) genuine, (3) able to communicate, and (4) knowledgeable about student needs.

Furthermore, institutions of higher education should strive for academic excellence and document how they are meeting student and institutional needs (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Institutions should be intentional about assessing and evaluating their programs. According to Tinto (1987, 1993), (1) it is within the means of every institution to periodically review their program (s), (2) the assessment process is foundational to

building a strong early warning system, which makes it possible to identify students who are struggling academically and socially, and (3) the assessment process is integral to building a wholesome evaluative system that touches on all aspects of institutional operations. Horton (2011) confirmed that the academic integrity of an institution lies in its ability to appreciate the processes student-athletes go through to acquire their degree. Thereby, student athletes are appreciated more for their academic ability as opposed to their athletic prowess (Horton, 2011).

Another aspect of the second theoretical framework will pull from Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) theory of student departure, which is designed to analyze the integrative processes that help students adjust to the institution's social and academic settings. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) defined integration as the common connections (i.e. values and behaviors) people share within the institutional environment that helps them adapt to the formal and informal structures that are paramount to joining the community. Horton (2011) asserted that institutions are able to construct a culture that hinges on assisting, inspiring, and responding to the needs of student athletes. Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) institutional departure model centers on the following six (6) components: (1) pre-college characteristics (family background, K-12 experiences, and intellectual capacity), (2) pre-college objectives (academic, career, and school), (3) college experiences (academic systems and social system), (4) institutional integration (academic and social), (5) post-college goals (academic, career, and school), and (6) outcome (departure). This model will give institutions of higher education the tools needed to build strong educational and communal programs for students. Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) posited that students are multifaceted individuals from diverse backgrounds (i.e. ethnic

groups, class, socioeconomic status, and academic status) who have goals and aspirations that guide them through college.

Tinto (1999) offered five conditions that support effective student retention efforts: expectation, advice, support, involvement, and learning. First, colleges and universities must demand excellence from their students. Students thrive better in environments where they are expected to do well. This is even more important for marginalized groups because their success generally hinges on their perceptions of the expectations that faculty members and administrators have about their academic performance (Tinto, 1999). Secondly, colleges and universities must provide students with guidelines that precisely outline what they must do to successfully maneuver through their programs of study (Tinto, 1999). Thirdly, students perform better in environments where they are provided with academic, social, and personal support (Tinto, 1999).

In addition, student support can take many forms such as student organizations, summer learning programs, tutoring programs, and mentorship programs. Tinto (1987) asserted that engaging students in educational and social activities is essential to integrating them into the college environment. Fourthly, the more effective interactions students have with faculty members, fellow students, and administrators increase their chances of persisting and graduating (Tinto, 1987, 1993, 1999). This is factual for all institutional types, genders, ethnic groups, and for part-time and full-time students. Fifthly, students are more prone to persist and graduate in environments where effective teaching and learning is occurring (Tinto, 1999). A student who learns will be less likely to leave the university (Tinto, 1999). According to Tinto (1993), student retention is

directly linked to the student's ability to connect with the learning environment. Tinto (1987) warned that extremely challenging transitional processes could cause some students to leave school early. Therefore, it is paramount that institutions of higher education periodically check the progress of their AA student-athletes (Person & Lenoir, 1997).

All in all, institutions should ensure that students not only graduate, but learn in the process (Tinto, 1987, 1993). In the process of preparing students for academic success, academicians should: (1) appreciate the diverse learning styles that students bring to the classroom, (2) set high achievement goals, (3) build healthy relationships with students, and (4) keep students abreast of their academic standing on a continual basis (Evans et al., 2009). Chickering and Reisser (1993) further posited that institutions of higher education should structure their academic programs in a way that appreciates the cultural background and past experiences of students.

Barriers to Academic Success for African American Students

It is also important to examine the barriers to academic success that have plagued AA students. In doing so, researchers can get a better understanding as to why the achievement gap between AA students and White students is so wide. It will also give insights into AA student's academic experiences at PWIs.

Achievement Gap

African American students have made steady gains in (a) reading literacy, (b) K-12 attendance, and (c) the number of high school graduates, but there remains a gap in the area of standardized tests scores (Anderson, 2007). Standardized tests scores are a major part of the achievement gap equation because they are the assessment tool by which all

K-12 students are measured (Anderson, 2007; Grodsky, 2008). For example, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that was passed by Congress in 2001 made it difficult for AA students to excel because states were given the authority to create their own knowledge-based skills assessments (Anderson, 2007). Lewis et al. (2008) reported that there have been no gains made in reading or math achievement scores for AA students in grades K-12. Lewis et al. (2008) conveyed that it will take AA students 45 years to reach the “At Proficient” achievement level in reading and math. Likewise, 88% of AA students from across all 11 US districts participating in the National Assessment of Education Progress did not meet proficiency in math.

Even more troubling, the 2000 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that by 12th grade, AA students will be reading and computing on the level of a White eighth grader (Lewis et al., 2008). This is a very serious matter because standardize tests have a significant influence over school curriculum and design, pedagogical styles, and the educational system as a whole (Grodsky, 2008). Therefore, while standardized testing was supposed to bring consistency to the educational system, some issues undoubtedly arose. The educational gap between AA students and White students continued to increase. The test scores for African American students were still falling at least one standard deviation below that of White students (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). This could be partially attributed to the overall quality of education provided to AA students, coupled with the hardship that they experience based on their families’ low socioeconomic status background (Fryer & Levitt, 2004).

Fryer and Levitt’s (2004) study is very important to the discussion surrounding the achievement gap between AA student athletes and White student athletes. In

particular, AA students typically come from low funded urban school districts where resources and instructor competency are limited (Anyon, 1997; Flenbaugh et al., 2017; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Studies also show that limited numbers of guidance counselors, high attrition among administrators, crowded classrooms, and underprepared teachers affect AA student's K-12 academic performances (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Khalifa, 2013). For the most part, AA students are often given easy assignments and are not challenged to raise their level of expectation by teachers in the urban school setting (Anyon, 1997). Flenbaugh et al., (2017) found that the curriculum used in most urban schools does not challenge, prepare, or serve the interest of students. Flenbaugh et al. (2017) further reported that teachers in this setting adversely affect the academic progress of AA students. In fact, AA students felt that their teachers were lacking in skills, unaware, ineffective, and easy. Students thought the coursework was pointless and did not challenge them to think critically (Flenbaugh et al., 2017).

African American Students' Academic Experiences at PWIs

The presence of AA students on PWI campuses has increased over the course of the 21st century (Payne & Suddler, 2014). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2017), AA students college attendance has increased from 11.7% to 14.1% from 2000-2015. From a historical standpoint, the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of *Brown v. Board of Education* led to the abolishment of the 'separate but equal' standard which opened the door for African American students to integrate PWIs (Allen, 2005).

However, in spite of success in some areas, AA students often find that the environments at PWIs are harsh and uninviting (Payne & Suddler, 2014). Allen (2005)

found that AA students do not fare as well in comparison to White students in the areas of retention, graduation, and admissions. The lack of acceptance and assimilation of AA students at PWIs causes them to struggle academically (Hamilton, 1997; Wilson, 2000). For the most part, AA students are asked to conform to an unknown environment that is made up of bureaucratic organizations and procedures, leisure activity organizations, athletic programs, diverse ethnic groups with different cultural values, and a legal system that is designed to keep order on campus (Hamilton, 1997). Therefore, even though they are away from home, AA students still deal with some of the same issues at school. As a result, they have a hard time adjusting to the culture at PWIs (Payne & Suddler, 2014). This is compounded by the fact that many initiatives that were geared towards AA students were not supported by the university community at PWIs (Allen, 2005).

In a study of 39 AA students from three (3) major PWI research institutions, Simmons et al. (2013) found that AA students sometimes find it difficult to express their blackness while trying to come to terms with the whiteness of their institution. There was a difference in the way things were communicated (i.e. the way of thinking) across cultural lines. According to Chavous (2000), this disconnect is unhealthy for AA students because it causes them to isolate themselves, which makes it difficult for them to adjust educationally and socially. Chavous (2000) and Cureton (2003) also warned that feelings of isolation can cause AA students to develop an unhealthy racial identity and face social adaptation issues.

Despite the barriers that commonly affect AA students at PWIs, some scholars report that adequate support services and faculty-student relations can positively affect their academic performance (Chavous, 2000; Dahlvig, 2010; Sule, 2011). Antonio (2002)

and Duhlvig (2010) assert that the ability of AA students to collaborate with AA faculty members increases their likelihood of academic success. However, this synergy is hard to achieve due to the minimal number of AA professors at PWIs. Consequently, AA students are constantly revisited by feelings of despair and isolation because they desire to work with and be advised by AA faculty members. Moreover, PWIs generally do not have the capital structures, educational structures, and social support structures that are needed to properly assist AA students (Chavous, 2000; Cureton, 2003).

During the 1960's PWIs created African American support centers to assist with AA student retention and educational success (Jones & Williams, 2006). This timeframe also saw the implementation of African American studies departments and African American associations, which also exposed White students to African American culture (Williamson, 1999). For example, Cureton (2003) found that when AA students perceive that their interactions with police officers and other officials at PWIs are racially motivated, they do not fare well academically. As a result, special social engagement and academic programs were created to provide AA students with a heightened layer of support at PWIs (Stewart et al, 1997). In Jones and William's (2006) study of six (6) AA males at a PWI, they found that participants learned how to effectively maneuver through and react to issues of racism on campus.

African American Student-Athletes' Academic Experiences at PWIs

In light of some of the barriers that AA students encounter at PWIs, it is important to get a sense of what AA student athletes expect to receive from their educational experiences at PWIs. Academic clustering is also a focal area that plays a major role in

the educational experiences of AA student athletes as it pertains to selecting their major and courses.

African American Student-Athletes' Perceptions

Examining the perceptions of AA student athletes concerning their experiences with negative stereotypes is paramount to bringing awareness to the predisposed ways of thinking that often plague the American higher education system (Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). The effects of stereotypical thinking are serious because they have the potential to undermine the ability of AA student-athletes to function effectively in the classroom (Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). The relatively lower academic performance of African American student athletes-as compared to their white counterparts- was documented in some early studies (Sellers, 1992). Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found that White student-athletes enter college with an academic advantage over AA student athletes. This is due in part to the poor educational and instructional systems AA student athletes matriculated through in grades K-12 (Eitzen, 2000; Gaston-Galyes, 2004; Harrison, Comeaux, & Piecha, 2006; Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavin, 2012; Sellers, 1992). According to Reynolds et al. (2012), AA student athletes and other minority student athletes come from high schools where administrators push students into courses without instructing them on what it takes to successfully matriculate through college. Many do not take the college readiness courses that are designed to prepare them for the rigors of college assignments (Reynolds et al., 2012).

Moreover, Comeaux (2008), Comeaux and Harrison (2007), and Harrison, Comeaux, and Piecha (2006) revealed that a student athletes' high school GPA is a strong indicator of their college GPA. White student athletes perform better academically than

AA student athletes in college because they enter with higher GPAs (Comeaux, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Harrison, Comeaux, & Piecha, 2006). Institutions of higher education should be more intentional about providing the academic assistance services (i.e. academic advising and tutoring) that are needed for AA student athletes to persist and graduate (Reynolds, Fisher & Cavil, 2012).

Martin, Harrison, Stone, and Lawrence (2010) discovered that AA student athletes feel that they have to keep proving to their instructors and classmates that they belong at their respective university. In essence, African American student athletes generally feel that they are penalized twice, once for being a student athlete and again for being African American (Comeaux, 2010; Engstrom et al., 1995; Harrison, 2008; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010; Person & LeNoir, 1997; Steinfeldt, Reed, & Steinfeldt, 2010). Bimper (2014) affirmed that the matriculation process (including team travel, practice, and workouts) for student athletes is very different than that of the average student, whose primary focus is academics. In particular, AA student athletes tend to feel the need to find creative ways to outdo the elite students at their university, in order to prove that they belonged (Bimper, 2014). They did this by (a) honing their leadership skills, (b) solidifying their academic foundation of knowledge, and (c) working extremely hard to excel in the classroom (Bimper, 2014). In doing so, the ultimate goal of AA student athletes' is to prove that they are capable of learning and are not a menace to society (Bimper, 2014). All in all, AA student athletes feel that they are responsible individuals who possess the self-diligence and confidence that is needed to excel at PWIs (Beamon 2008; Bimper 2014).

Beamon's study (2014) found that AA student athletes anticipated facing issues of racism at PWIs. Steele and Aronson (1995) conveyed that negative stereotypes motivate AA student athletes to show their antagonists that they can achieve academically. Harrison and Mottley (2012) expressed that academically engaged AA student athletes (those who take an active interest in their education) perform better than AA student athletes who are disengaged (those who do not make education a priority). Academically engaged AA student athletes generally find success through their ability to edify their academic identity (the level to which they identify with their academic role) more so than their athletic identity (the level to which they identify with their athlete role) (Harrison & Mottley, 2012). Similarly, AA student athletes feel that they are more responsible for their academic success as opposed to the university (Beamon, 2008). African American student athletes believe that the university community is more concerned with keeping them eligible to participate in sports. Benson (2000) reported that AA student athletes focus more on their academics than they do trying to remain eligible to participate in sports. Benson (2000) asserted that the racially divided American educational system is responsible for distorting the way AA student-athletes scale their academic abilities. Steele and Aronson (1995) and Stone et al. (1999) confirmed that African American student athletes lower their educational expectations in environments where negative stereotypes loom around them.

Singer (2009) in his study of four (4) AA student athletes from a large NCAA Division-I (NCAA D1) institution, found that AA student athletes felt that their educational interests were being overlooked in favor of the financial interests of those who manage high profile (large majority institutions that sponsor NCAA D-I sports)

intercollegiate athletics. These students conveyed that they should have more of a voice on the issues that they face in high profile athletics. Singer (2009) asserted that AA student athletes should be educated on how the NCAA operates. In doing so, their educational interests will be served by allowing them to think critically about what is taking place in their environment. Singer (2009) further noted that knowing how the system works will empower AA student athletes to take more control of their academic pursuits. All in all, AA student athletes are confident in their ability to become superb academic scholars, but demands on their time from sports adversely affected their coursework (Singer, 2009). Harris (2000) conveyed that the NCAA should appropriate more funds towards educating student athletes as opposed to retaining them.

Academic Clustering

Sanders and Hildenbrand (2010) conveyed that academic clustering occurs when the majority of student athletes within an athletic program enter the same major. This practice is commonplace in athletic programs where the goal is to keep student athletes eligible (Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Benson, 2000). Fountain and Finley (2009) expressed that academic clustering occurs when 25% or more of student athletes are enrolled in the same major. Capriccioso (2006) asserted that academic clustering transpires and is sheltered within college departments where professors value and support athletics.

In Benson's (2000) study of a large southeast NCAA Division-I institution, AA student athletes felt that their academic skillsets were not valued. They were enrolled in marginal level courses that were preselected by their advisors. This gave them the impression that they were not expected to work hard academically. The AA student

athletes did not feel that their advisers took the time to get to know them prior to filling their course schedule. These AA student athletes also felt that their professors did not care about their educational wellbeing. The majority of NCAA Division-I institutions with good sports programs offer insignificant courses to student athletes (Benford, 2007). These courses are taught by professors who have been unsympathetically referred to as “jock-sniffing professors” who give good grades to student athletes for little to no work (Benford, 2007).

From the standpoint of course selections, Singer (2005) found that AA student athletes are enrolled into courses that they do not need, while White student athletes are enrolled in courses that fit their degree program. In particular, one AA student athlete said:

they allow AA student athletes to take classes they really don't need and that's why they are here forever, because they are taking all the classes they don't need, where the White guy, he's just, you know, all classes you need...or, or even if he doesn't know, they might, I think they might give him a little advantage. They might tell him, you need this', where the Black person, they just, you know, 'we just want you to play football pretty much' (Singer, 2005, p.377).

Singer (2005) also asserted that AA student athletes were placed in classroom settings that compromised their ability to make progress towards a degree and get support for their personal development needs. Houston and Baber (2017) conducted a study on academic clustering using publicly collected data from sixty (60) NCAA Division-I institution's media guide, which contains information about student athletes' academic and personal profiles. They discovered that academic clustering occurs more frequently

among AA student athletes than White student athletes. Vanderbilt, Wake Forest, and UCLA were the institutions that had the highest proportion of student-athletes in one major. On the other hand, Missouri, Indiana, and Ohio State had the lowest proportion of student athletes in the same major. At Louisiana State University, 79.4% of their football players were heavily concentrated in two majors: General Studies and Sport Administration (Houston & Barber, 2017).

From an athletic conference standpoint, 60% of AA student athletes in the Big 12 were affected by academic clustering (Houston & Barber, 2017). In the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), 50% of all student athletes were largely enrolled in one major at their respective institution. Fountain and Finley (2009) found that all programs were affected by academic clustering. At one institution, 73% of all football student athletes were Business Management majors, and an average of 33% of football student athletes were concentrated in one major at six (6) schools. As it pertains to race, AA student athletes were clustered into one major more often than White student athletes. Fountain and Finley (2009) reported that an average of 62% of AA student athletes at four (4) schools was enrolled in one particular major.

Given the high occurrence rates of academic clustering at NCAA Division-I institutions, the NCAA must take charge and be more intentional about ensuring that the highest level of academic integrity is being demonstrated at their member institutions (Edwards, 2000; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Person & LeNoir, 1997). In a survey study of NCAA Division-I student athletes, Petr, Paskus, and Miranda (2011) found that 43% of football student athletes compared to 34% of all male student athletes were told not to take some of the courses they wanted to take. Schneider, Ross, and Fisher (2010) asserted

that academic clustering can occur in situations where academic course schedules conflict with athletic time schedules. Schneider, Ross, and Fisher (2010) also proclaimed that low skilled student-athletes often do not possess the GPA needed to enter some majors. As a result, low skilled student athletes tend to be overrepresented in some less challenging majors. However, the pressure lies on the athletic academic advisor to keep student athletes eligible (Busch, 2007).

Faculty Expectations of African American Student Athletes' Academic Success

It is important to examine the role of faculty members in helping AA student athletes prepare for success in the classroom. This will give insights into the perceptions and stereotypes they have about AA student athletes. Thereby, it will spotlight the dynamics of the relationship AA student athletes share with faculty members at PWIs.

Faculty Perceptions and Stereotypes

Feltz et al., (2013) conveyed that student athletes still have to deal with being stereotyped and labeled a “dumb-jock.” This misguided way of thinking is devastating for student-athletes because people around the university community tend to look at them differently (Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom et al, 1995; Sailes, 1993; Simon et al., 2007). This dumb-jock stereotype basically personifies student athletes as being incapable of learning or succeeding in the classroom. Simon et al. (2007) concurred that misguided stereotypes could negatively affect the student-faculty relationship in terms of academic expectations. In the Simon et al. study of 538 intercollegiate athletes at a large NCAA Division -I university, 33% revealed that they were looked at in a negative light by faculty members. 59% of student athletes reported being negatively stereotyped by the student body. The majority of comments from professors that were reported by student athletes centered on

them not being academically prepared for college. For example, one professor made the comment, “It’s an easy test [,] even athletes can pass” (Simon et al., 2007, p.252).

Studies show that AA student athletes are stereotyped at a higher rate than White student athletes (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2010; Engstrom et al., 1995; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Sailes, 1993; Simon et al., 1993; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Engstrom et al. (1995) confirmed that professors at PWIs generally possess negative feelings about low-skilled AA student athletes. According to Simon et al. (2007), 43% of AA student athletes reported receiving negative treatment from faculty members while 29% reported positive treatment. Simon et al. (2007) discovered that 42 % of AA student athletes compared to 34% of White student athletes reported that faculty perceptions of them were negative. They were suspected of cheating on assignments more frequently than White student athletes, and in some cases they did not believe that they were graded fairly on assignments (Simon, et al., 2007).

Sailes (1998) found that most AA student athletes are fully conscious of the misconstrued viewpoints that they are unlearned, underprepared, academically lackadaisical, and intellectually delayed. In particular, AA student athletes are well aware that professors at PWIs possess negative viewpoints about their intellect, educational motivation, and the benefits they receive as a result of being a university student athlete (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Comeaux, 2012; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). The negative stereotypical perspectives of faculty members and others can be damaging to the educational performance of AA student athletes (Harrison, 2001; Melendez, 2008). Cockley and Roswal (1994) and Hodges et al. (2008) conveyed that faculty members and

university support staff must eradicate their prejudices and stereotypical perspectives on the academic preparedness of student athletes. Faculty must self-examine to determine if their way of thinking has contributed to the racial tensions that have affected their relationships with AA student athletes (Hodges et al., 2008). Self-reflection is an important element that is needed for faculty members to effectively work with diverse groups of student athletes (Hodges et al., 2008). Faculty should celebrate AA student athletes for their academic abilities just like they would their athletic abilities (Donner, 2005; Hawkins, 2010; Hodge et al., 2008).

Comeaux and Harrison (2007) and Harrison et al. (2009) further revealed that White males quite often view intercollegiate student athletes as being unlearned because they take easy courses in order to remain eligible for athletic competition. Academicians and the general student population largely believe that AA student athletes are in school to hallmark their athletic abilities as opposed to their academic abilities (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Horton, 2011; Sailes, 1998). This way of thinking can negatively restrict and alter the way student athletes view themselves (Frye, 1990). Moreover, when a group is marginalized, it could affect their mindset to the point that they do not perform to their fullest academic potential (Harrison et al., 2009). In examining the role and perceptions of faculty members who work with AA student athletes, it is important to determine if they have done a good job of assisting them with formulating an effective curriculum of study (Harrison et al., 2009).

Faculty and African American Student Athletes' Interactions

The faculty-student relationship is also important to the academic success of AA student athletes. In a study of 1770 (1031 White; 739 AA) student athletes from four (4)

predominantly White institutions, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found that AA student athletes did not receive much academic assistance from White professors. White student athletes scored well on three faculty-interaction measures compared to one for AA student athletes. African American student athletes received encouragement from faculty members to pursue graduate school, but much less encouragement for post-college professional development or academic skills development (Comeaux, 2008). In similar studies, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) and Schwitzer et al. (1999) concluded that AA student athletes are somewhat apprehensive about interacting with White faculty members because the atmosphere they present is generally not inviting. Likewise, African American student athletes often feel inferior and less qualified to hold conversations with faculty members. Perlmutter (2003) confirmed that White professors shun AA student athletes when they try to engage with them in the classroom. African American student athletes are often overlooked, or not included in classroom dialogues, contributions to discussions are typically not valued, and their assignments are examined more harshly than other students (Perlmutter, 2003).

In addition, White professors have a tendency to check the clock when AA student athletes are afforded opportunities to talk in class (Perlmutter, 2003). These types of actions only expand the wedge between AA student athletes and White professors, which in essence validates the student athletes' dissatisfaction with the classroom experience. Comeaux (2008) and Comeaux and Harrison (2007) assert that AA student athletes tend to gravitate to mentors and advisors, as opposed to dealing with White faculty members who comprise approximately 89% of the faculty at PWIs. The faculty-

student relationship is a pivotal component to determining whether AA student athletes will persist through college (Comeaux, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007).

Programmatic Suggestions

LeNoir (1997) suggests that AA student athletes participate in on-campus summer learning programs prior to the launch of the academic year. In doing so, they will have an opportunity to become acclimated to the university's academic setting prior to being immersed into the athletic culture (Person, & Lenoir, 1997). Kuh et al. (2005) recommend that academic administrators set high student success goals for the student body. Benson (2000), Hall (2002), Spigner (1993), and Horton (2011) conveyed that institutions of higher education must build a culture of high educational expectations for AA student athletes that provides the support and direction they need to realize their full academic potential. Person and Lenoir (1997) further proposed that institutions of higher education create a student success advisory board. The board would be responsible for setting standards of excellence which student athletes must meet and follow (Person & Lenoir, 1997). Initiatives as such these will help academicians and student affairs administrators determine what is helping or hindering African American student athletes from exceling in the classroom (Comeaux, & Harrison, 2007). According to Kuh et al. (2005), students become more motivated to excel academically when they perceive that faculty members genuinely care about their well-being. Person and Lenoir (1997) found that African American student athletes perform better academically and athletically when they are properly advised and solid student support services are offered.

Factors that Influence African American Student Athletes' Ability to Persist

Like all other college students, AA student athletes' persistency and academic success are shaped by multiple interrelated factors. Researchers have reported that the ability of AA student athletes to persist through college can be affected (positively or negatively) by family influences, coaching influences, and university support services. Similarly, understanding how the psychosocial environment at PWIs affects AA student athletes is paramount to gaining balanced insights into their interactions with individuals outside of sports. This is beneficial in determining how much AA student athletes identify with their athletic identity and racial identity.

Social Support

Carter-Francique, Hart, and Cheeks (2015) revealed that institutions of higher education social support structures (advising, tutoring, etc.) are integral to helping AA student athletes succeed academically. The support aspect of Schlossberg's transition theory offers some perspectives on how universities and societies, family structures, social networks, and interpersonal relationships aid in the student development process (Evans et al, 2009). Studies show that when social support systems are in place, AA student athletes tend to excel athletically and academically (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015). Grayson and Grayson (2003) confirmed that African American student athletes who are void of social support systems, confidence, and/or community connections are more likely to quit school. Simms (1997) found that prosperous African American student athletes took charge of their lives, set high educational goals, comprehended and survived racial marginalization, took part in community service ventures, and received strong support from family and friends.

Family Influence

The influence of family is integral to the academic success of African American student athletes (Gragg, & Flowers, 2014). According to Evans et al. (2009), the development of individuality and autonomy in African American students is linked to the influences of family and the need for relationships. Gragg and Flowers (2014) asserted that family influence is the predominant non-cognitive factor that determines how AA student athletes and other student athletes will perform academically. Parents are more concerned with their son or daughter obtaining a degree, as opposed to their athletic ability (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Donner, 2006). When parents set high academic goals and are active in their child's educational endeavors, the child will excel academically (Wilson, & Wilson, 1992). On the other hand, some families push their children to play sports for economic purposes, with little regard for their educational well-being (Beamon, 2008, 2010; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Johnson & Migliaccio, 2009). However, in times of crisis, this could present some difficulties for student athletes who are not accustomed to making their own life decisions (Evans et al., 2009). According to James Marcia's foreclosure status, some people consent to the viewpoints of their parents without challenging the merits behind them. Therefore, students should develop their own professional goals that are in alignment with their personal interests. In doing so, they develop a sense of purpose that satisfies them (Evans et al., 2009).

Coaching Influence

Horton (2011) asserts that coaches should be purposeful in recruiting student athletes who can handle the rigors of college work and athletics. The types of student-athletes who are recruited by coaches give insights to the academic world about how

much intercollegiate athletics value education (Horton, 2011). According to the NCAA (2016) Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) report, only 57% of AA student-athletes obtain their degree in six years or less (vs. 71% of White student athletes). In spite of this grim statistic, some athletic departments across the country have implemented Intensive Learning Programs (ILP) that are designed to provide assistance to academically underprepared student athletes (Gill, & Farrington, 2014). The ILP provides student athletes with subject specific tutors, psychotherapy, and skills development programs. However, before student athletes can be enrolled in the program they have to be screened for reading and writing deficits, and complete an individual assessment survey (Gill, & Farrington, 2014). Programs like this provide the skills development initiatives student athletes need, while requiring them to actively participate in their own academic success (Kuh et al., 2005).

University Support Services

Institutions of higher education should strive to offer more comprehensive student support services to AA student athletes (Person, & Lenoir, 1997). In doing so, universities can develop programs that target their specific needs (Evans et al., 2009). In some cases, getting familiarized with an institution's academic and social structures could be challenging for first year African American student athletes (Person, & Lenoir, 1997). Typically, this period of discomfort occurs after they enter the institution, and the luxuries that were enjoyed during the recruitment process come to an end. Therefore, it is paramount that administrators support initiatives that focus on student wellness, mentorship, life skills, time management skills, and career development (Person, & Lenoir, 1997). To begin with, administrators should ensure that resources (funding and

human capital) are in place to facilitate these programs and services, which will provide students with an environment they can profit from (Kuh et al., 2005). Secondly, program and service objectives should be written in a coherent and concise manner that all participants can understand (Kuh et al., 2005). Thereby, students can judge and select the programs and services that best meet their needs. Kuh (2005) also conveyed that student success heightens when students perceive that their institution cares about their wellbeing and values the process of relationship building among students. This type of environment will provide African American student athletes with the solid support and services needed to better appreciate the college experience (Person, & Lenoir, 1997).

Psychosocial Needs of African American Student Athletes

The administrators at PWIs have to find effective and creative ways to meet the psychosocial needs of AA student athletes (Melendez, 2008). Melendez (2008) asserts that PWI administrators should make the campus environment more inviting and friendly for AA student athletes. Generally, student athletes have a difficult time getting acquainted with non-athlete students on campus due to their inflexible athletic schedules (Valentine & Taub, 1999). The AA student athlete community often felt that the drive to connect with fellow classmates outweighed the challenges faced in the classroom. Engstrom et al. (1995) conveyed that the limited ability of student athletes to connect with individuals on campus could open them up to ridicule and unmerited criticisms. Therefore, university support counselors should inspire student athletes to form relationships with people (classroom, dorms, and Greek life) outside of athletics (Valentine & Taub, 1999). Melendez (2008) also suggested that university officials help

AA student athletes form partnerships and relationships with community organizations and associations that could serve as constructive outlets for them.

In addition, Valentine and Taub (1999) assert that institutions of higher education should strive to expose student athletes to opportunities beyond the playing field (Valentine & Taub, 1999). Valentine and Taub (1999) also posit that student athletes will learn how to take ownership of their learning processes and make educated decisions with the support of a partnering industry professional or supervisor. Singer (2005) asserts that athletic advisors should design programs for AA student athletes that are geared towards meeting their special academic and developmental needs. In doing so, advisors can provide opportunities for AA student athletes to (a) attend seminars, (b) participate in leadership programs, (c) partner with industry professionals and companies, and (d) receive scholarships to advance their educational, personal, and professional development. Likewise, from an internal standpoint, athletic administrators can allow AA student athletes to gain pre-career training experiences through learning first-hand how athletic departments conduct business (Singer, 2005). This would be a kind gesture given the fact that AA student athletes generate significant revenue for PWIs in football and basketball (Singer, 2005).

Athletic Identity

The athletic identity of student athletes is determined by the level to which they identify with their role as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). Lewis (1993) warned that high levels of athletic identity could cause student athletes to become disconnected from their educational pursuits. Beamon (2012) reported that AA student athletes often exhibit athletic identity foreclosure (i.e. athletic identity over-represents the self-identity and

social identity of student athletes) due to their inability to find a balance between athletics and life. As a result, AA student athletes experience difficulties transitioning from sports to life after their college athletics experience (career development, athletic socialization, educational success) (Beamon, 2012). This is a phenomenon that disproportionately affects AA student athletes. Martin, Harrison, and Bukstein (2010) found that coaches promote the athletic prowess of AA student athletes above their educational development and recommend that these students avoid participating in non-sporting activities.

According to Parham (1993), student athletes create stress for themselves when they over promote their athletic identity. Consequently, if they ever get to the place where they cannot perform, it causes more issues for them. For example, in the Harrison et al. (2013) study of 79 football bowl subdivision players, some AA student athletes expressed that they would become depressed if they could not play college football.

Murty and Roebuck (2015) conveyed that the drive for colleges to win games negatively affects AA student athletes because they tend to focus less on academics. Moreover, in environments like this, institutions are more prone to lowering their admissions standards to secure top-notch athletes. In doing so, AA student athletes' chances of passing greatly diminishes because they are being setup to receive bad grades, dropout, or fail out (Murty & Roebuck, 2015).

Melendez (2008) asserts that university officials must look beyond traditional cognitive indicators (i.e. GPA, exams, sports performance outcomes) to help AA student athletes build a healthy athletic identity that centers on educational success, psychological stability, and athletic success. In doing so, student athletes will adjust better to the college environment (Melendez, 2008).

Racial Identity

The racial identity domain focuses on how AA student athletes perceive that their heritage is interwoven into the environment in which they coexist (Steinfeldt, Reed, & Steinfeldt, 2010). Steinfeldt, Reed, and Steinfeldt (2010) found that persistence rates increase for AA student athletes when they recognize that racial discrimination exists at PWIs. College administrators must take action as it pertains to race relations. University officials must reassure AA student athletes that they are important to the communities at PWIs. Singer (2005) asserts that PWIs must work to form stronger bonds with AA student athletes. In doing so, PWIs should focus on implementing the following strategies to more effectively serve AA student athletes: (a) create and implement more culturally relevant programs, (b) provide more leadership opportunities and experiences for AA student athletes, and (c) hire more minority coaches and administrators of color who players can relate to (Eitzen, 2000; Singer, 2005).

Summary

The prevailing literature on AA student athletes' experiences at PWIs gives insights into the academic and social environments in which they coexist. African American student athletes are more likely to be stereotyped concerning their academic credentials (e.g., standardized test scores, GPA, K-12 school system) than any other race of students. Many AA student athletes matriculate through K-12 school systems that are not equipped to meet their basic educational needs. In fact, studies show that by the 12th grade, most AA student athletes read on the level of a White eighth grader (Lewis et al., 2008). Even more, when they arrive at college, they are placed in easy courses that are designed to keep them eligible on the field of play. In doing so, AA student athletes are generally

looked down upon by faculty members and are not given the support needed to improve their academic skillsets. All in all, the ability of AA student athletes to persist through college depends upon their ability to effectively connect with family, coaches, and university support services.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will provide a detailed description of the research methodology, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), selected for this study. The following focal areas will be addressed: (1) IPA research design, (2) participant selection criteria and recruitment process, (3) data collection, (4) data analysis, (5) ethical considerations, (6) strategies for quality/trustworthiness, (7) subjectivity statement, and (8) participant information.

The purpose of this study is to explore former African American male student athletes' perceptions of their academic experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). In particular, this study investigates how former AA student-athletes understand the role of faculty members in shaping their academic success at PWIs. The following three questions will be pursued through this study:

1. How do AA male former student athletes view their academic experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)?
2. How do AA male former student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI?
3. How do AA male former student athletes build their academic capacity to persist and succeed at a PWI?

Research Design

Qualitative research is “an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the

social world” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520). The ultimate goal of qualitative research is to understand how meaning is constructed in the mindset of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In doing so, it gives insights into how people see their world and make sense of their experiences. Blaikie (2007) and Crotty (1998) assert that knowledge is formed through understanding the environment in which research participants live. Moustakas (1994) recommends that researchers must set boundaries around their preconceptions while examining circumstances that are embodied within their study. Thereby, they will not lose sight of themes that may be developing in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All in all, this made it possible for the researcher to do an effective job of creating an authentic description of the phenomenon that is under investigation (Merriam & Tindall, 2016).

The researcher employed an interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA) methodological design for this study. This methodology was used to explore, examine, describe, and interpret the lived experiences of participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The purpose of this study is to capture the precise experiences of the research participants - former African American male student athletes. The unobstructed natural experiences of the research participants as shared through their authentic narratives was the basis for this research’s interpretive process as opposed to using preconceived categorical systems imposed upon the narrative data. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkins (2009), IPA is concerned with how the phenomenon appears to participants and how they make sense of it. The researcher conducted an IPA study that analyzed the phenomenon as it appeared to and was experienced by the participants.

One valuable aspect of IPA is an idiographic perspective embedded in its historical tradition. Rather than paying exclusive attention to common themes across multiple individuals, the IPA method also allows the researcher to explore the intricate individual experiences of research participants on a case by case basis within the context of their environment (Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). The researcher developed a holistic view of the research phenomenon, which included both general themes across all cases and individual variations. This provided a more thorough and in-depth investigation of the participant's experiences. In doing so, the subjective experiences of participants gave intersubjective meanings to what they have lived through and understood from the phenomenon and their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Participant Sample Selection Process

The participants for this study were nine (9) AA male former student athletes who played sports for an NCAA Division-I member institution as college students. The researcher used the purposeful sampling method to recruit and invite eligible participants. Purposeful sampling is a widely accepted sampling method for qualitative research and it is designed to help researchers select participants and sites that will yield viable information about the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In particular, the researcher employed a set of clear selection criteria that outlined the requirements that participants had to meet in order to participate in this study. Criterion sampling served as the primary quality assurance measure that was used to ensure that participants were a good match for the study (Mertens, 2015). All participants

1. Are AA male former student athletes who played sports at a NCAA Division-I member institution;

2. Played NCAA Division-I sports within the past 20 years;
3. Played at least one full-year of sports at a NCAA Division-I member institution;
4. Played NCAA Division-I sports at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI).

The researcher recruited AA male former student athletes at sporting events that were held at PWIs around the Southeastern United States. Secondly, the researcher recruited some of the former players he knew from college to participate in the study. In addition, the researcher employed snowball sampling as a means for creating a pipeline to recruit more qualified participants through the recommendations of current study participants. Snowball sampling is designed to assist researchers with gathering referrals from study participants (Creswell, 2013).

Based on the current literature, African American student athletes are more likely to have experienced racial discrimination and other forms of social prejudices than any other student athlete groups (Comeaux, 2010; Engstrom et al., 1995; Harrison, 2008; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010; Person & LeNoir, 1997; Steinfeldt, Reed, & Steinfeldt, 2010). Therefore, the researcher decided to examine their academic experiences as student athletes to gain insights into how they were able to coexist within the contexts of a PWI.

Data Collection

It is important to note that the researcher who launches a phenomenological investigation intentionally engages in a self-reflective process called “bracketing (Epoche)” to distance him/herself from any preconceived attitudes and opinions about the subject matter, in this case, faculty expectations of AA student-athletes (Creswell, 2013). Likewise, it is essential to phenomenological research that the participants are given the

autonomy to expound on what they have experienced and how they experienced it. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkins (2009), IPA works well when research participants are able to provide detailed first-hand information about their own experiences. In doing so, the information for this study was gathered in its natural form (without the prompting of scientific methods and/or guided by external opinions). After IRB approval was granted by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte Institutional Review Board, the participants were recruited. All participants signed a consent form that explained the purpose of the study and the scope of their participation. This ensured that participants understood what they were getting ready to embark upon (Christians, 2001). The participants were given a consent form receipt for their personal records. Then the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with participants and made sure they were given ample time to freely share their experiences and perceptions.

Creswell (2013) asserts that conducting in-depth interviews with at least ten people is an effective way to collect phenomenological data. The researcher followed a semi-structured interview process where testimonials were recorded with a Sony voice recorder. Each interview lasted an average of sixty-minutes per session. The researcher was careful not to place any undue stress on the participants (Mertens, 2015). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) explain that the ability of researchers to build rapport with participants will increase their likelihood of receiving quality and authentic information. The researcher listened carefully to participants to determine how to effectively formulate and move the conversation along (Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). Smith, Flowers, and Larkins (2009) also posit that the researcher should construct an interview protocol that gives them the autonomy to make changes (e.g. rephrase questions, gauge the

environment, follow participants lead, and ask broad to specific questions) during interview sessions. In doing so, the interviews will serve as less tainted windows by which researchers can confidently elicit the deeper and authentic meaning behind the phenomenon that is being investigated (Mertens, 2015).

Data Analysis Processes and Procedures

The entire data analysis will be carried out following the guidelines explained by Smith and his colleagues (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher first listened to interview recordings and read interview transcripts at the same time. Spending time listening to the research participants' voices provided the researcher with an opportunity to conduct a more in-depth analysis of their experiences. The re-reading process allowed the researcher to see the full picture of each participant's testimonials in chronological order (i.e. broad recollections to more specific revelations of events and situations). Secondly, the researcher took initial notes that primarily focused on how the research participants discussed, comprehended, and thought about their experiences. The note-taking process focused on three types of participant comments: (1) descriptive comments (i.e. content of what is said), (2) linguistic comments (i.e. language that is used by participants – laughter, pauses, tone, repetition), and (3) conceptual comments (i.e. gain a more in-depth understanding behind specific accounts that are conveyed by participants). Comments were written along the margins of each transcript to assist with extrapolating emerging themes. Thirdly, the researcher condensed the initial notes and transcripts of participants while maintaining the integrity of its context to identify interrelationships, associations, and patterns (emerging themes) between exploratory notes.

In step three, the interview was broken apart to aid the researcher in reflecting on and delving deeper into the core of the data from which potential themes emerged (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Fourthly, the researcher identified connections across extrapolated themes. In doing so, the themes were placed in chronological order, and the researcher charted them to depict how they connect together. This process involved continuous arranging and rearranging of the themes to get an authentic portrayal of the participant's recollections. Fifthly, the researcher repeated steps one through four for all ten participants. The researcher was careful not to project his thoughts (bracketing) from previous studies onto this study. Finally, the researcher looked for and found patterns and trends across all cases. The researcher mapped themes in a graphic depiction that were similar across all cases and displayed those that were unique to each individual case.

In addition, the Atlas TI qualitative software program was used to store and arrange the interview data in a way that effective interpretations could be made (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used the system to build a concept map in which data segments were aligned and displayed according to the extrapolated themes (Creswell, 2013). The researcher also used the concept map to identify thematic trends among the interview transcripts of AA male student athletes. In doing so, the researcher was able to generate real-time comprehensive accounts of the experiences of all participants.

Risks, Benefits, and Ethical Considerations

Research, like all other human activities, involves some risks and benefits. Therefore, the potential for harm cannot be completely eliminated when working with human subjects for research purposes. Christians (2001) asserts, in accordance with the Belmont Report, that researchers have a fiduciary responsibility to protect participants

from unreasonable harm, and to lessen the likelihood of potential harm. Moreover, the researcher briefed participants on the purpose of the research project prior to them deciding to participate in it. Secondly, the participants were given the freedom and authority to decide whether or not to participate. Thirdly, the researcher required participants to sign a detailed informed consent form. In doing so, the participants were given enough information to make an educated decision about their participation (Glesne, 2016). The researcher reassured participants that they did not need to feel pressured to participate. This protocol was reiterated several times because the federal government classifies African Americans as a vulnerable group that could potentially feel obligated to participate in research studies. The researcher also clarified to all participants that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the process.

It is important to protect the privacy of participating individuals (e.g., participant characteristics and testimonials) and ensure the confidentiality of their participation itself (Christians, 2001). The researcher did not disclose any information about the participants to a third party. Any identifiable information about participants was not disclosed to the general public (pseudonyms were used to protect the participants identification). The researcher was cautious in how protected information was conveyed internally (within the organization) and externally (outside of the organization). According to Christians, protected information can be penetrated or unveiled by individuals who are aware of industry-specific pseudonyms (cover-ups). The researcher also reserved the right to end the research inquiry if it could have potentially caused harm to the participants (Glesne, 2016). Thereby, all necessary actions were taken to remove participants from possible harmful conditions and circumstances.

Potential benefits from this study are expected to outweigh the possible risks explained above. This study may ultimately benefit AA student athletes and the society at-large in multiple ways. In particular, participating African American student athletes will gain significant benefits from their participation. First, African American male student athletes will be able to reflect on their matriculation experiences in the K-12 school system and gain a new insight about them. Secondly, African American male student athletes will have an opportunity to address, in an unobstructed manner, their lived experiences at PWIs and voice their concerns and opinions. By having a chance to create a counter-narrative on institutional barriers and their academic capacity to succeed in White America, participants will be able to develop stronger resiliency and a positive outlook.

On the other hand, society as a whole (1) may gain an appreciation for the contributions of AA male student athletes and the struggles that they face on a daily basis and (2) society as a whole will unearth and cultivate the untapped potential of AA male student athletes beyond their athletic talents. All in all, this study will create a platform for AA male student athletes who have hardly been given opportunities to express themselves and contribute to the knowledge base that is accepted, acknowledged, and appreciated in larger society (Glesne, 2016).

Strategies for Quality/Trustworthiness

The researcher employed strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of the information collected in this study. The researcher built rapport with participants through contacting them prior meeting to explain the interview process (i.e. the consent form, average interview time, and meeting confirmation). This sensitivity to context allowed

the researcher to empathize with and make sure participants were at ease (Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) conveyed that building a relationship with participants will assist with eliminating any distorted information (i.e., misinterpretations and incorrect statements). Smith, Flowers, and Larkins (2009) posit that the key to conducting solid IPA research requires researchers to pay close attention to the interview process for its skillfulness, keenness, and responsiveness. Therefore, the researcher reviewed the overall written report to make sure the data was constructed and analyzed within the context in which it was extrapolated (Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). The researcher further ensured that all facets of the study were thoroughly documented and made them available to the dissertation committee and prospective readers (e.g. participant selection process, interview schedule, interview protocol, analytical process) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Furthermore, the researcher conducted an independent audit of the study under the guidance of his major professor. Yin (1989) recommends that researchers file their data in a systematic manner that would allow a third party to replicate their study. In doing so, the researcher ensured that the study (1) contained the rigor and cohesiveness that is required; and (2) followed a chronological order along the path of presented evidence (Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). The researcher followed these steps to make sure the report was credible.

Subjectivity Statement

I am an African American (AA) male who has over nine years of experience working in higher education. I currently work as an Instructor/Program Coordinator for the Claflin University (Orangeburg, South Carolina) Sport Management Department. In

this role, I am primarily responsible for effectively completing three tasks: (1) teaching and advising students, (2) writing assessment reports (accreditation, board reports, and faculty evaluations), and (3) supervising departmental faculty and staff. From a student body perspective, approximately 60% of my department is comprised of AA male student-athletes. Through working with these students, I have learned a lot about their upbringing and outlook on society. They have given me a firsthand view of some of the plights and successes that have molded them into the individuals who they are today.

Likewise, I have spoken with hundreds of students in my department about their pre and post high school educational experiences. In doing so, they generally believe that they were not expected to excel in the classroom and/or pursue a college degree. In fact, I remember talking to one student athlete who said, "I am not doing well in my classes because I did not learn anything in high school." This is the type of story that I typically hear from my AA male student athletes.

On the other hand, some of my AA male student athletes have excelled immensely in the classroom. For the most part, the ones who have succeeded came from homes and schools where non-negotiable standards of academic excellence were put in place. Thereby, they matriculated through academic systems that empowered them while simultaneously holding them accountable for their educational success. Observing this contrast among my AA male student athletes, I have long wondered how educators, including myself, can best support this unique group of college students so that they all could experience academic success during their college years.

Based on my keen interest in the academic success of AA male student athletes, I have conducted a study that focuses on the academic experiences of AA male student

athletes who attend PWIs. This study will give them an opportunity to create their authentic account(s) of how the educational system has shaped their lives and perspectives. Therefore, my role in this study is to listen and allow the participants to express themselves freely in a non-threatening environment. I will not interject any of my feelings or preconceived notions on participants based on my prior knowledge or outlook on what they might have experienced in the K-12 and college environments. In essence, I have tried to get a fresh sense of AA male student-athletes' experiences so that I could gain a new and deeper understanding about their lives and perspectives.

Participant Information

The (N=9) participants for this study were selected based on the following criteria:

1. African American male former student athlete who played sports at a NCAA Division-I member institution;
2. Played NCAA Division-I sports within the past 20 years;
3. Played at least one full-year of sports at a NCAA Division-I member institution;
4. Played NCAA Division-I sports at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI).

The (n=9) AA male former student-athletes (Terrence, Chris, Rico, Jerome, Thomas, Craig, Jim, Lance, and Kevin) who participated in this study played football at predominantly White NCAA Division-I institutions across the Southeastern United States. The participants selected a pseudonym to protect their identities. Pseudonyms were also used to protect the identity of the participant's institutions and the associated names (e.g., professors, mentors, teammates, family members, and coaches) that were mentioned throughout each interview.

All participants provided personal information about their matriculation processes throughout life and school. The following participant information was provided: (a) name and age, (b) sport played, (c) region where university is located, (d) family education history (i.e. first generation), (e) caliber of K-12 school district, and (f) academic interest.

The information provided by participants gave insights into the circumstances and events that shaped their experiences in college. Participants provided information about their background during the interview process. Chapter four will give a more detailed account of their lived experiences. This section of the chapter will give a brief picture of each participant's background. The average time for each interview was sixty (60) minutes.

Terrence

Terrence was a 30 year old former intercollegiate AA male student-athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the South. He was a first-generation student who majored in sociology, and matriculated through a low income school district in the south that he does not feel prepared him for college. He left school early during his junior year to enter the professional leagues. As a result, he recently completed his degree after eight years of being away from school. Academics were never a major priority for Terrence. He came from humble beginnings in a small town within the borders of a southern state. He also grew up in a single parent home where his mother always took good care of him. Terrence also credited her for providing the encouragement he needed to pursue his dreams of playing football for a major NCAA Division-I institution and professional franchise.

Chris

Chris was a 28 year old former intercollegiate AA male student athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south. He is a first-generation student who majored in management. Chris matriculated through a low income school district in the south that did not prepare him for college. He grew up in a single parent home in the inner city of an urban community in the south. Chris thanked his mother and uncles for taking good care of him in the absence of his father. He also rejoiced at the opportunity to leave his hometown in hopes that he would make it to the professional leagues. Chris, like Terrence, did not focus much on his educational pursuits. It was not something that he enjoyed.

Rico

Rico was a 36 year old former intercollegiate AA male student athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south. He is a first-generation student who grew up in a single parent home in the inner city of an urban community up north. Academically, Rico does not feel that he received a good education in his K-12 school district. He spent the later portion of his teenage life in the inner-city in the south. He majored in sociology, and it was always one of his goals to play football for a premier NCAA Division-I football program. Rico grew up in environments where survival outweighed the drive to obtain a quality education. In fact, he does not feel that the educational systems up north or down south prepared him for college. Education is something that he never revered much throughout school.

Jerome

Jerome was a 35 year old former intercollegiate AA male student athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south. He majored in management, and is one of three siblings who received a full athletic scholarship to play sports at a NCAA Division-I institution. Jerome and his siblings were also fortunate to have matriculated through a resource rich K-12 system that prepared them to enter college. He and his siblings grew up in a two parent home in the suburbs in a coastal region in the South. Moreover, given the fact that some of Jerome's siblings were former NCAA athletes, they prepared him for what he should expect as an AA male student athlete entering a PWI. Getting a good education was Jerome's top priority.

Thomas

Thomas was a 36 year old former intercollegiate AA male student athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south. He was a business administration major whose first priority was to graduate and obtain a degree. Thomas was the first student in the history of his high school to receive an athletic scholarship to play sports at a NCAA Division-I institution. He was also a first-generation college student who grew up in a two parent home in a very rural area of the south. Thomas matriculated through a resource depleted school district where the average college SAT score was 810. However, regardless of the odds that were stacked against him, he persevered and was able to slightly exceed the NCAA's SAT entrance requirement score of 820. Thomas credited his parents for inspiring him to graduate high school and do what so many of his friends failed to do. Thomas always had aspirations of playing in the professional leagues but graduating meant everything to him.

Kevin

Kevin was a 25 year old former intercollegiate AA male student athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south. He majored in kinesiology. Kevin grew up in several southern states throughout his high school years that consisted of three different geographic areas (e.g. rural, suburban, and inner city) because his parents moved quite frequently. As a result, he did not have a difficult time adjusting to the environment at his university; he had been accustomed to interacting with people from different ethnic groups. Kevin was also fortunate to have matriculated through some solid school districts along his K-12 academic journey. He completed his bachelor's degree and master's degree in five consecutive years. While he entered college with high athletic and academic accolades, getting a good education was Kevin's first priority.

Lance

Lance was a 37 year old former intercollegiate AA male student-athlete who played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south. He majored in sport management. Lance grew up in a two-parent home in the south. His parents also attended college and graduated. Lance matriculated through a resource rich K-12 school district that exposed him to many scholarship opportunities, and most importantly prepared him well for college. He credited his parents for believing in him and living a life that was worth following. Lance, like so many of the participants, had aspirations of playing in the professional leagues, but education was his main goal.

James

James was a 37 year old former intercollegiate AA male student athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south. He majored in Management. James is a first generation student that grew up in the rural midlands of the south from a single parent home with his grandmother. James, like some of the participants, matriculated through a resource depleted school district that struggled to educate its students. However, he always made good grades and persevered through college.

Craig

Craig was a former AA male student athlete that played football at a major NCAA Division-I institution in the south and majored in finance. He grew up in a two parent home in the midlands of a southern city. Craig was fortunate, like some of the other participants, to matriculate through a superb school district that prepared students for college. He never had any problems getting through school because he enjoyed it and wanted to excel. His parents inspired him to do well because they were also college graduates.

Participant Summary

The (N=9) participants in this study came from very similar backgrounds, but there were some unique differences. All participants attended a NCAA Division-I PWI in the south. Four (4) of the participants are first generation students (the first in their family to attend college). Four (4) of the participants grew up in single parent homes. Five (5) of the participants matriculated through poor school districts. Six (6) of the participants made education their first priority. Overall, the majority of participants emphasized that

they were internally motivated or inspired by their parents to value education above athletics.

Table 3

Participant Information for Former African American Male Student Athletes who Played Sports at a NCAA Division-I Predominantly White Institution

Pseudonym	Age	Years Played	Sport	Major
Terrence	30	2008-2012	Football	Sociology
Chris	28	2009-2013	Football	Sport Management
Rico	36	2000-2004	Football	Sociology
Jerome	35	2000-2004	Football	Management
Thomas	36	2001-2005	Football	Business
Kevin	25	2011-2015	Football	Kinesiology
Lance	37	2000-2004	Football	Sport Management
Jim	37	2000-2004	Football	Management
Craig	37	2000-2004	Football	Accounting

Summary

The researcher conducted an IPA study that is focused on capturing the authentic accounts of AA student athletes' experiences at PWIs. The researcher invited (N=9) AA male former student athletes that met participation criteria. After receiving IRB approval, data was collected from those individuals who were selected through the use of in-depth interviews. The researcher analyzed the interview transcripts for a deeper understanding of its contents to identify emerging themes. The researcher also ensured that participants were protected by requiring them to sign an informed consent agreement prior to the

interview. Most importantly, this study may support AA student athletes through raising awareness of their issues and concerns to the higher education community at PWIs. In doing so, it may inspire AA male student athletes to believe that they are valued beyond the field of play.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore African American male former student athletes' perceptions of their academic experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI). In particular, this study investigated how AA male former student athletes understand the role of faculty members in shaping their academic success at PWIs. The following three questions were pursued through this study:

1. How do AA male former student athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?
2. How do AA male former student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI?
3. How do AA male former student athletes build their academic capacity to persist and succeed at the PWI?

The findings for this study developed from in-depth interviews with nine AA male former student athletes who met the following criteria:

1. Played football at a NCAA Division-I member institution
2. Played NCAA Division-I football within the past 20 years
3. Played at least one full-year of football at a NCAA Division-I member institution
4. Played NCAA Division-I football at a PWI

The participants were introduced in the previous chapter using their preselected pseudonyms. The same will follow in this chapter as their lived experiences are recorded, extrapolated for themes, and presented in their actual form. The interviews provided a real-time look at the adversities and triumphs AA male former student athletes

encountered in their drive to find success inside and outside the classroom in their efforts to persist to graduation. This chapter is setup in the order in which the five major themes were identified. The themes include (a) academic dispositions and experiences, (b) facing a new world, (c) I am only of value on the field of play, (d) I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, and (e) taking the initiative. The first and second themes, (a) academic dispositions and experiences, and (b) facing a new world answered the first research question: How do AA male student-athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)? The third and fourth themes, (c) I am only of value on the field of play and (d) I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of Play, answered the second research question: How do former AA male student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI? The final theme, (e) taking the initiative answered the third research question: How do AA male student athletes interpret their academic capacity to persist and succeed at PWIs? A culminating summary of the findings will conclude the chapter.

Cross-Cutting Themes

The aforementioned emerging themes developed through the process of re-reading and taking initial notes along the margins of participant transcripts. Under each of the four major themes, three to five subthemes were identified. Under the first major theme, (a) Academic dispositions and experiences, the following subthemes emerged: (a-1) athletics is my first priority, (a-2) I was not academically prepared for college, (a-3) academics are my first priority, (a-4) I came in prepared, (a-5e) balancing academics and athletics. Under the second major theme, (b) facing a new world, the following three

subthemes are located: (b -1) from an inner city dog eat dog environment to a place with privileges, (b-2) unfamiliar and unexpected learning context, and (b-3) push through programs. The third major theme, (c) I am only of value on the field of play, includes four subthemes that illustrate the participants' encounter with negative stereotypes and faculty's low expectations, which resulted in the downward spiral of their academic experiences, (c-1) low academic expectations, (c-2) faculty lack of awareness to the needs of African American student athletes, (c-3) faculty preconceived stereotypes, and (c-4) futile faculty-student-athlete relationships. The fourth theme, (d) I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, presents a more positive path with three subthemes (d-1) faculty hold student athletes accountable for their academic performance, (d-2) have a good attitude and do your work, (d-3) faculty provide support. The last major theme, (e) taking the initiative, includes four subthemes, (e-1) my coaches are active participants in my success, (e-2) my family members are active participants in my success, (e-3) building a strong team for success, (e-4) challenge the system and believe in yourself. These subthemes provided the meaningful and concrete constructs for the five cross-cutting themes that are discussed in this chapter. These themes focus on the lived experiences of participants as it pertains to their academic experiences at NCAA Division-I institutions.

Table 4

Research Questions, Themes, and Subthemes

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
How do former AA male student-athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?	Academic Dispositions and Experiences	Athletics is My First Priority I Was not Academically Prepared for College Academics is My First Priority I Came in Prepared Balancing Academics and Athletics
	Facing a New World	From an Inner-City Dog Eat Dog Environment to a Place with Privileges Unfamiliar and Unexpected Learning Context Push Through Programs
How do former AA male student-athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI?	I Am Only of Value on the Field of Play	Low Academic Expectations Faculty Lack Awareness to the Needs of AA Student-Athletes Faculty Preconceived Stereotypes Futile Faculty-Student-Athlete Relationships
	I Am just as Valuable in the Classroom as I Am on the Field of Play	Faculty Hold Student-Athletes Accountable For Their Academic Performance Have a Good Attitude and Do Your Work Faculty Provide Support
How do former AA male student-athletes interpret their academic capacity to persist and succeed at the PWIs?	Taking the Initiative	My Coaches are Active Participants in My Success My Family Members are Active Participants in My Success Building a Strong Team for Success Challenge the System, and Believe in yourself

Academic Dispositions and Experiences

To the first research question: How do AA male former student athletes view their academic experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI)? The academic dispositions and experiences theme provided insights into the participants' priorities, academic preparedness, expectations, as well as their challenges and persistent effort to find ideal balance between two competing goals - academics and athletics - within the educational corridors of a NCAA Division-I PWI. The following five subthemes emerged to address the first research question. The first four sub-themes are structured in a way that reveals the contrasting dispositions and experiences of two groups of students: the first proclaiming athletics as their priority and the other affirming academics was their first priority. The first group's academic dispositions and experiences will be explained in two sub-themes: (a-1) Athletics is my first priority, and (a-2) I was not academically prepared for college. The two other sub-themes, (a-3) Academics are my first priority and (a-4) I came in prepared explain the experiences of the second group of student athletes. The last sub-theme, (a-5) Balancing academics and athletics delineates the arduous journey both groups of students experienced as student athletes at an NCAA Division-I PWI. When asked to talk about their academic experiences entering college, those who made athletics their first priority were fundamentally not ready to handle the rigors of college work, and vice versa.

Athletics is My First Priority

When asked to define their academic dispositions and experiences, some participants revealed that they were more interested in and hoped to focus on playing sports than excelling in the classroom. Chris, a former football player at SSU, said, "I just

knew that I was coming there for one thing only, and that was just to play football. That was just the one thing I wanted to do all my life.” Another former SSU football player, Rico, also made this point very clear in his interview when he said, “My mindset was there to play football and academics came in second.”

Well academics... It was not really a big factor because everyone knew you got to pass. You do what you have to do to go through. And even if you did the bare minimum you would get passed through. So, you know there is not that much pressure to be successful in the classroom. I had a teammate who was focused on trying to make the school and degree work for him, and he wanted to finish first in academics. My mindset was there to play football and academics came in second. That is how the programs are. You are there to play sports first, and academics come second. The media never say academics when it comes to athletes. It is all about athletics.

Chris, a former SSU player who majored in Management, echoed the same perspective. He openly admitted that he was “not really a big academic guy” and acknowledged that “people just knew that from me just coming in.” He was very clear that he came to college “for one thing only, and that was just to play football.” He expressed his conviction “that was just the one thing I wanted to do all my life.”

Oh man. Academic, I should say, I'm not really a big academic guy. And you can, most people just knew that from me just coming in. I was the big risk that SSU took to get me in. I remember there was one time I had a conversation with one of my academic advisors and she was telling me, "Man, I tell you what. We really were just unsure about you because I remember when you came on your official

visit, and we did a whole academic spiel and you were no way near like this, like no way near interested in it at all." And I was just telling them, I was like, "It's academics. It is what it is. It's something I got to get through."

To Terrence, school work was something that he just had to manage so that he "could stay eligible to play ball." "I didn't like it," confessed Terrence. He explained that his goal had been clearly playing as a pro-athlete and college was simply a gateway "just to go to the NFL." He was keenly aware of the short career of most pro-football players and "wanted to maximize every second and every day of it." This meant that he was willing to leave college at any time, and he left school as a junior. The career span of most professional football players is five years, which means this is something that college football players should seriously think about prior to leaving school early. They should take into consideration that a college education may better position them to enter a career that exceeds the average lifespan of a professional football player.

Once I figured out, I just needed to get the right help. It [the inspiration from teachers] gave me the confidence to just dive in with school work. I didn't like it. It was just something that I was able to learn and coexist so I could stay eligible to play ball, because I went to school just to go to the NFL. I always made a promise to myself, I was like I'm going to get to the NFL, and I'll come back to college and I'll graduate when I'm done making money. You can't always ... that window to make money as a pro athlete is short. And I just wanted to maximize every second and every day of it. So, I ended up leaving school as a junior. I was a junior in the classroom, and still had two years to graduate. I was like I'll come back and finish it then. (Terrence)

Rico, Chris, and Terrence explained that they came into college with a mindset that their life-time goal was pursuing a pro-athletic career. Their evaluated commitment to athletic excellence was much more important than their academic distinction. Their desire and commitment to athletic success overshadowed their academic dispositions and experiences at college. These AA male student athletes will be discussed under the next sub-theme: I was not academically prepared for college.

I Was Not Academically Prepared for College

The interviews further revealed that some participants were not prepared (I Was Not Academically Prepared for College) to handle the rigors of college academics transitioning from high school to college. Many of them came from educational environments where the capacity (i.e. funding, instructional tools, and qualified teachers) to properly educate and guide its student body was limited. Rico, like some of the other ill-prepared participants, matriculated through school districts that did not prepare him for college. “I was not prepared in high school academically. When you push forward...you cannot because as long as you produce [on the field of play] you get pushed forward so that mindset...that is what it was. So there was no preparation at all, and none was offered.”

Thomas, a former CMU student athlete, gave a startling testimony about how the average SAT score in his school district aligned with the bare minimum score a prospective NCAA Division-I student athlete could make to be accepted into college. The NCAA’s required SAT score is 900 today, which falls short of the 1280 most flagship universities require. That means a student athlete from Slaton County School District would have a better chance of being accepted into college with their athletic scholarship

than a student from the district's general student population. The NCAA sliding scale provides a great benefit for student athletes, but it does not guaranteed that they will perform well in college. While Thomas grew up in an impoverished school district, he still persevered through college unlike some of the other participants.

No, I would say I was a bit behind, because like I said the average SAT score from my area was 810. So put it like this, are you familiar with the College Board where you have the Clearing House? Yes. Alright, the clearing house goes like this: you have to have a core GPA of 2.5, and that's the bare minimum. You can have higher, but if you got a core, a lower level core or 2.5 back then you had to make an 820 on your SAT, alright. Now, for me in high school the average SAT score was 810. That's even the top five, the top ten, that's everybody. So there's no way I can say I was academically prepared for CMU coming from high school. Who fault is that? I don't know. That's not for me to say, to judge. But I do know that it was a big adjustment. And the numbers don't lie; I mean the numbers tell you itself. If I had to make the bare minimum ten points out of 820, and my average high school SAT score was 810, you know what I mean?

Chris talked about the shame he felt entering college as he found himself lacking the basic skillsets that the average high school student should have mastered prior to graduating high school. In particular, he expressed concerns about entering college with poor writing skills. This could possibly mean that the quality of English writing instruction at Chris' high school was low and teachers simply passed students without concern for their writing skill development.

Me personally, I wasn't prepared at all. I didn't even know how to write a paper in MLA form. There was just some stuff that I didn't learn in high school. But when I got to college I had to pick up the pace, or I had to pick up the slack where I left off from and get that information from tutors or my academic advisor because there was some stuff that I didn't know how to do. And I wasn't the only guy. It was some guys that were reading at a lower level or whatever the case may be or they needed extra attention. But I got through those problems. I even had a learning specialist. You know, I'm not ashamed to say that. I had a learning specialist my first year, then once I started ... I hit the ground running and got through like all the tough times and stuff like that because it was ... in the beginning it was kind of embarrassing, but you know, I was like, man, how am I supposed to go through life not knowing how to type a paper?

Former SSU player Terrence's, path to college mirrored Chris' because both had to attend a prep school to improve their academic profile prior to entering a four-year institution. Prep schools are often a second avenue that institutions use to help struggling prospective student athletes reach NCAA entrance requirements. It is not uncommon for AA male student athletes to enter school through this route. Prep schools provide an extra year of academic skillset development for student athletes that leave high school with low GPAs and SAT or ACT test scores. The threshold for student athletes to enter an NCAA Division-I member institution is a 2.30 GPA, 900 SAT, and 75 ACT (students can take either the SAT or ACT)

I was not prepared at all coming out of high school. I think what truly helped me is, I had to do a post graduate year, at a prep school in New Hampshire. I was able

to learn from my teachers because the classroom setting was very small. I think the graduating class was a class of 30. That's how many seniors we had in that class. Basically it was just a school for athletes. I was able to get one on one attention, and I realized that I wasn't a great ... I wasn't as strong in a huge group setting as I was in an intimate, one on one setting. Once we were able to figure that out, school started to make more sense to me when that happened.

Rico, Thomas, Chris, and Terrence, gave insights into the academic struggles of AA male student athletes who matriculated through poor K-12 school districts. African American male student athletes often enter college reading below grade level, and some experience difficulties with their writing. Given the large number of academic hardships these athletes faced, they really lost hope in the school systems that were designed to prepare them for college. For the most part, they did not have anyone or anything tangible that would lead them to believe that they would succeed academically. They were just accustomed to being “non-academic” student athletes whose primary goal was to remain eligible to play sports. Therefore, they gave more thought to playing professional sports because to them that was a more achievable possibility.

Thomas matriculated through a poor school district like Rico, Chris, and Terrence did, but he was able to succeed because he had a strong conviction that his first priority was getting a good education. However, his testimony still added to the context of this theme concerning the poor state of affairs in his former school district. In the next section, Thomas expounded on how his drive to get a degree despite not being academically prepared propelled him to excel in college. This shows that AA male

student athletes may still succeed even if they were not academically prepared in high school.

The next sub-theme is a contrast to the first and second sub-themes. The second group of AA male former student athletes reported that (a) academics were their first priority, and (b) they entered college academically prepared. There was a stark difference between the two groups. Excluding Thomas, the majority of the student athletes who made academics their first priority were the ones who entered college academically prepared.

Academics are My First Priority

In contrast to the academic experiences of Rico, Chris, and Terrence, the majority of participants placed academics first on their list of priorities. The general consensus was academics gave AA male student athletes the best possibility of succeeding in life. Jerome, a former SSU football player, said, “I think as an African American student athlete, there's a lot of stereotypes that hey this guy's only here because he can play football, and for me, school has never been a challenge.” This statement provided evidence that AA male student athletes value education and are concerned with life outside of sports. This is true even to those who entered college without adequate academic preparation. Thomas, despite not feeling academically prepared when he entered college had a broader perspective about life and persevered to do well in the classroom. “I think my expectation was to get a degree, better my life, come out of college better than I came in, and being able to have options to do something with my life.” Kevin, a former football player from NNU, expounded on how he prided himself on not needing academic support services because he was so far advanced entering college.

He came in with a roadmap already drawn so he rarely needed help from academic advisors.

My academic experiences were pretty good. A lot of my teammates, they struggled as far as academics and staying in the study hall and having to have help from tutors and academic advisors and whatnot, but I saw early freshman year that it was very time-consuming, and it would take away a lot of time from what I wanted to do in college, so after freshman year, which we had a mandatory study hall, I made it a point to have my GPA to a level and my grades to a level to where I didn't have to be involved with academic advisors. So, basically, a lot I did on my own as far as class scheduling and what classes to take. When I needed help, I asked my advisors, but a lot of it was self-dependent. (Kevin)

Grounded in their keen awareness of negative stereotypes against their academic capability and a desire to negate such stereotypes that are prevalent on college campuses, Jerome and Jim further elaborated on the points that were made by Thomas and Kevin. Their success was possible through their determination to work hard in the classroom regardless of the unfair educational systems (i.e. K-12 schools, college experiences) and negative stereotypes that pervaded their academic environments.

Jerome stated:

When I got to college, we had mandatory study halls, we had people checking behind us, and different things like that, but also, too, as people looking from the outside in, saying hey this guy, or these guys, and I'm speaking to the African Americans, themselves, on the team. These guys are just football players, they're not academic ... they're not student athletes, they're really athletes. I always felt

like I wanted to prove those people wrong, but also, too, again, I always had that dream of wanting to do well in school, period.

Lance, a former SSU football player, challenged himself to take more course hours than were needed so he could get an early start on his master's degree. This was a brilliant move because most student athletes understand that participating in NCAA sports is very time consuming, and could take twenty or more of their weekly hours outside of the classroom. This aligns with the internal drive of most participants: they were excited about the prospects of completing their degrees above honing their athletic abilities.

Educational experience was pretty good, I was supported. When I say it's pretty good I mean I think it's just like with any university. You can go as deep as you want it to, or it can be as shallow as you want it to. Definitely try to challenge myself and do a lot of different things. I try to always take a full course load. I always try to take summer school classes. Not just one session but both summer sessions. Try to just really get as many credits as I could and knock out as much as I could especially with sports. But even in the fall I was a little ambitious and most times guys would be taking 9, 10 hours in the fall with sports, but I'd be taking a full course load, and just try to really get that degree as quickly as I can because I wanted to try to work towards getting a master's degree or something at that time. But that changed after a couple of years. (Lance)

Jerome, Thomas, Kevin, and Lance, showed courage by challenging themselves to exceed the norms of what is generally expected from AA male student athletes in the classroom. They entered college knowing that getting an education was of most

importance to them. The next sub-theme will give insights into the strong foundations (e.g. K-12 matriculation, guidance counselors, parents, academic advising) that propelled some of the participants to excel in the classroom.

I Came in Prepared

The majority of participants who listed their academic goals as priority are the ones who felt that they were well-prepared to handle the rigors of college work. These participants had the backing of a strong support system (e.g. counselors, school districts, and teachers) and possessed internal motivation driving them to succeed in school work. Kevin replied, “Academically I would say I felt prepared in the sense that, I’ve always made the academics. I’ve taken school seriously.” Some of the others also responded favorably to the inquiry on how academically prepared they felt entering college.

Jim commented on how he entered college prepared to succeed because he was accustomed to doing well in school. Therefore, he did not allow any negative circumstances to stop him from progressing through college. Having a strong academic background is something that the participant was very adamant about. Jim, despite being a first-generation student from a single parent home, confirmed that AA male student athletes can accomplish academic success in college.

I always was a good student so I never really worried about that part. My main thing was, "Can I play here?" "Will I be able to play here?" I knew I would make it through school because I was not going to come back home without that degree to my grandmother. That wasn't going to happen. So I knew I was going to make it through school. But I didn't think I would run into the things that I ran into at a big university with ... you got faculty that say they hate athletes. I never thought it

would happen at a big university. I never thought it would be an option at any university. If you are part of the university, I thought you would want everybody in that university to succeed. But it's not like that all the time. (Jim)

Jerome and Lance talked about how their high school academic experiences prepared them for college. Both participants expressed how the courses they took gave them the foundations needed to effectively handle the course load and course assignments in college. Student athletes who aspire to play NCAA Division-I sports are required to take college preparatory courses to meet academic entrance requirements. The added benefit of taking AP courses in high school is they will give high school student athletes college credit, which may allow them to graduate early or replace a failed course. The NCAA requires student athletes to have earned a total of 24 hours freshmen year, 48 hours sophomore year, and 72 hours entering the senior year.

Academically, I felt like I was very prepared because I had a great guidance counselor in high school. Also, too, in addition to learning, I also had older cousins that played collegiate football, as well, and they were student athletes, and I was able to gain insight from them. I feel like I was prepared, but also, too, it was a situation of where, I think it was kind of really two part. Number one, having a great guidance counselor that encouraged me to take college prep classes, AP classes, but also, too, always gave me insight about coming in contact with a higher, or an increased workload, and having to study more, and having to work on my writing skills to write papers. (Jerome)

Lance replied:

Well I took some college prep classes when I was in high school. So I think as far as the workload or the expectation prepared me for just as far as just knowing how to study, be on top of your work, and being diligent with your time. So that really helped me. My parents of course helped me with that, so that really help provide a foundation for me I guess to be successful in sports and anything.

Unlike widespread social prejudices portraying AA male student athletes as being devoid of academic competency, the majority of participants in this study testified to the opposite point. However, many of the participants who entered college with a solid educational background still experienced some difficulties balancing their academic commitments and athletic commitments. The demands of going to class, team practices, athletic competitions, and study hall created academic stress and frustration for AA male student athletes.

Balancing Academics and Athletics

Another major issue that student athletes expounded on was the challenge of balancing athletics and academics. This subtheme sheds light on the daily battles AA male student athletes face trying to fulfill their athletic duties while simultaneously trying to maintain their grades and meet other academic requirements. Jim commented, “The thing that made it difficult for me was football never stopped. In high school, you have your season and then you have a break and then you have spring football then it's over until fall football.” Thomas, Jerome, and Kevin had similar issues adjusting their personal schedules to meet the academic and athletic demands of being a student athlete. Lance

also shared a similar point. They all had some consensus that the adjustment process during the freshmen year was tougher in college than in high school. Thomas stated:

It took a lot of time, like I said as a freshman, like I said that was my hardest year because I had to learn how to adjust. I had to balance academics and my personal life, and sports because during the day, like I said you would get up at 7:45 a.m., you have breakfast check, then they had a program for freshmen athletes called PTND or something like that for like 45 minutes before we actually went to our classes. And you had to keep up with your grades and you had to be cautious with your time.

Jerome made a similar point saying that ensuring consistency in everyday life was the hardest part of the adjustment.

I expected it to be a tremendous challenge, just by talking to other folks. The challenge wasn't so much a challenge that could not be obtained. But it was more of a challenge of being consistent with studying, and managing the academic side with the football side, and not falling behind, going to class, studying, preparing for tests, mid-terms, and papers.

Kevin also struggled during the first semester until he found out how to balance between the two obligations.

I expected it. Let me think. Coming out of high school I expected the workload to probably be a little overbearing for the fact that I knew football was going to take up a lot of time. Trying to find that balance between that. And with that being said, my first semester I struggled, I got some grades that I wasn't used to making.

That was an eye opener for me and I learned how to time manage my classes and football together. So it was kind of a, I would say, smooth sailing from there.

Traveling added another layer of challenge for them. Craig, a former SSU football player, gave sharp insights into how traveling for athletic competitions sometimes caused him to miss classes. This was problematic at times because the support structures (e.g. academic advisors, study hall, and tutors) that were put in place often fell short of meeting his needs. This is a challenge that many student athletes face because intercollegiate academic enrichment programs in some cases focus more on attendance than academic skills development.

Knowing that you get out of practice on Thursday, you go home, pack your bags and you may travel that whole day Friday. You on the road all day Saturday and you play your game that night, then you fly back and you already missed all of your Friday classes. You miss exams, assignments, and you try to get excuses again to make them up. Schedule wise it was just, until I got out of the mandatory study hall to where I got a chance to go and work with people in my major, and study with them a little more, it felt like a waste of time sitting in a computer lab with people who did not know much about my major or I am just sitting there trying to work with someone who just wants \$20.00 an hour to come help me when they do not know anything about accounting or what I am doing.

Jim, Thomas, Jerome, Kevin, and Craig expressed how difficult it was balancing athletics and academics given their tight daily and weekly schedules. This was a major issue for the student athletes because their work week outside of class time during the season was no less than twenty (20) hours each week. The NCAA does not allow teams

to exceed twenty (20) practice hours during the athletic season. While none of the participants explicitly mentioned the number of actual practice hours, their descriptions of extremely tight daily schedules suggested that the NCAA's guideline was an abstract number on paper that did not reflect their lived experiences. This delicate balancing act is just one of many challenges that might cause concern for incoming AA male student athletes who are entering college for the first time.

The second major theme, facing a new world, explained the new landscape that AA male student athletes encountered when they entered college. It was an unexpected, strange world that they had never experienced or anticipated.

Facing a New World

To the first research question: How do former AA male student athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)? The facing a new world theme provided insights into the ability of AA male student athletes to persist in an environment that they were not familiar with. The participants in this subgroup had to find effective ways to adjust to the culture, attitudes, and beliefs that were prevalent at their respective institutions. The following two sub-themes provided the foundation for answering this research question: (b-1) from an inner-city dog eat dog environment to a place with privileges," (b-2) unfamiliar and unexpected learning context and (b-3) push through programs. When asked to talk about their academic experiences entering college, a good number of the participants talked about the challenges they faced transitioning from their hometown, previous way of living, and past educational experiences.

From an Inner-city Dog-eat- dog Environment to a Place with Privileges

The from an inner city dog-eat-dog environment to a place with privileges subtheme aligns with the cross-cutting theme for this section. African American male student athletes often struggle when they enter unfamiliar territory. Challenges as such are further exacerbated when AA male student athletes enter these types of environments without the tools (e.g. cultural awareness, academic drive, and confidence) they need to be successful. Some of the participants talked about coexisting in a college environment where the students were of a higher socioeconomic class. This was an unfathomable reality that they never would have dreamt of coming from some of America's toughest cities where poverty was commonplace. They were not afforded the luxuries of having dependable transportation and did not have the purchasing power to buy whatever they wanted. Survival was their only means of inspiration. Jerome stated, "I remember when I first got to college, a million folks were driving Range Rovers, as students, and BMW's, and that kind of opened up my eyes to another class that I wasn't used to." Rico responded in a similar manner given his process of transitioning from a rough inner city to a well-established suburban environment.

I was prepared more physically in shape and mentally in shape for football, but not for the world of college. You know when you come from an inner-city dog-eat-dog environment and you go to a place where people are privileged and have resources it is different from coming from a neighborhood where people struggled. You know you see people from big neighborhoods who have been somewhere in life. So you know it is a lot to handle and digest because it is like

this world does exist where people can live carefree without any worries, and go to the ATM machine and not have to look over their shoulder.

Lance further illuminated this point from an emotional standpoint in regards to AA male student athletes who grew up in poor communities who had to transition to an environment with affluent resources.

I think that athletic departments and academic departments have to take into account the emotional side of a lot of these things for a lot of these guys. And a lot of the bravado and different things you see with a lot of them is really just them trying to mask their insecurities of saying, “Man, this is my first time being away from home.” “Man, I didn’t know, man we only had one traffic light.” “I don’t know how to deal with the police.” “I don’t know how to deal with my academic advisor, and this is first time being able to go get food whenever I want it.”

Chris commented on growing up in the south and attending a college in the south. He was mindful of the historically oppressive practices that continue to alienate and hinder African Americans from advancing in life today. This war for equality is definitely one that AA male student athletes face on a daily basis at PWI. They are often looked down upon as though they cannot take care of themselves or think for themselves.

But for me, I just feel like I really didn't know what to expect (i.e. college), but I knew I was still living in the South. I grew up in the South, and I just knew I had to carry myself a certain way because of the society we live in. My dad grew up in the Jim Crow era, and my mom did too, so I just knew that certain things I could do as a black man, and certain things I can't do as a black man, because I don't

have certain privileges as others. So, I just knew, socially, I had to be aware of my surroundings at all times.

Chris understood that even though some advances were made in the area of race relations, he still needed to remain vigilant about being aware of what was taking place around him. Even in a society where laws are created and implemented to protect the rights of its citizens, AA males are often still treated unfairly and viewed as being subservient to their White counterparts. “It’s like, what can we do to set our presence in this society and people just really, just up and down, cross the board respect us, in general, without us having a jersey on, or something like that.”

Jerome, Rico, Lance, and Chris expounded on what they and others around them experienced transitioning from resource depleted regions to universities where resources were plentiful. This was a new concept for them that challenged them to stay focused on where they were going in spite of where they started off in life. This is a troubling state of affairs, because the participants were not ignorant to the fact that they were being treated differently than the White student-athletes. The third subtheme focused on the mental adjustment processes some of the AA male student athletes underwent while transitioning to the academic environment at college.

Unfamiliar and Unexpected Learning Context

The unfamiliar and unexpected learning context subtheme centered on the mental adjustment processes some of the AA male student athletes encountered transitioning into the college academic environment. While the need for AA male student athletes to understand the climate (the way of thinking and practices) and physical environment (geographic location) by which they coexisted was important, it was also imperative that

they prepared mentally to make any academic adjustments that were needed to succeed. Jim talked about how he had to get accustomed to taking courses with large enrollments. This was a new experience for him because he was accustomed to learning in a smaller, user-friendly (i.e. a place where you can easily maneuver and get around) environment where everyone knew each other. It was a humbling experience for him having to matriculate through an environment where he was just another number among hundreds of students from everywhere. It is not uncommon for students that attend PWIs to take courses with large enrollments. However, it may put AA male student athletes at a disadvantage because it is out of context compared to the number of students they are accustomed to encountering in one setting.

Oh, I have a funny story. My high school had about ... maybe, maybe 800 kids and so my first day of class, which is like a history class, I went to the class and I walked in and it's like 500 people in there. So, I walked ... I said, "Oh snap! They got awards day the first day of school!" So, I walked back to my dorm room and got in the bed, went back to sleep. Football coach came to the dorm room cussed me out, "Why the F you didn't go to school!? Why da-da-da-da." I said, "Oh, they had a ceremony or something at the school!" He said, "That is not a ceremony, that's your class!" I said, "Man, they had about 500 people in there!" "That's your class!" So, that was a culture shock to me because the biggest class I have ever been in was maybe nine to ten people.

Terrence gave insights about having to shift his mindset from solely focusing on sports, which was his custom in high school, to now paying more attention to academics.

Something I realized, where my grades were, my play was better on the field. So once I realized that both of those things went hand in hand, I did just enough to stay above that threshold so I could just have a clear mind. It was tough. I had a lot of people at home banking on me to be who I thought I was, and that was ultimately to be a professional athlete.

While the family of AA male student athletes generally inspires them to do well in school, studies show that it is not uncommon for family members to overemphasize the athletic identity of their student athletes above their academic identity (Beamon, 2008, 2010; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Johnson & Migliaccio, 2009). In doing so, it may cause AA male student athletes to lose sight of the benefits that could be derived from graduating. This is significant because AA male student athletes and their families may view intercollegiate athletics as a bridge to the professional leagues, which will give them a viable pathway out of poverty.

Rico talked further about the problems he had opening up to people in an environment that he did not fully trust. He found solace in sticking to what he knew from his home environment.

It is just the mentality, your personal mentality, not letting go of certain things and trying to evolve and develop a sense of trust. Trust is the big thing, if I cannot trust this whole college experience or where it is going to take me, if I do not know my end result, I will just stick to what I know. I survived this long, and I can always go back home.

Jim, Rico, and Terrence gave examples of how they once struggled but eventually became acclimated to the culture and climate at their respective universities. It was a

gradual process that required them to find a balance in the way they viewed academics in light of their athletic commitments. They realized that transitioning to college would present some challenges, but were resolved in maintaining their identity and making the changes that were necessary to succeed.

The third subtheme shed light on the unscrupulous practice of many NCAA institutions of placing AA male student athletes in easy majors that are designed to keep them eligible on the field of play.

Push through Programs

The push through program sub-theme gave insights into how NCAA member institutions placed AA male student athletes into dead end majors which had low prospects for employment. This practice exists for the sole purpose of benefiting the university by keeping athletes eligible for the field of play. This push through program theme is not designed to decry the validity of some programs of study; however, participants' narratives clearly indicated that some programs are often targeted and misused. These programs were called push through programs because of their lack of rigor, low student post-graduate employability rates, and apathetic professors who do not hold student athletes accountable for completing assignments. The NCAA requires that student athletes maintain a prescribed grade point average (GPA) and make satisfactory progress toward graduation each semester in order to retain their eligibility. Craig recalled, "When I first went to college, normal students go into register, and I remember a lot of things were kind of off, as an athlete they did everything for you, and you were thrown into certain things, and you did not get to choose." Jim echoed the sentiments of Craig, "Everything that was made available to me was through football, academic

advisors, study hall, community service, we did all that stuff through football. You know, you met with the academic advisor? I've never met with an academic advisor." These two experiences demonstrate that some institutions were intentionally trying to keep AA male student athletes from making any academic decisions concerning their own coursework.

Craig further commented:

I remember sitting there going why am I in this Music 102 class. I started realizing that they were trying to section me into a retailing major and trying to section me into an African American Studies major. And I said hold on...hold on, I am going this avenue, and it was not until I spoke up for myself, and said I am not taking this, and I started to change my own things around, but it was kind of they were handing you your class schedule, and saying this is where you are going. They were pretty much herding all of these athletes into the same major to where if you did not speak up, that is where you were going to be. I believe that is just wrong!

Jim also went on to give more testimony about how the practices of some institutions were disenfranchising AA male student athletes while providing choice for White student athletes. This demonstrates that PWIs do not have confidence in the intellectual capacity of AA male student athletes to thrive in courses that are considered more difficult. This on its face may be one of the barriers that cause AA male student athletes to shift their focus from academics to athletics.

I think I can say I witnessed when our academic advisor, during the time, tried to put all the Black athletes in doggone African-American Studies. That's crazy! Like, it's like ... 34 kids came in with us and maybe 26 were black and he was

trying to put them all in Sociology and African American Studies. Come on man, that's ... you can't even tell me that everybody belongs in African-American Studies or Sociology. Come on man that is not right. I told them I wasn't doing it. That's not going to happen. And then all the white kids picked their majors. You know what I'm saying"? "Oh, I want to major in Business." "I want to major in Mathematics." "I want to major in Management." "I want to major in whatever ... Engineering." But none of the black kids majored in Engineering, none of those other stuff. They always try to put ... or they used to do Sports Management too now, I forgot about that. Ninety-nine percent was in Sport Management, African-American Studies, or Sociology. (Jim)

Given the pervasive culture of clustering AA male student athletes in easy majors, Kevin was adamant about selecting his own program of study. He did not want to become causality like some AA male student athletes who might later regret not getting a degree in a field of their choice. Kevin mentioned, "So the major that I choose was one that I was very interested in, so my academic experience as a whole was very good because the classes I took were actually ones that I was interested in and I wanted to go to class and learn about them."

Rico expressed gratitude for the experience he had taking a very popular African American Studies course. However, he was concerned about what one would do with an African American Studies degree. This was an important inquiry because one of the primary goals of any credible institution of higher education is to make sure students are prepared to enter the workforce and find gainful employment.

I did want to be a Criminal Justice major outside of playing football, so I majored in Criminal Justice. The Criminal Justice courses kept my focus, but the other classes I really was not very interested in. I did like all the Black athletes did, they told me about this African American studies class that everyone should take. I did and it was the best thing, the best thing I ever had in my life. It was the best experience, the best everything, but again what could you do with an African American studies degree.

Terrence commented on another group that is potentially being manipulated during the process of clustering AA male student athletes into preselected majors. He felt that academic advisers and faculty members could be in danger of losing their jobs if student athletes lose their athletic eligibility. This is a systematic problem that creates opportunities for faculty members to engage in fraudulent academic activities. Sometimes this places them in predicaments where they feel obligated to change an athlete's grade to keep them eligible on the field of play. This is not an uncommon practice, especially when a star athlete, who is loved and revered by coaches, alumni, and boosters (who donate millions of dollars to the university and its athletics department), is in jeopardy of losing their athletic eligibility. This situation could result in the university losing money and losing games when they lose key players.

For the most part, the athletic academic advisors they put you in classes, where they know the professor will look out for you, because at the end of the day, their job is on the line. If guys start flunking out of school, that star athlete is not on scholarship, now academic probation. That person that's helping you through school, they get fired. Now it goes back down to the president, because everyone

knows college football is the cash cow that makes most of these universities function. It's like if you scratch their back, they scratch your back and they go hand in hand. (Terrence)

Craig, Jim, Kevin, Rico, and Terrence expressed how they were placed in or stood against being placed in preselected majors. This unorthodox practice is mean-spirited and portrays to AA male student athletes that they are only of value on the field of play.

I Am Only of Value on the Field of Play

To the second research question: How do former AA male student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI? The I am only of value on the field of play theme is one of two major themes that gave insights into the relationship between faculty members and AA male student athletes. In particular, this first theme sheds light on the lack of interest shown by faculty members in ensuring that AA male student athletes receive a quality education. When asked about their relationship with faculty members, many participants did not feel that a viable connection existed. The participants were generally paired with faculty members who did not push them to excel in the classroom. The following subthemes will provide a foundation for understanding this phenomenon: (c-1) low academic expectations, (c-2) faculty members can't relate to African American student athletes, (c-3) faculty preconceived stereotypes, and (c-4) futile faculty-student athlete relationships.

Low Academic Expectations

Some of the participants felt that faculty members did not expect them to do much of anything in the classroom. The focus always tended to revolve around what AA male student athletes had to offer on the field of play. This unilateral view of AA male student

athletes often left them feeling empty in an imaginary world that seemingly only appreciated them for what they had to offer athletically. Rico stated:

So it is like you take care of me, and I will take care of you. Well they just want their school to win. They believe in their sports program so bad that they just want you on the field, and they do not want to be the cause of you not being on the field. Especially when you look at the classes you take....they are going to do their best to get you on the field and win, that is all they want.

Terrence commented, “For the most part the professors they know what to do when they see student athletes. They keep it simple.” Some participants felt that faculty members who follow sports are generally more prone to lowering their standards in order to cater to the needs of student-athletes. According to Jim, the general consensus is, “They didn't come recruit you for academics so everybody say student athlete but don't get it twisted, its athlete student.”

Rico, Terrence, and Jim expressed that faculty member's perspectives and actions are reminiscent to that of some people in society who feel AA male student athletes can only prosper in life if they are a star athlete. This way of thinking is may be highly detrimental to the faculty-student athlete relationship because it could limit faculty members from exploring other aspects of the lives of AA male student athletes. As a result, it could make it very difficult for them to relate to the struggles and triumphs of AA male student-athlete.

Faculty Lack Awareness of the Needs of African American Student Athletes

The faculty lack awareness of the needs African American student athletes theme expounded on the lack of awareness faculty members had concerning the needs of AA

male student athletes. The participants in this study are unique in that most of them are the first in their family to attend college, they grew up in low income urban communities, and they matriculated through underfunded, low resource K-12 school districts. As a result of these conditions, AA male student athletes are sometimes prejudged and viewed from the standpoint that they are bound to fail and not willing to take the steps that are necessary to excel in the classroom. Given this presumptuous climate, faculty members should consider getting to know AA male student athletes on a personal level to possibly get a better understanding of who they truly are, and what is important to them. Rico and others (Chris, Thomas, and Jerome) expressed similar point:

Um...I do not think they really understand.....no one takes the time to understand us, or know who we are. They know us from a bio or profile picture, but they do not know us. Put it this way....we are the interesting people on campus because we got dynamics and we all have stories, so we are interesting. You know what I am saying; we come through some devastating things that people cannot believe so sometimes they feel sorry for us in a sense.

African American male student athletes come from very diverse backgrounds, and in many cases they did not grow up in communities where it was common to see two parent families. Many of them have had to step in to help support their families through seasons of financial insecurity and scarcity. This type of phenomenon sometimes does not register with individuals who grew up in more privileged environments. Thomas commented, "Well I would say that's kind of like culturally because, I would say black, African American professors would know nine times- or will probably figure out what type of background a person comes from. A white professor, I would say they can't relate

because we're culturally different.” Chris and Jerome’s viewpoints about the plight of AA male student athletes were similar to that of Thomas. Chris stated:

I would say some of them didn't understand our plight. A good bit of them didn't understand our plight because a lot of them didn't know that a good bit of us came from broken homes. Some of us came from a bad situation where there was no food in the house, there were no lights. There was just, some of us came from tough times. Like I had my tough times, but some was way worse than mine and I can honestly say it could've been worse for me. So I take those situations where they get Pell Grants every semester and they send their whole \$3500 home because there isn't any food in their house.

The participants also gave insights into what faculty members can do to better prepare for and be more sensitive to the needs of AA male student athletes. Faculty members should consider making a more contentious effort to reach out to AA male student athletes to better understand their struggles. Jim responded, “I think what would be ideal was just that it would be the same for everybody. No matter African-American or not, everybody want to see you succeed, everybody pushing for everybody, everybody pulling for everybody to go in the right direction.” The approach that faculty members take when dealing with AA student athletes is important to winning their trust. Oftentimes faculty members try to avoid AA male student athletes or hurriedly deal with them when they are in need of help. This is seen in the classroom when they raise their hand to respond to questions or voice concerns. Kevin gave advice on how faculty members should address AA student athletes, “So you have to be patient with them and work with them to teach them that, in a calm manner, not a rude manner because once

they see that rudeness and the fact that you're not willing to work with them, and then they shut down.”

Rico, Chris, Thomas, and Jerome expressed their concerns about not being fully understood by faculty members. They believed that all student athletes should receive fair treatment from faculty members. African American male student athletes have often been stereotyped concerning their ability to succeed in the classroom. Even when AA student athletes excel in the classroom, they are often accused of cheating or receiving too much help from tutors and other academic support personnel.

Preconceived Stereotypes

Thirdly, the data revealed that faculty members often have unwarranted preconceived stereotypes about AA male student athletes. This subtheme centered on faculty members’ perceptions and preconceived notions about how AA student athletes will perform in the classroom. It is not a new phenomenon, AA male student athletes have been viewed as being cognitively delayed and low-skilled for decades. A lot of these viewpoints are based on unmerited philosophical beliefs that are not backed by truth. In terms of faculty member’s grading systems and how they view AA student athletes’ coursework, Craig and Jim felt that there was a double standard. Craig said, “Again, I believe that it might be case by case, but when you talk about the majority of faculty, they probably say by looking at the group that this one is probably not going to perform well.” Lance’s testimony was also very compelling:

I mean plenty. There was plenty of times where other classes, maybe some of those same classes the teacher would say "All the athletes don't cheat, you know you guys like to cheat." And again that is a stigma. But there were a lot of guys

who I know that scored 12, 1300's on SAT's and they were just taking mandatory classes in classes that were quote, unquote maybe athlete heavy classes. But they weren't in there cheating or trying to.

Some participants talked about why they felt preconceived stereotypes are typically formed by faculty members. Chris proclaimed, “And then you got some professors that expect you to be, they just expect you to act out because of who you are. So the athlete, you got a bullseye on you at all times.” Terrence made the following statement that gives insight into how “bullseyes” could be formed:

What usually happens, guys that come in with an attitude, thinking that they're better than they are, they just end up pissing on the little people that really are there for them from the get go. It messes it up for the people that come behind you. I've seen that where the academic advisors are struggling to put athletes in class, because so many guys have burned their bridge between being a student athlete. So where it's like, every time they need some help for exam, or to change a grade, or whatever, they make it hard because they've messed it up for the guys ... basically messed it up for the guys behind them.

Lance, Craig, Jim, Chris, and Terrence elaborated on the nature of their relationships with faculty members. Given the culture (almost all athletics with limited opportunities to interact with faculty) at PWIs, there are usually few opportunities for AA male student-athletes to form meaningful relationships with faculty members. The participants surmised that faculty members only deal with AA male student athletes when it has something to do with sports or academic issues.

Futile Faculty-Student-Athlete Relationships

Lastly, the data revealed that the relationship between faculty and student athletes is futile. This subtheme highlights some of the participant's experiences with the relationship between AA male student athletes and faculty members as almost being pointless. Some of the participants did not feel that their limited encounters with faculty members yielded any meaningful results. Faculty members and AA male student athletes continue to struggle to find creative ways to bond inside and outside the classroom. Rico mentioned, "So all of my teachers were welcoming...they were nice, but we did not have a personal relationship outside of talking about sports. So there is no personal relationship....they just like you because they know you are a part of a program that they like." Thomas commented on this issue as well:

You don't really interact with faculty members like that. As D1, as athletes because as athletes they all over the schedules. So only time you really get to see them is after a game or- most faculty members are not going to be downtown or drinking in bars with their students, most of them, so you don't really get to interact with them unless it's something that's school- school related event. So it's not like it's a lot of interaction on the outside.

The higher education landscape does not seem to be changing as it relates to faculty-student relations in general. The faculty-student relationship is seemingly built on students going to class and taking orders from their instructors. Therefore, given the stigmas (e.g. lazy, unlearned, suspicious, freeloader) that are commonly attached to AA male student athletes; it may be even harder for them to form credible relationships with

their instructors. In some cases, faculty members gravitate more to a particular AA male student athlete because of the caliber of athlete they are on the field of play. Rico stated:

I really did not have contact with faculty members outside the classroom. I mean.....no open communication or dialogue like that; we pretty much did our own thing. If it is not during class time, or if you do not have to go to that class you see them probably twice a semester.....you see them at the beginning and at the last day. Outside of that there is none except if you are having some kind of trouble or something like that. Other than that you will not have any interactions besides shaking someone's hand or signing an autograph because of how popular you are on campus.

While some AA male student athletes have expounded on the need for faculty members to be more intentional about getting to know them beyond the classroom, other participants claimed that they did have viable relationships with their faculty members.

I am just as valuable in the Classroom as I Am on the Field of Play

The I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play theme contrasts the previous theme. This theme gave insights into the positive relationships some participants shared with faculty members. The data from this section answered the second research question: How do former AA male student-athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI? The following three subthemes provided a foundation for answering this question: (d-1) faculty hold student-athletes accountable for their academic performance, (d-2) have a good attitude and do your work, and (d-3) faculty provides support. When asked about their relationship with faculty, some participants felt that they were able to bond with

them. Overall, the participants applauded their faculty members for holding them accountable in the classroom.

Faculty Hold Student Athletes Accountable for Their Academic Performance

The faculty holds student athletes accountable for their academic performance sub-theme centers on faculty members who held student athletes accountable for performing well in the classroom. Some of the participants were encouraged by having professors who cared about their academic well-being. Chris said, "I really just felt like they had a genuine interest in helping me and making sure I was successful, and that made me feel good inside. I don't know if it was because of my status as a student athlete, you know, just being one of those guys that play outside of there." Lance recalled a time when his professor encouraged him and his fellow student athletes to envision their future in sports and beyond the field of play.

I definitely did have more, and I did have a strong support system. Not just from the athletics department, but from teachers themselves. I remember my freshman English teacher... we had to write a personal narrative and do some different things and some future tense stuff that we were trying to do is like where we saw ourselves in so many years, and I remember she kind of made a statement like "I know you guys are athletes, and you're probably going to put whatever." But she kind of pushed us, and tried to stretch us to do more.

Jim also said something that was very significant about how one of his teachers pushed him to give his academics just as much attention as he gave athletics.

I had a teacher that was always saying, "Look, if you can go hard in the class ... on the football field, you can go hard in the classroom. You know? Put this time

in" And she would always refer to things on the football field, "It's fourth down, it's fourth down or fourth from goal, we got to get there!"

Chris, Lance, and Jim appreciated their professors for challenging them to give it their all in the classroom and in life. It was through these experiences that the participants gained renewed perspectives on why it is important to make education a top priority. This revelation contributes to the next sub-theme that centers on student athletes having a positive attitude when interacting with faculty members.

Have a Good Attitude and Do Your Work

The second subtheme, have a good attitude and do your work centered on the need for AA male student athletes to present themselves in a dignified manner when communicating with faculty members. Many participants talked about how their positive attitude toward faculty members created an environment where they were able to excel in the classroom. Terrence commented,

I need to always act like I'm always on stage, and never let your guard down.

That's what happened to most players. It can rub the professors the wrong way.

Professors don't want to deal with arrogant athletes. They'll be more lenient with guys who just act like they care.

Kevin's statement was also very profound and reiterated Terrence's experience and perspective on working with faculty members.

I would say faculty members; it was a hit or miss, like it really depending on how you treated them. I've had some teammates that were very arrogant and disrespectful in the classroom. So the professor or the faculty treated them that

way. Then I've had teammates that were very respectful and they held their self in an upright manner, so the professor would treatment in that way.

African American student athletes had to be intentional about doing their coursework and showing faculty members that they were capable of exceling in the classroom. Thomas responded to the need for AA male student athletes to do their work.

I mean, that's that I've learnt: honor and integrity, do your job, do what you're supposed to. That's kind of like what sports teach you. That's why I want my kids in sports because I feel like as athletes, we have a very different mental state. We have that attitude, well my attitude is to get it done, get it done. Nothing can stop me. No or can't, that's almost like words I don't even believe in. So honor, integrity, and do as you need to get done; and everything else will take care of itself.

Lance also added that it was important for AA male student athletes to do their work - earn satisfactory grades, progress toward degree hours, attendance to class in order to remain in good standing with the university.

I would tell any young 17, 18 year old fellow that's going into that experience, man, look, don't take it for granted. Tomorrow isn't promised. You could be there today and that coach, one slip up and that coach can decide, "Hey, I'm sending this young man home."

Terrence, Kevin, Thomas, and Lance explained that having a good attitude and getting your work done is essential to gaining support from faculty members. Faculty do not respond well to student athletes who are arrogant and self-absorbed, but are willing to do whatever it takes to help student-athletes who show humility.

Faculty Provide Support

The last subtheme, faculty provide support gave insights into some of the participants' accounts of how faculty members were willing to do whatever it took to help them succeed in the classroom. The faculty members were willing to work with the student athletes outside of the classroom to make sure they understood the course materials. Lance said, "That's kind of the good thing about being a student athlete unlike a regular student. There's a lot of different, just for regular students there's a lot of different... you get your own counselor and advisor, and all those things, and those people help you." Craig recounted a similar experience,

Now we did have tutors, but again I believe the tutors were more helpful for the lower level classes that we had. I do remember teachers coming into our sessions to help us with some stuff, and they would go over some of the things that were discussed in class.

Chris also commented on his experience interacting with faculty members:

Inside the classroom, I had ... most of them; most of my professors inside different classrooms were good. I did have some that were good. I did have some that I didn't particularly care for, but for the most part, most of them were good. They were very helpful, giving me different resources so I can be able to study and look at things differently if I didn't understand things. But I remember when I had the stat class and the first exam, I failed miserably. I had like a, I think I made like a 50 or something on it. And she pulled me to the side, and she was just like, "Yeah, that sucks." She was like this, "You know, going forth, if you need any

help, just let me know." Then my next exam, I ended up getting an A on it, which was great.

It is quite surprising and unusual for faculty members to visit the institution's athletic academic center to work with student athletes. Faculty members generally meet with student athletes in the office or classroom. This may show that faculty members are committed to providing the support that AA male student athletes need to excel in the classroom. As seen in Chris' case above, faculty's proactive and caring interaction with AA student athletes was an important factor that often raised their confidence and positive academic outcome.

Kevin recalled how one of his professors encouraged him to be confident in himself and inspired him to unlock his academic potential to excel in the classroom and his career.

So my freshman year, second semester I had an English 101 teacher and he really helped me open up to public speaking and not being afraid to speak in front of a classroom setting and to speak my mind. He was very positive and encouraging and he really enjoyed my work. He sat me down a couple times and told me how bright of a student I was and the career path I had ahead of me.

Lance, Craig, Chris, and Kevin reported that they were supported by their faculty members. Faculty inspired them to take command of their educational and life pursuits. In doing so, they would become the primary control agents that would work in concert with faculty members and others (e.g. family members, coaches, teammates) to chart a path for their own success.

Taking the Initiative

To the third research question: How do former AA male student-athletes interpret their academic capacity to persist and succeed at the PWIs? The taking initiative theme focused on AA male student athletes taking a stance for what they believed in concerning their educational pursuits, and getting things done with physical, emotional, and psychological support from coaches, parents, and teammates. The following four subthemes provided a foundation for answering this research question: (e-1) my coach is an active participant in my success, (e-2) my family members are active participants in my success, (e-3) building a strong team for success, and (e-4) challenge the system, and believe in yourself. When asked to talk about how they felt concerning their ability to persist through college, the majority of participants credited their family, coaches, teammates, and academic advisors with inspiring them to believe in themselves and graduate. The participants realized early on that in order to succeed in college they would have to believe in themselves and challenge the negative views of some within the academic community.

My Coaches are Active Participants in My Success

The first sub-theme my coaches are active participants in my success expounded on the support participants received from their coaches in helping them to persist at their respective institutions. Coaches have strong influences over how student athletes will perform in college because they are the ones who promised the parents and guardians of these student athletes that they would be supported when they offered them an athletic scholarship. Terrence proclaimed, "I call my coach out, because I study so much, I was like, "Hey, you're wrong." When I felt myself achieving that type of knowledge and

being able to retain everything the coaches were throwing at me, it really gave me a leg up athletically, and it gave me a leg up academically.” (Terrence) Jerome went on to comment about how the culture of an athletic program is a key indicator of how student athletes will perform in the classroom.

I think for me, it was the culture that was being built from the athletic standpoint, with the focus on academics. I think that was a huge...huge help for me because coming in to SSU, the coaching staff was really trying to come in and change the culture at that time, and implement it, kind of a mandatory mentor type of a system, and I was able to partner up with teammates that could give me a lot of great insight, but actually really cared about my well-being, and could also kind of help me with the roadmap to success.

Thomas talked about how grateful he was for the student enrichment program that was set up for student athletes at his university. This was one of the initiatives that were put in place by the athletics department and coaches. The NCAA requires its member institutions to provide a place for student athletes to receive academic support. These academic centers are generally comprised of academic advisors, life skills coordinators, academic coaches, tutors, field of study related software (e.g. SPSS for math and science majors), and other support resources deemed necessary to help student-athletes excel in the classroom.

Well I definitely had lot of people. From my coaches, to mentors like Jim Dalton, who's head of the, I forget what it called, the SAW positively program up at UC now, student enrichment. He was a big mentor. We've had a lot of great mentors, men that have walked my shoes, experiencing the same things that I experience

which helped me figure out how to handle it myself. So I have a lot of great people in that time. And you know, going back to my persistence is- I went into school with a goal, like I said I came in to graduate. (Thomas)

In addition to the positive support coaches generally provide AA male student athletes, one participant felt that coaches could do more to ensure that AA male student athletes are actually learning in the classroom.

Coaches can do, I guess, just be more involved with the student athletes' education not ... one thing they do is they make sure you at class, they make sure you at study hall, they make sure you at practice but who's making sure you're really learning? Who's making sure you're really progressing? If I'm making sure you're there that's not making sure you're learning. (Jim)

Terrence, Jerome, Thomas, and Jim explained that coaches who are concerned about the academic success of AA male student athletes will (1) create a culture of accountability, (2) implement student success programs, and (3) hold faculty members accountable for reaching and teaching them. All in all, coaches are like parents to student athletes because they are the ones who they see every day and look to for advice.

My Family Members are Active Participants in My Success

The second sub-theme, my family members are active participants in my success, expounded on the support participants received from their family members in helping them to persist at their respective institutions. As one looks at the career of the average AA male student athlete, he or she would probably see many role models and mentors, but family was most important to the participants in this study. In fact, Jerome talked

about how his sister and a couple of cousins who all attended a NCAA Division-I PWI were instrumental in guiding him through college.

My sister, she was a student athlete, full scholarship track, student athlete, and had two cousins that were full scholarship football student athletes that kind of helped shape me, but also too, I had a coach that was a student athlete at the SSU, in high school that always gave me advice and insight into what to expect, and how to navigate.

Thomas and Lance went on to express how they wanted to do well because they did not want to let their parents down. Their parents had invested so much time and energy into them that it motivated them to keep moving through college and graduate. The push from parents is a motivating agent that may inspire AA male student athletes to graduate from college. It may even help AA male student athletes to develop a spirit of independence that will stand up against oppressive systems that are designed to redefine who they are as educated young AA males. Thomas stated:

My parents and my family mostly, that's it, man. They were the ones that stayed on me, that pushed it. I don't really care about letting people down but you never want to let your family down, you never want to let your parents down. And I think that's one of the things that kind of drove me. I had so much success of great things happening to me that, I had to follow them, I had to. In my mind there was no, not completing. Because I was given a free scholarship, I was given a free education and not only that I could have gone anywhere I wanted to go in the country for the most part.

Lance talked about how his parents who passed away prior to him finishing college inspired him to excel in college. They laid the foundation for Lance's success, and other organizations and individuals stepped in to help fulfill that vision.

Yeah, definitely my parents have. Both of my parents, my father passed away halfway through my college career but that in itself was a huge eye opening experience to see all the other people who supported me just from other academic folks. I remember, obviously the athletics department but my department who I'd gotten my degree from they reached out, and did different things, always supported me. Religious folks that we had FCA groups different things who even though I wasn't apart of those groups they still reached out and did different things. So definitely I had a lot of support.

Jerome, Thomas, and Lance expressed how their family members and community in some instances all came together to inspire them towards a shared goal of graduating college. While family members were very inspirational in pushing some of the participants across the "finish line," they were also inspired by their teammates not to give up on their pursuit of completing school.

Building a Strong Team for Success

The third sub-theme, building a strong team for success," expounded on the support participants received from their fellow teammates in helping them to prepare for college and persist through college. Kevin recalled how one of his high school teammates who entered college a year before he did told him what to expect when he entered college.

Yeah, I had a teammate that I played high school football with that was a year older than me and he went through the same path to play Division-I NCAA football and get his degree. So talking to him and watching his path helped me with what I needed to do and motivation wise.

Rico also expounded about how some of his teammates who grew up in the same hometown with him helped him adjust to college.

Everyone really played a major role in pushing me forward in life. Some of my teammates from my hometown played a critical role in shaping my expectations about college. I ran into some of them prior to leaving for college and they told me about some of the things I should expect at the next level. They did not play at my high school, but we got to know each other on the recruiting trail. We were all being recruited by the same institution.

This quote is symbolic of the spirit of camaraderie that is commonly shared among team members who trust each other and have a mutual respect for each other. This may be the type of bond that will help AA male student athletes better adjust to the cultural environments at PWIs.

Terrence expressed how important it is for AA male student athletes to link up with teammates who are just as passionate about learning as they are.

When I started hanging out with the guys who, they weren't as gifted, but they understood how to work and they understood the scheme, understood how to study, I started hanging around them, the game just became so much easier. I was able to play faster and to learn more, and understand what the coaches wanted.

Chris expressed how important it is for teammates to rally around those players who are having difficulties adjusting to college life, and the many challenges they present. Jim discussed a similar view as well.

We did have academic personnel that did, reached out and made sure guys like me and other people did have that shoulder to lean on. And then us as teammates, we did the same thing. We always looked out for that person, you know, that's going through hard times. We were like, hey man, we here. We always going to be here regardless, if you need anything, make sure you call us or whatever. And that's how we roll.

Kevin, Rico, Terrence, Chris, and Jim explained the benefits of having a strong team of supporters. It closes the gaps that are created when frustration and difficulties arise for AA male student athletes. It also prepares these athletes when they can reach out to former teammates who have matriculated through the environment that they are getting ready to transition into. While having the support of likeminded teammates is important, AA male student athletes must believe in themselves and challenge those ideas, systems, and ways of thinking that have been implemented to lessen the impact of their drive for success.

Challenge the System, and Believe in Yourself

The participants realized early on that in order to succeed in college they would have to believe in themselves and challenge the negative stereotypes of some within their academic community. This would also require them to shift away from the activities and ideals (partying, missing classes, making athletics a first priority, and dropping out or failing out) that commonly hinder AA male student athletes from succeeding in college.

Thomas commented on how he decided to finish his degree as opposed to leaving school early for the NFL Draft. "I actually had an opportunity to leave college early, but I didn't. I actually stayed all five years. For Division-I athletes ...you get four years to compete, and five years to graduate." Unlike Thomas, Rico did not complete his undergraduate degree until later in life. "I only lasted as long as my football career lasted. I left in my last year with like two classes left because of something that happened off the field. Yes, because of that...I was not even caring about school or graduation." Given this situation that occurred with Rico, he was adamant about not allowing his children to make the same mistakes he did.

I know my kids will focus on academics and get their degree; especially if they are lucky enough to get someone to pay for their degree. They will get something out of the deal so they would not have to go back and pay for their own degree someday. So they will take something that they really like to do and try to take it as far as they want to.

Terrence spoke about the need for AA male student athletes to see life beyond the bright lights that shine down upon them on the field of play. This is a classic marketing strategy that coaches use when they recruit AA male student athletes. However, Terrence did not allow the enticing words of his coaches to cause him to lose sight of the things that were important to him.

All these universities they sell you on getting playing time, they sell you on getting exposure, and playing on ESPN. They're always selling the school and the product, but they're not selling you as a man, and that's what you need to know.

It's like hey, how can I benefit from this, when the helmet and shoulder pads are not on anymore?

Chris talked about his resolve to win in all that he does in life. African American male student athletes must pride themselves on reaching their end goal in order to dispel society's negative outlook on their ability to persist through college. African American male student athletes may find inspiration through the challenges they face.

I hate losing at anything in life. I just hate losing. I'm just that ultimate competitor, I just want to win at all costs, and just that persistence just always kept driving me. I got to get through this, whatever it takes, I will get through it, and I will keep going. Because I already know, once I get through it, there's an end goal, whether it be that final grade or me walking across the stage and shaking the president's hand and you know, being able to say, hey, I did it. But that's what really drove me. (Chris)

Kevin made the following statement about the need for AA male student athletes to protect their identity (i.e. who they really are) and not allow any system or anyone redefine who they are.

I would probably say just the word balance, in the sense that that athlete has to be themselves and don't change being themselves for the fact that's going to make them, and help them to grow in college.

Thomas, Rico, Terrence, Chris, and Kevin, explained why it is important for AA male student athletes to work hard to reach their goals. The world system believes that AA male student athletes are only concerned with making it to the professional leagues. However, these participants did not allow the system to redefine them, but they proved

the system wrong by (1) learning from their mistakes and taking corrective measures, (2) graduating on time, and (3) being confident in their ability to succeed as an AA male student-athlete. The AA male student athletes in this study for the most part have demonstrated that going to the professional leagues is not an all exclusive goal for them. They seem to be more concerned with getting a viable education in an inclusive educational environment that supports them.

Summary

The data for this study was collected through the use of in-depth interviews of nine former AA male student athletes who played sports at a predominantly White NCAA Division-I institution. The participants gave insights into their real-time experiences matriculating through the academic corridors of higher education. Their experiences were quite unique because some of them were first generation college students whose initial focus centered on making it to the professional sports leagues. However, the majority of them entered college with the mindset that graduating was their first priority. While graduating was a noble goal, many of them came from K-12 school districts that did not prepare them for the rigors of college coursework. As a result, they had to rely heavily on the prospect that the institution would provide them with the resources (e.g. academic advisors, tutors, study hall, life skills) that are needed to help them advance academically.

Moreover, throughout their time in college some participants felt that faculty members generally cared about them and held them accountable for succeeding in the classroom. On the other hand, some left their respective institutions feeling like they were only valued for the contributions they made on the field of play. There was also a general

consensus from the participants that faculty members did not take the time to get to know them on a personal level. Thus, most of their faculty members' perceptions about them were based on preconceived stereotypes that did not portray them in an accurate light. Given this climate, the participants overwhelmingly decided to challenge the system by leaning on the support of their teammates, parents, and coaches. All in all, they were resolved to stay committed to their goals and believe in themselves through every obstacle they faced in the classroom and university community at-large.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

While issues surrounding the academic performance outputs (i.e. GPA, SAT scores, and other pre-college inventories) of AA student athletes have been a topic of discussion for quite some time (Gragg & Flowers, 2014), there still remains a need to gain perspectives on their perceptions of the educational systems through which they have matriculated.

The purpose of this study was to explore African American male former student-athletes' perceptions of their academic experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). In particular, this study investigates how former AA male student athletes understand the role of faculty members in shaping their academic success at PWIs. The following three questions were pursued through this study:

1. How do AA male former student athletes view their academic experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)?
2. How do AA male former student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and their academic experiences at PWI?
3. How do AA male former student athletes build their academic capacity to persist and succeed at PWIs?

This study's findings were obtained through face-to-face interviews with nine (9) AA male former student athletes who attended NCAA Division-I PWIs. The data analysis process yielded five (5) key themes: (a) academic dispositions and experiences, (b) facing a new world, (c) I am only of value on the field of play, (d) I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, and (e) taking the initiative. Among these five themes, five statements generally represent the participants'

perceptions of their academic experiences, faculty expectations of their coursework, and their personal outlook on their ability to persist through school and graduate.

- African American male student athletes who make education their first priority perform better in the classroom, and generally enter college prepared to handle the rigors of college assignments. In contrast, AA male student athletes who focus more attention on athletics are often unprepared to handle the complexities of college-level assignments. These two paradigms, coupled with having to balance life and athletics, makes it difficult for AA male student athletes to succeed in college.
- African American male student athletes are often placed in easy majors that are designed to keep them eligible on the field of play. Many of them are first generation students who are not educated on the particulars that comprise the college entrance and academic advising process. Therefore, African American male student athletes often struggle with the process of transitioning from their home and K-12 environments to the college academic and social environments, which they are not familiar with.
- Faculty members have preconceived notions (stereotypical prejudices) about AA male student athletes, which prohibit them from seeing their true academic potential. In essence, AA male student athletes are only celebrated based on what they can offer the university on the field of play. Faculty member's expectations of AA male student athletes are low because they largely do not feel that they are capable of handling the rigors of college coursework. This way of thinking is often left unchallenged because faculty

members do not take time to get to know their AA male student athletes.

Thereby, faculty members can not relate to their needs or appreciate the cultural background of AA male student athletes.

- African American male student athletes appreciate faculty members who care about them, support them, and hold them accountable for being successful in the classroom. All in all, faculty members work well with AA male student athletes who show interest in the learning process and present themselves in a dignified manner when communicating with them.
- African American male student athletes gain strength when they stand up for themselves and set the direction for how their academic journey is managed. Some AA male student athletes have defied the odds of not being academically prepared by entering college with the skillsets, experiences, and confidence that make academic success possible. Most importantly, AA male student athletes benefit from the emotional support they receive from coaches, parents, and teammates. The support AA male student athletes receive from these individuals inspire them to excel in academic environments where they have been deemed to fail.

The researcher selected critical race theory (CRT) as one of the theoretical underpinnings for this study because it provides a strong foundation for understanding the lived experiences of African American male student athletes. According to Singer (2005), CRT is a viable tool for examining the experiences of AA student athletes because it gives insight into the perceptions of AA student athletes concerning racial inequities at PWIs. The CRT will also give AA male student athletes a voice to speak their authentic

truths about what they have experienced and how they experienced it. Delgado (1989) gave four reasons why giving African Americans a voice to tell their stories is important: (a) truth is socially created, (b) stories are a potent means for abolishing and shifting uncharted mind-sets, (c) stories construct communities, and (d) stories facilitate psychological self-preservation among the members of marginalized social groups.

In addition, Tinto's (1987) principles of effective retention model, and Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) theory of student departure model were selected to shed light on what institutions of higher education can do to build relationships with and retain AA male student-athletes. Person and LeNoir (1997) affirmed that institutional retention plans play a critical role in outlining what AA student athletes must do in order to thrive academically and socially within the college environment. Institutions must pride themselves on being student-centered, whereby they can make concerted efforts toward building a relationship with students (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

In this chapter, five major findings are discussed in relation to each of the three research questions and their significance in the existing research literature on African American student athletes in higher education. The discussion will consider the theoretical framework, Critical Race Theory, adopted for this study while elucidating the points of convergence and divergence between the major findings and existing literature. To elicit important implications for future educational practices and scholarship, the researcher will also discuss the following: (a) study limitations and strengths, (b) professional implications for K-12 school districts, college coaches, faculty members, and college administrators, (c) future research, and (d) closing thoughts.

Discussion of the Findings

According to Harper (2009), PWIs lean heavily on the athletic skills of AA student athletes, but they do not provide the support that is needed to help them graduate. Hyatt (2003) conveyed that the graduation potential of AA student athletes increases and their desire to become socially and academically involved in campus initiatives strengthens when the university community (administration, faculty, staff, and students) supports them. This study intended to draw authentic knowledge and critical insights on the lived experiences of AA male former student athletes who matriculated through a PWI which are often known to have limited support for their academic success while exploiting their athletic prowess to reach the institution's financial goals.

Among the five major themes that emerged from this study, the first two themes, (a) academic dispositions and experiences, and (b) facing a new world, address the first research question: How do former AA male student athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)? The third and fourth themes, (c) I am only of value on the field of play, and (d) I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, were drawn to answer the second research question: How do former AA male student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI? The last the theme, taking the initiative, is a theme that answered the third research question: How do former AA male student athletes interpret their academic capacity to persist and succeed at PWIs?

Research question #1: How do AA male former student athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?

Academic Dispositions and Experiences

The first theme, “Academic Dispositions and Experiences”, revealed that some of the participants were not academically prepared for college, and some were prepared. This theme produced mixed results based on each student’s reason for attending college. Some placed getting a degree as a high priority on their academic list, and others were more concerned with being drafted to the professional leagues. The participants who placed education as their first priority were less likely to struggle in the college classroom. However, those AA male student athletes who chose to pursue a career in the professional leagues and used college as a means to advance to the leagues struggled in the classroom. While choosing to pursue a career in the professional leagues does not singularly equate to poor in class performance, such a tendency emerged which is worth exploring further. The AA male student athletes who strongly aspired to pursue a professional career also conveyed that they had matriculated through poor school districts that did not prepare them for college. The lack of proper K-12 academic preparation could be the problem that caused AA male student athletes to lose faith in the American educational system. Based on their schooling experience, education was not--and would not be-- a viable option for upward mobility. Their perception was in fact accurate since many dilapidated and resource-deprived urban and rural schools would not be able to adequately support students’ academic development. This may be a problem that disproportionately affects AA male student athletes. AA male student athletes are more

likely to come from a poor urban or rural community as compared to their White counterparts who attended schools with better academic support and resources.

This finding is well aligned to existing literature because some early studies have consistently shown that White student athletes outperform AA student athletes in the classroom (Sellers, 1992). Comeaux and Harrison (2007) concurred that White student athletes enter college with an advantage over AA student athletes. This gap continues to widen today because most African American student athletes matriculate through substandard K-12 school districts (Eitzen, 2000; Gaston-Galyes, 2004; Harrison, Comeaux, & Piecha, 2006; Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012; Sellers, 1992). African American students in general typically come from low funded urban school districts where resources and instructor competency are limited (Anyon, 1997; Flenbaugh et al., 2017; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Studies have also shown that limited numbers of guidance counselors, high attrition among administrators, crowded classrooms, and underprepared teachers affect AA student's K-12 academic performances (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Khalifa, 2013). Therefore, the literature supports this finding that AA male student athletes do not perform well in college due to the substandard quality of education they received in grades K-12.

On the other hand, this study clearly testified to the existence of some AA male student athletes who were academically well-prepared to handle the rigors of college coursework. The participants who responded affirmatively credited their high school guidance counselors, instructors, and parents with preparing them for college. This is an important insight that can be added to the current literature on AA male student athlete academic experiences at PWIs. Despite the evidence of some academically well -

prepared African American student athletes on college campuses, very few scholars have paid attention to this extraordinarily resilient group of students and their academic accomplishments and success at PWIs. Researchers generally focus on the issues and circumstances that hinder AA male student athletes from advancing at PWIs. That is why oftentimes AA male student athletes whose first priority is academics have to find effective ways to demonstrate their academic competencies. According to Blimper (2014), AA student athletes tend to feel the need to find creative ways to outdo (i.e. they want to show the university community that they belong) the elite students at their university. They do this by (a) honing their leadership skills, (b) solidifying their foundation of academic knowledge, and (c) working extremely hard to excel in the classroom.

From a theoretical framework perspective, the commitment to social justice aspect of CRT informed this theme on the unequal K-12 educational systems that continue to plague African American communities. Urban K-12 school systems have not done a good job of preparing AA male student athletes for success in college. In particular, the commitment to social justice concept sheds light on the fact that African Americans are not only oppressed because of their race, but also experience hardships as a result of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, sex, religious observances, and disabilities among others (Ladson-Billings, 1999; McCoy et al., 2015). Some of the AA male student athletes in this study expressed how disappointed they were in the K-12 educational systems that they had matriculated through. In most cases, they did not have sufficient resources like up-to-date textbooks and course materials that were needed to help them advance in college. According to Flennaugh et al., (2017), the curriculum that is used in

most urban schools does not challenge, prepare, or serve the interest of students. An individual's zip code should not determine whether they will receive a quality education. Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted that CRT was implemented to dismantle oppressive systems that hinder people of color from advancing in life.

The second theme, facing a new world, gave insights into the AA male student athletes entering a world -a climate and culture that they were not familiar with. This was a daunting task for some participants because they were first generation college students who did not have solid support systems like family members, friends, or advisors) to lean on.

Facing a New World

The second theme, facing a new world, was the second theme that addressed the first research question: "How do former AA male student athletes view their academic experiences at a predominantly White institution?" This theme revealed that the adjustment process for entering college was difficult for some of the AA male student-athletes because it was a vastly different world from what they were accustomed to back home. In essence, these participants who were used to living in resource depleted communities had to adjust to living on campuses where everything was readily available to them. This was a culture shock for them, having to make drastic changes to their way of living. The participants felt these changes in vital areas as they affected their psychological and academic wellbeing. Academically, many of them were purposely excluded from the advisement process, which made them more vulnerable to entering less rigorous majors with fewer prospects of getting a job after graduation. Several of the participants never recalled being included in the process but were just handed a course

schedule before the start of classes. This is a practice that schools use to prey upon AA male student athletes who are not knowledgeable about the college entrance and advisement process. That is why, psychologically, some of the participants could not get to the place where they could trust members of the university community (i.e. faculty and other school officials).

Existing literature provides ample evidence that African American male student athletes who enter these types of environments have little control over their academic future. Singer (2005) found that AA student athletes are enrolled into courses that they do not need while White student athletes are registered for courses that fit their degree program. Singer (2005) also asserted that AA student athletes were placed in classroom settings that compromised their ability to make progress towards a degree or get support for their personal developmental needs. Houston and Barber (2017) revealed that academic clustering occurs more frequently among AA student athletes than White student-athletes. In a survey study of NCAA Division-I student athletes, Petr, Paskus, and Miranda (2011) found that 43% of football student athletes were told not to take some of the courses they wanted to take, compared to 34% of all male student athletes.. This reflects the fact that many Division I institutions exert a strong controlling power over African American male athletes' academic program decisions and deprive them of the chance to develop an academic degree plan that would offer richer career trajectories. Simply put, athletic programs at major flagship universities do not seem to champion the rights of AA male student athletes to have a say-so in crafting their degree plan. Instead, these institutions focus on keeping AA male student athletes eligible to play sports. Singer (2009) found that the educational needs of AA student athletes were being

overlooked in favor of the financial interests of those who manage high profile (i.e. large flagship institutions that sponsor NCAA Division-I sports) intercollegiate athletics.

From a theoretical framework perspective, Critical Race Theory provided a foundation for examining circumstances and issues where people of color have been marginalized. Yosso (2005) defined CRT in education as “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 74). In particular, the interest convergence aspect of CRT informed this theme of AA male student athletes being exploited for their athletic prowess. Interest convergence theory is constructed on the premise that the interests of African Americans will only be served when their interests converge with the interests of those in authority (McCoy et al., 2015). Some of the AA male student athletes in this study were placed in less rigorous majors (i.e., programs that are less rigorous with apathetic professors who do not hold students accountable for their work) as a means of keeping them eligible for athletic competition. This is a critical issue because NCAA member institutions make millions of dollars from gate receipts, television royalties, sponsorships, and other related revenue streams that are associated with athletic competitions.

The published research on this topic narrowly supports the findings from this section. The current literature primarily focuses on what could happen to AA male student athletes in environments where biased norms have not been challenged. However, there has not been any research conducted on what can be done to help AA male student athletes successfully maneuver through this climate (i.e. way of thinking and prevailing ideals) at PWIs. According to Harrison et al., (2009), when a group is marginalized, it

could affect their mindset to the point that they do not perform to their fullest academic potential.

The current theme, facing a new world, gave insights into the challenges AA male student athletes face adjusting to a world that was preprogrammed to meet the financial interest of the university, and not the academic interests—or holistic development-- of its student athletes. The next two themes, I am only of value on the field of play and I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, shed light on the relational dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and AA male student athletes' academic experiences. These two themes address the second research question:

Research question #2: How do AA former male student athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators' expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI?

I Am Only of Value on the Field of Play

The I am only of value on the field of play theme illustrates the negative relational dynamics experienced by AA male student athletes with faculty members and administrators who did not provide the support that was needed to help AA male student athletes get acclimated to the collegiate academic setting. The participants revealed that faculty members were not interested in ensuring that they received a quality education. Some of the AA male student athletes in this study did not feel that their faculty members took time to get to know them on a personal level. Everything that faculty members thought they knew about AA male student athletes was primarily based on what faculty members read in a history book, hearsay through the media, or campus news. This might have been the reason why faculty members had such low expectations when it came to

AA male student athletes' coursework. Often faculty did not give these student athletes the credit they deserved, even when they attended class and turned assignments in on time. Some of the participants talked about how blatant many of their faculty members were, stating that all student athletes cheat and were not enrolled in school to earn a degree. From the participant's perspective, faculty members generally seemed to assume that AA male student athletes were enrolled in school only to make it to the professional leagues.

Prejudices and negative stereotypes against AA male student athletes' academic competency and potential are widespread cultural beliefs in higher education. Studies show that AA student athletes are stereotyped more often than White student athletes (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2010; Engstrom et al., 1995; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Sailes, 1993; Simon et al., 1993; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Professors at PWIs generally possess negative feelings about low-skilled AA student athletes (Engstrom et al., 1995). Simon et al. (2007) reported that 43% of AA student athletes recalled receiving negative treatment from faculty members, while 29% conveyed receiving positive treatment. In addition, 42 % of AA student-athletes reported that faculty perceptions of them were negative, compared to 34% of White student-athletes (Simon et al., 2007). As a result, scholars have argued that faculty must self-examine to eradicate any ill-conceived prejudices they have against AA student athletes in order to effectively meet their needs (Hodges et al., 2008). The overall findings under this second theme corroborate what has been well documented in the existing literature. For example, faculty and administrators' low academic expectations, lack of awareness regarding the needs of AA student athletes, and preconceived negative

stereotypes have been repeatedly discussed in previous studies. The fact that the AA student athletes experienced a significant challenge in developing supportive and productive relationships with faculty is not surprising considering the prevalence of negative stereotypes and prejudices against AA male student athletes' academic competency on campus.

From a theoretical framework perspective, Critical Race Theory provided a foundation for examining circumstances and issues where people of color have been marginalized. In particular, the centrality of race and racism in society aspect of CRT informed this theme on the climate by which AA male student athletes have to maneuver through at NCAA Division-I PWIs. The centrality of the race tenet affirmed that racism is pervasive and deeply embedded within all facets of American society (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998). The participants in this study expressed their concerns about being stereotyped because of their skin color. Professors often accused them of cheating and in some cases felt that their academic tutors were completing their assignments for them. Studies show that AA student athletes are often suspected of cheating on assignments more frequently than White student athletes; and in some cases AA student athletes did not believe that they were graded fairly on assignments (Simon, et al., 2007). The participants in this study expressed how some faculty members made comments about student athletes having to cheat in order to pass their courses.

The current literature shows that there is limited to no viable interactions between AA male student athletes and faculty members. The futile relationships between faculty members and AA male student athletes are largely built on hearsay as opposed to knowledge gained from an authentic face-to-face interaction and conversation.

Academicians and the general student population believe that AA student athletes are in school to hallmark their athletic abilities as opposed to their academic competency (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Horton, 2011; Sailes, 1998). While there may be *some* student athletes with a weak academic performance due to several reasons (e.g., prior K-12 school education), it is surely an ill-grounded over-generalization that faculty members and other members of the university community assume that this is the case for all AA male student athletes. This notion is largely speculative and can be checked or validated through the formation of an effective relationship between faculty members and AA male student athletes.

The current theme, I am only of value on the field of play, gave insights on faculty members who do not have confidence in the academic abilities or discount the importance of developing a positive relationship with AA male student athletes. In contrast, the next theme, I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, centered on the positive relational dynamics that the AA male student athletes had with faculty members who acknowledged their needs and their academic potential and provided relevant support.

I am Just as Valuable in the Classroom as I Am on the Field of Play

While answering the same research question, “How do former AA male student-athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty/administrators’ expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI?” the I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play theme contrasts the previous theme. This theme revealed that some faculty members do acknowledge AA male student athletes’ academic potential and value the academic contributions made by this group of students. Faculty members provided the

support and encouragement that was needed to help AA male student athletes excel in the classroom. Some of the participants in this study admired their professors for taking the time to encourage them towards reaching their academic goals and life goals. They discovered that faculty members were more willing to work with student athletes who showed “a good attitude” and treated them with respect. The AA male student athletes who responded favorably about their relationship with faculty members were also the ones who conveyed that getting a solid education was their first priority in college. These student athletes were possibly able to form meaningful relationships with faculty members because they showed their genuine interest in being in the class. The participants who did not make academics their first priority cared less about how they progressed in the classroom. Therefore, they did not receive the academic support that the others received from being proactive and finding effective ways to form healthy lines of communications with faculty members.

Benson (2000), Hall (2002), Spigner (1993), and Horton (2011) conveyed that institutions of higher education must build a culture of high educational expectations for AA student athletes that provides the support and direction they need to realize their full academic potential. Most of the participants in the study revered professors who held them accountable for doing well in the classroom. According to Kuh et al. (2005), students become more motivated to excel academically when they perceive that faculty members genuinely care about their well-being. Person and Lenoir (1997) found that African American student athletes perform better academically and athletically when they are properly advised and solid student support services are offered.

From a theoretical framework perspective, Tinto's (1987) principles of effective retention model informed this theme on how faculty members should effectively engage AA male student athletes. While Tinto's model does not directly address AA male student athletes, it gives instructions on how faculty members should build effective relationships with college students in general. Tinto (1987, 1993) posited that the faculty-student relationship should extend beyond the walls of the classroom with mentorship initiatives, activities and events. As a result, faculty members and staff members become more accessible to students (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The participants in this study were inspired by faculty members who showed a genuine interest in them. Other student development scholars like Chickering and Reisser (1993), affirmed that solid faculty-student relationships develop as a result of faculty members being (1) available, (2) genuine, (3) able to communicate, and (4) knowledgeable about student needs. The more effective interactions students have with faculty members, fellow students, and administrators increase their chances of persisting and graduating (Tinto, 1987, 1993, 1999).

Two previous themes, I am valuable only on the field of play and I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play, portrayed two contrasting academic paths experienced by the participants. In particular, the current theme, I am just as valuable in the classroom as I am on the field of play," gave insights into how faculty members established and cherished relationships with AA male student athletes that inspired them to excel in the classroom. The last theme, taking the initiative, is closely aligned to the fourth theme, yet it highlights the active role played by the AA male student athletes themselves. The theme expounded on AA male student athletes standing

up for themselves and taking control of their academic destiny. This last theme addresses the third research question:

Research question #3: How do AA male former student-athletes interpret their academic capacity to persist and succeed at PWIs?

Taking the Initiative

The taking initiative theme revealed that AA male student athletes excelled when they stood up for themselves, showed interest in the educational process, and took control of their own educational pursuits. This is an emerging theme that is often subtly alluded to in seminal pieces of literature on the academic preparedness of AA male student athletes; however, there is no definitive literature that articulated this unique and critical point. This motivational theme was crafted to describe how AA male student athletes use their voice as a trumpet for change and transformation in environments where oppressive practices are commonplace and normalized. The participants expressed how their coaches and parents encouraged them to be more proactive in fulfilling their academic obligations and aspirations. In doing so, they realized early on that they needed to connect with other players who were focused on doing well in the classroom to serve as accountability partners. Through hard work and determination, the majority of participants challenged the system that had been designed to hold them back by foregoing the professional leagues and deciding to stay in school. They were keenly aware of multiple career trajectories after college available to them and maintained healthy balance between a professional athletic career and other viable career options. Overall, these AA male student athletes did not allow the bright lights of fame and fortune to cause them to lose sight of their primary goal of graduating with a viable degree.

Simms (1997) reported that prosperous AA student athletes took charge of their lives, set high educational goals, comprehended and survived racial marginalization, took part in community service ventures, and received strong support from family and friends. Studies show that when social support systems are in place, AA student athletes tend to excel athletically and academically (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015). In contrast, Grayson and Grayson (2003) confirmed that African American student athletes who are void of social support systems, confidence, and community connections are more likely to quit school. Considering the dearth of research on AA student athletes' sense of agency in their academic decision making, more research is needed in this area to determine what and how to facilitate AA student athletes to take constructive action (i.e. trusting that their voice has meaning, and being an agent of change) when faced with adverse issues on campus.

From a theoretical framework perspective, Tinto's (1975, 1987, & 1993) theory of student departure model informed this theme on how institutions of higher education can provide the support structures that AA male student athletes need to take ownership of their educational pursuits. Tinto (1975, 1987, & 1993) posited that students are multifaceted individuals from diverse backgrounds (i.e. ethnic groups, class, socioeconomic status, and academic status) who have goals and aspirations that guide them through college. Tinto (1999) asserted that colleges and universities must provide students with guidelines that precisely outline what they must do to successfully maneuver through their programs of study. College administrators should ensure that resources (i.e. funding and human capital) are in place to facilitate enriching programs and services that benefit students (Kuh et al., 2005). Thereby, students can evaluate and

select the programs and services that best meet their needs. Many of the participants in this study were adamant about doing what they thought was best to receive a viable education at their institutions. They did not allow their academic advisors or faculty members to unilaterally determine the course of their future. Their critical evaluation, proactive action, and courageous decisions resonated with the core recommendation made by leading scholars in higher education. Evans et.al (2009) affirmed that students should develop their own professional goals that are in alignment with their interests. Tinto (1993) also highlighted that student retention is directly linked to the success by which students are able to connect with the learning environment.

This theme, taking the initiative, culminates the findings from this study. The AA male student athlete participants wanted to have a say in how their academic journey was constructed and managed. While AA male student athletes wanted more autonomy in building their individualized academic portfolios, they understood that they would need the support of the university community. They translated the idea of “building a strong team”—gained from their athletic experience—into the academic realm and proactively constructed a team that would support their academic goals.

A Critical Analysis of Tinto’s Effective Retention Model and Critical Race Theory

There is a clear difference between the core common goal of Tinto’s (1987) principles of effective retention model and the AA male student athletes in this study. According to Tinto’s theory, the institution’s interest and students’ academic success are viewed as the core common goal. However, the participants were exploited more for their athletic prowess than their academic scholarship. The financial returns that institutions of higher education gain from recruiting AA male student athletes continues to outweigh

conversations about the progress, if any, that these students are making in the classroom. This is especially true for AA male football student athletes who attend PWIs. The participants in this study were being prepared to preserve the financial interests of their respective institutions. It was not uncommon for them to be placed in less rigorous majors that were designed to help them meet NCAA academic standards. Therefore, Tinto's theory can be improved by taking into consideration those underlying interests of the university community that is keeping some groups from maximizing their full academic potential. In particular, the AA male student athlete population should be explored by Tinto to determine how they can be better integrated into the academic and social environments at PWIs.

The experiences of the AA male student athletes in this study were better grounded in CRT since they had to take the initiative to accomplish their goals. Through the participants taking the initiative to overthrow the oppressive practices of academic clustering, preconceived stereotypes, and lack of support that tried to hinder them from making progress, the climate (i.e. way of thinking at the university) began to change around them. The experiential knowledge aspect of CRT closely aligns with the AA male student athletes resolve to stand up for themselves and create their own path to academic success. According to Closson (2010), Delgado (1989), Ladson-Billing (1998), and Tate (1997), giving voice to the experiences of minority groups is a liberating factor that allows them to overcome the misconstrued thoughts and ideas that have been expressed about them within the American system (Closson, 2010; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billing, 1998; Tate, 1997).

Moreover, because most of the AA male student-athlete participants took the initiative concerning their academic futures, things turned around for them, and their institution and the people around them became a team to support their academic success. Such support did not come naturally but was hard earned through the participants' critical awareness about their position in the institution and society at large. Only by taking a stand for themselves and challenging the system did Tinto's theory start to work for them.

In conclusion, the five themes provided evidence that is worth exploring to determine if the location where AA male student athletes grew up has an effect on the way they experience college academically, socially, and psychologically. Based on the study's data, it was apparent that the AA male student athletes who matriculated through resource-rich K-12 school districts had positive college experiences. They were in contrast to the other participants who struggled in the classroom and found it difficult to form meaningful relationships with faculty members. All of the student athletes who experienced a great challenge in navigating the academic side of college life had attended urban or rural schools unable to provide quality education to their K-12 students.

Limitations of the Study

Like all other research studies, this phenomenological study is not without limitations. First and most important, it should be noted that participants in this study were previous, *not current*, AA male student athletes who played sports at a NCAA Division I institution in the past. The participant profile for this study shifted from current AA male student athletes to former AA male student athletes due to the unwillingness of most athletics departments to allow their student athletes to participate in the interview

process. In essence, the proposed study and interviews would give them useful data that are needed to improve the organization's performance outputs. However, NCAA Division-I member institutions did not seem interested in being transparent or listening to the voices of their student athletes.

Second, the sampling method was primarily snowball sampling, which is an alternative route to recruiting participants through the referral of other participants. Prior to recruiting participants through the snowball sampling method, the researcher established an explicit list of participant selection criteria so that sampling could also follow the process of purposeful sampling as recommended and widely used by most qualitative researchers. Snowball sampling with a clear selection criterion was a successful alternative, many participants responded favorably to the invitation, but many failed to keep their commitment in the end. As a result, the researcher adjusted the sample size from ten (10) participants to nine (9) participants. One more interview probably would have yielded more data, but the researcher was confident that the study had reached the saturation point since the five major themes were very stable across the nine participants.

Third, the data set was constructed based on one-time in-depth interviews with each of the nine AA male student athletes and therefore lacked reciprocal and iterative two-way communication that could have added deeper and more authentic interpretations of their initial narratives. In fact, time was a significant constraint that limited the researcher's interactions with participants. Many of the participants had busy schedules as coaches and administrators, which made it difficult to conduct follow-up interviews. Creswell (2013) asserted that ongoing interactions with participants better positions

researchers to eliminate inaccurate data. However, Lincoln and Guba (2001) also acknowledged that no one research process can produce absolute truth. Still all nine initial interviews generated high quality, rich data describing the participants' experiences as former AA male student athletes at a Division I institution. Therefore, the researcher is confident that major findings drawn from the data are well grounded and accurately portray their first-hand experiences as AA male student athletes.

Fourth, it was difficult to receive clearance to interview current college student athletes because many institutions were afraid of what might come to light about their athletic programs. I had many coaches, administrators, and friends who promised to assist me with this study, but most of their prospective referrals never materialized.

Fifth, the researcher only interviewed *AA male* former student athletes. This gave a micro-view of possible academic inequalities that many different groups of student athletes (e.g. AA female student athletes) face at NCAA Division-I PWIs. Also, while the study was open to former AA male student athletes across all sports, only former African American male football student athletes responded to the invitation. This study focused on one specific group of student athletes, AA male football players, and therefore lacked diversity in regard to student athletes of different races and female representation.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that the researcher's own subjectivities, including his prior knowledge and preconceived expectations about the participants and research outcomes, could have influenced the results of the study. Ezzy (2002) argues that all social research, especially qualitative inquiry grounded in interpretivist paradigm, cannot be separated from the researcher. While noting the inevitable influence of one's subjectivities, the researcher also utilized multiple strategies to maintain a self-critical

and self-reflective attitude throughout the research process. In particular, the researcher has not worked with NCAA Division-I student athletes in over eleven years, and maintained an open attitude throughout the interview and data analysis process. The researcher made multiple consultations with his faculty supervisor to check the relevance of a proposed interpretation and evidence from the data. Therefore, major findings in this study were the product of a long time and labor intensive and iterative analytic process carried out by the researcher.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study provided rich data into what can be done to support and meet the needs of African American male student athletes. Insights and recommendations are given to (a) K-12 school districts, (b) college coaches, (c) faculty members, (d) college administrators, and (e) research.

Implications for K-12 School Districts

While this study investigated the academic experiences of AA student athletes in higher education, major findings offer a series of important implications for K-12 education. There is no doubt that the urban K-12 school districts across America should make concerted efforts to improve the academic standards within their schools. The study revealed that AA male student athletes received little to no academic support from their K-12 schools. Consequently, African American male student athletes continue to leave high school without the soft or hard skills that are necessary to succeed in college. Some of these students cannot compute or read at grade level. Lewis et al. (2008) conveyed that by 12th grade, AA students will be reading and computing on the level of a White eighth grader (Lewis et al., 2008). This seems to be a never ending plight that continues to

plague African American communities across America. African American students in general have always been on the wrong side of the spectrum when it comes to teaching and learning. Henceforth, it is the job of the K-12 system to educate every student regardless of their race or gender. The primary goal of every teacher should center on meeting students where they are and helping them to obtain the skillsets that are necessary to succeed at all levels of education. Therefore, building a strong educational foundation is the key to helping African American male student athletes excel in college.

In short, school districts should ensure that the teachers they hire are qualified to do the job. African American male student athletes generally matriculate through urban school districts where some teachers are not certified to teach in their cognate area. This further exacerbates the problem: how can one learn when the quality of instruction is absent. The Educational Testing Service (2011) reported that only 25% of the teachers at schools with 50% or more African American students are certified in their cognate area. I believe that this is the unsubtle infection that is killing the ability of African American male student athletes to successfully advance through school. Urban school districts will have to lobby their local and state government offices for more funding to compete for better teachers.

Implications for College Coaches

College coaches are vitally important to helping African American male student athletes transition from high school to college. After all, they are the ones who enter the homes of African American male student athletes and promise their parents that they will provide them with a good education. This does not mean that African American male student athletes should receive a free pass; however, they should be treated with respect

and valued for what they can offer beyond the field of play. It should be one of the responsibilities of the coach or coaching staff (including the head coach) to ensure that African American male student athletes are being treated fairly by the university community (i.e. faculty, administrators, and student-body). For example, the coach should make themselves available to meet with faculty members and other university officials when concerns arise with African American male student athletes. This should be done based on the situation (s) African American male student athletes are facing. Thereby, the coach will have to determine when it is appropriate to meet face-to-face or send out written communication to faculty members and university administrators.

To this point, college coaches have to take more initiative in making sure that the university community understands that African American male student athletes are capable of learning and persisting at the university. College coaches cannot become shortsighted to the fact that issues of disenfranchisement and racism could arise and affect their African American male student athlete population. Therefore, college coaches have to keep inspiring African American male student athletes to defy all odds by forming relationships with their professors, studying hard, turning in all assignments, and showing up prepared for all classes. All in all, college coaches are the first and closest advocate for AA male student athletes' holistic development and academic success

Implications for College Faculty Members

Faculty members should take time out to get to know their African American male student athletes. This is vitally important because faculty members are responsible for fairly engaging all students in the learning process, regardless of their skin color or predisposed dispositions. Therefore, faculty members can no longer formulate opinions

about African American male student athletes that are based on what they have read in a textbook, heard in the media, or grew up believing about African Americans throughout history. The majority of participants in this study grew up in the south and was aware of the narrow-minded way of thinking that still pervades their communities today. For so many generations society has gotten away with degrading and tearing down the character of African Americans without taking their feelings into consideration. However, this climate can change for African American male student athletes and faculty members at NCAA Division-I PWIs. In order to form meaningful relationships with African American male student athletes, faculty will have to get to know them on a personal, one on one level. In doing so, they will get an accurate picture of who they truly are as an individual, student, and athlete.

Furthermore, it should be mandated that all student athletes meet with their professors at the beginning of the semester or before school starts to introduce themselves. That way they can talk about their goals and aspirations, and the logistics that go into to being a student athletes at a NCAA Division-I institution. Student athletes have rigorous practice schedules and game schedules that sometimes pull them away from the university. In such cases, it is customary at some universities that the office of academic affairs forwards an excuse of absence letter to faculty members when students are traveling on university business. However, this does not always occur, and student-athletes are often penalized for it by faculty members. This is also where a lot of stereotypes form about African American male student athletes not wanting to obtain a degree, but enter a professional sports league (i.e. NFL, NBA, MLB, and MLS) at the expense of their education. This is one of the reasons why studies show that African

American student athletes are apprehensive about approaching faculty members about issues that affect their academic performance.

Most importantly, faculty members at PWIs should be required to participate in at least one diversity training course or program each year that centers on working with students from diverse populations. This is important because some faculty members at PWIs are not accustomed to working with African American student athletes, which could cause them to lose sight of or overlook the special needs (i.e. first generation, academic skills development, and socialization adjustments) and gifts (i.e. arts and crafts, poetry, music) that they bring to the university. I think that the university community often looks at African American male student athletes as being lost with no possible hope for the future. Again, faculty members must avail themselves to African American male student athletes in a non-judgmental manner that fosters an environment where they can learn and form meaningful relationships with them.

Implications for College Administrators

It takes the whole institution to create an environment that is conducive to the academic success of African American male student athletes. University administrators are key decision makers and play a critical role to implement any positive change that would benefit AA male student athletes. It would be important to implement academic success programs and monitor the academic performance outputs of AA male student athletes. Horton (2011) asserted that athletic programs with integrity place more emphasis on ensuring that student athletes are positioned to graduate. Therefore, organizations are committed to catering to the whole student athlete, both their academic and social well-being. Gill and Farrington (2014) conveyed that comprehensive academic

support programs can help African American student athletes increase their overall academic performance. For example, NCAA Division-I schools have implemented Student Athlete Support Programs (SASPs), which are designed to provide student athletes with academic advising, grade monitoring, career counseling, psychological counseling, and skills for life programs (Gragg & Flowers, 2014). Given the fact that so many student athletes enter college with educational deficiencies, administrators should be devoted to helping them reach their academic goals (Gragg & Flowers, 2014).

Furthermore, Baker and Hawkins (2016) asserted that academic mentoring is an effective way to help African American student athletes improve their academic performance. This is a viable way to build stronger bonds between faculty members and African American student athletes. Carter and Hart (2010) found that mentoring programs can cater to the educational, athletic, and socialization needs of African American student athletes. Comeaux (2010), in his piloted study of a professor-student athlete mentorship program at an NCAA Division-I institution, found that African American student athletes became more focused on their school work, developed a positive outlook on future job prospects, and genuinely felt that they had a bright future ahead of them. These feelings of affirmation developed as a result of the program. In short, programs like this must continue to operate because they are a tremendous benefit to the African American student athlete population (Comeaux, 2010).

Lastly, there should be a critical evaluation about prevalent advising structures and practices that separate African American male student athletes from the rest of students on campus. African American male student athletes should not be excluded from the regular advising process at the university. African American male student athletes

should follow the same protocol that the general student population adheres to. For far too long, college academic advisors have been in the business of pre-selecting majors and courses for African American student athletes. This is an unacceptable and illegitimate interference on each student's academic endeavors. The general student population and White student athletes are simply given the autonomy to construct their own individualized academic plan of action (course mapping) with the assistance of an academic advisor. Many of the African American male student athletes in this study confessed that they had never participated in a truly reciprocal advisement process. This is an issue that must be addressed because less than two percent (2%) of collegiate athletes make it to the professional leagues (i.e. NBA and NFL) (Harper, 2016), which means they should be able to select a major that will give them the best chance of becoming gainfully employed after graduation.

Implications for Future Research

The current study focused on the perceptions of AA male student athletes concerning their academic experiences and faculty member's expectations of their coursework at NCAA Division-I PWIs. The study revealed mixed results depending upon the original intent behind why each athlete decided to attend college. The participants who made academics their first priority performed better in the classroom and did not have problems forming relationships with their faculty members. The AA male student athletes who struggled through college came from inner city communities with substandard K-12 schools. In particular, these student-athletes went to college with the dreams of making it to the professional leagues.

Given the findings from the current study, a comparative qualitative case study should be conducted on AA male student athletes who matriculated through K-12 inner city and suburban schools, respectively. It would be important to explore those school districts where AA male student athletes generally leave less prepared to excel in college. This will give researchers a more in depth look at the issues that hinder AA male student athletes from exceling in college. Researchers will also be able to determine if the poor educational systems through which AA male student athletes matriculate have an effect on their decision to focus on academics or making it to the professional leagues when they enter college. Likewise, it would be important to examine the lived experiences of AA male student athletes who matriculated through resource rich suburban K-12 school districts (where the college success rate is traditionally higher). This will provide a comparative reference point for the study that will help researchers determine if location is the primary driver in determining how AA male student athletes experience college from an academic, social, and psychological perspective. The qualitative case study design will allow researchers to get a micro-view of this phenomenon prior to expanding its scope.

In addition, researchers could later look at how one develops the sense of “taking initiative” and what contributed to their awareness and proactive handling of their academic decisions. Lastly, researchers could also look at other minority sports groups, such as AA female student athletes and AA male student athletes who play other sports besides football. In doing so, they could determine if and where the intersection of gender, sport popularity, and the institutions’ primary interest in each group intersects.

Closing Thoughts

In light of the issues AA male former student athletes face when transitioning from high school and getting acclimated to the environments (academic and social) at NCAA Division-I PWIs, this study is significant because it raises the consciousness of faculty members and university administrators that AA male student athletes are capable of learning in inclusive environments where they are valued and accepted for who they are. African American male student athletes do not want to be prejudged, but desire to excel in the classroom and graduate just like the average college student has the desire to do when they enter college, regardless of their skin color or predisposed dispositions of others. Therefore, faculty members and university administrators should consider finding creative ways to meet AA male student athletes where they are, and connect them with the support and resources that are needed to help them excel in the classroom.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

My name is Nathan Chaplin, a doctoral student from the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study that explores African American male former student athletes' perceptions of their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). In particular, this study investigates how AA male former student-athletes understand the role of faculty members in shaping their academic success at PWIs. You may participate if you are an African American male former student-athlete, who has played a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sport at an NCAA member institution for at least a year.

Please do not participate if you have not participated in a NCAA sponsored sport at an NCAA member institution for at least a year.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one 60 to 90 minute semi-structured interview. This process will be audio recorded and require you to sign an informed consent form. The study will include at least 10 participants who participate in athletics at an NCAA member institution. The project may involve risks that are not currently known. However, the primary investigator will reserve the right to cancel the interview if it poses some type of physical, psychological, social, and financial threat to participants. The primary investigator will not disclose any identifiable or sensitive information that is shared during the process. Each participant will receive confirmed consent receipt and a copy of the interview transcript. Participants will not receive any monetary or non-monetary for participating in this study.

If you would like to participate in this research study, I can sign you up now, or you can contact me by no later than October 10, 2018.

Do you have any questions now? If you have questions later, please contact me at (803-553-8019/ nchapli1@uncc.edu) or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Jae Hoon Lim, at (704-687-8864/ jhlim@uncc.edu).

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

My name is Nathan Chaplin III and I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Thanks for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to explore African American male former student-athletes' perceptions of their academic experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI). In particular, this study investigates how AA male former student-athletes understand the role of faculty members in shaping their academic success at PWIs. During this 60-90 minute interview, I will ask you questions about your academic experiences, interactions with faculty members, and factors that influenced you to persist at your university.

Opening Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Tell me about your college experience as a whole?
Possible prompt: How was it like?

Academic Experiences

3. Can you tell me about your academic experiences in college?
Possible prompts: What happened? How do you feel about those experiences?
4. Can you tell me about what you expected your college to be like?
Possible prompts: What did you expect it to be like academically? What did you expect it to be like socially? What did you expect it to be like culturally?
5. Can you tell me about how prepared you felt entering college?
Possible prompts: How prepared did you feel for college personally? How prepared did you feel for college academically? What would you say helped to prepare you?

Faculty Expectations and Interactions

6. Can you tell me about your experience with faculty members?
Possible Prompts: *How would you describe your interactions with faculty members inside the classroom? How would you describe your interactions with faculty members outside the classroom?*
Possible Prompts: What happened? How did the experience (s) make you feel? What did you take away from the experience?
7. How did you feel about faculty's expectations concerning your academic performance?

Possible prompt: Why or why not

Factors that Influence Persistence

8. Can you tell me about how you felt about your ability to persist at your college?
9. How would you describe faculty members' awareness and sensitivity to needs and interests of AA student-athletes?
10. Can you tell me about the major factors that shaped and impacted your experiences as an AA student-athlete at your institution?
Possible prompt: What helped you to adjust? What hindered or slowed your adjustment process?
11. Tell me about any significant individuals (like parents or guardian) who played a critical role in shaping your expectation about college.
Possible prompt: How so?

Closing Thoughts

12. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience at the college?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: African American Male Former Student Athletes Perceptions' of their Academic Experiences and Faculty Expectations of their Course Work at Predominantly White Institutions

Project Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study that will examine African American male former student-athletes' perceptions of their academic experiences at a predominantly White institution (PWI). In particular, this study investigates how AA male former student-athletes understand the role of faculty members in shaping their academic success at PWIs. This study is unique in that it will give voice to African American male student-athletes whose academic victories are often overshadowed by their athletic successes.

Investigator(s):

Primary Investigator:

Nathan Chaplin III

University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Charlotte

Email – nchapli1@uncc.edu

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Jae Hoon Lim

University of North Carolina at

Email – jhlim@uncc.edu

Eligibility: You are invited to participate in this study if you are an African American male former student-athlete, who has played a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sport at an NCAA Division –I member institution for at least a year. You may not participate in this study if you have not participated in athletics at an NCAA member institution for at least a year.

Overall Description of Participation: If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one 45 minute to an hour semi-structured interview that (1) centers on your educational journey (i.e., how do you feel about your college readiness from an academic standpoint); and (2) centers on your interactions with faculty members (i.e., what are your perceptions of faculty expectations concerning your coursework). This process will be audio recorded and require you to sign an informed consent form. The study will include at least 10 participants who participate in athletics at an NCAA Division-I member institution. A follow-up interview opportunity might be afforded to you, if deemed necessary by the researcher (to gain more information or verify information). You will also receive an official copy of your interview transcript.

Length of Participation: Your participation will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. This experience should only last for one day; however, you will be given an option to participate in a follow-up interview at a later date that will span 45 minutes to an hour. Furthermore, after the audio recorded data has been transcribed, you will receive and be asked to verify the collected data to ensure validity.

Benefits and Risks of Participation: There are no known risks to participating in this study. There may be some direct benefits to you as a study participant and society in general. First of all, this study will give African American male student-athletes a platform to express themselves about issues they value. Secondly, African American

male student-athletes will be able to talk in an unobstructed manner about their lived experiences at predominantly White institutions. Thirdly, humanity as a whole will be able to gain an appreciation for the contributions and struggles of African American male student-athletes.

Compensation/Payment/Incentive: Your participation in study will not result in you receiving any type of monetary or non-monetary incentives.

Volunteer Statement: You are a volunteer. The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you. If you decide to be in the study, you may stop at any time. You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to participate in the study or if you stop once you have started.

Confidentiality Statement: The privacy and confidentiality of your testimonials will be protected (to the extent possible and will not be disclosed without your permission or as required by law). The researcher will not disclose any information about you to a third party. Your information will be disclosed to the general public under the veil of anonymity (through the use of pseudonyms and anonymous responses). Your name, birth date, address, student ID, employee ID, and all other personal information about you will not be disclosed to the general public. During the interview transcription process, all identifiable information that could disclose who you are will be redacted. After the interview is transcribed, a copy will be hand delivered to you by the researcher for further validation of the data. The audio recording will be destroyed after the interview transcription process ends.

Statement of Fair Treatment and Respect: UNC Charlotte wants to make sure that you are treated in a fair and respectful manner. Contact the Office of Research Compliance at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu if you have questions about how you are treated as a study participant. If you have any questions about the actual project or study, please contact Mr. Nathan Chaplin III (803-553-8019/ nchapli1@uncc.edu) or Dr. Jae Hoon Lim (704-687-8864)

Approval Date: This form was approved for use on June 27, 2018 for use for one year.

Participant Consent: I have read the information in this consent form. I have had the chance to ask questions about this study, and those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am at least 18 years of age, and I agree to participate in this research project. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form after it has been signed by me and the principal investigator of this research study.

Participant Name (PRINT)

DATE

Participant Signature

Investigator Signature

DATE

APPENDIX D: RESEARCH QUESTIONS, THEMES, AND SUBTHEMES

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
How do former AA male student-athletes view their academic experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?	Academic Dispositions and Experiences	Athletics is My First Priority
		I Was not Academically Prepared for College
		Academics is My First Priority
		I Came in Prepared
		Balancing Academics and Athletics
	Facing a New World	From an Inner-City Dog Eat Dog Environment to a Place with Privileges
		Unfamiliar and Unexpected Learning Context
		Push Through Programs
	How do former AA male student-athletes evaluate the dynamics between faculty expectations and their academic experiences at a PWI?	I Am Only of Value on the Field of Play
Faculty Lack Awareness to the Needs of AA Student-Athletes		
Faculty Preconceived Stereotypes		
Futile Faculty-Student-Athlete Relationships		
I Am just as Valuable in the Classroom as I Am on the Field of Play		Faculty Hold Student-Athletes Accountable For Their Academic Performance
		Have a Good Attitude and Do Your Work
		Faculty Provide Support
How do former AA male student-athletes interpret their academic capacity to persist and succeed at the PWIs?	Taking the Initiative	My Coaches are Active Participants in My Success
		My Family Members are Active Participants in My Success
		Building a Strong Team for Success
		Challenge the System, and Believe in yourself