Perceptions of Black Female Student-Athletes Towards Their Academic Achievement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that affect academic achievement of Black female student-athletes with a goal of achieving a deeper understanding of how to support the academic success of Black female student athletes using the conceptual framework of student involvement, development and ecological development. The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research method. The participants in this study believed that educational relationships with professors, familial relationships with parents, sport relationships with their academic advisors, campus environment, and their overall participation greatly impacted their success in academics in college.

Keywords: Black, Student Athlete, Academic Achievement

INTRODUCTION

Athletes, who are women and Black, play dual roles in athletics and share the distinction of being two of the most historically underrepresented groups in higher education. Black female athletes fill minority roles in athletics as women and students of color. It was not until the mid-1960s that Black students were allowed to attend majority institutions in significant numbers in America, and not until the 1970s when they were allowed to participate in athletics overall. By 2018, NCAA reported, 4.9%, or 24,462 of all student-athletes were Black females (NCAA Demographics Database, 2018).

With the expansion of sports that women compete in and the diversity of women of color competing, addressing the concerns specifically of Black female student-athletes, and identifying strategies for satisfaction and success will be beneficial in addressing graduation success for Black female student-athletes.

Much of the research conducted in athletics addresses the academic success of Black male student-athletes, primarily in Division I revenue generating sports (Strayhorn, 2007, Evans, 2008, Carter-Francique, 2012). Black female student-athletes exhibit high graduation rates when compared to other students of color and Black male student-athletes. However, when compared to the majority of ethnic groups on the collegiate level, Black female student-athletes have lower graduation rates than White female student-athletes. The graduation success rates (GSR) for the entering classes of 2017 and 2018 reported Black female student athletes at 87% in 2017, and 86% in 2018 (NCAA). In comparison, White female student-athletes had a GSR of 95% for both years, and Latina female student-athletes had a GSR of 91% in 2017 and 87% in 2018 (NCAA, 2018). Thus, academic achievement challenges exist for Black female athletes.Misinformation and silence of Black female student-athletes have led to gaps in information about academic success and distortions about sport choices. Black females are often told certain sports are beyond their grasp. The absence of research on Black female students'academic achievement in athletics supports the need for this study.

Study Purpose / Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that affect academic achievement of Black female student-athletes.The goal was to achieve a deeper understanding of how to support the academic success of Black female student-athletes using the conceptual framework of student involvement, development and ecological development. For this study, achievement equated to 2.5 grade point average (GPA), matriculation through the academic career of the student, and graduation within six consecutive years. Based on the review of literature, the following research questions were proposed for focusing the study; (1) How do factors within the educational environment influence the academicachievement of Black female student-athletes in sports?

(2) How does ecological factors impact Black female student-athletes toward their academic achievement? (3) How do Black female student-athletes participation in sports impact their academic achievement?

Conceptual Framework / Literature Review

Psycho-social theories of student development in higher education explain how students grow and develop their identities over their college life span. Development is sequential in nature, generally accomplished through tasks, stages, or challenges that must be mastered or overcome before advancement to the subsequent phase of development (Long, 2012). These tasks are frequently age-related, and most theorists working in the area of student development have focused on the developmental stages closely related to the traditional age of college students—ages eighteen to twenty-two years (Long, 2012). In this study, Astin's student involvement theory and Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological development were used to frame discussions of black female studentathletes involvement and motivation based on environment.

Astin contended that students learn by becoming involved. He stated that students who are involved in academic and social dimensions of college life are more inclined to succeed academically and socially in college and other areas of life (Long, 2012). Accordingly, "the amount of physical and psychological energy devoted to the academic experience" (p. 297) directly impacts the likelihood of graduation.

Any activity that develops a connection between the student and the institution can be considered involvement. Involvement could be interaction in classroom settings, time dedicated to studying, or participation in extracurricular activities (Long, 2012). Astin (1984) grouped the activities into three general categories: academic absorption, extracurricular participation, and faculty interaction. Academic absorption refers to those actions that pertain specifically to the academic curriculum (Cheatham and Berg-Cross, 1992). Studying regularly, planning one's education, performing research and participating in an internship are some examples. Participating in activities like student government, intercollegiate athletics or social organizations are examples of extracurricular participation. These activities are crucial in developing the peer relationships that increase institutional commitment (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Faculty interaction consists of developing relationships with professors or other university personnel. Such involvement has consistently been cited as the most important form because it provides students with an intellectual connection to the institution (Astin 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

A strong connection exists between student involvement and student development. Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological development was examined in relation to the participant's social surrounding. The study used Bronfenbrenner's theory to explore how academic and social support received from proximal processes affect the academic performance of Black female student athletes. Bronfenbrenner believed development occurs as a result of interaction between the person and environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, Bronfenbrenner contended that context is the component of the theory that is of the most interest and includes four other components microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner proposed that the developing student is surrounded by layers of relationships like a set of nested Russian dolls (1979).

The inner most circle, called the microsystem, describes the setting in which the student has direct, face-to-face relationships with significant people such as friends, classmates, instructors, roommates, family, teammates, or coaches in their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, the locale also affects the development of students in the microsystem. Some examples of locations in this system are the relationship students have to home, or school/campus. The microsystem is the most influential level of the ecological systems theory. This is where students live daily lives, and this is where they develop.

The next level of the ecological system is the interactions of multiple systems called the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem consists of the interactions between the different parts of a person's microsystem. The mesosystem is where a student's individual microsystems do not function independently but are interconnected and influence upon one another and have an indirect impact on the student (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Beyond the mesosystem is an outer circle of people who are indirectly involved in the student's development lies the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner,1979). The exosystem does not involve the student as an active participant, but it involves factors that can affect a student's life. This can be decisions made bya coach, the employers of a students' parents, the NCAA, and the Department of Education. If a parent is fired from a job, it may pose financial burdens for the parents, family, and onto the student. This type of event can deter development.

Academic Success

Demographic factors that have been associated with the effect of academic performance of student athletes have generally focused around demographics of the student athletes— gender, race, and socioeconomic status, and not on the time commitments that student athletes are required to spend on their sport. Research has alluded to the ability of

student athletes to be high achievers due to their experiences in making quick decisions in intense game situations (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). Studies on academic performance and athletics have shown that participation in college athletics can positively or negatively affect students' academic performance. A 10-year study of academic performance and educational accomplishments of student-athletes at a Division I institution acknowledged a gap in the literature (Purdy, Eitzen& Hufnagel, 1982). The purpose of the study was to evaluate the depth of hindrance Black female athletes are exposed to due to their participation in their sport.

The results of the study were that student-athletes were ill-prepared for college compared to the non-student athlete group. The educational accomplishments of student athletes were generally less positive with low grade point averages and graduation rates than the general student population.

In line with the academic performance of student-athletes, an investigation of the academic preparations and achievements of Black student-athletes found that some athletes come to college prepared academically and that there is a linear relationship with academic performance, gender and socioeconomic status, but not family structure (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). In a study to examine the relationship of selected demographic variables on the academic performance of NCAA Division 1 athletes, researchers studied players' views on their family structure, socioeconomic status, and gender (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). The study utilized the Morris Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Student Athletes' Motivation toward Sports questionnaire coupled with a demographic survey to analyze the results (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). The findings indicated that female student-athletes had a higher correlation amongst gender and academic performance than their male counterparts. They were found to be "more studious, focused, and poised to make a difference in their future" (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). The research suggested that female student athletes come to college with a focus to graduate because there are not many opportunities to obtain professional athletic employment. Therefore, female student-athletes view college athletics as a free path to fulfill their educational goals by playing sports (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012).

A review of the literature suggests that students' perception of the campus environment plays a large role in their educational experience and outcomes (Hoffman, Rankin, &Loya, 2016). For student-athletes, the campus environment encompasses individuals such as faculty, staff, non-athlete peers, athletic department, coaches, other athletes, and the surrounding community. Research proves that negativity can come from different aspects of the college environment. Some of such trajectories are disengagedand disinterested faculty in matters concerning athletics, faculty that harbor negative stereotypes of student-athlete intellectual ability, and pressure from coaches and athletic staff or athletes to perform athletically and academically (Hoffman, Rankin, &Loya, 2016).

Institutional policies can make academic success in college for student-athletes difficult. Student athletes frequently miss classes in order to travel to scheduled sports events and institutional policies require that they make up for missed material, assignments and examinations (Fletcher et al., 2003). Since sport participation may require missing class, institutions have formulated policies to govern athletes' travel to competitions, however, faculty members who have little understanding or empathy for the special needs and requirements of student athletes react negatively. Indeed, faculty and staff are known to have stereotypes towards athletes such as "dumb jocks who are over privileged, pampered, lazy and out of control" (Fletcher et al., 2003:37). The lack of understanding in the special circumstances for student athletes creates and fosters stereotypes of student athletes as dumb jocks who are rewarded with good grades for athletic excellence rather than academic ability (Fletcher et al., 2003). The overall graduation rates of the student athletes within six years is slightly higher than the regular student at 88% (Le Crom et al., 2009; Simon, 2008, NCAA, 2019).

Environmental support for Black female athletes is important to their overall academic success. Carte-Francique(2017), describes the benefits of athletic departments' fostering Black female college students' social development through a culturally relevant framework that creates programs that center specifically on Black female student athletes. The most important criterion that came out of the framework developed was the idea of ethnic care. Ethnic care was based on three components that supported the developmental, social, and academic needs of Black female student- athletes (Carter-Francique, 2017). Such needs included personal uniqueness, appropriateness of emotions in dialogues, and the capacity for empathy (Carter- Francique, 2017). Out of this research, Carter-Francique and colleagues developed a program called *Sista to Sista* at Texas A&M University to facilitate meaningful dialogues and nurture Black female student-athletes.

Merged in the idea of a sense of belonging and a successful educational environment is the need for social support. Social support is described as the "existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about and value us" (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013). Research on social support has delineated specific ways in which aid in provided to individuals. There are four categories of support: appraisal

support, emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013). Appraisal supportis described as an individual or organization providing information, constructive criticism, or affirmation. Emotional support is expressed as providing an empathetic environment of love, trust, and care. Informational support is described as providing information, advice, and suggestions. Instrumental support is characterized by an individual or organization providing tangible and palpable services and assistance. Each ofthe functions can be seen as instrumental supports at any specific time in a students' life, and many times the supports overlap (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013).

In a qualitative study of Black college athletes at PWI to understand the perceptions of academic success and how social supports contribute, nine black college athletes articulated their perceptions of success through a mix of cognitive and noncognitive factors. Many students deemed the definition of academic success were the grades that they made and that it related to their personal effort and balancing the student- athlete life role (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013).

Method

The study used a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews to understand factors most relevant to academic success for Black female student-athletes. The use of qualitative in-depth interviews was necessary to examine the topic thoroughly and gain insight into the rich meanings of the student experiences. Qualitative research permits participants to speak in their own voice, rather than conforming to categories and terms imposed on them by others (Sofaer, 1999).

Phenomenological inquiry was used to guide the study so as to better understand the lived experiences of Black female student-athletes and how they are able to perform successfully in athletics and academics.

Study participants were given the opportunity to communicate stories about their undergraduate encounters. Experiences of Black women have been misrepresented, misappropriated, and mis-constructed in many ways, specifically in research (Jones, 1991). The representation of members of the Black family life has been largely quantitative data defined through terms of difference from Whiteness (Jones, 1991). Understanding this context and how it plays a role in Black female student athletes' actions was important to this study.

It was assumed that a qualitative research design is the best way to engage student-athletes by methods such as interviewing to gain an understanding of their background and experiences encountered in college. This study also assumed that all participants will answer all questions honestly, and that the researchers will analyze data without apparent biases. The researchers acknowledge past experiences as student athletes. To limit any prior biases, the researchers bracketed their thoughts in the resulting interviewing and analysis processes.

Site Selection

There are 12 member institutions within the study population with nearly 340,000 students. In planning the study, the researchers chose to use Black female student-athletes of a large Division I Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) as the participants. Selecting a large Division I HSI institution allowed the researchers greater opportunities to recruit participants for the study. The 2017-2018 undergraduate enrollment was listed as 41,834. After researching Black female student-athletes participating in sports in all of the institutions, the HSI was chosen based on the number of athletes participating in a variety of sports with a diversity of state and national origin.

Population and Sample Selection

Study participants were female student-athletes currently participating in athletics and identify as Black and attending a public university. It was important that all participants were currently enrolled and living the experience as a student-athlete to support the validity of the results of the study. The institution selected has a populationof roughly 42,000 with close to 12% of the population identifying as Black (FIU, 2019). This institution was chosen due to the accessibility to a large population of Black female student-athletes

This study used purposeful sampling. All participants were Black female student- athletes who were actively participating in athletics. Purposeful sampling is a commonly described means of sampling in the qualitative methods literature. It involves identifying and selecting individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, et al, 2013). This type of sampling notes the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Palinkas, et al, 2013).

All participants were asked to complete a consent form prior to data collection. Organizational support was obtained through written letters to the coaches of the institution explaining the purpose of the research, description of the study, benefits, risks, and the reassurance of confidentiality. The survey questions were composed of demographic information, as well as questions on athletic and academic motivations. The researchers identified 12 participants from

the institution who met the following criteria: female, identified as Black, currently participating in athletics, and in good academic standing.

Data Collection

Data collection was completed in two parts. In part one, participants completed a demographic survey. In the second part of the study, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant using a standardized set of questions that asked all participants individualized questions directly related to the research questions. All parts of the questions allowed the researchers the ability to extract rich data to understand the factors that encourage success (and those that discourage) in the academic achievement of Black female student-athletes participating in sports.

Initially written permission for the research to be conducted was obtained from the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB) and participating institution. Written permission was sought from athletic directors and head coaches at the selected institution. Black female student-athletes from participating institution meeting the criteria were notified by the researchers. After receiving permission, the researchers individually contacted the students to inform them of the research opportunity. Afterwards, student participants received a survey with an information sheet attached regarding the purpose of the study, and other pertinent information as well as the informed consent form.

To minimize coercion, students were reassured that the decision to participate or not to participate in the study would not influence their standing as a student at the institution or influence as an athlete. They were reassured that the utmost confidentiality will be utilized in the research. Participants were then asked to read and sign the consentform. Data was collected for this study through 12 questionnaires and interviews. Because of COVID-19, 11 of the 12 interviews were conducted semi-structured via teleconferencing. All participants agreed to being videoed and audio recorded.

Interviews were transcribed within a couple of days of occurrence, after which participants were able to review their comments and the researchers were able toask follow-up questions. Interview times varied and were scheduled at times conducive for both participants and the researchers. The researchers also took field notes during each interview.

Data Analysis

Survey questions were used to get preliminary demographic information from participants. This was used with the interviews to compile robust information about the perceptions of the participants. The researchers employed Creswell's (2014) steps in data analysis by organizing and preparing the data for analysis. This involved transcribing interviews, reviewing notes and memos taken during communication with participants, cataloguing all of the supplemental visual and audio materials, and sorting and arranging the data into different types (Creswell, 2014, p. 197).

The interviews were all transcribed with the assistance of Zoom recording software and Otter transcription software. The audio files from the taped interviews were downloaded and saved into Otter AI. The transcription software identified words used frequently in the interview and listed them at the top of the transcription. The words were later used in coding the data.

The researchers then used Quirkos, a qualitative computer data analysis program, in organizing, sorting, and assigning codes from the interviews in order to assist in analyzing the data (Creswell, pg. 195). The interview transcripts from Otter AI were entered into the Quirkos software as a word document. The transcripts generated additional themes from the data and created a template of visual codes. The researchers then compared the themes from the interview transcriptions and the qualitative analysis software to find similarities, then made themes through thematic analysis.

As the data was coded and organized, the themes identified in the research questions, expanded into multiple sub-themes which included the environmental influence on academic achievement, the ecological factors on academic achievement, and the perceptions of how their overall participation affects academic achievement.

Trustworthiness

In order to build trustworthiness in the study, each step of the research process needed to include it by design. In this study member checking and prolonged engagement was used to build study trustworthiness. Member checking was done to ensure that the researcher checked for clarity in understanding the participants, restating and summarizing information shared by participants to ensure that the information accurately reflected theirexperiences.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Description of the Participants: Information from each participant was gathered in the initial contact. After the participants confirmed their interest in the study, they were sent a demographic profile to capture information about the student-athlete to ensure they met the following: 1) the student-athlete must have identified as an African-American,

Black, or from the African diaspora; and 2) the student-athlete must be in good academic standing with their institution with at least a 2.5 GPA. The pseudonyms used to identify the participants in the study were selected by the researchers and confirmed by the participant during the demographic profile and used during the interviews. Table 1 is a demographic description of the 12 participants interviewed.

Table 1
Demographics of the Participants

Participant	Age	Year	Sport	Home	Ethnicity	Major	GPA	Family
Liz	19	Fr.	CC	FL	Haitian Am	Nutrition	2.8	2 Parents, 1B, 1S
Rhianna	21	Jr.	TF	Carib	Black	Rec Therapy	3.1	Mom
Jordan	18	Fr.	BB	FL	Black	Electrical Eng	2.8	2 Parents, 2S
Carmen	22	Sr.	VB	FL	Black	Communications	2.9	2 Parents
Angelica	21	Sr.	VB	IL	African Am	Information Tech	3.0	2 Parents, 1S
Devin	19	So.	CC	FL	Haitian Am	Nursing	3.2	Mom, 1S
Kobena	20	Sr.	BB	TX	Black	Communications	3.0	2 Parents, 1B
Lady Pele	20	Jr.	S	Carib	Black	Hospitality	3.5	Mom, 1B
Statia	19	Fr.	TF	FL	African Am	Undecided	3.5	Mom
Wilma	20	So.	TF	Carib	Afro Latina	Biology	3.8	2 Parents, 1S, 1B
Gladys	22	Sr.	TF	Africa	African	Computer Tech.	4.0	2 Parents, 3S
Mimi	18	So.	SW	Europe	Black	Biochemistry	3.2	2 Parents, 1S

Note. Sports: Swimming (Sw), Track & Field (TF), Soccer (S), Basketball (BB), CrossCountry (CC), Volleyball (VB); Home: Caribbean (Carib); Ethnicity: Haitian American (Haitian Am), African American (African Am)

Phenomenological Analysis

The themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews were categorized into three themes and three sub-themes, which were consistent with the research questions. The major themes identified from the results of the study were:

1. Relationships:
- Educational – professors, instructors, faculty, classmates, tutors
- Familial relationships—immediate/extended family, religious affiliations, boy/girlfriends, HS staffing, best friends
- Sport relationships—coaches, teammates, academic advisors
2. Environment—location of school/campus, layout of campus
3. Persistence—commitment and competitiveness

All of the themes were related to the first research question: *How do factors within the educational environment influence the academic achievement of Black female student athletes in sports?* Theme two addressed the second

research question; *How does ecological factors impact Black female student athletes in sports toward their academic achievement?* The third theme addressed the third research question; *How do Black female student athletes perceive their participation in sports impacts their academic achievement?* Each theme is discussed in further detail below.

Research Question 1 (RQ1)

How do factors within the educational environment influence the academic achievement of Black female student athletes in sports?

Theme 1: Relationships

Sub-Theme: Educational. Participants believed that there were many people in their educational environment at the university that influenced how they performed in classes. The relationships discussed were with (or without) faculty (professors, instructors, teacher assistants), tutors and classmates.

Most of the participants felt that being in a class with a good teacher was paramount in doing well in classes. It was stated that they consult with a website, *Rate My Professor,* when choosing professors to review the professor's teaching, grading, difficulty, and overall quality.

The majority of participants did not meet with students after class or for study groups. They all lamented that they didn't have time to work with study groups or meet with professors during office hours. Most participants had dedicated study hall hours which regulated that they spend one to three hours with tutors from the Student-Athlete Academic Center (SAAC).

The participants described stereotyping from many individuals based on their athletic ability in which they felt that their peers and professors downgraded their intelligence. They verbalized the assumptions on the part of their classmates and professors that they were at the institution to play sports and grades were given to them in their quest for academic success. One participant described situations where faculty, tutors, and classmates made remarks like "you don't have to go to class" or "just tell your coach" in reference to not going to class or getting low grades. A few of the participants felt that their professors were hard on them in regards to the service they were providing to the institution.

Another stated: "The chair of the pre-medical program was also my first advisor. She discouraged me from declaring a major in pre-med (biology). She encouraged me to do health management or education with a science focus. According to her, I wouldn't graduate with that degree while being an athlete and I also wasn't going to get good enough grades to get into medical school. I changed advisors after that encounter. I also never took her class."

The experiences that the athletes described did not hinder their academic success, but it did make an impression that some of the individuals they interacted with on campus may not have had high expectations of them. Moreover, after discussing, two participants believed that they needed to form a better relationship with their professors.

Sub-Theme 2: Familial. There was a consensus amongst all participants in the study that they learned how to develop relationships from a young age through family interactions. All of the participants have siblings and felt that early socialization, the process of learning how to become members of society, began with interfamily socialization. This theme was one of the stronger topics discussed in all of the interviews. All of the participants expressed that a familial relationship hasimpacted their overall success in academics in college. In the sub-themes below, the students described how their familial relationships with parents, community members, High School staff, and partners have assisted their academic accomplishments.

Parents. All participants identified either a mother, father, or grandparents as powerful influences in their academic achievement. Eighty percent of the participants answered by stating their mother.

Out of this sub-theme the topic of role models was noted. It is not listed as a sub- theme, though powerful in the responses, this is mentioned in the sub-theme of parents because most of the responses about role models was geared towards parents. The conversations of role models were mentioned by one respondent who was inspired by the tenacity of her Haitian mother who immigrated to the United States and later sponsored her parents and siblings.

Another respondent had strong convictions about the role that her mother has played in her academics. She only considers her mother in her immediate family. She stated that her mother has supported her as a single mother all of her life and has been her sole motivating force behind her academic success:

Mummy is my whole world. I am doing everything to be in her good graces and succeed for her. She was my first teacher so it's only fitting that I do well because of her right? When I think that I can't go on, she motivates me to push harder. When I first got to college the English classes were difficult. I spell some words in British fashion. She went on to explain that she is accustomed to spelling words with a "u" as in "colour, favourite, catalogue, or labour", or

with"que" as in "cheque", not "check", which caused her to get "low marks" on some assignments. I called home crying to my Mummy and she said 'Di hotta di battle, di sweeta di victry. So shut yatrap!'. She was telling me that success is better after hard work and struggling and that I needed to stop complaining. That was her tough love and I thank her for it.

Community at home (members of the neighborhood).The participants hailed from a variety of locations with varying socio-economic demographics, but all women found that the neighborhoods they grew up in impacted their academics in some way. One athlete described how her sport and neighborhood allowed her access to the best schools and international travel which afforded her the opportunity to get a full scholarship to attend college in the United States.

Two participants noted that while their family was very instrumental in shaping their college aspirations, their religious community had a major impact impacts on their academic support. One participant expressed:

My church and community are one and the same. The people who went to my church lived in the same community as me and told me that I was going to be successful. They explained that God chose a plan for me and I should follow it. I am following it. I used to be a Sunday school teacher and I learned how to listen and lead because of that. I have faith that success is in his plan and I am just following it.

The other participant expressed her motivation from religion as an important factor :
God has played a huge factor in my success in school. Prayer is a big part of my faith. Each day I start my day with a call from my home church's prayer line. I watch online sermons since I can't attend regularly at home in Texas. I also pray with my teammates who want to. I also get a scholarship each year from my church that helps with expenses not covered by my scholarships. I feel grounded knowing that I have a greater power watching over me and guiding me. I wouldn't have made it this far without him [sic].

Highschool staff (Counselors/Teachers).Some participants indicated their relationship with high school staff was instrumental in academic success in college. Many of the athletes explained that their high school classes strongly prepared them for academic success in college. The reason being, they had great high school instructors. They were strong in their areas, tough during instruction time, and consistent in making sure the students didn't cut corners

One participant described how she felt her teachers pushed all students academically in the Caribbean based on their written exams:

School in the Caribbean has contributed to my success in school. I think that school in the Caribbean is much more difficult than in America. Our version of high school expects more out of students. By Standard 5 students in the

Caribbean are expected to know what they want to do in life. In Form 5 which is like America's 10thgrade, we sit for the CXC exam which allows us to continue to traditional pre-college school or sends us to vocational school. The system is very competitive and only students who are prepared academically get to continue to pre-college schools, the others have to settle for vocations or go to work. There are still good jobs you can get, but in order to really get ahead in life you have to go to Form 6 and do O and A levels for entrance into college. For me I was preparing for CXC since I started school. I took lessons after schoolto help with my scores. It's a long essay exam. That hard work has prepared me for university studies and to be successful in school. My Misses (teachers) prepared me for the work here in America.

Other participants mentioned roommates motivating them to do well academically. They commented on how their teammates were major support in their academics. Mimi commented, "My teammates support me and help me when I don't understand something in the classroom." One athlete believed that her friendships have had the most influence on her academic success. She shared:

My parents have been stressed ever since I was a senior in high school coming to college. I am the third kid in college. My brother and sister are two and three years older than me so we have almost always been in school together. We all do well in school, but I also really wanted to run.It is my passion and my release. I could have gone to community collegeand waited until my brother and sister graduated, but it worked out that I got a scholarship at [the university]. My parents stress so much about my grades I don't talk to them about my grades! They so aggie. Even if I had problems, I wouldn't tell them because they would tell me to come home. All of the answers to my problems are 'come home'. *'You sick? Come home. You tired of Miami? Come home. You don't like your coach? Come home. You hungry? Come home.'* I've made friends with my roommates and we study together.
It's easy because we also live together so we can decide to work anytime. We have quiet time in our suite Monday through Thursday from 10pm on. No loud music or guests. We give respect to our roommates and I think that helps with ourclasswork.

Sub-Theme 3: Sports. The relationships that the athletes had with people related to their sports also had a profound influence on some of the participants. Out of the theme of sports relationships, the sub-themes of coaches, advisors, and teammatesemerged.

Only one Black female student-athlete stated that she was encouraged to perform academically by a coach. She shared that her coach was very adamant about making good grades. She explained that her coach said that certain GPAs were required in the upper level of some of the majors that they were interested in applying to. She went on to speak at length about her admiration for her coach as a role model and as a Black woman in athletic administration at a predominately White university.Other participants did not have any feelings towards the institution's athletic administration or coaches, but there were strong feelings towards teammates andacademic advisors being a source of strength to make sure they were academically successful.

Advisors. Wilma switched from one advisor who was the chair of the department, to another advisor who she felt has been supportive of her academic goal from the start. One student athlete clarified:

The most valuable interaction to my educational attainment has been with my academic advisor. She ensures that I am on the right track to graduate. If something changes in my program, a requirement changes, she tells me right away. I also think she pushes me to be better. I can get a degree with Cs, but she tries to get me to do better. She helps me find the best professors that fit my style of learning with the right class times for me which helps me get to practice on time.

Another student athlete felt that her relationship with her academic advisor was important to her academic success. She said:

I enjoy the relationship that I have with my advisor. She has been supportive of me in my educational endeavors. I am a biochemistry major and I need to be matched with instructors that are sympathetic to my commitments to the university. My advisor makes sure that I am registered for the right classes during the right semesters. She matches up harder classes in my off-season and during the summer with easier classes when I'm in season. She wants to see me graduate just as much as I do! She was also a swimmer, so she knows what it's like to be an athlete in college.

The efforts made by the advisors were noted by eight participants which also made them feel that the university was doing their job in assisting this special population of students.

Teammates. The other sports relationship that was meaningful in the student athletes' academic goals is the relationship with their teammates. Three of the twelve athletes acknowledge the low participation of Black female athletes playing their sport.

Most participants relayed that their relationships with their teammates was important for both their sport and for academics. They linked the success of one with the other. One participant specified, "I guess my teammate interaction is important. I play on a team sport, so it requires that we work together. That relates to me keeping my scholarship and being able to stay in school. So, I guess making sure we do well on the field is as important to getting my degree" Another affirmed, "All those that sweat it out with me are valuable to my education because those are the ones who help me to keep my scholarship. We all want to see our teams win, but we also want to see each other graduate"

Research Question 2: (RQ2)

How does ecological factors impact Black female student athletes toward their academic achievement?

Theme 2: Environment

This theme explored how the location of the institution and overall campus environment impacts the academic success of Black female student-athletes. For many of the students the institution locale in sunny Florida was the immediate draw in being recruited to the institution. For some, the weather made students feel comfortable in the tropical climate which assisted in the transition to a new environment and ultimately allowed them to be able to perform academically and athletically. One participant fromFlorida, explained that she chose the institution because of its proximity to home, "Being so close to my childhood home has allowed me to grow independently as well as enjoy the support of family being nearby." She described this feeling of comfort that has helpedher in herclasses.

Participants also complimented the campus esthetics and noted that the walkable campus with the proximity of housing near the classes and practice fields made juggling academics and sport easy. One student reported:

I think living close to the practice facilities allows for me to be successful in my classes and in my sport. It lowers my stress level to get to practice and workouts on time which allows me to concentrate on my schoolwork when I need to. Everything that I need on campus is close by. I'm near all of the science buildings which have their own study facilities, so I don't have to go to the library. There are also study rooms in our dorms, in the SAAC, and just nice places all over campus that I can go to. I train and work out in the early morning, eat breakfast (sometimes), take

classes in the later mornings, and I'm done with classes by noon. Practice is normally in the early evenings. Not having to run around campus gives me time to get ready for practice and relax. After practice I eat, get a shower and then study. Nothing is too far away that I need to rush or wake up really early for.

They also described the accessibility of the campus, "Everything is in reach. The library, study rooms, dorms, practice and game fields". Many details of the campus were discovered to be important for Black female student athletes. Another such factor was class size. A participant described how she thought that the larger class sizes would prepare her future. The participants did not see their race or sociocultural experience as major environmental factors that impacted their academic success.

Research Question 3 (RQ3)

How do Black female student athletes perceive their participation in sport impact their academic achievement?

Theme 3: Participation

The participation theme arose when the participants were asked about how their sport impacted their academic pursuit for excellence. The question was intended to make the researchers aware of the challenges the athletes faced while undergoing dual roles as a student and as an athlete. The consensus of the athlete's responses focused on themselves being determined, committed, and competitive.

Kobenashared that she doesn't take anything for granted. She said, "I know it was a blessing to make it here, so I'm working hard to stay here. I use time management and stay ahead of schedule so that I can make sure my work is done before I have a meet. I know how important my grades are. I have to keep a 2.0 GPA to be eligible and I am way above that."

Discussion of Results

This research collected qualitative data by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. Participants in the study included 12 Black female student athletes at a large, Division 1 public university. The data were coded, analyzed, and organized using categories and subcategories to assist with theme development.

Three major themes emerged from the data: relationships, environment, and persistence. Under the theme of relationship, three sub-themes developed: educational relationships, familial relationships, and sport relationships. The findings were indicative of the research questions and in line with the conceptual framework of the study. As a secondary level of analysis, the relevant conceptual theories were reviewed and were tied into the results as well.

Both researchers used in the study, Astin and Bronfenbrenner, agree that the student's environment serves as a means of development for the student. Astin's student development theory contends that students learn by being involved. In his research, he posited that there were three categories of activities: academic absorption, extracurricular participation, and faculty interaction. In this study, the responses of the participants coincided with Astin's categories of activities. All of the Black female student athletes acknowledged their unique status as student-athletes and how their participation advanced their goal of a college degree.

Participants responses also indicated that educational relationships were important to their academic success which relates to the faculty interaction in Astin's categories of activities. The majority of participants concurred that having a relationship with faculty strengthened their knowledge of material related to classes as well as their understanding of what professors intend for them to do. Moreover, creating a relationship with faculty would also be an opportunity to allow professors to get to know the student-athletes educational talents.

Astin's final category of academic absorption is described as actions that pertain specifically to the academic curriculum (Cheatham and Berg-Cross, 1992). Participants described academic absorption in their studying habits, how they planned to complete work while traveling for games, and their coordinating schedules to accommodate training, practices, and games.

Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological development was utilized to examine the participants social surrounding in relation to their collegiate academic success.

Bronfenbrenner believed development occurs as a result of interaction between the person and their environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The interview questions for the study were designed to determine if any of the four components of Bronfenbrenner's systems were relevant in the participant's academic success.
The four system components—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem are described as multi-layer system of relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each system was addressed by participants which included

relationships and environmental factors. Much of the participant responses considered the factors in the inner-most system, microsystem, to be the most influential in their academic success.

Black Females' Experiences as Students

The research questions sought to determine the experiences of Black female student athletes within the specific context of academics. The participants in this study described their transition from high school to college academics. One participant, a junior, attended three institutions because of her difficult transition from high school to college. Moreover, all of the participants spoke of the challenges of their first year of studies as well as the juggling between sports and classwork. Specifically, the women from the Caribbean shared their observations and frustrations with the differences between American and Caribbean educational systems. Five of the women in the study discussed frustration in direct relationship to their majors and major professors. Although it is common for students to struggle during the transition from high school to college academics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), student athletes face additional challenges that include 20-hr per week practices, rigorous travel schedules, poor and disconnected advising, lack of information, and being stereotyped by teachers as dumb, privileged, and unmotivated (Ferrante et al., 2005). In addition, half of the women transitioned from different educational systems. Adjusting to different ways of teaching, test-taking, and general delivery of education as well as cultural norms emanating from educational systems are common for international students (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Sacker, Schoon, & Barley, 2002).

Research on both faculty and staff attitudes toward student athletes continues to find that athletes contend with negative stereotyping from their peers and faculty especially in regard to academic competence, special services, and recognition (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995). In addition, research has found that misperceptions of student athletes as "dumb jocks" or a privileged group of academically underqualified and under-motivated individuals have led to a lack of understanding and a lack of support for one of the most diverse student populations on college campuses today (Ferrante et al., 1996). More than half of the participants described experiencing stereotyping which supports research that suggests athletic stereotyping.

Black Females' Experiences as Athletes

The research also sought to determine the experiences of Black female student athletes within the specific context of athletics. All of the participants identified as either African American, Black, or of the African Diaspora. More than half of the participants did not identify as American. They described that while they were "of African descent" they were not American and did not harbor the emotions of Black Americans and their plight in America. For the researchers, this removed the need to divulge in racial identity. While they identified as Black, the majority of participants did not feel as though their race impacted their academics in college.However, while the participants of African diaspora were devoid of the historical memory and emotionalunderpinnings of being Black Americans, this study result does not in any conclusion suggest that Black African American female college athletes are not subjected to daily racial microaggressions in sports. A further research study in this area of inquiry is suggested.

Relationships

Participants described the relationship that they held with their academic advisor played a major role in their academic success while the relationship with their coaches was not considered important to their academic success. Research to determine the impact of coaching relationships on Black student athlete's perceptions of their academic achievement may be useful. There is empirical research supporting that student athlete relationships with coaches can impede a student's development, specifically pertaining to a student's ability to achieve autonomy and independence (Cornelius, 1995). Jowett et al. (2010) qualitative case study supported the existence of closeness, co-orientation, and complementarity in the coach- athlete relationship that was imperative in the success of a student-athlete. This work supports the need for further research to develop a credible depository about coach- athlete relationships that impact performance, academically andathletically.

Relevant to this study would be research examining coaching relationships from a Black female student athlete perspective that considers cultural expectations intertwined with coaching expectations. One woman in this study touched on that expectations. She overwhelmingly felt that her coach treated her with care and concern. She described her as a mentor and felt that it was her job to do well in school to make the coach "look good" because she was an African American coach. Due to the lack of Black female role models within athletics, this participant was empathic in her description of the coach and the assistance that she provided in her collegiate experience.

The other women participants seemed disconnected from their coaching staff mainly because they could not relate to or turn to for support. The lack of trust and support could be an impediment in academics and athletics and for student success and development.

Researchers continue to study the representation of minority coaches, administrators and staff in athletics on college campuses (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Gaston, 2003; Lapchick, 2003). The results continue to indicate decreasing numbers of minorities and women across all divisions and all sports. These studies confirm quantitatively that a lack of minority and female representation continues to hinder the disproportionately large Black female athlete population. Furthermore, findings from this study support the consequences of not having role models and the effect role models can play in the success of some Black female athletes. The perception from the participants in this study that there were few Black female role models, and the importance they seemed to place on this, suggests a possible connection to previous research findings. Researchers suggest a linkage with having a Black female role model by whom the athlete feels cared for, trusts, and wants to please, and her ability to successfully steer through her athletic involvement in college (Lee & Rotella,1999; Mcdowall-Long, 2010, Potrac, Gilbert, & Denison, 2015).

Finally, it is important to note that the women in this study reported that although they experienced many challenges and difficulties during their collegiate experiences, they felt their experiences had given them a stronger belief in self, made them better prepared for life, and had fostered advocacy in them for others. These are important findings as student affairs practitioners consider how to best meet the needs of Black female student athletes.

Conclusion

The primary intention of this study was to understand how participation impacted academic achievement of Black female student-athletes at a large Division I university. Few studies evaluating Black female student-athletes' academic achievement have been conducted. As such, this study was an attempt to fill the gap in the literature and to advance knowledge of the sub-group. The experiences of the Black female student-athletes in this study allow an understanding of the challenges encountered by Black femalestudent-athletesprimarily competing in non-revenue generating sports and places in perspective the meaningfulness of their experiences to share how they have achieved positive outcomes which have been missing from previous studies.

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