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# Leaders Yearning For Excellence: How Motivation and Self-Determination Benefits a Diverse Group of Student Athletes

## **About the Author(s)**

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## LEADERS YEARNING FOR EXCELLENCE: HOW MOTIVATION AND SELF-DETERMINATION BENEFITS A DIVERSE GROUP OF STUDENT ATHLETES

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### **Abstract**

Many athletic departments within Predominately White Institutions (PWI's) have a culmination of competition, academic support, and an abundance of campus support. With this, comes an expected tradition of athletic prestige. Winning athletic contests is culturally derived attitude. At the same time, improving academic motivation and success of student athletes should be an equally important, culturally derived attitude as well. Given the need to improve academic outcomes of diverse student athletes, the emphasis to improve holistic development is imperative in encouraging academic growth while leading student athletes to recognize, understand, and analyze social situations.

This study highlights a diverse group of student athletes at PWI's, and their motivational factors that influenced academic and athletic outcomes. This study also utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens to thoroughly examine and explain the athletic and academic experiences of diverse student athletes at PWI's. The necessary tenet within CRT in order to explore this study is the interest convergence principle.

### **Introduction**

Athletics, coupled with academic preparedness and growth, has the potential to benefit student athletes in areas far beyond their respective playing careers. The visibility of not only these student athletes, but their collegiate institutions as well, increases the drive and motivation to succeed in athletic endeavors as well as attend these prestigious institutions. As the visibility and exposure of the athletic world continues to grow, the relationship between athletic prowess and academic excellence has caused the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to modify numerous academic requirements for institutions accountability. Although many institutions, athletic personnel, and student athletes adhere to many academic requirements, there are still institutions that continue to perpetuate systematic and institutional practices that produce to low academic performance outcomes from Black/diverse student athletes.

There is a vast amount of literature highlighting the relationship between athletics and academics. However, the unequal representation of the two within athletic departments at highly visible collegiate institutions, demands immediate analysis, considering that both play a critical role in the lives of student athletes beyond their careers. Much of the research in regards to connecting athletics and academics revolves around Black and diverse, revenue producing (i.e. football, men's and women's basketball) student athletes. However, at many institutions, a diverse student athlete population dominates athletic departments. In order to enhance the holistic development of the total student athlete population, the constant critique of these individuals must be analyzed consistently. Edwards (1986), and many scholars since, have enlightened and informed the public on the mobility aspirations of Black athletes and other racially diverse athletes as well. The emphasis of winning in athletic departments is seemingly far ahead that of academics importance, which in turn causes discourse in the total

measurement of success. As collegiate athletic programs generate revenue, increase visibility, recruit students, and receive alumni support-to-support athletic departments (Beamon, 2008; Donnor, 2005; Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999), these athletic departments turn into progressive, professional plantations with an expected outcome of athletic success and prestige. Winning numerous games and leading athletes to and through their lifelong goals of being a professional athlete is indeed great for athletic departments and the student athletes they service, however, in order to improve academic success rates within a diverse student athlete population, institutions should work to prepare these individuals for their futures after expired eligibility. If athletic departments are to change the academic outcomes of Black/diverse student athletes, then they must be able to recruit and obtain academically motivated student athletes as well as employees that understand the goal of a meaningful education.

Although there is literature in regards to Black and diverse athletes, the research that specifically concentrates on the motivations of this population and how it relates to academic performance has received little attention. Critics have argued that revenue generating sport within the NCAA serve as training and recruiting agencies for professional sports organizations. Therefore, these institutions encourage student athletes to direct their primary attention to performing well at their sports in deference to doing well academically (Snyder, 1996). This perceived lack of motivation; often reflected in a general “misidentification” with school and reduces academic performance (Snyder, 1996; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1992). In other words, Black and diverse student athletes seem less willing to become motivated to transfer their athletic motivation into academic motivation (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999). However, after processing their college careers after their eligibility expires, African American student athletes have to face reality and conclude that competitive athletics will no longer be a part of who they are or what they do.

Motivation has the ability to influence specific goals of students, more specifically, Black and diverse student athletes; it helps them acquire knowledge, develop social qualities, increase initiation, improve performance and develop a sense of discipline. Furthermore, motivation and its usefulness in predicting athletic and academic success for African American student athletes continues to generate thought provoking discussions as well (Sellers, Chavous, & Brown, 2002). Specifically, motivation can be a useful predictor in both athletic and academic success.

Nonetheless, several student athletes are committed and motivated to succeed athletically and academically. These students do not have the fear of failure and are persistent through hard times (Snyder, 1996). They have a strong sense of self-worth and believe they have the ability to compete physically and intellectually, and expect to succeed and take pride in their academic achievements (Snyder, 1996). These students have a history of strong academic performance which reinforces their feelings of self-worth and gives them confidence in their ability to succeed academically (Snyder, 1996).

### **Motivation**

A continuous and consistent question arises when analyzing the Black/diverse individual within the United States of America; this question is “Are they motivated to succeed?” This question arises even more so when it comes to the Black/diverse student athlete. Although the literature in regards to how Black and diverse student athletes are motivated is growing, the existing literature in regards to these students primarily focuses on their perceived deficits. For instance, the literature in regards to this population often references a lack of willingness to participate in academics, intellectual inferiority, or the lack of interest (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999; Snyder, 1996; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1992). Coupled with this,

there also is not much literature that highlights the motivations of Black/diverse student athletes; only generalities and of course, low expectations. Therefore, the only belief that people in positions of power tend to rely on is what is commonly written about them; along with the perceived notions of these individuals, which further leads to low expectations. Therefore, organizing literature that highlights the positive motivational factors of student athletes is necessary, but at the same time, a challenge due to the stigma, status, and partially due to the topics motivation researchers have chosen to pursue in regards to these individuals. In other words, the willingness on behalf of scholars and educators to critically observe, focus, and disseminate information on the positive motivation factors as it represents this population, is indeed minimal.

It is apparent that the literature highlights many perceived negatives from Black/diverse students and student athletes. Additionally, the existing literature also lacks the need to address the common practices that lead to low expectations and expected outcomes of this population. The common result of low academic standards and results from certain individuals is not due to intellectual incompetence or deficient learning skills, but rather the low expectations that are placed on them by either themselves, their surrounding network, or society itself. Accordingly, within American society, Black and diverse people are deemed and recognized primarily as athletes and entertainers, but rarely as academicians or scholars. Furthermore, these same individuals generate millions of dollars for their respective institutions, only to recognize that their academic achievements is with doubt, hesitation, and resentment. These student athletes are questioned for their academic ability, whereas they are seen as individuals who would not have been admitted into college without physical giftedness (Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). As a result, the academic expectations for these students are relatively low from peers and others surrounding them in a campus environment (Steel, 1997).

With these statements and expectations comes belief, and ultimately the focus on positive motivation deteriorates over time. However, many student athletes combat these stereotypes and beliefs by exemplifying high levels of motivation, high standards, and are highly motivated to succeed academically. Although sparse, disproving intellectual stereotypes has surfaced throughout the literature and research for Black/diverse student athletes as well. For that matter, the majority of academically successful Black/diverse student athletes have felt, in different ways, the need to disprove specific stereotypes conveyed upon them in regards to academic competence (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

Because these student athletes continue to defy literature written about them, their stories and experiences must be told. Therefore, the need to address the positive motivations of African American student athletes is timely. Once these positive motivational factors are uncovered, we as educators can then properly explain and enlighten the masses on the positive motivations that these individuals tend to exhibit on a regular basis (Covington & Covington, 1992; Berry, 1976). In simplifying the term, however, motivation is the dynamics that “gets us going and helps us get the job done” (Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). For those who wish to achieve success, these forces are driven by hope, confidence, pride, and expectation. For those who wish to avoid failure, they have feelings of indignity, embarrassment, and shame. That said, as we see student athletes progress through both their athletic and academic goals, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators make up the complete core of these student athletes (Woodruff & Schallert, 2008).

With student athletes in particular, their expectations along with the athletic lifestyle drive these individuals to value behaviors that identify with an accepted process necessary to achieve success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Student athletes have personal goals and work towards

obtaining these goals, therefore the behavior in which a student athlete demonstrates is influenced by certain factors.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Black and diverse student athletes, their pursuit of athletic and academic excellence, and their specific motivations can be analyzed through Critical Race Theory (CRT). The images produced through CRT are perspectives that convey vivid reproductions of realities within particular cultures. At its purest form, CRT is as a critique of racial reform as well as a collection of evidence from activists and scholars that seek to transform the relationship between race and power in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Emerging in the 1970's, in an effort to resist push back from the dominant culture during the Civil Rights era, new theories and strategies were warranted in order to combat more subtle expressions of racial discourse that gained ground against people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). According to Delgado (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT emerged through the early works of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both of whom were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. Alan Freeman's article, "*Legitimizing racial discrimination through antidiscrimination law: A critical review of Supreme Court doctrine,*" helped begin the CRT framework. This article documents how the United States Supreme Court implements and rationalizes racial jurisprudence; even when seemingly liberal, the Supreme Court exercises and legitimizes racism. Furthermore, Freeman (1977) suggests that certain institutional practices normalize and control cultural messages, policies, and traditions that function to benefit those in power both directly and indirectly (Donnor, 2005).

CRT has also adopted a feminist perspective that seeks to understand and transform unjust social situations. The insights of feminism highlights the relationship of power and the construction of social roles -- the unseen, invisible collection of patterns and habits that make up patriarchy and other types of domination. Accordingly, CRT is necessary in order to analyze race critically, largely in part, because of the implementation and conviction of race within American society. This reality has been in American society since Europeans used race as a means to build status and hierarchy on North American soil, while African slaves and indigenous people were reduced to subordinate and inferior beings. These actions have in turn, reproduced racial discrimination, hierarchy, judgments, stereotypes, and ideologies that occur in society as well as the workplace.

### **The Interest Convergence Principle of CRT**

For the purposes of this study, one tenet of CRT is necessary – the interest convergence principle. The interest convergence principle is necessary in order to highlight covert forms of prejudices and injustices that occur to Black and diverse individuals. This principle also provides solutions to overcome macroaggressions and subtle forms of discrimination. Additionally, the interest convergence principle is used to disengage merit and color blindness, which are indeed common practices that influence and sustain economic, political, and social inequality within American society. While people of color continuously advocate coexistence throughout society, evaluations of current social, political, and economic crises demonstrate the preferences of the authorities. That said, the interest convergence principle, in regards to this study, is applied as a means to highlight the current educational context of academic outcomes of Black/diverse student athletes and the low expectations placed on them by people in positions of power.

Moreover, the interest convergence principle is a method to understand the common and underlying practices and values in an athletic department that requires so little commitment from its staff. Additionally, the interest convergence principle serves as a method to examine

the individual differences that exist within groups and cultures; thus, providing greater understanding of differing outcomes within particular individuals. The aim of this principle is to hold educational institutions along with their employees, accountable for providing a quality education to all students. Furthermore, this principle can be a tool used to divert away athletic personnel who channel student athletes into a system of low academic expectations and refuse to develop them academically. This further allows invested stakeholders to identify the practices that contribute to the academic shortfalls of student athletes.

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this study was to produce a clear, accurate portrayal of the perceptions of one group in a particular context, without looking for generalizable conclusions (Gonzalez & Gonzalez, 2004). This article seeks to enlighten the reader on the perceptions that Black/diverse student athletes have regarding motivations and expectations in regards to academics. As we seek to understand why groups of people convey certain behaviors, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to capture everyday life and interpret practices that engage in critical, cultural analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

This research study too the case study approach. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that a case study involves an investigator that takes a detailed examination of a single subject, group, or phenomenon. The rationale for using the case study method is it provides the necessary descriptions in order to interpret judgments of transferability between contexts (Merriam, 1988). Purposeful sampling was used to gather participants. Purposeful sampling attempts to utilize participants who have similar experiences (Bogdon & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1988; Turner, 2004). The criteria for the selection of participants were as follows:

- Non-White
- Participated in collegiate sport at a PWI

Gaining trustworthiness is critical in a naturalistic inquiry. Trustworthiness was essential for the participants to engage in naturalistic inquiries and to provide truth-value through credibility (Merriam, 1988). This enabled the researcher to learn the culture of the participants over an extended period. This technique allows the researcher to build trust and develop a rapport with the respondents. Furthermore, triangulation of data established credibility. According to Lather (1986), establish triangulation through multiple measures to include various data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes. In order to be thorough in the research process, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also stated that each piece of information in the study should be expanded by at least one other source. Therefore, triangulation of data includes their natural educational and athletic settings, academic observations, and the literature.

Due to the rigorousness of data collection and analysis, this study provides the reader with transferability. Although, the researcher only sought to describe and understand the meaning of one particular situation, the reader of the specific study can apply the findings of the research to similar situations in which he or she is involved (Turner, 2004).

### **Analysis of Findings**

This section analyzed the findings to understand the current academic trends within athletic departments. As the lives of the participants began to shape, and although these student athletes have different backgrounds, their experiences as student athletes are indeed, very similar. As the participants expressed their stories, experiences, as well as current situations, themes emerged that highlighted the motivational factors that led them academically. After analyzing the participant responses, major themes that represent viewpoints and experiences of the group emerged. The result of the project encompasses overall descriptions that explain athletic expectations, academic expectations, and overall experiences of the participants.

In order to understand how these student athletes are motivated to succeed academically, the emerging themes were categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. For the purposes of this article, however, only intrinsic motivation was analyzed. As the process began to unfold, intrinsic motivation was supported with sub themes of high academic and athletic expectations. As these two sub themes emerged, it was evident that all of the participants seized every opportunity in their dual pursuit athletic and academic excellence. Therefore, self-determination emerged as a major component of intrinsic motivation.

### **High Academic Expectations**

Academic expectations were shown to be an intrinsic form of motivation from the participants. Their commitment to academics was recognized throughout the process of prolonged engagement. Their academic lives revealed success stories and accomplishments. Some accomplishments include the A/B Honor Roll, the National Honor Society, Academic All-American honors, and top performances at UIL competitions. This continued their pursuit of academic endeavors and expectations through the university level. Although the participants aimed for becoming professional superstars, they also recognized the importance of obtaining a degree and going to graduate school in order to maximize their intellectual ability. The participants also recognized that they should gain transferrable skills; these skills are analyzing, decision making, and implementing systems.

### **High Athletic Motivation**

Participants began their athletic careers at a young age. In addition, each participant emphasized that before considering sports as a profession, they wanted to be involved because it was fun. Nonetheless, as they grew older, the participants stated that their athletic expectations gave them significant confidence that they knew they would be able to succeed. This was clear, as they emphasized the fact that they played against and beat top competition in the nation. Additionally, all of the athletes in this study stated that they knew, or at least have the desire to compete collegiately and beyond.

Based on the findings, this supports research that states most student athletes are highly motivated to succeed in the athletic domain, after selected to participate in intercollegiate athletics because of their proven athletic ability (Simons, Rheenen, & Covington, 1999). Accordingly, many reasons for this commitment and desire to participate collegiately surfaced. They had the desire, albeit due to athletics, to attend college. At the same time, the participants understood the value of academic success as they move forward in their futures.

### **Self-Determination**

Self-determination in regards to this study, developed into a sub theme of intrinsic motivation. The student athletes often acknowledged that work ethic influenced them in most areas of their success. For instance, one of the participants noted that he was the determined to be the hardest worker on the team. He stated:

“That was really my thing... I am going to work harder and I just had confidence that no one was going to outwork me. They were not better than me. I don’t care how big they were or how fast they thought they were... no matter what... if given the same number of opportunities or even given slightly less I was going to make the best of my chances and that is literally how I became a starter.”

” As soon as I started doing this... at two points in my career... I was number one in the world... and I directly attribute that to those two-day sessions.”

Furthermore, the participants referenced how self-determination benefitted them athletically and academically. Work ethic, in this study, is not limited to just physical work, but intellectual work as well. Athletically, the participants were obsessed with outworking their



teammates and more importantly, their opponents. Academically, they were driven by good grades. Accordingly, their motivations helped them persist through academic and athletic challenges in order to obtain viable career options after their careers have ended.

### **Conclusion**

High academic and athletic motivation along with self-determination are the driving influences that prepare Black and diverse student athletes for success and certain endeavors as they navigate the college and university system. These motivations also prepare them to challenge themselves and overcome academic and athletic obstacles they will face in the future. Although it is not a generalized formula, these factors proved to be a working force and successful combination for Black and diverse student athletes within various sports. Success demonstrated and attained by these individuals requires one to be persistent, competitive, focused, dedicated, and confident. The participants in this study are scholarship, well-decorated athletes that are committed to obtaining their degrees as well. The purpose for embarking on this research is to shed light on others in regards to the positive motivations held by many Black and diverse student athletes in spite of the critics, disbelievers, and people in positions of power who overlook and ultimately try to oppress these individuals. In many instances, literature and higher education personnel view these individuals negatively in an academic light. Many of these individuals are often staffed in these same athletic academic departments. However, this study provides clear examples of academic motivation and the drive of high achieving Black and diverse individuals. What emerged from this study was an understanding of how athletic participation transfers into academic pursuits. The participants were not defined by their future degrees or sport; however, their experiences as student athletes and how this mechanism could shape them into successful individuals in the near future.

The focus in this article is to combat negative thinking and assure those deemed necessary that many student athletes possess great forms of motivation and influenced by many positive influences. Participating in athletics may be a gateway into certain privilege; however, these same student athletes are well educated and committed. More importantly, their effectiveness as current role models and future professionals was evident through the collection of principles they learned and acquired while being student athletes. All of the participants left encouraging words of wisdom for upcoming student athletes. Many times, the dominant culture views the population as ultimately unsuccessful with no future after sports. Moreover, this is reinforced because there are few individuals in these athletic departments that say otherwise (i.e. educated, people of color). As stated in Rutledge (2014):

“The thought is to get an education, to better yourself means that on some subconscious level you have to sell out... they don't say that... but... think that... that hurts us... nobody ever claims somebody is keeping it real if they're a football player... you know he is real.

But if you are a professional, doctor, or a lawyer, now they want to question whether you are real or not... people just assume that you lose part of yourself because you start reading... but that is not the case... but people have adopted that mindset.”

However, this study has demonstrated through the participants, that there are positive examples of athletes in which youth and others can look up to.

### **Discussion**

In an attempt to understand how Black and diverse student athletes are motivated academically, in depth, qualitative inquiry was utilized to interpret and understand the population. This was investigated through in depth and structured educational sessions. The literature review provided within this article was included and necessary to introduce the reader

about this specific population and the factors they face on a continuous basis. It was also included due to its relevance to the academic, athletic, and professional context within this study.

CRT was a framework to gain an understanding of the relationship between athletes and their academic expectations. The interest convergence principle utilized in this study was a foundational tool used to convey the current trends in regards to the low academic expectations placed on these student athletes in many institutions. Although these expectations are common, this study hopes to reveal the positive influences that foster positive academic performance and to give participants a voice to relay their motivations and to transform beliefs in regards to Black and diverse student athletes and their perceived willingness to participate academically. It is my belief that high profile, Black and diverse student athletes will be an example to those who are looking to follow their example. This study is a realistic example of making the most of every opportunity. As our nation grows, and sport becomes more globalized, it appears that these individuals have transferred the knowledge and values learned through athletics to demonstrate that athletics is not just about winning a game; it is about winning at life (Rutledge, 2014).

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that university athletic programs promote academic success, through development and mentoring programs. It is further recommended that research on Black and diverse student athletes highlight their positive attributes and not focus totally on their athletic abilities. Oftentimes, perceptions of this population is derived from the literature and research.

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